

Hifi Pig

Magazine

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WELCOME

Welcome to the Hifi Pig Yearbook. Here you will find every review that we have carried out over the year - there are over a hundred!

What a great year 2014 was for Hifi Pig - we have seen our readership figures soar, introduced the free Hifi Pig Magazine, media partnered the North West Audio Show and visited several other European audio shows.

Moving forward we have some very innovative plans that will further consolidate our position in the audio world including a media partnership with the SIAV Hi End Show in Shanghai.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all Hifi Pig readers for showing us your continued support and wish you happy listening for the coming year.

Stuart Smith

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Van de Leur 002 Preamplifier and 402 Power Amplifier



Van de Leur Audio is a relatively young company with just two products in their portfolio – the 402 power amplifier and the 002 preamplifier. Both products are designed and hand-built in Holland and the power amplifier is of a class D design using Hypex modules, whilst the preamplifier uses valves. Both units come with a five year guarantee and arrived double boxed and very well packed.

We first bumped into Pim Van de Leur on the last day of the Munich High end show, but we never got more than a cursory listen in less than ideal conditions to what looked like very interesting first products from a young, vital and funky Dutch company. You only need to take a look at the company's website to see they're setting themselves apart from the often straight-laced high-end branding that is prevalent.

002 Preamplifier

The 002 preamplifier certainly looks the part with its brushed aluminium fascia, hefty carrying handles and "Van de Leur" engraved top plate. On the front you get a large volume control knob, source selector, a funkyly lit on/off button, a balance control knob and a headphone output.

Move around to the back and you have four line inputs, a home theatre pass through and inputs for both moving coil and moving magnet cartridges – when ordering the 002 you will be asked the MC cartridge brand and model you intend to use and the unit will be set specifically for this cartridge. The

Van de Leur 002 Preamplifier and 402 Power Amplifier

moving coil input uses Vanderveen MC10 step up transformers. You get outputs for power amp, record and direct out for connecting to another pre/processor.

All in all the 002 is a very well equipped preamplifier and the included infra-red remote is weighty and well made with just volume up and down buttons.

Tubes used are two E88CCs for the line stage, four 12AT7s for the phono stage and wiring throughout is silver.

Plug the pre in to the mains and the on/off button glows red. Press it and it glows light blue whilst the preamp sets itself up and then brighter blue when ready to use – set up takes a few seconds. Nice!

402 Amplifier

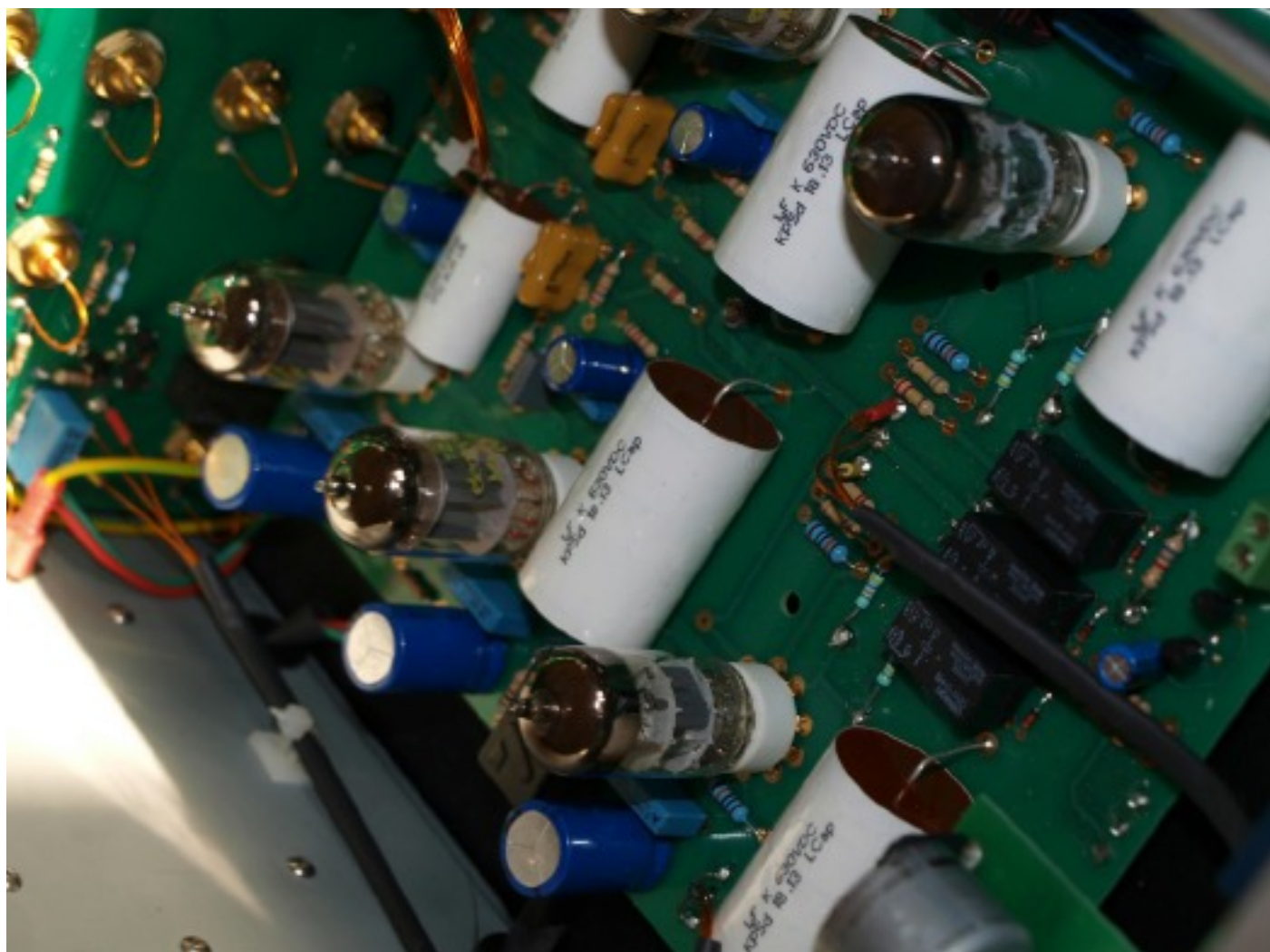
The 402 power amplifier matches the looks and styling of the 002 preamplifier perfectly and the pairing certainly looks handsome and purposeful on the rack. On the front you get an on/off switch, whilst round the back you have switchable inputs for RCA and balanced XLR. Now this struck me as a bit

of an odd one – clearly the 002 and the 402 were created to work together but the preamp doesn't have the option for balanced XLR output. You also get a pair of Audio Note silver plated speaker connectors which will accept banana or spade connectors.

The amp is dual mono, delivers 2 x 400 watts via its Hypex modules and inside looks very clean and tidy.

Let's Have a Listen

Naturally the sensible thing to do here is to listen to the preamp and the amp together as they were made to compliment each other. Straight into the main system they go with the VAD DAC, the usual vinyl front ends and the hORN Mummys. First up is an album that's hardly been off the CD player since it arrived and Sano "Sano". Bass is deep, bouncy and well controlled with the stereo mix being fairly wide and with good depth - sound effects do jump out from the mix as they should. The overall character is quite "analytical" and very accurate and dynamic which may not be to everyone's taste and I think this is down to the nature of the Class D amp, but the pre-amp does seem to be tempering this Class D-ishness a tad. Cranking up the volume you get more of the



Van de Leur 002 Preamplifier and 402 Power Amplifier

same and you get the impression that the amplifier is barely even breaking a sweat – given its quoted output it certainly shouldn't be.

Popping on "Apostrophe" by Zappa you get the vocal very much centre stage and slightly forward in the mix. Lead guitar has good attack and decay and is fast in that not lingering in the air kind way that I hate. Instrument separation is very good with instruments being positioned left to right and back to front correctly. Where the Black Pearl integrated we reviewed recently was quite "warm", with the Van De Leur you seem to get what is on the recording without a great deal of embellishment – some will enjoy this whilst others may find it not to their individual tastes. I suppose like a lot of things we all have our own personal way of preferring how things are done – and the World's a better place for it! The Van de Leur amplifier certainly could never be accused of being warm in its character; it's very matter of fact "here's what you gave me and that's what you'll get".

If you enjoy an accurate portrayal of the studio mix then you'll love this pairing as there seems to be very

little added or taken away. There is certainly plenty of detail in the sound and with "Cosmic Debris" you really can hear everything that's in the recording – it just hasn't got that X factor for my taste – some will say that the X factor I'm referring to is an artifice and shouldn't play a part in true high-fidelity audio reproduction anyway.

On Vibert/Simmonds' "Rodulate" there is a real power to the music with the machine drum hats sounding just like they do on the actual drum machine. Here I found myself thinking that this would be the perfect amplifier to have in the studio. Bass is deep and powerful and does that stop start thing that I like – no overhang. On complex passages in the mix the pairing is nonplussed and just gets on with banging out what it is presented with without getting befuddled or confused in any way. Sub bass sounds (Room 28 Rap) go LOW and are very well controlled.

I think that what shines through with the Van De Leur pre and amp pairing is that there is an overriding sense of the amp being very much well implemented Class D in that it sounds accurate, fast



Van de Leur 002 Preamplifier and 402 Power Amplifier

and detailed ...but bit lacking in creating an emotional involvement with the music for my own taste. This is all very subjective I'm well aware and I know lots of people will really love the no nonsense approach to the presentation!

Pop the pre in front of the Tellurium Q Iridium power amplifier (SECA) (at around double the price it has to be said) and here things seem to take a leap towards what I'd consider to be a great pairing. Gone is the sound I'd like to hear in front of a pair of monitors in the studio and out comes a fabulous bit of home audio.

Jean Michel Jarre's "Sessions 2000" simply comes to life and is the best I've heard with any pre in front of the Iridium. The detail is still apparent but the preamplifier doesn't seem to be there only to give the amp a bit of character as it seemed with the Van de Leur amp in the chain.

The Van de Leur pre adds something to the Iridium that has my own preamplifier cowering in the corner, afraid to show its face – musical is the word I'd use I suppose – gloriously musical!

Fat Freddy's Drop again comes to life with "Shiverman" bouncing along in the bass department and being nicely controlled too. The reverbed sound effects come out of the mix in a totally 3D fashion and the soundstage is deep with excellent height. Vocals are very clearly defined as being separate to other instruments and the whole thing is wonderfully coherent in a believable home-audio-experience sense. There is delicacy when it's needed and there is whoomf when it's needed.

Vinyl O'Clock

Switching from CD to vinyl and the MM input using the Wilson Benesch Circle turntable, Origin Live Silver arm, the Cartridge Man Music Maker III and the SECA amp in place you are rewarded with a great sense of the music. Hats are snappy, bass is deep and controlled and vocals just sound right. This is certainly a step up from my Electrocompaniet phonostage I hate to say. Gus Gus "Arabian Horse" is deep in the bass, shimmer in the tops and the mid frequencies bring everything together nicely. Vocals leap out from the mix and are correct in tone. There's masses of detail and a wide and deep soundstage ...much more so than with my reference pre and phonostage in place.

Time to switch turntables and over to the Technics 1210, Origin Live Silver arm and Audio Technica EV33 Moving Coil cartridge we go. There's a little

In isolation the stand out product here is the preamplifier – it's musical and has a host of features that add to the usefulness and value. When paired together you have a very competent duo that compliments each other very nicely.

toggle switch on the back of the preamp to switch between moving coil and moving magnet – it would have been nice to have it on the front, but to be fair I'm sure not everyone who buys this pre is going to be switching between MM and MC every five minutes.

Fleetwood Macs old faithful "Rumours" comes out of hiding and there just seems to be a whole lot more of the record there than I'm used to with my pre/phono combo – lots more detail and on "Second Hand News" and there's an extra layer to the top-end which sounds sublime. "Dreams" is bouncy with the vocal silky and hats sparkling and crisp. I love this album and this is as good as I've heard it sounding anywhere with any pre/phono/amp combo. Guitar strumming is fast and controlled and there's a nagging hi-hat noise that I've honestly never been

Van de Leur 002 Preamplifier and 402 Power Amplifier

The preamp comes in at €4999 and the amp is €3499 which isn't a drop in the ocean by most people's standards, but for your money you get well made, great looking kit that delivers on sound quality.

aware of before. The sound is hugely detailed, delicate and yet powerful. "Songbird's" vocal is wonderfully rendered and the sense of space within the recording is very apparent. Again, as with the MM section of the pre there are certainly no complaints here.

As a bit of an experiment before the Van de Leur amp and preamp are returned to Holland I thought I'd plug them into the little Concept 20 loudspeakers from Q Acoustics – they're still in the main listening area and firing across the room. Now I wasn't going to bother with this as price-wise this is a complete mismatch...but how wrong I was. There certainly seems to be a bit of a synergy thing going on here. Yes you've still got that overall sense that the amp is Class D but the combination is very pleasing. The amp just seems to grab hold of the little Concept 20s and it drives them really well. Well whoda thunk it – a few hundred quids worth of loudspeakers on the end of €8498 of amp and preamp? Actually I'm a bit gobsmacked by the combo. Bass is rendered tight and controlled on "One Night in Comene" whereas Phantom Limb sounds nice and fast with a lovely velvety rich tone to the vocal. There just seems to be a little more musicality brought out with the 002, 402 and Concept 20 mix than with my Mummy speakers - vocals in particular stand out as being well done, appearing warmer and more rounded, whilst still

accurate, but without that analytical feel I mentioned - bass is deep and powerful. There's definitely more of an emotional connection to the music than with my own speakers. Perhaps a bit of clever loudspeaker partnering with the amp is what is needed to bring out the very best from it!

Headphone Time

It's good to see a headphone amp on a pre and this looks like a feature more and more manufacturers are embracing...and that's a good thing for occasional headphone users. There are certainly no complaints from me with regards to the headphone output. It drove all the headphones I plugged into it very well and the sound was good, clean and well balanced. For most but the diehard headfi fanatic the included output will be more than satisfactory.

Conclusion

Build of both the 402 amp and the 002 preamplifier is of very high quality and the overall design aesthetics will please many – they manage to pull off that "guy-fi" image whilst maintaining an elegant stance on the rack which will satisfy those in need of keeping domestic bliss. I can see it appealing to those who want to have a fantastic looking bit of kit on display and who want a no nonsense, accurate and powerful reproduction of their music collection.

One of the things I enjoyed about the 002 preamp in particular was the inclusion of a full function phonostage and a headphone amplifier. The phonostage is easily better than my current Electrocompaniet stage and would stand its ground in company of stages up to the £1500 mark, perhaps beyond, I would have said.

In isolation the stand out product here is the preamplifier – it's musical and has a host of features that add to the usefulness and value. When paired together you have a very competent duo that compliments each other very nicely.

The preamp comes in at €4999 and the amp is €3499 which isn't a drop in the ocean by most people's standards, but for your money you get well made, great looking kit that delivers on sound quality. The Class D amp will not be to everyone's taste I am well aware (some folk just don't get the Class D sound whilst others do), but even if you aren't a fan of this implementation you really should give the Van De Leur pairing a serious audition as this is Class D done well.

Stuart Smith

Coffman Labs

artful audio. purely analog.



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



G1-A Preamplifier

MM/MC Phono Stage • Line Stage

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www.CoffmanLabs.com

Coffman Labs G-1A Preamplifier

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



First of all let me say that I absolutely love the aesthetics of the \$5500 G-1A from Coffman Labs with its purposeful and almost steam-punk looks.

It's beautifully put together and feels bomb-proof. I also love the way the knobs on the front of the preamp feel – the selector switches clunk into place and they have a firm and solid feel to them – they're also of a size that just feels right. On top of the rack it looks absolutely fabulous and is something of a work of art to my eyes.

OK, so it looks great but what do you get for the not inconsiderable sum of \$5500? Quite a lot actually! There's a separate and visually matching outboard tube rectified (5AR4) power supply which connects to the main unit by a thick and sturdy umbilical. You get a phono stage with a step up transformer moving coil input and moving magnet input, a headphone amplifier, three line level inputs, two variable outputs and a tape output. Feature-wise the asking price is starting to stack up to seem pretty reasonable and then we look inside where we have NOS paper in oil capacitors sourced from cold war Russian, the switches are military aircraft grade and designed for millions of operations and all wiring is point to point and by default labour intensive. Then there's the fact that there will only ever be 500 of the G-1A made

Coffman Labs G-1A Preamplifier

and so you actually get to own something that has a degree of rarity value too.

So who are Coffman Labs?

Based in Oregon, USA Coffman Labs is the brainchild of Damon Coffman a classically trained violinist and physicist (that classic combination) whose stated aim is to “create products that reproduce the natural sound experienced during live performance”. Damon comes from a background in developing and patenting specialised medical passive monitoring devices and was involved in creating a visual stethoscope which allowed cardiac care decisions to be made by medical assistants in rural 3rd World countries.

Expectations are High!!!

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

warm up for a while. We settled back to listen to music through this new wunderkind on the block only to look at each other and say “this doesn’t sound right”. Perhaps it needs more warming up so we persevered. Nope, this thing sounds screechy and positively headache inducing and we were of a mind that Damon, given his violin background, had tuned it specifically for this instrument ...surely not. I contacted Damon and explained that I didn’t think I could review the preamp as it didn’t reach our benchmark and he suggested there may be a problem with the power supply and so sent out a new rectifier tube...nope, still the same problem. We popped it in front of different amps, we tried different sources and still the same.

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

Expectations are Low!!

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



Coffman Labs G-1A Preamplifier

1A was a bit of a lemon and Coffman Labs had produced something that was tuned specifically to Damon's hearing after our first experience!

However, I can truthfully say that having lived with this preamplifier for a good while now it is a wonderful piece of equipment that sounds really beautiful in our system with whatever kind of music we throw at it. I can only assume that, despite the excellent packaging the original review unit arrived in, somewhere along the line it was damaged in transit. The unit's been sent back and I'm sure Damon will do a thorough investigation as to what was wrong with the first pre – certainly there seemed to be no physical damage!

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

Specifics

On the Moving Magnet input using the variable loading at 47K (95K, 70K are available too) using the Cartridge Man Music Maker the word that immediately springs to mind is coherence.

Soundstage is very wide and deep, bass bouncy and tight on Dillinger's "Cocaine" with the vocal track being clearly forward in the mix. Each instrument is easy to identify in the mix and there's an overall very pleasing tone to the sound. The lead guitar that comes in at the end of this track is particularly realistic sounding which had me reaching for the Latin rhythms and virtuoso guitar of "L'Ame de Baden Powell" by Baden Powell. The close micing of the guitar is very evident in the recording and the illusion of there actually being a stage in front of you is very real indeed with the G-1A in the chain.

There's a bit of microphony from the valves in MM mode (evident if you tap the top of the preamplifier) but I'm fortunate to have the electronics in a separate and relatively isolated part of the living space so this really wasn't an issue for me. Had I the time and inclination I'd have loved to have explored a bit of tube rolling to see if this could be cured for the sake of Audiophillia Nervosa. On poor recordings the Coffman pre is pretty unforgiving and would suggest that whatever it adds to the sound it not trying to mask the original recording in any way.



Coffman Labs G-1A Preamplifier

Switching to the MC input and the Technics 1210/Origin Live Silver/AT33EV combo the microphony is still evident when you tap the unit. From previous listening there is no doubt that on acoustic instruments this pre is really a top class performer but now it's time to throw a bit of techno at it in the form of 3 Phase and "Current 1" and the Coffman copes very well indeed. The soundstage opens up even further than with the MM input and you get a very 3 dimensional and enveloping sound which is layered with loads of detail. In comparison to my own Electrocompaniet phonostage I'd say the Coffman Labs clearly outshines it by a country mile. In comparison to the recently reviewed Van de Leur the flavour is slightly different but overall I'd say I preferred the Coffman, particularly when using the MC input – it's slightly more 3 dimensional in its presentation.

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

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

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

The sound is open and balanced and decidedly incisive.

Conclusion

\$5500 (£3350 at today's exchange rate) is a good deal of money to spend on a pre-amplifier and the Coffman Labs amp is clearly aimed at a pretty high end market. However, given the quality of the unit overall, how well it is specced and the fact that it is handbuilt in limited numbers I'd say it represented very good value to anyone living in the US. Add delivery and taxes to the EU and you're getting closer to a preamplifier that costs upwards of £4250 so the relative value thing becomes a little more blurred, but I'd still say that the Coffman Labs offers excellent value against anything I've heard in this price bracket available in the EU!

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

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

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

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

Stuart Smith

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Amptastic Mini-1

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Amptastics Mini-1 amplifier is the follow up to the British company's Mini-T that Jerry Jacobs loved so much...and it costs £99

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

Amazing, astonishing.

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

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

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

But Chris at Amptastic is not one to let the grass grow under his feet, and after extensive design and

Amptastic Mini-1

development work a range of new product, including a DAC, is being rolled out over the coming months. The first of these to be released for sale is the £99 Mini-1 amp reviewed here.

Technicalities

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

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

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

Custom made copper 'Air Core' output inductors are used to reduce the amplifier's harmonic distortion. The output filter is a key part of the design, and Amptastic say they have benchmarked and tested many different inductors and found that any amount of ferrite causes unwanted distortion. A long time was spent selecting the best quality 'Air Core' output inductor and better than Tripath datasheet performance in some areas is claimed.

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

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



Amptastic Mini-1

requiring a pair of needle-nosed pliers.

Sound Quality

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

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

Well, that all sounds very impressive, doesn't it. But

There's an overall naturalness, a "yeah, *that's* how the music should sound" about the Mini-1 that I find pretty much totally satisfying and that I can return to with a smile again and again.

is it really the Perfect Amplifier?

Well, no. Resolution is good but not top notch. Despite its amazingly open and extended high frequencies, like the Mini-T before it, the Mini-1 doesn't quite resolve the last layer of detail. For example, the repeated 'spangy clap' in Eddy Louiss's



Atoll IN200SE & CD200 SE-2

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Atoll seems to be little known outside their French homeland but Hifi Pig has always been impressed with the sound of their electronics when we've heard them at shows and so we thought it time to take closer listen.

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

I was a bit surprised, to say the least.

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

Electronique-labelled boxes soon arrived.

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

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

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

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

There is also a "high end" range called Gamme or 400 Series, priced at around £4,000 per component. The styling of these is rather more adventurous than the rectangular boxes of the mid-priced range, and I am sure the intention is to provide sonics of even higher fidelity. I've not heard these, but given the fine performance of the lower-priced range, I would be very interested in doing so!

The IN200 SE integrated amp

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

Available with black or silver faceplates, this is a solidly made substantial piece of gear and quite attractive in a conventional rectangular box kind of

Atoll IN200SE & CD200 SE-2

way. A finishing touch that greatly appealed to me were the ventilating grille holes on the top panel of the amp; a swirling array of small circular holes, very nice!

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

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

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

The CD200 SE-2 CD player



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

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

A stereo pair of RCA outputs is accompanied by a RCA digital output. As mentioned, an option is available to access the onboard DAC by adding USB and co-ax digital input sockets.

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

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

Sonics

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

Where these Atoll components excel is in midrange

**Loreena McKennitt's
Parallel Dreams
album again
highlights the Atoll
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lucidity in vocal
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of confusion when
the music has many
simultaneous
interwoven strands.**

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

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

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

But, realistically, you cannot have everything,

Atoll IN200SE & CD200 SE-2

especially with what must be regarded as mid-price components.

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

Component Matching

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

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

Comparisons

The slightly higher priced Roksan Caspian M2 integrated amp that I reviewed a while back for Hifi Pig provides an excellent example of an alternative approach to amplifier voicing. The Roksan's presentation is funky and upbeat, with grippy bass and real slam across the frequency range, and a way with rhythms that just propels the music along. Great for some music, but, for me, lacking in subtlety and finesse for less upbeat musical genres.

So - bring on the Atoll IN200 SE!

With the Atoll amp everything is a bit more evenhanded. The rather 2 dimensional imaging of the Roksan is improved upon by a subtler and more insightful rendition of the recorded acoustic, although as previously mentioned, more can be had

It would be very interesting to hear what the top range Gamme / 400 Series of Atoll components provides - the very fine sounding mid-price units reviewed here would certainly form an excellent foundation for a true high end range - at the cost, of course, of nearly tripling the prices!

in this respect. The truly excellent high resolution in the Atoll midrange and treble gives a startling and subtle insight into vocals and higher frequency percussion, for example.

But does the Atoll amp re-arrange your internal organs and have you stomping your feet to dubstep rhythms in the way the Roksan can? Well, no - it really is a case of horses for courses. It would be very interesting to hear what the top range Gamme / 400 Series of Atoll components provides - the very fine sounding mid-price units reviewed here would certainly form an excellent foundation for a true high end range - at the cost, of course, of nearly tripling the prices!

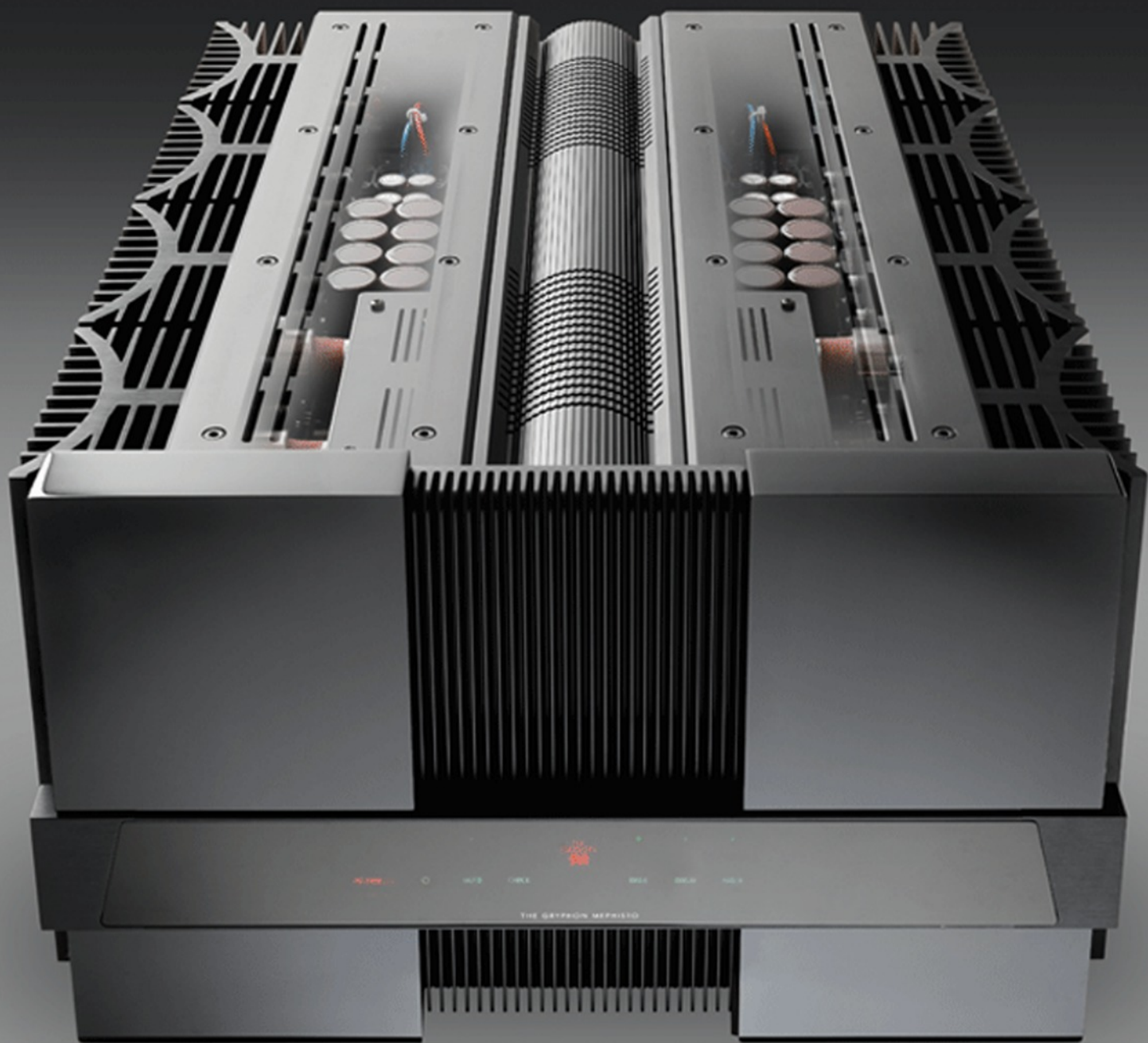
Summary

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

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

Jerry Jacobs

THE GRYPHON



GRYPHON MEPHISTO

www.gryphon-audio.dk

Chord Electronics Qute EX DAC

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



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

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

Burning In

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

The Sound

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

Chord Electronics Qute EX DAC

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

Listening to vocal and acoustic music I would say that there is an emphasis on the recorded material that really stands out. I know a few guys who really enjoy delving into the mix of a recording and this type of sound would suit them perfectly but for me I felt that the DAC didn't render the decay of the instruments with a flowing nature, but that it stops and starts on a dime displaying leading edges with absolute precision and timing. It's fast, very dynamic, has a soundstage that can explore every reverb, performer and musician without breaking a sweat and all in a more upfront nature that offers the listener a semi near-field experience.

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

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

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



Chord Electronics Qute EX DAC

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

I'm giving with one hand and taking with the other here I know and my personal tastes are somewhat irrelevant here - it's more about describing the overall sound of the DAC which I am trying to convey.

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

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

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

In Conclusion

The Qute EX is exactly that, it looks absolutely fantastic. Sound-wise it not within the boundaries of what I would consider to be perfect for me across the broad range of music I listen to day to day, but for the nearest of acoustical performances and late night listening I thoroughly enjoyed its hugely detailed and forward presentation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dan Worth

Brunoco Diva Amplifier and DAC

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



**Originating
from Canada
the Brunoco
Diva is a small
form factor
digital amplifier
with integrated
DAC and is only
a little bigger
than a Mac
Mini.**

It's housed in a stylish aluminium case and sports connections for coaxial RCA, optical and Async USB digital inputs supporting up to 24/192, along with one set of analogue inputs which run through an ADC (Analogue to Digital Converter) in order to utilise the inbuilt amp. Output is 40wpc. The amplifier is not a standard class D and DAC combination it is in fact a full digital amplifier which the manufacturer has the following to say about it "Diva is full digital amplifier, that means input PCM(pulse

code modulation, master digital signal) signal is processed and amplified in digital format. So there is no DAC(digital to analog converter) needed. DAC is necessary for conventional analog amplifiers(both solid-state and tube) because analog amplifiers need input analog signal to amplify.

DDC converts input PCM signal into PWM signal which can be amplified by PWM amplifier in digital domain. The Critical part of digital amplifier is this PCM to PWM converter. Performance of DDC is based on how the algorithm used can minimize the distortion and noise and do the exact conversion which results in final sound quality. One of the most important factor to sound quality is SNR(signal to noise ratio) and especially residual quantization noise and RF(radio frequency) switching noise of PWM should be removed from the audible frequency range(20-20kHz)."

The external power supply is a very high quality analogue design and is very heavy in comparison to the main unit and there's no doubt that the quality of the PSU is a key factor to the Divas performance.

Substantial packaging encases the cute little Diva keeping it safe for its long journey overseas and during unpacking its easy to appreciate the units all aluminium build quality and substantial weight to the high quality power supply, along with a true credit card sized remote control with only 6 buttons - in fact this is all that is needed for full control of the unit. First impressions left me feeling satisfied with what I was presented from this new kid on the block.

Brunoco Diva Amplifier and DAC

I ran the unit in for a week of continuous play time ensuring it was ready for a good listen.

First impressions were, “digital amplifier” but during the week I noticed a certain amount of weight and a little more richness coming through filling out the bottom end nicely, my only gripe was this added weight to the bass was emphasising a steep roll off point giving the bass a more one note approach.

There is an equaliser built into the device - not the usual rock, dance, acoustic type, it's way more subtle than that, the settings have a couple of letters and a number (ie BaMd2) to refer to them, each setting is like a slightly different version of the previous. The goal is to use these settings as more of a digital room equalisation than the typical graphic equaliser found in cheaper products. Playing through these differing settings I found one or two which I preferred, notably for their smoother roll off of the bottom end allowing notes to fade more naturally in my listening space, which even though subtle was a very welcome addition. The EQ really does seem to be very transparent indeed, has been implemented very well and doesn't seem to get in the way.

Chris Jones' 'Soul Storm Comin' has many overlaid smaller guitar details which is a highlight of the Brunoco - it has a great way of picking out these smaller details even in a strongly central focused track and each can be heard in its entirety along with each textural strum of string and richness to Chris's vocal. I've found many times with Class D amps (not all of them) that the attention to detail is fantastic yet the performance as a whole can suffer with a colder tonal balance, the Diva is voiced extremely well and doesn't suffer from this 'coldness' - it's not a Class D amp after all. It's far from coloured and far from warm, it's has all the characteristics of Class D yet with a richness to the sound!

Phantom Limbs 'Don't Say A Word' displayed glossy vocals with great undertones of rich harmonies, sound staging with the dinky Diva is fantastic along with great layering allowing drum rolls, guitar strings and double bass to really recreate

I've found many times with Class D amps (not all of them) that the attention to detail is fantastic yet the performance as a whole can suffer with a colder tonal balance, the Diva is voiced extremely well and doesn't suffer from this 'coldness' - it's not a Class D amp after all.

stage placement fantastically well, encapsulating the performance in a high end way that belies its meagre price point.

As you're all probably are aware by now I am partial to some heavy dance beats - I've always liked what



Brunoco Diva Amplifier and DAC

Hitting the volume seriously hard the little Diva achieved some insane volumes and spl's through my loudspeakers, I reached a volume which was so loud I had to turn it down a little before I reached any perceivable levels of distortion and the neighbours came knocking!

digital amplifiers can achieve with this sort of music - a clean and crisp representation of the genre - and the Brunoco is no different. Hitting the volume seriously hard the little Diva achieved some insane volumes and spl's through my loudspeakers, I reached a volume which was so loud I had to turn it down a little before I reached any perceivable levels of distortion and the neighbours came knocking! A slight change in the equaliser settings to add some more punch to the sound and I was really amazed with what could be achieved from the unit.

In comparative terms at twice the cost of the Brunoco Diva is the £1000 Peachtree iDecco, also using similar technology. The Brunoco makes for a much

more engaging and exciting listen in comparison, leaving the iDecco's blander and colder sonic signature behind in the stakes of sound reproduction.

I've written this review using my Squeezebox Touch as in my mains system it is my most known source and is easier to gain an impression of what the Brunoco Diva adds to the sound. However, I did get a little carried away in what we can call my own free time testing the unit with some big and small single driver speakers, some two way bookshelves in a desktop system, with some wall speakers in a bedroom system and also with other sources such as the Mac Mini, a Windows laptop and an Apple TV and I'd be very happy to use the little Diva with any or all of these sources. Notably in the bedroom with a TV on the wall a set of wall speakers and an Apple TV, it's was a wonderfully minimalist approach to reproducing great unobtrusive sound quality.

Conclusion

Connected to a Mac/PC, Streamer, CD/DVD, Television or Smart Device, the Brunoco Diva can cater for all of today's digital devices and can be setup in the smallest of spaces.

Whether the chosen music be a stripped down acoustic or a big medley for an evening listen or a more beat driven piece - or let's say 'party mode' - the Diva has a substantial amount of intelligence at reproducing each sound and note with plenty of air and space around them and can hold a coherent overall image with rich tones and decay that just makes it such an enjoyable listen.

It can pride itself on having a 'grown up' sound and a sound that belies its small size and low cost, with plenty of inputs, great looks, a decent outboard power supply and the ability to use what we could call a simple but effect room equalising option which has gentle changes in the sound that allows for some fine transparent tuning - all in all with its enjoyable and toe tapping sound is an excellent in a modern home or hard core audiophiles second system.

Build Quality - 8.5/10

Sound Quality - 8.5/10

Value for money - 10/10

Overall - 9/10

Price when reviewed - £499

Highly Recommended for its detail driven, exciting performance that is true value for money.

Dan Worth

Onix A-25 Amplifier

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



The A-25 amplifier was created to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the much loved Onix OA21 and to recall the “old-style” sound of the original Tony Brady project.

The amp is a dual-mono integrated affair which will deliver 2 x 30W into 8Ohms (5 of which are in Class A) and 2 x 50 W into 4 Ohms and it costs around £775.

I won't go too much into the history of Onix as we've already covered this when Jerry reviewed the Onix RA-125 back in July of last year.

It has to be said that the A-25 is a smart looking bit of kit with its half-width elongated shoebox design and glass panelled front. There's a big gold volume control (Alps Blue Velvet), a source selector button and a power button on the front. It's sleek, it's elegant and I really like the look of it, though I'm sure that it will have its detractors who will say it's a bit blingy – I don't think it's at all blingy and just looks understated and classy when parked on the rack.

Round the back you get two pairs of RCA inputs, a pair of balanced XLR inputs and a pair of RCAs for bypass for when you want to use the amp in a surround sound set up. There's also a pre out section catered for by another pair of RCAs and finally there's a nice pair of loudspeaker binding posts.

Onix A-25 Amplifier

Feature-wise it's well catered for I'd say with enough inputs to satisfy most people. A remote is available though the review sample came without.

Listening

We thought that the ideal partnership for the Onix would be the Q Acoustics Concept 20 loudspeakers fed with the computer through the DAC and we felt that this partnership, which comes in at around the £1500 mark using a computer and not taking the reference DAC as the source into account, would be probably where Onix would like to pitch this amp. We'll also use it for watching a few films I dare say.

First onto the virtual turntable was a healthy dose of disco in the form of Patrick Adams Presents Phreek and here I found that the Onix offered good overall definition and tightness in the bass kick and whilst it doesn't dredge the very lowest registers it is perfectly acceptable for such a modestly priced amplifier.

Comparing with the recently reviewed Tellurium Q Claymore, which excelled in the bass department, the Onix could be seen as lacking a tad, but then the Claymore costs four times as much as the Onix and

There's a slight overall warmth (which some will really enjoy) and this leads to a really nice non-fatiguing listening experience – you really can listen to this amp for hours and feel the music as being as fresh at the end of the session as it was at the start.



Onix A-25 Amplifier

so we're comparing apples and oranges. Comparing the Onix to the slightly less expensive Clones Audio i25, bass was somewhat tighter with less flabbiness with the Onix.

On with Brian Jackson and Gil Scott-Heron's "Winter in America" and its opening tune demonstrating the amp's ability to give a really good insight into the recording. Vocals are a strongpoint with the A25, as is the portrayal of all the mid-range frequencies and I reckon this amp will be really popular with those whole love vocal music - I'm sure it will also shine at hifi shows given the kind of music often played at them.

There's a slight overall warmth (which some will really enjoy) and this leads to a really nice non-fatiguing listening experience – you really can listen to this amp for hours and feel the music as being as fresh at the end of the session as it was at the start. Overall the mids do dominate slightly and, at the relative budget end of the scale of things where this amp sits, this is no bad thing I'd possibly suggest. Piano and acoustic instruments were particularly nicely portrayed I noted, as were hi hats which were sharp and crispy. Again comparing it to the little Clones amp there's a touch more colouration and warmth to the overall presentation which depending on your preferences you'll either prefer or not.

Soundstaging is very wide and extends way beyond the speakers left and right and there is good, but not exceptional, portrayal of depth of stereo image. Overall you get a very acceptable, and somewhat enjoyable, insight into the mix and it's also very stable.

On Rock (Hawkwind's glorious re-release of Warrior On the Edge of Time) compared to the £6K reference amplifier there is a slight blurring of the overall image but it is still possible to pick out individual instruments from the mix quite easily. An analytical tool the A25 is not, but the soundstaging on this kind of music was highly entertaining. Hihats were again crisp and basslines easy to follow.

The amplifier performs at its best when allowed to breathe a little at medium to high volumes, but at low volumes (to which I rarely listen) you are left with very little bass content and a mid and top heavy sound...so any excuse to turn up the noise I suppose! If you are a late night listener then this amp may not be for you and perhaps here the inclusion of a headphone amplifier for occasional late night

sessions would have been useful.

Shifting to electronic music I expected to be underwhelmed by the Onix, but popping on Tresor.136 (Annex 3) I found it a very interesting listen indeed. The opening track on the record has a kick that's easy to mess up, but here it was tight and taut and the sub bass synth was certainly very much in evidence. There's still that slight warmth to the overall sound, but again I found myself really warming (*pun intended*) to the Onix. Instead of that cold and analytical, studio type sound you can get with some amps you are offered up a portrayal that allows good insight into the music without there being so much information you end up mentally pulling a track to pieces and losing a degree of enjoyment.

Track two on the Tresor album by Stewart S Walker has an electronic hat sound that really cuts through the mix and this was portrayed superbly by the Onix. There is still that ever so slight blurring of the sound at the very top end compared to the best but for its class I thought the sound was really very acceptable indeed. Dave Tarrida's "Mouse Catcher General" has a really cool sub bass synth sound that some amps can struggle with, but despite what I've said previously about the bass on the Onix it coped really well.

Overall the sound of the Onix A25 is very enjoyable indeed with a balanced musicality erring in favour of the midrange especially..

Conclusion

At the asking price I believe that the Onix A25 offers users a very good value product. Its sound is weighty and nicely controlled in the lower registers and despite its moderate quoted output it certainly packs a punch.

With the great value Q Acoustics Concept 20s I certainly got the impression that the two were bringing the very best out in each other and as a relatively inexpensive system this pairing would be very good.

At playing music the Onix does a formidable job and it certainly gets your toes tapping for extended periods. It's fast, punchy and a good deal of fun and

Onix A-25 Amplifier

whilst it may not have the very last degree of finesse at the frequency extremes as our (£10K) pre and power partnership, it certainly does a great job at conveying what it is fed with in a coherent and (I can't stress this enough) fun way. The Onix lacks a little of the Clones overall finesse too, but what it misses out on here here it makes up for in spades with clout and foot tapping enjoyment. Bass isn't always the last word with the Onix in absolute depth but what is there is tight and taut, whereas the Clones can sound slightly flabby and uncontrolled in this area.

Overall the sound of the Onix A25 is very enjoyable indeed with a balanced musicality erring in favour of the midrange especially..

Soundstaging is wide (very wide for an amp at this price) but when compared to the best it lacks that 3D thing a little and here it's on a par with the Clones if not actually slightly better.

It does well with all the genres you can throw at it without having to make too many compromises along the way and after extended listening I really got to like the overall balance of the sound. I particularly enjoyed its punchiness!

In the sub £1000 price range there's a lot of choice in amps to be had but I'd strongly suggest that the Onix should be on your short list of amps to audition with your kit. It performs well, is well specified and looks fabulous.

As an after-word, we had a pair of speakers that came in for audition and it was clear that they needed a kick up their backside to get them singing and of the five amps we had to hand the Onix, despite being one of the least expensive, gave us the best results.

Build Quality - 8/10

Sound Quality - 7.5/10

Value for money - 8.5/10

Overall - 8/10

Price when reviewed - £775

Recommended for listeners looking for a relatively inexpensive amplifier with good looks, good features and a non fatiguing sound profile that is fun to listen to with a wide range of musical styles.

Stuart Smith



AudioValve Eclipse Preamplifier

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



AudioValve have been around for quite a while and have earned a reputation for making good sounding valve-based equipment with salon-level visual appearance. The current product range encompasses 14 different models of valve amplification, from headphone amps to pre and power amps, and integrateds. Here the Eclipse Preamp is put through its paces.

The very first thing I did as I carefully peeled away the protective covering after lifting the Eclipse out of its carton was whisper and astonished "Wow". The pre-amp is *gorgeous* to look at! An absolutely stunning mixture of Art Deco architectural loveliness and German hi-tech precision. It has a see-through perspex top and is gently internally illuminated with a couple of red LEDs when in operation. You just have to see it, photos really do not do it justice.

The Eclipse (or Eklipse as it is called in German speaking areas) is a valve (tube)-based remote controlled pre-amplifier. The review sample had "Eclipse" on its faceplate.

It has 7 stereo RCA inputs, 2 pairs of RCA outputs and 1 pair of XLR outputs.

The front panel sports and output selector (including mute), source selector, volume control and, quite unusually, a balance control.

Valve options

I decided to perform this review with the pre-amp valves in stock form; four Electro-Harmonix 12AU7A. The audiophile world is practically awash in tube-rolling options, and undoubtedly the overall flavour and presentation of the Eclipse pre-amp can be substantially modified by inserting your own choice of valves. Which in a way makes this review something of a snapshot of a moving target, but hey

AudioValve Eclipse Preamplifier

ho, that's part of the fun of valve based kit, I guess!

According to Steve Dorian, of the UK distributor Audioelec, *"The Eclipse is a "tube rollers" dream. Depending on what your sonic tastes are will determine which tubes you will want to use in the Eclipse. While you may like the sound of the Eclipse with the stock Harmonix tubes, in my opinion, NOS tubes like the RCA Clear Top take its performance to a higher level."*

Yep, based on my experience of other valve pre-amps, I can well believe that. And I would certainly encourage Eclipse owners to try a few alternatives to see how the sonic standard can be raised further from the excellent performance already available with the ElectroHarmonix valves.

The Sound in Eclipse

This is a very fine sounding pre-amp - there's an immediate feeling of rightness and a wonderful sense of dynamic ebb and flow. I knew I was going to enjoy this review from the off.

Overall tonality is pretty much spot on, I think. A genuinely full-range sound, from the generous (but not too generous!) bass thru a very palpable midrange to a smoothly extended treble which gets vocal sibilance (a difficult challenge) just right.

Vocals have more individuality and character than I often hear, with excellent articulation and clarity, and sheer in-the-room presence. There's a rich tonal texture conveyed in voices that make them seem

Vocals have more individuality and character than I often hear, with excellent articulation and clarity, and sheer in-the-room presence. There's a rich tonal texture conveyed in voices that make them seem more real than usual with the Eclipse.

more real than usual with the Eclipse. Very nice indeed.

Bass is deep, textured, controlled, powerful and vibrant. It really is impressive. I'm tempted to characterise it as solid state bass done right! Those listeners who prefer some valvey bloomy loveliness to the lower frequencies may well be disappointed by this valve pre-amp, but my own view is that the Eclipse is far more realistic in its portrayal of lower



AudioValve Eclipse Preamplifier

frequencies than that.

There is an impressive lucidity in complex, multi-strand music. Nothing seems to phase it, music is just presented clearly and without confusion no matter how 'busy' it gets. I was very impressed by this, all too often the musical plot is lost as the going gets going, not so with this pre-amp.

Despite the eulogy of praise so far presented in this review, its imaging ability is, quite possibly, where the Eclipse pleases me most. There's a wholeness to the soundstage, a sense of immersion in the recording space that really encourages involvement in the musical experience. There's a 'you are there' feel to the presentation that really tops off an already impressive performance.

The one area that I have any real reservation about is in the ultimate resolution of detail. Leading edges of transients are slightly smoothed over, a little of the 'spang' of plucked strings, for example, is lost; rapid runs become just slightly homogenised and run together. The feeling of musical immediacy is reduced compared to some amps, you may feel that you are seated a little further back from the musicians than with some components. I know that some listeners will like this aspect of the Eclipse's presentation, those who enjoy a slightly laidback and less intrusive presentation. Others, like me, would prefer to feel they are closer to the action.

I often find it illuminating to try and come up with a single word which encapsulates a hifi component's nature, a word that instantly conveys my emotional response to its sound. For the Eclipse I think that word would be "vibrant".

Usability

There's a warm-up period of about a minute after switch-on before the Eclipse becomes operational.

The remote control of volume is nicely slow in operation but not too slow, you are unlikely to get whisked to unexpectedly high volumes by the careless press of a button.

But the manically flashing red light indicating remote operation is a bit distracting! - personally, I'd cover this with a small piece of black insulating tape.

An unusual feature of the Eclipse is its ability to clean and deoxidize the internal relays' contacts. An amazing racket of clicking switches results when this feature is selected - it's quite worrying when you first do this. And there is a firm recommendation in the user manual to turn your power amp OFF when

using this function - I suggest you follow this recommendation!

Tube hiss / valve noise? Nope, I never heard any. OK, if I turned up the volume toward full there was a faint tracery of hiss - but the volume level would have been insanely, ridiculously, speaker-destroyingly loud - I can't believe that anyone would ever have an issue with this.

Value for money

This strikes me as being reasonable, not one of the world's great bargains, but you get what you pay for. Current UK pricing is £3,700, for which you obtain wonderful appearance (subject of course to personal taste), superb build quality and genuine high end sound. My feeling is that you pay a bit extra for the visual design aspects, but that seems fair enough to me and will be an important aspect for many buyers at this price level.

Summary

Despite the slight shortcomings heard in ultimate resolution, I can imagine many music lovers falling in love with the Eclipse pre-amp. You can count me as one of their number! It really is a musically rewarding and engrossing pre-amp.

So the Audio Valve Eclipse pre-amp is recommended! - for its musical palpability and sense of involvement, and yes, the vibrancy of the presentation. If you want the ultimate in resolution and micro-detail I would suggest you may want to look elsewhere, although you may have to sacrifice other aspects in which the Eclipse excels if you do so!

Build Quality - 9/10

Sound Quality - 8/10

Value for money - 8/10

Overall - 8.3/10

Price when reviewed - £3700

Recommended for its musical palpability, sense of involvement and the vibrancy of the presentation

Jerry Jacobs

SoulNote SA 710 Amplifier

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Nippon Hifi are sole distributors for the SoulNote brand throughout Europe and it's they who first contacted Hifi Pig with a view to taking a listen to one of their little SA 710 integrated amplifiers. They also do a larger amp and a CD player we'll take a listen to later on.

Yes, me too! I'd never come across the SoulNote brand before but it appears they have a long and illustrious history spanning back several decades and have close ties to a Japanese chap by the name of Mr Nakazawa who is president of CSR in Japan (the first company to be listed on the Tokyo stock exchange by all accounts). It's a history that involves Marantz, Superscope and Philips, plus the launch of a number of breakthrough products including Mr Nakazawa's development of the world's first two-body CD player (Philips LHH100) back in 1988...there are lots more products I could mention but this is a review so perhaps not the place to delve into the history books too far! Suffice to say, SoulNote was born out of the desire for Mr Nakazawa to create products free from the constraints of the "bean counters" and concentrate on delivering on sound quality for music lovers.

The SA710 isn't a new design by any stretch of the imagination having been launched in 2008 and so I was a little intrigued having not heard of this little Class A/B beastie that boasts no negative feedback and so accepted it for review with the usual caveats.

First impressions were that it looked nice enough but nothing spectacular – it's a black box of normal width with a power switch, input selector, a volume knob (stepped) and a quarter inch headphone socket on the front. Flipping the amp round you get a good range of inputs including three line level inputs and a balanced XLR input, a gain switch that gives about 14dB lift in its high position, some nice and sturdy

SoulNote SA 710 Amplifier

speaker terminals, two variable level pre-outs and the AC input. Overall it looks decently put together.

The user manual states that the speakers must be of 8 ohms or more but I connected it to the Mummy's (4 Ohm/94dB) anyway as these were the most sensitive speakers I had available and given the amps diminutive output I thought these the most suitable for the job in hand.

The manual talks about their being "spike pins" to allow the amp to sit on spikes but none were in the pack and so I never tried this option, though there are the threads on the underside of the amp should you fancy a go and they look to be standard fit.

Packaging is ok (single box and polystyrene protection) and adequate but I'd be happier having it double boxed if I was sending it out personally – though it arrived here in perfect condition which is saying something given the care most couriers seem to take over kit. Finish is pretty good and the volume and source selector knobs have a good and solid feel to them. On the rack it looks stylish in a minimal no frills kind of way and I sort of like the way it looks, though others will have it down as being a bit dull and lack lustre...it's definitely quite utilitarian!

I'll be honest and say that, given I had never heard of the SoulNote brand, I was fully expecting sending this back without review, but as I plumbed it in for the first time and turned it on there was a "crikey this sounds pretty decent" moment that happens once in a while with review kit – sometimes it's the other way round and stuff goes straight back without a word being said other than "thanks, but no thanks".

As mentioned, this is a 10 watts a channel amplifier but given the deep bass that came out of the speakers and the control that the amp exerts over these low

When I put a posting up on Facebook about us reviewing this amp a while ago there was a comment made along the lines of "10W for €1800 is ridiculous" but in hifi, as in life, it isn't necessarily about who has the biggest willy waving rights in the Watt department and often its more to do with how those Watts are used to give a great and emotionally satisfying experience... and it's here the SoulNote really delivers.

frequencies you'd hardly believe it was such a weedy (on paper) amplifier. The bass notes fair bounce along and are tight, controlled and deep. In the bass department (I'm a bit of a bass head) this is a very capable amplifier to my mind and it certainly made a very positive first impression on me.

It was a bit of a revelatory experience listening to this amplifier if I'm honest and the last time I had this kind of feeling was listening to Neil Young on the Tellurium Q Iridium for the first time. I was a bit gob smacked with the SoulNote from the off. I was telling Hifi Pig colleague (Danny) on the phone



SoulNote SA 710 Amplifier

about first turning it on and had goosebumps whilst talking about it – surely a good sign.

The first record I put on was Deep Dish's "Yoshiesque Two" which is a great tech/house album that rarely fails to please but does put amp and speakers through the wringer. Tonight really was no disappointment in any way and there's that great bass quality that I mentioned, crisp and sparkling highs and an overall balance that suggests that this is a great little amp. Sound stage is wide and there is some depth too – in no way three dimensional but pretty good. The amp is neither cold and harsh nor warm and fluffy but overall pretty neutral in its character.

It's dynamically engaging too as on Hawkwind's "Warrior at the Edge of Time" album and it's able to portray the full on acid freak-out wall of sound, but also communicate minor details of the mix nicely and with a good deal of finesse that belies its modest output and relatively modest pricepoint. In some ways this amp reminded me of my much lamented 300B PSE amplifier which is high praise indeed!

As I'm writing this I'm aware I'm becoming a little gushing, but I do think this is a good amplifier and

especially for the money they are asking. When I put a posting up on Facebook about us reviewing this amp a while ago there was a comment made along the lines of "10W for €1800 is ridiculous" but in hifi, as in life, it isn't necessarily about who has the biggest willy waving rights in the Watt department and often it's more to do with how those Watts are used to give a great and emotionally satisfying experience... and it's here the SoulNote really delivers.

On the negative side I do think that you will need reasonably sensitive speakers with this amp to allow the 10 Watts to really sing (even with that 14dB boost) and if you feed it with crap it will dish out crap. But feed it good quality files through speakers that are relevant and I think many will love this amp. I'm not sure about the thing about speakers needing to be 8 Ohms either as this would suggest the amp may be unstable with more difficult loads, but I certainly had no problems with the Mummys. The emotional connection to the music (and isn't that what hifi is all about) with this amp is really at a high level, but in the grand scheme of things that doesn't add up to a whole hill of beans in the reviewing game...you want to know how it actually sounds don't you?



SoulNote SA 710 Amplifier

I played a lot of techno and house music through this amplifier as I simply loved the slam and overall feel with this genre, but being able to play one kind of music does not a great amplifier make! Roy Harper's "Flat, Baroque and Broke" was on next and there are not a lot of negative comments to be made – again I was pleasantly reminded of my 300B amp. It's very smooth in the midrange but seems to be delivering the power across the frequencies fairly evenly and without a great deal of effort – it just doesn't seem to get in a flap and get all flustered even when pushed to pretty loud volumes. There's a good degree of openness to the music too which I liked with instruments sitting in their own space in the mix.

"Acoustic guitar sounds wonderful" I wrote in my notes, but there is a tiny bit of brittleness to the very top end but you do have to listen out for it. There is good amount of detail to the sound that does again belie this amp's relatively modest price-point. There is an "in the room" experience on the tune "I Hate the Whiteman" with the level of detail being very high but without being too in your face and overwhelming. Vocals are well portrayed being clean and relatively lifelike with only a little colour being added by the amp and the main vocal being slightly forward in the mix. The midrange frequencies are a certainly a strong point of this amplifier.

Soundstaging isn't overblown or exaggerated and what you get overall is a natural and organic sounding amplifier. There is little in the way of this amp feeling at all over analytical and things have an unforced feel to them which I enjoyed a lot.

On acoustic music there is good space around instruments and a delicacy to the way instruments are portrayed. The sonic image doesn't get blurred with complex music as the Onix amp we recently reviewed had a slight tendency to do, but then you don't get the same degree of oomph you got with the Onix... though the SoulNote does have more control in the bottom end and this leads to a pleasantly engaging punchiness - it just doesn't go as low as the Onix I didn't think.

At high volume (but without clipping) the very top end gets a bit brittle as I mentioned, but listening at low levels you get a good balance of the frequencies and also good insight into the sound. The midrange does dominate a little at these volumes, but there is still that feeling that everything is represented properly. Lovers of late night listening sessions will

really enjoy this amp I think!

The headphone output is adequate and a useful addition to proceedings, but isn't going to win any prizes with those dedicated to headfi. It goes loud and it is powerful, driving the three pairs of cans I had to listen to with ease – it just doesn't seem to have the same level of intimacy and openness that the amplifier itself brings to the table. Most occasional headphone users will find it more than sufficient for their needs I think!

Conclusion

It goes without saying that I really enjoyed my time with this little amplifier and if what I've said in the course of the review appeals to you and you're in the market for a well put together, great sounding amplifier that doesn't cost a fortune then try and get a listen to it. You'll need to have relatively sensitive loudspeakers though. Price wise I think it punched slightly above its weight and I stand by my comments comparing it to my 300B PSE amplifier.

It does all genres pretty well (no classical music listened to i'm afraid) with its strong points being an open, detailed sound that you can listen to for hours on end. It has a strong midrange and good punchy and tight bass. The very top end does give way a little, but this was a minor negative point in an overall sea of positives.

The little SoulNote is pretty basic in its facilities, but more than adequate for listening to music but it has no AV facilities and no remote control.

What this amp does in conclusion is just get on with the job of playing music and as such it will appeal to those people that love music rather than the kit that the music is played on and for this I recommend it.

Build Quality - 8/10

Sound Quality – 8.5/10

Value for money – 8.0/10

Overall – 8.2/10

Price when reviewed - €1799

Recommended for listeners looking for a no frills yet reasonably specified integrated amplifier that delivers an effortless sound at both high (if you have the right speakers) and low volume without breaking the bank.

Stuart Smith



Black Pearls

DIVE DEEP INTO YOUR SENSES



Temple Audio Bantam Gold Integrated Amplifier

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Made in Britain and widely regarded in some circles, the Bantam Gold from Temple Audio is a low cost and versatile little amplifier.

I'd been waiting to get hold of one of these little amps for a long time ever since I read about them on one of the many hifi forums and then when I read that one of our readers was using the power amplifier version on the end of a Shindo Labs pre amplifier I just had to get one in for review...and fast. There seems to be a good few folk who are ditching their uber-expensive amps in exchange for these little class D affairs, so what gives?

Temple are a family business that sells direct to the public and are based in the UK. They offer a number of products including the amplifier we're reviewing here, monoblocks, a headphone and pre-amplifier,

Temple Audio Bantam Gold Integrated Amplifier

the Bantam Classic and the Bantam USB with everything coming with a 60 day no quibble money back guarantee plus three year warranty - can't say fairer than that then!

Just how tiny this amp actually is came as a bit of a shock if truth be known – they are very small indeed and come with just a push button on/off switch which glows blue when powered up, a volume knob and then round the back a pair of decent quality speaker binding posts and a single pair of stereo RCA inputs. One input, no switches and that's your lot. Now I don't mention this lack of facilities as being a bad thing at all as this is a low cost and purposefully minimal on features amp that to be fair satisfies my input needs most of the time. It's solid feeling, certainly reasonably well put together and offers up a surprising 25 Watts via a chip. On the rack it looks absolutely lost it's so small, but then size isn't everything and it coped fine with the heavy Ultra Black speaker cables I was using without being dragged down the back of the rack. The amp comes with a dedicated wallwart but many people are using a dedicated battery supply with reportedly very good results, though for the purposes of this review I'll be sticking to the standard PSU it arrived with. The

Vocals were very nicely portrayed and separated from the other instruments in the mix.

paint job on the amp I had was a little lumpy in places but overall absolutely acceptable.

As I'd read so much about this amplifier being the best thing since part-baked foccacia it was straight in at the deep end for it and so I plumbed it into the main system. Now at around £200 (£189.99 to be precise) putting the Bantam Gold in the company of kit costing god knows how much would seem at first glance to be absolutely nuts, but the hype around these amps is huge and, as I mentioned, folk are using them in high-end systems in favour of much more expensive offerings and so I thought this was a warranted and legitimate exercise... but the review does need to be read in the context of a £200 amp in a £15K plus system.



Temple Audio Bantam Gold Integrated Amplifier

During the review period I used digital files throughout with some being ripped as FLAC from CD and some being Hi Resolution downloads. The DAC used was the VAD DAC, the speakers hORNS Mummys and the cables were all Tellurium Q. Source was a laptop running JRiver and Bliss and a NAS for storage.

First impressions were very positive on Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here". The mids are nicely done, the bass is deep enough and nice and tight, but the top end was quite harsh I thought. I contacted Temple Audio about this and was asked if I'd run the amp in which I duly did for a few weeks before restarting the review process proper.

On my return to the tiny little Bantam I found it in many ways quite similar to the SoulNote amp we were reviewing at the same time – revealing, punchy and quite dynamic, but where this amp fell down a little in my opinion and in comparison, was still in the top end. Running in had calmed things down a good deal, but there was still a feeling that this amp wouldn't compete with the best out there at the frequency extremes. Now don't get me wrong as we're comparing a sub £200 amplifier with an €1800 amp and so the more expensive amplifier really should be better - and it certainly is to my mind. The Onix amp we recently reviewed was in some ways a better amp too, but again that is four times the price of the Bantam. Where the Onix was warmer and more forgiving the Bantam is ruthless and unforgiving and it's certainly a good deal leaner and less warm with a good degree of transparency.

On some hi-rez piano files I found the amp to render the sound a little unnaturally when compared to the reference amp and this niggles at me quite a bit. However, the bass and mids with the Bantam Gold were thoroughly enjoyable and you get a really good portrayal of the stereo image in both depth and width. Vocals were very nicely portrayed and separated from the other instruments in the mix.

Listening to "Closer" from the Deadmau5 album I think I've discovered what this amp does really well (and I mean REALLY well) and that's that side-chained compression pump that is ubiquitous on modern dance and techno. Here the bass was really good and, despite what I've said earlier, so was the top end. OK, so we're talking about a specific genre of music here, but what was coming out of the speakers was deep, detailed and thoroughly enjoyable. Perhaps further burning in was beginning to pay dividends. On the strength of what I heard

with lots of house and techno, I'd suggest that if you like these genres then this is a great choice of amp for you if you're on a budget and have reasonably sensitive loudspeakers – it really is very good indeed and everyone in the house listening was in agreement with this.

Now I'm going to allow myself to be sidetracked a little here but I'm forever banging on at people that how in the 80s every teenager wanted the standard "beginners" system of a Dual turntable, a NAD amp and a pair of Wharfedale or KEF something-or-others and it strikes me that what we have here with the Bantam is the modern day equivalent of the old NAD 3020 amps – something that gives you a great big slice of the audiophile pie but leaving you craving for more...if that makes sense. Jerry listened to the similarly priced Amptastic amp recently and enjoyed that a good deal, but sadly I don't have one here to do a direct comparison – I'd like to very much and if it happens I'll add a little post script. What I do have is one of the second generation T Amps from Sonic Impact and in a direct comparison the Bantam Gold wipes the floor with its older chip based counterpart – it's similar in flavour but you just get more of everything, more controlled and just "better" in every respect with the Bantam Gold.

Anyway back to the music and on with Chic's "Good Times" and we've got an expressive and dynamic sound with great separation of instruments in the mix and a particularly tuneful bass – certainly no one-note-fart-fest here! On the Streets "Too Much Brandy" tune there's a richness to the bass but on other tracks from the same album the really deep bass can be a little much for the Bantam and it does struggle a little.

On most acoustic music I found the Bantam to be a real hoot and thoroughly enjoyed it. The Great Reunion album I play a lot had musicians stood on the stage in the correct places and again the vocal was rich and well defined in its space. Horns were natural enough sounding but again I found pianos to sound ever so slightly not quite right.

Conclusion

I don't think this amp is the panacea that some are claiming it to be, but I still believe that it is a very good amplifier that offers exceptional value for money and will offer a great introduction to what is available in the audiophile world without having to spend a fortune. I also believe that for a person starting out down the slippery audiophile slope the

Temple Audio Bantam Gold Integrated Amplifier

amp will allow them to climb a good few more rungs up the ladder with other kit without having to worry too much about buying a new amplifier and for that reason I think it is a great buy. If I was to be in the position of not having my main amp to use all the time then I would be happy to use the Bantam Gold, but I also think I would miss the added finesse, refinement and all round better quality afforded by what is after all a £6K amplifier.

If I was a teenager or anyone looking to get a great quality amplifier at a bargain basement price then the Bantam Gold would most certainly be on my shortlist. As I say, it will allow a buyer to upgrade other components before feeling the need to change the amplifier and in that time it will give a great deal of satisfaction and enjoyment I'm certain. In absolute audiophile terms it falls down in a couple of areas, namely at the extremes of the frequency spectrum, but who cares to be honest - it's £190, performs brilliantly in the main and you can play with power supplies to satisfy the tinkerer in you should you so desire.

In the main system it did a very good job, but was bettered by the significantly more expensive amps

we had in to compare it to...and so it should be. As a low cost amplifier to use in a second system then this really is going to be very hard to beat in my opinion...and so I bought the review sample.

Build Quality - 8/10

Sound Quality – 7.5/10

Value for money – 9.5/10

Overall – 8.3/10

Price when reviewed - £189.99

Recommended for those that want to have a great introduction to what is achievable in the audiophile world and who are on a budget. Very highly recommended to those looking for a very good and low cost second system amplifier presented in a format that is easy to accommodate even when space is at a premium.

Stuart Smith



PrimaLuna Prologue Premier - Valve Integrated

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



With EL 34 valves onboard this great looking amp from PrimaLuna comes in at £2300. Specify it with KT88 and the price goes up a little to £2600, which for a well put together valve amplifier is pretty much loose change these days, but will it cut the mustard? .

Gone are the days when valve amps sounded like a lush, overly warm and romantic interpretation of the music. These days a typical valve amplifiers circuit is more geared towards a sparkly more dynamic and gutsy type of presentation and the PrimaLuna Prologue Premier continues this trend. This particular valve integrated from PrimaLuna was sent along to Hifi Pig for review from Absolute Sounds in the UK.

The amp looks modern and clean and on the front has just the volume control (ALPS Blue Velvet) and the source selector knob. A valve cage is included to protect the valves from inquisitive fingers and the power switch is on the left hand side of the amp. Around the back is a good selection of four line level RCAs, a home theatre pass through and speaker terminals for 8 and 4 Ohm loads. Inside wiring is point to point. Included in the design of the PrimaLuna is a Bad Tube Indicator which takes the form of a small LED on the chassis in front of each valve and as its name suggests this indicates if a valve is bad. The Power Transformer Protection circuit allows the amp to switch off and reset should the power transformer overheat and there's a similar circuit (OTP) for the output transformers. In place of a plate fuse the amp utilises a "+B relay" which

PrimaLuna Prologue Premier - Valve Integrated

works in conjunction with the OTP circuit to protect in case of valve failure.

The model we were sent had 4 EL34 power tubes and 4 smaller ECC82/12AU7 valves. The more typical 'old school' valve enthusiast would take one look at this valve compliment and suggest that the amp would have a large, overblown midrange, soft bass and perhaps a rolled off treble. How wrong he would be!

It's such a common misconception with valves that they are nothing but trouble ridden unreliable and unnecessary parts of an audio setup - this is also untrue. Yes, a valve can have issues of its own from time to time, but they are far from unreliable in their modern form and with the ability for a user to replace a valve rather than send an entire transistor amplifier to an engineer for repair general maintenance is somewhat simpler in the main. I have personally been using valve amps for a fair few years now and apart from one instance (which a quick valve change solved) have not had any trouble with them whatsoever.

One of the main advantages for me is that the valve platform allows for tube rolling where the valves can be changed to offer a slightly different sonic characteristic and flavour to the music, which is

certainly something that cannot be achieved with solid state amplifiers.

The Prologue Premier being all valve has this tube rolling capacity, but taking this notion one step further the PrimaLuna has the ability to configure its Auto Bias settings via the flick of a switch to power KT88 valves and it's variant a 6550 - as well as the EL34's (provided for this review) and their variants of KT77 and 6CA7 valves.

Then there are the four ECC82/12AU7 which also have various and different sounding equivalents in modern or NOS (new old stock) vintage tubes, industrial, military and broadcast forms. A minefield you say? No, a fun way to tailor the amp to specific requirements and tastes in that all valves convey slight variations in bass, treble and midrange presentation with some have larger effects than others.

There's a certain unmistakeable quality to vocals and instruments using a good valve amplifier, a richness of tone, a naturally glorious and beautifully liquid midrange which is both expressive and organic. The PrimaLuna Prologue Premier is one of those valve amps which certainly ticks these particular boxes for me.

SOUND



PrimaLuna Prologue Premier - Valve Integrated

The first thing apparent when switching the PrimaLuna on is its cleanliness in the top end. It has a wonderfully sparkly and airy treble which blends down into a clean upper midrange. Details are prominent and easily depicted even when listening to large crescendos and larger orchestral pieces. Dynamics in this portion of the frequency range are not overly strong, they are however far from subdued or mellow and they are a little more energetic and cleaner than natural.

Moving down into the midrange most listeners would agree that this is the strongest area of the sound reproduction with valve amplifiers (and which I agree with) although there are vast differences in tonal balance in this area from amplifier to amplifier. Vocals on the Prologue Premier are strong vibrant and clean in nature, projected and very slightly up-front - which is how I like them. An EL34 tube will always have some added warmth in the midrange and the cleaner circuit on the PrimaLuna allows for a great flavour to vocals. As well as the cleanliness the midrange conveys there is an unmistakable richness to the undertones of male vocals and an organic and natural rasp to the sound which really allows the listener to hear the great vocal range of the likes of Frank Sinatra... or his modern counterpart Michael Buble.

Female vocalists like Rachelle Farell, Ilse DeLange, Mariah Carey and Diana Krall all have a pitch of tone respective to their vocal presentation. Here, although a little bit cleaner than some other modern EL34 amplifiers, upper midrange factors in a bit more forwardness when hitting higher volumes, but at reasonable volumes it's not as apparent.

Moving along into the bass regions – another common trait of an EL34 amplifier is that its bass is a little fuller, less driven and a little less complex. The nature of the PrimaLuna circuit actually compliments this very well! There isn't a lot of bloom, there is a tightness compared to other amps such as the Eastern Electric M520 and a simple change of the power valves to the 6CA7 or KT77 would increase pace, drive and lower mid information. Bass as I said is full and it's surprisingly well extended for an EL34 which is a testament to the circuit used in the PrimaLuna. I would say that overall it was more complimentary to live performances than manufactured music.

Exploring some other aspects of the sound a little further Damien Rice's 'Volcano' showed marvellous timbre to the running of guitar strings to the left hand side of the realistic soundstage allowing both the male and female vocals to sound fluid and engrossing. This is a great late night listening track with great flow and although a modestly stripped down piece of music, the Premier really brings out all the small nuances and finely detailed sounds within the soundstage in a true 'out of the box fashion'.

I wouldn't say that there is a great amount of refinement in this amps presentation, although it can convey delicacies which for a bit of soft rock such as 'The Sultans of Swing' from Dire Straits allows for the electric guitar to pierce the air and give a bit of an edgy grunt to proceedings.

Of course, being an ardent tube roller I just had to swap out the tubes in the amp and opted for a quad of Gold Lion (GL) KT77's which bias from the EL34 switch on the side of the amp.

I also changed the stock 12AU7's for a quad of Siemens and Halaske (S & H) triple mica E82CC long plates from the early 60's. From experience the GL's should provide more bass drive whilst retaining warmth whilst the S&H will add bandwidth, balance and control.

Switching back on and allowing the PrimaLuna to preheat the valves and do its usual safety circuit checks the differences that could be heard were immediate.

There was a larger bass re-



PrimaLuna Prologue Premier - Valve Integrated

With its ability to switch between KT88, EL34's and their variants via a simple flick of a switch and its non-deadly auto-biasing feature, the PrimaLuna is extremely flexible and should cater to the specifics of most users.

sponse which was also tighter and more driven. Mid-range gained openness and the silky clean expression of the vocals attested to a more 'in the room' feeling with them being more lifelike, less muddy and absolutely wonderful in every way.

Top end was a huge leap for me with the depiction between details and the airy silences really added a more intense and lifelike feel to the sound. Notes were crisper yet more controlled and the detail retrieval seemed greatly improved with added bandwidth and rendering.

Dynamics also seemed to sound freer and came from a darker background which was never overly dead and still allowed for that seductive valve flow to wash across an improved soundstage.

I ended up concluding my time with the PrimaLuna listening to some rock and I'm sure most of you that follow my reviews know this really isn't my favourite genre, but then I do like a little from time to time. One of my favourite rock albums of all time is the 'Hysteria' album by Def Leopard, definitely their best work and with the rolled tubes on board I easily went through the whole album. The amp still retained the previous grunt with the genre that I enjoyed earlier when listening to some Dire Straits and this was truly unexpected. I'm sure some would argue that valve amps just don't do rock music but I enjoyed it very much with the PrimaLuna in the system.

Accompanied with the amplifier is a seriously sleek 'wand' type remote in black metal and with just six shiny stainless buttons. I never touched on this earlier in the review as my example had run out of batteries - probably due to having a button depressed when it was packaged after it's last review, I never bothered to change the batteries as you need to remove the two rubber rings (which prevent it from being scratched (or scratching) a flat surface and which stop it from sliding about on a table) to reveal a couple screws which then expose the battery compartment. I'm used to having to turn two volume pots on my Emille so one was still an easier solution than normal.

I just found myself holding the remote from time to time and admiring it instead... and playing air guitar with it too from time to time!

CONCLUSION

I would conclude that the PrimaLuna Prologue Premier's circuit is highly accomplished and with the stock valves in place it sounds fantastic. However with a few changes in valve compliment there really is a whole heap of detail, complexity (amongst other attributes) which can be achieved to provide for a really engrossing listen.

With its ability to switch between KT88, EL34's and their variants via a simple flick of a switch and its non-deadly auto-biasing feature, the PrimaLuna is extremely flexible and should cater to the specifics of most users.

Looks-wise it's simple, attractive and well made and it comes with that super sexy all metal remote control.

I for one would certainly stump up the pennies for one of these. Have a listen and see what you think and if your already on the valve train and have any of the variants of the tubes mentioned take them along and see if your dealer will let you have a play - if not wait 'til you get it home.

Build Quality - 8/10

Sound Quality - 8/10

Value For Money - 8/10

Overall - 8/10

Price when tested EL34 - £2300 (KT88 - £2600)

Highly recommended for its flexibility, simple good looks and core sonic signature.

Dan Worth



CLONES Audio are a small company producing a handful of products that have been well received the world over. Here Hifi Pig takes a listen to their monoblock power amps and preamplifier.

My first contact with Clones was when I reviewed their [25 watt per channel integrated amplifier the i25](#). I was quite literally stunned when I opened it up and saw the wonderful quality of workmanship the unit contained.

As a result of the auditory results this unit achieved, I immediately asked them if they would like me to review their, soon to be released, 55 watt monoblock power amplifiers. I got in touch with Stuart and all I had to do was to wait!

The UK Distributor LW audio were contacted and a loan pair of amplifiers and the matching Pre-amplifier were duly dispatched.

They took a couple of days to arrive and from their double boxed packaging they emerged unscathed.

55pm. Monoblock Power Amplifier. Amplifier specification.

Output Power - 55Watts (into 8 ohms) 100Watts (into 4 ohms)

Input Impedance - 22Kohm (unbalanced only)

Gain - 30dB input

Signal to Noise Ratio - <95dB (minimum)

Dimensions - 170(w)x100(h)x170(d)

CLONES Audio Pre-amplifier and Monoblock Power Amps

Nb. all dims are in mm.

Weight - 4.2 kg each.

These units are covered by a five year warranty.

Cost - £890.40 per pair inc VAT and delivery

AP1 pre-amplifier comprises

Three line level inputs

One pair of line level outputs (a dual line level output is an option)

This is the same size as the Mono Blocks

Weight - 2.5 Kilo

Guaranteed for five years.

Cost. - £543,60 including VAT and delivery.

HOW ARE THEY BUILT?

These power amplifiers are elegant in an understated way, and have a diminutive footprint. Ideal for those amongst us that value aesthetics. Although, how they look is not all of the story! They are equipped with excellent socketry, the phono sockets are amongst, with the legend CMC USA engraved on them, the

finest I have ever used. They grip the plug with just the right amount of pressure. They are not the usual phono sockets fashioned from rather cheap plate, they are properly cast and machined sockets which are located with nuts and washers. Along with the usual, switched and fused, IEC mains socket on the rear they also have a pair of heavy duty Loudspeaker terminals, these are large enough to accept any type of cable or termination. The front panel has the Logo along with a green led to indicate when the unit is powered up. This shows some thought has gone into this as Funjoe (he owns the company) has resisted the urge to put a blue high intensity LED in. I find these really bright LEDs draw my eyes all the time and cant take my eyes off them!

Inside the robust case sits a large toroidal transformer, in the compartment at the front. Along with the power supply regulator board and of course the power indicator. In the rear compartment is the output stage and most of the internal wiring.



CLONES Audio Pre-amplifier and Monoblock Power Amps

So the amplifier is built along logical lines. From its alloy case to its three cone type feet, although care must be taken when using large and heavy mains power leads, this amplifier has been thought through properly. The case is built from sensible materials and is screwed together using metric thread machine screws rather than the ubiquitous self tapping screws that we see on most of the other amplifiers we see these days. Funjoe's soldering is second to none, each joint has been made correctly - again unusual as all of the soldering has been fashioned by hand.

All of these points instilled into me absolute confidence in the manufacturers build quality. This is important to Hi Fi enthusiasts as it promotes pride of ownership.

Funjoe built these amplifiers to drive larger loudspeakers that needed a bigger current swing. This of course is not a bad thing and it shows that he is aware of his clients needs. This awareness continues with the, "stiff", power supply, which almost doubles the amplifiers output into 4 ohm loads.

Before switch on I always check the DC offset, as a matter of course, which was commendably low.

The AP1 pre-amplifier is built along the same lines as the 55pm power amplifiers. It has the same front face as the 55pm's save for two control knobs. These are the selector switch and the lower one is the volume control. Inside the case the transformer sits in the front compartment. All of the active circuitry and switch and potentiometer sit behind the "Firewall" which is a logical choice as toroids can be responsible for RF pollution unless mounted correctly. Funjoe uses the same phono sockets as he does on his power amplifiers. The pre amplifier also uses the same IEC switched and fused mains input socket. The AP1 is identical in size as the 55pm units, but as you may suspect the AP1 is almost half the weight, at 2.5 Kilos, of the 55pm.

If you are not familiar with the use of separate power amps and a dedicated pre amplifier, you will find that it is best practise to switch the pre on first, wait a few seconds and then switch the power amplifiers on second. Of course you will make sure that the pre is turned down to zero before switching on. If you do this then you will get no "Burps" nor noise at all. The Clones units made no sound at all on switch on or indeed when powering down. Switching them off is the reverse of the instruction I have just written. Upon switch on I always listen to a mono radio

First disc into the machine was Joni Mitchell, "Turbulent Indigo", from the first bar of the music I knew this was a very good pair of power amplifiers with a sumptuous, tight bass and the almost liquid presentation of the mid range allied with crystalline treble.

programme at low level, at first, to make sure that the amplifier is working correctly. Also, I give any amplifier at least fifteen minutes to allow the power supply to stabilise, before turning the amplifier up to normal levels! Ben Duncan alluded to this some years ago in an article about power supply design.

HOW DO THEY SOUND?

As regular HiFi Pig readers will be aware I am on a quest to replace my ageing Crown DC300a amplifiers. The replacements must be physically smaller, deliver large amounts of current and use less power from the mains and must sound as good if not better! You may say this is an impossible quest, but I have tried many power amplifiers and only three have come close!

The amplifiers are warmed up, I have a pot of tea, milk and sugar, and loads of music so let the listening begin!

As is usual I first listened to some Radio Four, the stereo image was HUGE! With all the newsreaders spread in an arc between the loudspeakers. The famous R4 signature was evident, in that they always

CLONES Audio Pre-amplifier and Monoblock Power Amps

sound as if they are too close to the microphone. Coupled with the usual bass lift on the voice.

First disc into the machine was Joni Mitchell, "Turbulent Indigo", from the first bar of the music I knew this was a very good pair of power amplifiers with a sumptuous, tight bass and the almost liquid presentation of the mid range allied with crystalline treble. It was easy to identify the instruments in the cavernous sound stage. The depth of the stereo image was astonishing, although it was a little foreshortened in comparison to the Mighty Crown and the large Sumo Five (a 50 Watt per channel "A class" monster), although the HH AM8/12 amplifiers gave a very similar presentation. As an aside the HH amplifiers were designed for BBC use along with their LS3/5A speakers. The internal equalisation was set to "flat" before the test was started. This proved the manufacturer of the Clones has gone for an essentially flat frequency response, rather than a "Rose tinted Spectacle" type of response.

Larry Klein's bass playing was a joy to listen to, as he plays the melody on his instrument. Along with Wayne Shorter and Jim Keltner on the drum kit. I judged this album to be represented correctly.

The Reiner Beethoven discs were inserted next, Symphony No 6 rang out in my large listening room. Confidently played, I think this piece is happy music. With little or no restriction on the dynamic range of the original recording this piece always brings a smile to my face and although rarely heard on Radio 3 these days it is amongst the finest use of a symphony orchestra. From its very first performance on December the 8th 1813 it still sounds like it has been composed recently. The image was almost shoulder to shoulder in a wide arc in front of me. Along with precision, as the music demands, you can almost see Fritz waving his arms frenetically in his attempt to control the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Although if I were to be critical I would say that the version was played with a little too much gusto and was a little quick. From the woodwind to the huge bass section this piece certainly is a show stopper.



Along with the lush first and second strings this was displayed as a very emotive rendition.

The next disc was the Archiv production of the Brandenburg Concertos, played by The English Concert directed and led by Trevor Pinnock. This is one of the most unusual recordings as the Orchestra uses period instruments. It was recorded in the Henry Wood hall in between 1982 to 1984.

With the use of period instruments there had to be a large amount of care taken during the recording so as to not make the instruments sound “artificial!” Concerto Number four was played next, and I was greeted with a huge stereo image coupled with excellent transient attack and recovery. All of the detail of this small orchestra was described within the image. I did notice a little colouration in the upper bass. This gave a warm presentation to the music. Although it did not take any enjoyment from the Concerto.

I was loaned a copy of Melody Gardots album “My One and Only Thrill” and this was duly inserted into the CD player. Oh WOW! She sounds so.....sleazy, as if she was in a smoke filled bar late at night, instead of a modern recording studio. From the first track, “Baby I’m a Fool” to the last, “If the Stars Were Mine”, her voice was so captivating. I am sure this was due to the engineer on the desk as well as her rather fine musicians. Larry Klein no doubt had a large part to play in this as this album is full of subtle parts, as well as a well balanced recording. The musicians seem to play in their own space, in other words a well built amp does this. I must go out and buy a copy of this album! The sound was so infectious that I listened to very late at night, but I had to just try another album.....

Amadou and Maria, “Welcome To Mali” was pressed into service next and there’s that spacious image again, displayed with plenty of space between the musicians. The bass instrument was delicious, and the percussion was almost perfectly played, both technically and from the sound quality perspective. Again this album was played from end to end. I am not familiar with all of the instruments, but can say that this is a great album, although if you are into heavy rock it maybe wont suit you.

I played King Crimson, “Red” next, with plenty of bass definition and loads of lower midrange to upper treble detail this album certainly scooted along. Robert Fripp dancing on his guitar pedals was evident from the beginning, coupled with John

The bass instrument was delicious, and the percussion was almost perfectly played, both technically and from the sound quality perspective.

Wettens bass mastery, as well as Bill Bruford on the drums. A wonderful three piece band, but on this album they had the assistance of a couple more musicians who certainly fill out the sound. I have listened to Mr Fripp for more years than I care to remember, and the excitement generated as I cued the album up was almost tangible!

Tentatively I placed the next album into the machine, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, with their album, “The Tracks Of My Tears”, from the introduction as the drum solo kit gives way to the band, which had weight and drive, words fail me to describe the album, as this takes me back to my youth in the Night Clubs spread over the North East of England. But the sound quality was exemplary. The amplifiers describe the album with pace, precision, and weight. Oh and the songs.....proper songs that tell me a story, recorded in the heyday of Soul Music. The pick of this album has to be, “Shop Around”, a warning to young stud from a worried mother.

Funk was the next genre to be played with an album you probably have never heard before, “The J.B’s”. In James Browns career there were loads of bands in America who copied his style, the J.B’s were amongst the best as they captured his sound and energy, and James Brown appeared with them on numerous occasions. He took this copying of his

These are fine amplifiers, along with a fine pre amplifier. They display music as it was recorded save for a tiny bit of upper bass boost.

style as a compliment. From the weighty bass line to the flautist this album just makes me want to do a couple of spins and drops, but sadly I am not in the first flush of youth. Although the music is full of subtle licks as well as brass and strings, and of course James Brown appears on some tracks as well as Fred Wesley. This has to be one of the stand out Funk Compilations, so if you are not yet into Funk go get a copy and listen to it.....LOUD!

The final disc was put into the machine and Play was pressed. It was Diana Krall, "Live in Paris", the disc opens with applause ringing out, and it did sound realistic. Unlike a lot of much more expensive amplifiers, on poor amplification applause sometimes sounds like rainfall but this was not the case with these Mono blocks. I settled myself into my sofa, and the music begins.

My large listening room was transformed into the Paris Olympia. From the sumptuous piano, to the crystal delicacy of her voice this album is one of my most prized recordings. Of course the room acoustic was displayed with alacrity. This is not an easy trick to achieve and as we are all aware the acoustic of the recorded space depends on the equipment having an almost ruler flat frequency response.

I could almost hear the musicians breathing with this album in the machine. As well as the huge stereo image there seemed to be a definite cavernous depth to the image as well. The music was played with

breakneck pace as the set settled down, At track Five, "East of The Sun", the playing slowed down and the subtlety of Diana's band showed themselves to be extremely fine musicians. A very fine result, the CD was played from to the end and I almost had tears in my eyes as the final track was played.

CONCLUSIONS

These are fine amplifiers, along with a fine pre amplifier. They display music as it was recorded save for a tiny bit of upper bass boost. But, because of my size of listening room, they didn't quite have enough power for me. With my equipment they really shone. From their excellent build quality to the lovely aesthetic they represent an almost obsessively built Solid State amplifier. Although I do have one complaint! The control knobs have no cursor on them, and in dim lighting it can be very difficult to see what input is connected, and what level the pre is set to.

I did notice a difference when I plugged in the Clones pre amplifier rather than my home built passive pre-amplifier. The sound became much richer, although the sound stage shrunk a little. This was only in depth not in width. Now the thorny question, would I replace my Mighty Crown Power amplifier and my Denon pre amplifier with them. Firstly I sadly wont be replacing my Denon as the Clones does not have enough inputs and outputs in it, but its sound quality is not that much different. This is because my system is rather large and the Clones does not have any video inputs nor a monitor out. The Clones power amps are very good and really well made, but sadly don't have the power output I require. If I was just starting with my first or second system and I had a smaller listening room then I would buy these three units at the drop of a hat!

The Clones units have the ability to transport me to the recording studio, or the venue where the event took place.

Simply put, they are truly astonishing units, I will miss them after they are returned, sigh.....

I rate these power amps and pre very highly!

Build quality - 10

Sound quality - 9.5

Value for money - 9.0

Overall - 9.5

Stewart Wennen

Lampizator Level 7 DAC

Lukasz Fikus gained an enviable reputation in modding off the shelf hi-fi but now has his own portfolio of kit available for audiophiles to purchase. Here Hifi Pig listens to the £7200 Lampizator Level 7 DAC to see if all the hype around this product is well founded.



Hifi Pig
RECOMMENDED

The latest Lampizator Dac, the Level 7, has been causing quite a stir amongst those who have had the pleasure to listen to one and when I was offered to review it I gladly accepted. I had been getting many emails and phone calls from consumers who had either listened to, bought one or wanted to know if I had heard one recently, that the offer came just as I was about to make the enquiries myself to get a sample delivered.

The Level 7 is Lampizator's most minimalist DAC to date, utilising 2A3 power output tubes. Yes 2A3's, that you only find in an amplifier! The chip is directly connected to the grid of the single ended triode, with absolutely no series components in the path.

Level 7 is a combination of insight from previous level DACs which due to the compliment of components could not be housed in a single enclosure, so there is a PSU box and that Lampizator refer to as the music box (the DAC).

The two units arrived in two separate double boxes and lined with medium density furniture foam, not the most professional of packaging but very effective nonetheless.

To connect the two units together there are two neutrik speakon type locking cables or umbilical chords, one for the main power and the other to power the 32bit Asynchronous USB, this one for the USB is very thick and substantial and the other even thicker again!

Connections on the sample I had were thin on the ground, a coaxial RCA and a USB, which is the standard input configuration for the base model, with a toggle switch on the rear to flick between them.

Lucasz's primary goal is to keep the DAC as simplistic as possible in order not to injure the signal path in anyway.

Although when ordering there is the availability for any connection the heart desires as long as they are not balanced XLR outputs, which I'm sure you have already worked out due to the tube implementation of the design.

On purchase the end user has the option to choose the tube compliment. The DAC runs with two 6X5 rectifiers known for their low sag. The main tubes can be either 2A3, 45 or 300B, the variants are not interchangeable and the option must be specified on order.

A multitude of digital connections, AES/EBU, Coax, Optical, BNC, multiple analogue output sections in order to use the DAC as a multi room hub and volume controls can be specified, but be prepared for small compromises in sound with the likes of adding a volume control as this will sit in the signal path and disturb the purity of signal transfer.

All digital inputs will read files of up to 24/192, yet with a push of the button on the front of the music box the DAC enters DSD mode, allowing for USB streamed files to be read at 64X and 128X in DoP format.

The PSU is a completely separated dual mono power supply with vacuum tube rectification stage and choke, employed for filtering in each channel. The power reservoir is big enough to serve medium power Push Pull amplifiers. This is where Lampizator says the bass control secret lays.

Lampizator Level 7 DAC

The build of the Lampizator is somewhat industrial - it is a handmade product which could be more related to a workbench type product rather than a state of the art machined piece of engineering.

The front aluminium plate and it's simplicity works for me and is the face of the product... the rest of the case, which has a more industrial feel to it is covered well in my rack.

Note - you are NOT paying for expensive casing, pretty appearance and a piece of jewellery here, what you ARE paying for are two well constructed boxes of the highest grade components and experience of implementation.

The Sound

On first impressions the Lampi displays a purity of sound which I simply have not heard from any digital source, there is clarity and presence which can only be described as true 'realism'.

Kathryn Roberts 'The White Hind' conveys a breath-taking vocal which has its own three dimensional space in the centre of the soundstage, with hauntingly realistic height and an overall tonal balance which breathes with an organic and natural completeness that only vinyl enthusiasts with rigs of the highest quality would dream of. Sean Lakeman's accompanying vocal similarly embodies its own presence and parameters of positioning totally different in character and expressively as convincing.

'Hey Laura' - Gregory Porter conveys a piano harmonic to the listener which is both totally accurate and harmonically proficient. The acoustic of the listening space is so developed, allowing for notes to appear to reflect off the rear wall of this intimate performance that it gave me the perception that my own listening room was a direct comparison in size of that of the recordings.

The Level 7 was really digging its heels into my listening experience to the point that it's holographic representation of the music all but allowed me to walk through and around the performance with the ability to look each area part of the music up and down, through and through.

'Liquid Spirit' from the same album gave remarkable depth to the bands positioning within the recording, displaying what can only be referred to as a sculptured scene of sound waves. Differing depths and heights of brass, tambourine, bass, piano and Gregory's own vocal which was convincingly a few feet back into the surrounding band simply gave that im-

You're not paying for expensive casing, pretty appearance and a piece of jewellery here, what you ARE paying for are two well constructed boxes of the highest grade components and experience of implementation.

pression of undeniable realism.

The Lampizator oozes a sound of pure single ended beauty and grace. I listened thinking of how correct the sound was, how natural it was presented to me and how for each instruments dynamic a truth could be heard, effortlessly spacious captivating the listener. With a bass that delved down into the notes deepest depths with a preciseness that left me gobsmacked.

Fond memories of listening to the TQ Iridium came to mind. The midrange of the Level 7 was absolutely crystal clear and liquid, it's difficult to express an educated take on the balance when it just doesn't seem that balance plays any factor in a sound which is so pure and true.

Being able to reproduce Laurie Anderson's robotic vocal throughout a range of her music which is so heavily midrange dependant can be a chore. Her mu-

Lampizator Level 7 DAC

sis is plagued with many synthesized sounds and to be quite honest annoyingly repetitive lyrics.

The DAC arranged portions of the music pretty amazingly, listening for tonal effects and representation of natural and computer generated notes was the only true appeal to her music for me, but nonetheless for a few review criteria such as complex staging and rendition of midband properties it can be quite an interesting listen, which reflected again at how cohesive the Lampizator can separate many different sounds whilst still displaying a complete image.

The DAC really does have that instant “draw in” factor, not a wow factor as I talk about so often, more of a mesmerising grasp, that sits the listener down in a hypnotic state for hours on end without even allowing thoughts of the day to enter the mind.

Dynamically strong and naturally expressive of harmonic flurries 'The Courier' Seth Lakeman explores fast violin work that soars across the right side of the soundstage stating its position firmly in its acoustic space. Bass notes are so full and deeply accurate. The speed of the track entwined with its dynamic flare adds an excitement to my system which is normally a more subtle affair, never noticeable until the Lampi reproduced it the way it does.

The good old saying 'you can't miss what you haven't had' comes to mind and then 'you don't know what you've lost until it's gone' comes shortly after removing the DAC from the system.

More beat driven music such as Derrin Nauendorf's 'Universe Demands' lost out on its rhythmic flow and warmer fuller undertones for me, the tubes I were sent - the Psvane 2A3's and their cleaner flavour didn't embody the strength of the driven beat, although when talking to Greg at G-Point Audio (the UK importer) he said that the alternative mesh variants have a warmer and fuller bodied sound, which for me on this track would have been an improvement.

However 'Ghost Town' from the same artist with its more acoustic vibe hit bass notes of accurate proportions, tighter and incredibly well extended down to the darkest depths of my rooms resonant ability. The Level 7 may not have that fast punchy rhythmic flow of more

Ben Webster's smooth sax was beautiful and emotional, each breath could be heard and the piecing nature of its dashing flow throughout the soundstage was absolutely gorgeous.

up beat tracks but when it comes to reproducing the purest of natural bass notes, I simply have not heard anything that comes close.

This leaves me to reflect on the genres that I personally feel the Lampizator in its current incarnation is capable of reproducing. Acoustic and vocal was undeniably strong, involving and utterly to die for. This genre does make up the majority of my listening although I do like to listen to some other genres with a more driven beat.

Quite obviously Jazz was stunningly impressive. Ben Webster's smooth sax was beautiful and emotional, each breath could be heard and the piecing nature of its dashing flow throughout the soundstage was absolutely gorgeous. Bass notes were bouncy and weighty but lacked that little bit of warmth I personally prefer which a tube roll could offer to this and some other performances.

Trad' had overlays of articulation and undertones of fullness that were a more pleasing listen with the tube compliment to hand, exploring older recordings lower end detail far better for me without losing



Lampizator Level 7 DAC

body, adding more depiction to a naturally warmer rounder tone.

I didn't expect much from pop and dance music, but a fair few tracks I played were pretty good, the bass doesn't have that slapstick speed on upper bass notes, but then we are talking about an all tube DAC here and who really goes out to buy a DAC of this type for this type of music? Clarity, sound staging, dynamics and air in the top end were great and there are strong harmonics nonetheless.

Rock was a little too refined and didn't have a presence of weight and grunt to it which some of the other Lampizator models can do better with. I do predominantly think that this DAC excels mostly with instrument and vocal work and 'excel' truly is an understatement it is pretty damn incredible!

I don't really listen to classical music, but exploring this genre was pretty impressive. Big orchestral movements were easily separated into differing proportions, singling out instruments as well as groups of brass or woodwind for example. Spatial awareness, large dynamic shifts and reverbs were conveyed again with that single ended type of purity and clarity with absolute control and sophistication.

The Level 7 can handle complicated arrays of dynamic surges with ease allowing for larger bass notes and finely tuned harmonics to scale the soundstage with absolute ease creating for a really complicated portrayal of a performance to sound so effortless.

Polished triangle and sharp strings floated around a particularly busy soundstage never losing there crisp appeal during busier fore-fronted brass and deep full bodied bass notes, allowing for their decay to never be overshadowed by lower end dynamic shifts.

Conclusion

The Lampizator Level 7 is a truly remarkable listen! It has the ability to reproduce naturally formed notes and vocals with an organic and breathtaking sensation of purity, embodying the true essence of a performance. It renders these aspects effortlessly giving a correct balance and tonal appreciation that is very difficult to question and can only be described as 'lifelike'.

However, it doesn't explore a huge range of genres and for me I require a DAC that can do this for the purposes of reviewing, but then it's clear to tell when reviewing this product that it was clearly voiced and



focused for the natural beauty an instrument and vocalist can offer, reproduced at it's very best and as analogue as digital can truly be.

A very difficult task to really nail with true substance and if there has to be trade offs then who cares, if this DAC reproduces the music you love so much, that is the vast proportion of your listening material everything else just fades into the background and doesn't matter, leaving the listener with the truest representations of these genres that I believe is available right now anywhere in this industry.

Personally I love the understated simple appearance of the two units and thought they looked fantastic on my rack. You are not spending your money on bling here, that is obvious, it's all gone into the quality of the internal components and the obvious painstaking R&D which has given this DAC it's stunningly regal sound.

I for one have been Lampized!

Build Quality - 7.5/10

Sound Quality - 9/10

Value For Money- 8.5/10

Overall - 8.3/10

Price at time of review - £7200 plus £500 for DSD

Highly Recommend - For being at the pinnacle of what it's been voiced to achieve, reproducing instruments and vocals in breathtaking fashion.

Dan Worth

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Astin Trew Concord DAC 1

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



The £3760 Astin Trew Concord DAC 1 impresses.

This review comes from a personal experience with the Astin Trew Concord DAC1 I recently borrowed from Tony Sallis at NuNu Distribution.

I had been very impressed with the Totaldac D1 tube since reviewing it last year and subsequently bought it. However, I began to increasingly feel that I required a unit which being my main source needed to be more of a jack of all trades rather than strong in a handful of areas.

Having a system for reviewing other products cannot always be a system which is suited perfectly to the reviewer's personal needs, or a particular flavour of music, as this can inherently cause a bottleneck when reviewing other products.

An amplifier strong in bass could be reflected on as being thin and light sounding in a system that doesn't have a good balance. This can be a tricky situation for the reviewer.

Fortunately I like and listen to a good few genres of music which contrast hugely in their system demands and so I admit this was my initial intention, but as I thought more about the consideration of changes the above conclusions soon became just as important for me.

There was previous talk between myself and Michael Osbourne of Astin Trew a few months ago after the release of the Astin Trew Concord USB review with the Never Connected Power Supply about trying

Astin Trew Concord DAC 1

their Concord DAC. With it having the option for balanced XLR and tube buffered RCA outputs I could run both a solid state and valve amp simultaneously, just as I did with the Totaldac.

So I put in another enquiry to have a listen as soon as it was possible, a few other DACs I had tried over the past months still didn't offer the ability to do many thing "right" instead of one or two things great for me and the option for straight transistor output or tube could well be a balance that would offer a take on the varying genres I wished to be able to cover.

Connectivity and Specs

I'll go through an overview of what the Concord DAC has to offer connection-wise and run through some specifications before I move on to the impact the sound had on me and convey the abilities which ultimately led to me purchasing one.

First up I'll mention that the DAC is constructed in modular form, this allows for future upgrades, which an Astin Trew insider has informed me are being tweaked and finalised for a future release. A Signature version, or, by Astin Trew's past form, maybe a Plus version?

There are 6 separately regulated supplies within the DAC and power sections are 'firewalled' from the data sections reducing EMI interference even further.

The casework is substantial and solid, very nicely fitted together with a wrap around - up and under chassis lid and sides. The coating on the chassis feels like it could be scratched fairly easy (not a test I wish to perform though) by the feel of it... it's not rubber, but it is a compound specially formed to reduce resonances that the chassis may be subjected to.

The underside has four of Astin Trew's proprietary feet fitted - a wide and shallow coned footer which is created from a special mix of compounded polymers.

So what do you get connection wise? A fair bit is the answer:

There are RCA tube buffered outputs, a pair of ECC82's fulfill this task and are under run ensuring extra long lifespan.

Also included is a pair of XLR outputs, fully balanced and running in solid state. Both sets of outputs work simultaneously which for me allows me to have a constant connection to

a solid state and valve amp without having to constantly change connections.

Two breakout cards are available when purchasing the DAC, an "either or decision", to occupy the single slot on the board and rear panel. They is an Asynchronous USB or Firewire connection, capable of decoding files of up to 24/192 from a computer based source.

An I2S connection via HDMI, this is purely an input and Astin Trew's Concord Transport due very soon will make full use of this connection for the optimum in digital data transfer.

There's also the usual suspects, which you would expect on quality DAC these days- an optical, RCA and pleasantly a BNC as well as the RCA coax input. (Another great feature for me reviewing transports).

All inputs are selectable from the front right knob via relays rather than mechanical switches conserving the purity of the signal. The left hand knob is for power on and off.

Now the important bit

The Concord's immediate sonic signature is one of complete textural musicality with an authoritative bass. Undertones are completely fleshed out, rich and rhythmic. midrange clarity is unmistakably naturally presented with each note and vocal dropping through its range into a natural bodied reflection of the material played.

Higher frequencies and overtones are marvelously displayed - notes begin with accurate rendition of edges, enter the musical performance with absolute clarity, explore the note naturally and decay with full expressive tonality and that for me encapsulates the full timbre and embodiment of the instrument.



Astin Trew Concord DAC 1

Dynamics from the Concord are pretty huge, not sharply explosive but more of a full bodied largeness in scale and presence, they are completely cohesive and focused in the fact the higher pitches of notes grab lower frequencies with both hands and lift their dynamic integration hand in hand with perfect timing.



Pronunciation of phrase is so well developed every spoken word has a clearly defined status due to the extremely impressive way in which the Concord renders texture.

There's no fading of the pronunciation of words trailing off into a more defined edge of the next, there is clarity from start to finish in a completely sibilant free manner.

The pace and rhythm of the Concord is utterly engaging... fluid and encapsulating... driven with a bass force and tempo which is full of degrees of speed and layering that never gets too tight or dry. There is a controlling punch and extension which leaves other higher priced DACs in its wake, a real force to be reckoned with when listening to pacier beats.

The pace and rhythm of the Concord is utterly engaging...fluid and encapsulating... driven with a bass force and tempo which is full of degrees of speed and layering that never gets too tight or dry.

On the flip side delicate passages have a fluid and liquid characteristic to them that is so involving, extended and smooth, with attention to flow that takes the listener to a level of commitment from the sound that intimate late night listening deserves, exploiting bandwidth with care.

By contrast to these points Kathryn Roberts silky tones sounded beautifully fluid on the 'Ballad of Andy Jacobs' precise, centred, never too large, but amply projected with a clarity of tone and focus.

Then on the other hand a strong electronic beat with fantastic dynamic range, impact and harmonic excitement during Route 94's 'My Love' shows off the Astin Trews ability to hold strong, deep bass notes coupled with pace and rhythm. I found it increasingly more difficult to throw off the ConCORDs balance...

Micheal Buble's 'All of Me' is also dynamically rich, with the big band giving slam and impact which never clouded or muddled Buble's lead vocal. Top end brass quality was undertoned with texture adding a "trueness" to the range the Concord was able to convey convincingly.

Gregory Porter's jazzy vocal in contrasting tempo and varying instrument backing on his 'Liquid Spirit' album proved to me how subtle, contrasting and exciting the Concord can be and how much inner detail and rhythm it can put across in layers of three dimensional imaging without leaning to a specific characteristic, which could be deemed as DAC infused.

Soft rock through to harder grungier tracks from compilation albums such as the 'Power Ballad' albums quickly reinforced opinions that this DAC can manage a whole range of genres and that it's abilities across the board were strong and competently even handed.

I have heard instruments and vocals done better, such as with the Lampizator Level 7, which has a depth and scale to acoustic and classical musical which is at the pinnacle of today's offerings, but where the Lampizator triumphs for some musical genres it fails against the Concord on others.

In comparison to the Totaldac which I have owned for the best part of a year, the Totaldac sounds very beautiful and compares well across music types such

Astin Trew Concord DAC 1

as jazz and acoustic with the Concord. The Astintrew is slightly forward in the mids and the Totaldac slightly recessed or laid back, both swing each way of a stable mid-point in the depth of a system and comparing their vocal strength is also difficult and system dependent.

My own system is already a little forward in this department which is something I tune for as I enjoy a projected vocal, I like to here the singer really belt out the words, yet not overshadow the instruments in the music to a point where the artist sounds too forward.

I spent a great deal of time comparing the vocal contrasts between the Totaldac and that of the Astin Trew, both use tube outputs (both just on the single ended outputs). The Astin Trew with its tube buffered output and the Totaldac has a full valve output.

The Totaldac has a wonderful refinement yet lacks drive, punch and excitement but has a seductive sound. The Astin Trew swaps absolute refinement for a vibrancy and excitement. Detail is still magnificent, but displayed very differently. There is an unmistakable clarity, pace and rhythm to the sound and being buffered still gives a truly musical substance to the music and is just so involving, it leaves one not necessarily admiring the sound, but getting more involved and invigorated by it.

I had a chance to listen to the XLR outputs vs the RCA outputs when I had a Roksan Caspian M2 integrated here recently (my own transistor amp which can accommodate both connection types is away to have some work done).

Both connections do sound different as the RCA output is buffered and the XLR isn't, there's not a favourite in my mind, just a different take on the same core sound. There's an arguably cleaner, more dynamic nature to the straight transistor and a richer, slightly rounder character to the midrange of the single-ended output with a little less bass extension and firmness. The top end is also slightly more rounded and has a little less air through the RCA outputs, but it's really down to personal preference and not by any means better or worse.

I will be intrigued to compare the differences even further and more in depth with my Kavent when it comes back.

So in Conclusion

After demoing a fair few DACs over the past few months and as I stated at the beginning of this re-

After demoing a fair few DACs over the past few months and as I stated at the beginning of this review, I did purchase the Concord and I think that time will prove that the decision was a correct one...

view, I did purchase the Concord and I think that time will prove that the decision was a correct one for me with my musical preferences, system needs and wants for connectivity having all been ticked.

Of course I would recommend it, that goes without saying. The only reasons I can summarise is that it's ability to reproduce so much music so well outweighs any DAC I have heard which can do one or two genres better... and from what I've heard upto and around £8k there aren't many.

Some seriously technically minded and serious music enthusiasts have had their fingers and thoughts involved in the final tweaked production model of this DAC and it shows. Great time and attention has gone into voicing the product. An ability to do all things well and nothing short of that fact, is the Concord's calling card.

I keep saying it does all things well, but I would like to emphasise it's better than just well done, the Astin Trew Concord does everything great and then some. In many cases it has punched above its weight. I can say confidently that I don't see the product being one that falls into a category of system synergy, it simply falls into the category of outstandingly diverse and musically competent!

Build quality - 8.3/10

Sound Quality - 9/10

Value for Money - 8.7/10

Overall - 8.6/10

Price at time of review - £3,760

DAC with USB input - £4,100 (as reviewed)

DAC with Firewire input - £4,200

Highly recommend for being able to perform many genres fantastically and in some cases even better than one trick ponies that cost more money... and because I know own one of course!

Dan Worth

McIntosh MA5200 Integrated Amp

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



**Well loved
American brand
McIntosh's 100w
per channel
MA5200 integrated
amplifier gets put
through its paces.**

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

McIntoshes are very American both in terms of design cues and in terms of size. Visually it will happily sit alongside any Mac made over the last fifty years – it has the distinctive black fascia with blue dials and a shiny green logo, like it or hate it.

By American standards, it is quite svelte at 48 x 15.1 x 44.3cm but its depth and width might trouble many Euro equipment racks. It weighs a hernia-inducing 17 kilos, so frequent moving is not desirable. On the other hand, this unit (in common with several competing offerings) provides scope for considerable rationalisation as it could credibly replace a preamp, power amp, DAC and phono stage, and accordingly save on all the associated cables, isolation, racking etc. It also supports multi-room implementations. Put that way, £5000 seems reasonable if not fantastic value. Judgement on fantastic value will depend on the sonics.

First impressions

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

McIntosh MA5200 Integrated Amp

venting needless returns to base. Other manufacturers might take note.

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

Under the hood

The controls are actually quite sophisticated. Not only do they turn, but they can also be pressed or clicked to navigate the user menu. Reading through the manual, which is well written and comprehensive, you find instructions for a bewildering array of settings such as activating the S/PDIF inputs for the built-in DAC, applying home theatre throughput or setting up comms for a multi-room system. The built-in DAC has a built-in Windows driver which

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

allows simple access through a USB connection. The S/PDIF options are set through the menu where one of the five line-level inputs (4x RCA, 1 x XLR or RCA) is deactivated. All these inputs can be named. In addition to the line level inputs, there is an in-built MM phono stage and a pre-out/main-out loop with metal jumpers. Helpfully there is a 6.3mm headphone socket on the front. The speaker terminals are chunky and are standard rather than multi-tapped.

Let us look first at the pre and power amplifier sections. Sadly, this Mac is made without the proprietary autoformers for which the marque is renowned. Instead, McIntosh has deployed new circuitry called Dynamic Power Management or DPM, designed to intelligently adapt to varying loads. In all fairness, I



McIntosh MA5200 Integrated Amp

cannot claim to have presented anything difficult enough to this amp to comment on the effectiveness of this circuit. Living in a built up area and not wanting an ASBO, the limits of my testing were such that this amp never broke a sweat, less still challenged any of my speakers.

How does it sound?

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

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

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

The treble never obtrudes and the bass is always well rendered without veering towards the flatulence that sometimes comes with big amps, but this is no window shaker, unless you want it to be. It plays good recordings well with only a small suggestion that the top and bottom ends could go further but it also has a tendency to make poorly recorded music more listenable - it tames slightly edgy modern (digital) recordings and it renders sometimes flabby 50s and 60s (especially classical) recordings well. It is not the last word in detail retrieval, nor in resolving transients but what it puts out is recognisably music.

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

I used the MA5200 with both a pair of Sonus Faber Grand Pianos and a pair of Bastani open baffle speakers alternating between runs of Skogrand Ignis Purist cable and my normal Electrofluidics cable. I also borrowed a pair of Spendor BC1s from a friend to try out on the MA5200. Again, consistency of sound proved to be the order of the day, even with speakers as coloured as the SFs. I tried a pair of eld-



McIntosh MA5200 Integrated Amp

erly Sennheisers on the headphone output and can report that late night listening will not be a chore.

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

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

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

I'm afraid I was much less taken with the standard 47 K ohm MM phono stage, but then I listen to vinyl more than any other medium. For "residual" vinyl users it will do the job with a good MM or HOMC. It does its job adequately but compared to any of my outboard phono stages, even the humble Dynavector P75 Mk III, it falls quite short.

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



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

Conclusion

I have long been a fan of McIntosh kit and the MA5200 does nothing much to disappoint. For me, the McIntosh MA5200 is an excellent amplifier, with a quality DAC and a no fuss approach to presenting music. The amp is very tolerant of supports, cables and sources and requires only simple set up and precious little tweaking. Set it up in an hour or so and off you go.

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

Build quality – 9/10

Sound quality – 8/10

Value for money – 7/10

Overall – 8/10

Peter Stanton-lfe

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SoulNote SC710 CD Player and SA730 Integrated Amp



Japanese manufacturer SoulNote's SC710 CD Player and SA730 integrated amplifier should be a great match, but are they really?

I took a listen to [SoulNotes little SA 710](#) amplifier a few months ago and awarded it an overall score of 8.2/10 so when we were asked if we'd have a listen to it's bigger brother and associated CD player I was very keen! The design of the two black boxes carries on from the SA 710 and is simple and elegant with little being given to unwanted and unnecessary frippery. The

only concession to any kind of blingness is the SoulNote nameplate which sits in the middle of each of the two units' facia. Both units are of standard width but are both quite shallow in depth.

SC710 CD Player

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

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

SA730 Integrated Amplifier

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

SoulNote SC710 CD Player and SA730 Integrated Amp

you get a healthy 115W a side.

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

On the back panel there's the two stereo XLR inputs, the four stereo RCA inputs and a pair of substantial loudspeaker binding posts.

The pair look good together on the rack and come with a lightweight remote commander that controls both the CD player and the amplifier. This remote covers all the necessary functions with the volume going up slowly which is a nice feature.

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

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

Some Tunes

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

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

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

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



SoulNote SC710 CD Player and SA730 Integrated Amp

frequencies become a little more pronounced than I would have liked but the bass and mids remain tight and controlled.

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

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

I buy a lot of second hand CDs and often take pot luck on artists I've not come across before and sometimes the discs look like they've been used as frisbees at a chimps tea party to the point my usual transport gets quite fussy about playing them. Not so

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

the SoulNote with it playing pretty much every CD I threw at it bar the very worst examples... which I really ought to get round to binning!

Anyway, back to Madeleine and it's clear from the first opening bars of "Dance Me To The End Of Love" that the SoulNotes can play this popular jazz style too. There's not the same finesse as when I'm using the Tellurium Q SECA and reference DAC and pre, but there is a feeling of control again ...and of course the SouleNote goes louder with these speakers! The play between drums and bass is portrayed



SoulNote SC710 CD Player and SA730 Integrated Amp

really well and with the syncopated rhythms you can't help but tap your feet along in time to the music.

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

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

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

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

Switching out the Roksan speakers for a pair of Triangle Signature Alphas we have in for review there's still that sense that the SoulNotes are taking control of the speakers and you can clearly hear the very different presentation the two speakers have.

Conclusions

The SoulNote CD and amplifier are a natural pairing

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

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

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

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

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

Build Quality – 7.9/10

Sound Quality – 8.3 /10

Value For Money - 7.9/10

Overall – 8/10

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

Price when reviewed:

Amplifier - €4200

CD Player - €4000

Stuart Smith



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Roksan Caspian M2 Integrated

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



We've taken a listen to the £1995 Roksan Caspian M2 Integrated amplifier previously, but thought it deserves a second airing.

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

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

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

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

Roksan Caspian M2 Integrated

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

The power amplifier stage of the M2 dishes out 85wpc into 8 ohms and 125wpc into 4 ohm loads. Coupled with a low noise high quality 350va transformer the M2 is on paper ready to be able to competently kick out some tunes!

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

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

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

If I had one complaint with the newer Roksan amps is that I feel the knobs on the front are too shallow, not too shallow for use but I like to have a good sized selector and volume dial to turn. I feel this is down to the aesthetics/style of the dials as they are at their centre point deep enough, it's just their rounded edges that allow for that shallow feeling to the touch. Yes, Roksan do provide a remote, a full system re-

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

remote actually, allowing for the control of all of Roksan's accompanying equipment, so yes you could argue that what does it matter, stop complaining! But it's my review and I'll cry if I want to!

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

Roksan Caspian M2 Integrated

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

Channel balance on an amp is something which, since having the Emille, has become a more prominent area and one I listen to carefully. I have had amps in the past, monoblocks, which I could swear had an imbalance in output or I felt the timing was off quite badly. After having the manufacturer come around for a listen and a couple friends too, they all told me that I needed to get my ears cleaned, but I was adamant and pulled out a multimeter and yes, I was correct, the amps were 9mv out from each other.

The Caspian M2 caused me think about this event, not because I heard an imbalance, quite the opposite in fact. During listening I remarked to myself at how well timed I felt the presentation to be. I don't get a

huge sweet spot in my listening room due to its modest size, it's ample don't get me wrong, but I've heard better in larger rooms. The M2 gave me a great centre focus and sound staging was very accurate, wide and full.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Roksan Caspian M2 Integrated

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

On Rice's 'Cheers Darlin' from the album 'O' a fluidity was expressed through the sound expressing fantastic soundstage detailing front to back with great spacious rolling soft bass notes and violin which washed through the soundstage. The track is a very spacious affair when reproduced well and the Caspian added body and a touch of warmth to the overall take on the sound.

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

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

In Conclusion

The Roksan Caspian M2 for me has retained and further improved the characterisation of what I loved so much about the very first model of this amplifier.

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

The M1 got a little way there but the M2 has nailed the essence of what (for me) a £2000 price tag should buy you.

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

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

Build quality - 8/10

Sound Quality - 8.5/10

Value For Money - 8.5/10

Overall - 8.3/10

Price at time of review - £1995

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

Dan Worth



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Schiit Lyr 2 Headphone Amp & Bifrost DAC



American manufacturer Schiit, yes it is pronounced like that, build all their range of kit in the US and still manage to keep prices pretty reasonable. Here we take a listen to the £340 LYR 2 headphone amplifier/preamplifier and the £395 Bifrost Digital To Analogue Converter.

I like Schiit's attitude to their products and confess to using their entry level (£90 per box) Modi USB DAC and Magni headphone amp when listening none critically on my normal work desktop system. They're made in the USA, well made, attractive and offer very good value for money to my mind, and despite their name they have a solid history in the audio world - Jason Stoddard and Mike Moffat designed numerous well known products for Sumo before branching out on their own to launch Schiit. The entry level kit comes with a two year warranty, but the more expensive kit, like we're

looking at here, comes with an impressive five year warranty. I also like their marketing spiel "Because you're an audiophile does not have to mean "born with a stick up your ass"".

Here we have on test the Lyr 2 headphone amplifier and the Bifrost (with full blown USB 2 receiver) DAC which retail in the UK for £340 and £395. Both the units are substantially bigger than their entry level siblings, but still a good deal smaller than conventional hi-fi boxes and suitable for use on a desktop - they each measure 9 x 6 x 3.25 inches. All the bits and bobs in the boxes are surface mounted with the aim here being to keep prices down to affordable levels. The units are finished in brushed aluminium and look really rather nice I think.

Lyr 2

Lyr 2 is a high powered headphone amp offering up 6W into 32 ohms to 330mW into 600 making it suitable for just about any headphone you'd care to throw at it. In the box you get the attractive and distinctive Lyr 2 itself, a power cable, some little stick on feet and a pair of 6B7Z valves - the Lyr 2 can use any 6Dj8, 6922, ECC88, 6N23P and 6Bz7 tubes so that tube rollers can play to their hearts content, though I decided to stick with the stock Russian tubes in the box. The Lyr 2 uses a "Dynamically Adaptive Output Stage" which the company says is a "current sensing adaptive output technology which allows the amplifier to dynamically adjust to the headphone load. The Primary benefits are essentially single-ended Class A output for high-impedance headphones, moving seamlessly to push-pull Class A and finally into Class AB as current needs increase".

Set up is a simple case of inserting the valves, plugging in the IEC, turning the amp on and then connecting to a suitable source via the input RCAs. Also

Schiit Lyr 2 Headphone Amp & Bifrost DAC

around the back is a pair of RCA outlets (turned off when you plug in headphones) allowing you to connect to a power amplifier of your choice. You also get a gain setting switch for efficient or less efficient headphones and an on/off toggle switch. Move round the front and you have an LED to let you know the unit is powered up, a volume pot, a quarter inch headphone jack... and that's your lot.

The Lyr 2 has a few "upgrades" over its predecessor including a regulated 180V power supply for the valve stage, separate regulated power supplies for the current sources and DC Servo and regulated supplies for the DC heaters.

Bifrost

The USB input on this Bifrost uses C-Media CM6631 USB receiver interface and asynchronous data transfer of up to 24/192, but you also get the option to input via coaxial or optical. The D/A chip is an AKM4399 and rather than upsampling the Bifrost keeps samples at their original rate using adaptive master clock management system.

Round the back of the Bifrost you have the IEC power in, a power switch toggle, inputs for USB, Optical and SPDIF coaxial and a pair of RCA outputs to connect to your preamplifier. On the front you've got a button to cycle through the input selections and three LEDs to let you know what input you have selected.

Set up is a simple affair of downloading the Windows drivers, plugging in your input cables and connecting to your preamp/amp. J Player recognised the drivers and the Bifrost itself immediately and the

The Lyr 2 has a few "upgrades" over its predecessor including a regulated 180V power supply for the valve stage, separate regulated power supplies for the current sources and DC Servo and regulated supplies for the DC heaters.

whole set up procedure took no more than three or four minutes.

I'm moving over to a computer based system and so most of the listening will be done using the USB input using JRiver as the player, with some listening using the coaxial output from a pioneer DVD. Headphones used will be Audeze LCD -XC and when using the Lyr 2 as a preamplifier it will be fed into a TQ Iridium power amplifier.

Lyr 2 and Bifrost Paired Using Headphones

The first album off the virtual shelf was the excellent 2 Future 4 U by Amand Van Helden, a slab of funky beats and deep bass which comes across here as nicely timed with snappy beats and a coherency across the frequency ranges that was really rather pleasing. There's punch to the sound but with no frequency range really dominating. I've been testing headphones and headphone amps out a lot over the last couple of months and it's to the pairing's credit that I didn't really miss the reference VAD DAC and my reference



Schiit Lyr 2 Headphone Amp & Bifrost DAC

On female vocals such as Kathryn William's Crown Electric and Mary Black's Best Of albums there's a silky smooth quality that is really addictive.

headphone amplifier on this type of music. Switching to the Tresor 109 compilation it's really hard to fault what the pairing is doing for just over £700. There's good separation of instruments in the mix, which is thrown wide and is stable. The combination give a slightly more analogue feel to the sound than I've encountered with some headphone/DAC combos. The slight softening of the sound will appeal to a good few and make the transition from an analogue front end to an all digital set up much more acceptable. This is not to suggest that the sound here is mushy or compromised, it's not, it's just not got that slight harshness at the frequency extremes that you can sometimes get with some DACs.

On Fleetwood Mac's Songbird track there is a good sense of the recording space with the natural reverb on the piano being large and natural sounding, another area that can leave some cheaper DACs found wanting. In this area the Bifrost/Lyr 2 combo really do rather well when compared to the reference DAC and headphone amp, though there is a feeling of there being more spatial information being apparent with the, it has to be said, much more expensive references. This is evident also on Gil Shaham's 1930's Violin Concertos where it's pretty easy to get a good sense of the orchestra in front of you and the recording space, but not as deep an insight as I'm used to. Could I live with it...well I suppose it's like anything

isn't it, if you've heard something you consider to be the best then it's hard to move down the listening ladder, but for those with 700 quid to splash, then I reckon you'd be hard pushed to beat this duo when used with headphones.

On female vocals such as Kathryn William's Crown Electric and Mary Black's Best Of albums there's a silky smooth quality that is really addictive. Again there's a feeling of a slight softening, or warming to the sound in the mid frequencies that I really enjoyed with this kind of music. The combo will be popular with those that listen to the stereotypical audiophile recordings that prevail at shows, but that's not to say that the Shiit coupling can't rock out as proved on Pixie's Doolittle where there's enough power and oomph to satisfy, with that non-analytical feel to the sound that actually makes the combo really easy to listen to for long periods of time.

Lyr 2 in the Main Rig

Popping the Lyr 2 into the main system and using it as a preamplifier was a pleasant if not overwhelming experience, but then the pre it was replacing is the Coffman G1-A costing several thousands of dollars.

The soundstage is good, wide and deep with an ever so slight feeling that things are being slightly exaggerated. Instruments remain nice and stable and you get a good idea of where they are seated in the mix.

This is an easy to listen to preamplifier with the slight warming effect I noted previously and it has to be said that it performs very well for the money Schiit are asking you to pay. There's reasonable amounts of detail coming through when compared to the reference and there's good tonality...erring on the side of smoothness. In reality there's little really to criticise, but the Lyr 2 is a little out of its depth here, leaving me with a feeling that I'm not connecting with the music in the same way I would normally with the main pre in place. Sadly I don't have an entry level power amplifier in the house at the moment and so couldn't test the Lyr 2 in a setting it may be reasonably used in, but given its performance so far I'd say it would be a very decent choice for the money.

Plug in the headphones and the output to the main amp is cut. There's a sense that you are getting a reasonable deal of the VAD DAC's character, with the Lyr doing that slight softening thing again, particularly in the mid-band. However, when compared to

Schiit Lyr 2 Headphone Amp & Bifrost DAC

the Beyerdynamic A20 headphone amplifier costing around £400 and in the same system it performs well, with the Schiit perhaps being more to my taste when listening to cans.

The Lyr drove all the cans I threw at it to loud volumes and with the Audeze headphones plugged in I found that going anywhere past 9 o'clock was too loud. I note here that the Lyr 2 does get very hot indeed and so this needs to be a consideration when placing it on your rack.

Bifrost in the Main Rig

Again this is a bit of an unfair ask given the price-point of the Schiit DAC, but all in all it performed very well indeed. On Madonna's MDNA album there's a terrific drive to the sound, particularly in the lower frequencies and the play between drum tracks and basslines. There's a real feeling of pace and overall a big sound that is sure to bring a smile to your face.

On more laidback tracks such as The Rolling Stone's Lady Jane, there's a warmth of the sound overall, particularly mids, but the plucked strings still manage to sound fast, precise and sparkly. Actually there's an addictiveness to this little DAC that belies its asking price. No, it doesn't have the overall finesse and poise of our reference, but it certainly does a very admirable job of connecting you with the music.

I've mentioned warmth quite a bit in the review of these two products, but I'd suggest that the Lyr 2 is responsible for the majority of this. The DAC is pretty well defined with a relatively transparent sound.

Soundstaging is pleasing and at the top end of the frequency scale hats sparkle nicely with good decay, whilst at the lower end of things there's good weight and punch. Mids are an area that I'd say are a little on the warmer side of neutral, but as a whole this warmth in this frequency band brings an ease to the listening experience that I really enjoyed. There is good layering and separation of instruments in the mix

Conclusion

The Schiit kit reviewed here offers great value for money and at the price point they offer a very high level of sound that most will fail to achieve. They are certainly a step up from many of the products I've heard at a similar price.

As a pairing when used as a desktop system for listening via headphones they are really very good indeed and despite being quite big for a workspace, they do look attractive and sound great.

As separate entities and for use in a main system, I have no qualms in heartily recommending each of the Schiit products reviewed here and they do punch well above their weight, but I would suggest that they are both best suited to ancillary equipment that is of a more relevant performance point.

Lyr 2

Build Quality – 8.5/10

Sound Quality – 8.25/10

Value For Money – 8.75/10

Overall – 8.5/10

Price at time of review – £340

Bifrost

Build Quality – 8.5/10

Sound Quality – 8.65/10

Value For Money – 8.9/10

Overall – 8.68/10

Price at time of review – £395

Both these products are recommended as offering no-nonsense solutions that offer



Schiit Lyr 2 Headphone Amp & Bifrost DAC

good sound for a very reasonable asking price.

Stuart Smith

Having scored over 8.5 the Bifrost was sent for second review to Janine Elliot

Having done some PR/advisory work with Tacima mains cables/conditioners, and suggested the name sounded a bit, well, 'Tacky', they then changed the name to Kauden, which sounded like something you find in a cow shed. So after I got over laughing at the different paraphrases associated with Schiit Audio (there is also a British speaker company called Dyer Audio, the list just goes on!) I just got on with re-viewing this DAC, and also putting it alongside the totally different Slee DAC reviewed last month. Actually, whilst the other names were unfortunate, Schiit audio was named that way quite simply to get attention. And no, the company is not German, but designed and built in America, founded by two audiophiles, Jason Stoddard (ex Sumo) and Mike Moffat (ex Theta) and not sold at extortionate Class A prices, like most American built obesities. This is a healthy size 6 yet still with the oomph and energy associated with more expensive products from across the pond. As they say on their website, they are dead serious about audio, and boy is this more than its reserved dimensions would suggest.

The Schiit Bifrost is a 24/192 SPDIF and Toslink DAC with option for 24/192 capable USB input with the USB Gen 2 upgrade and improved electronics in the Uber Bi Frost add-on, all for a total of £410 (up a tad from the time of Stuart's review). It was this complete version that I review here. Unlike the Slee Majestic DAC I reviewed recently, with only 24bit/48kHz USB input and balanced output and the benefit of its own volume control, the much cheaper Schiit has RCA line outputs for connection to an integrated amp or pre-amp. Connected to my Passive MFA Baby Reference ensured there were no added sound-prints on the way to the speakers, and through my obese Krell monolith and Townshend SuperT-weeter and Torus subsonic generator would ensure all frequencies would get to my speakers unadulterated and with all the energy they deserve. Unlike the Slee, the Schiit is future proof, with separate upgradeable USB input and DAC/analog cards, and as stated above comes in a variety of versions with or without USB. Ok so far.

This is a serious piece of kit for the price and well worth a listen to if you want to spend anything sub £1000.

Schiit pricing is amazingly good, starting with their \$99 Modi 2 USB DAC, cheaper than the £99 Cambridge Audio USB equivalent, though not so petit. Indeed, their ethos of pricing to meet the mass market is something new and welcome in the rapidly changing market place. The design is equally simplistic in its use of a single switch toggling between the three sources indicated with white LEDs and with a simple RCA output. There are cheaper and more exciting looking units out there, but the finish is by no means cheap in appearance. What is welcoming, and something I expect to see in all high-grade HiFi, is that the components are full discrete designs (whether you choose standard or Uber versions), and assembled in such a way that they can be manufactured at a price point to compete with cheap Chinese built products. With the Uber analogue stage you get the more advanced Gungnir DAC and a DC servo which eliminates the need for capacitors in the signal path. This all has an effect on the sound I heard. There were no crinkly top frequencies; rather they were as crisp as the Roast Duck I cooked over Christmas. All frequencies had a clarity and power that I would expect in higher price kit. Connected to my S/PDIF CD player output, Pictures at an Exhibition 'The Hut of Baba-Yaga' (Minnesota orchestra) had clear definition between each instrument with respect to position and a clear 'space' between the instruments, and music was calm and in control, un-

Schiit Lyr 2 Headphone Amp & Bifrost DAC

like many DACs and CD players I have put this through. Wynton Marsalis 'New Orleans Bump' had a very clear musical spread, My Krell KPS20i was in another league in terms of detail and musicality, but the Schiit put on a very good show. Spring can Really Hang You Up the Most (Rickie Lee Jones) bass was more forward than through my CD player though lacked the deepest frequencies that the Krell CD gives with such authority. The snare in 'Walking to the Moon' (The Yuri Honing Trio) wasn't so clearly defined, in terms of natural sound decay, but not so exciting and 'life-like' as I would like it.

Putting away my aged CD player and joining the 21st Century, using Foobar2000 I played 24bit/192kHz digital files from my growing collection. The bass had bite, cymbals had clout and metal rock didn't sound like aluminium. This was a surprisingly powerful piece of kit, not over the top but 'tight' and with authority, and most importantly, musicality. All instruments had a clearly defined soundstage in 'Secret Love', as did complicated orchestration of percussion and piano in 'The Man Who Sold the World', both from Claire Martin (Linn) all from Linn's kind 24bits of Christmas present to all 24/192 fans this December (well worth a download). This worked clearer than many DACs I have tried over the last few years; which often sounded fuzzy or 'digital' with unclear soundstage. However, once I got into mid frequencies the clarity, composure and delicacy of sound wasn't quite as good as the best out there. For example in the brilliant Requiem in D from Mozart K626 (Linn) was surprisingly less clear in the violins than it was through the 24/48kHz SLEE Majestic, as was the slow Elgar Enigma Variation No 9. (Lawrence Foster. Houston Symphony Orchestra). This DAC was better at playing more exciting and easy-to-differentiate sounds, than those that perhaps require a more musical musician's ear. Maybe more technical specification doesn't necessarily mean more musicality, and something maybe needing a very slight tweak in the analogue section. However, I do not want to sound like I am at all putting down this machine. In terms of detail and crispness of sound per pound (or dollar), this is a stonker of a machine. I could hear compression and limiting in some of the tracks I played, which I didn't hear in other similarly priced DACs, but I believe this was more of the recording getting to my speakers rather than any fault in the equipment. Nothing was getting passed this machine un-noticed. With no

sample-rate conversion, all data is processed at its native rate, which is something I am always in favour of. Unlike the SLEE, the muting circuitry came alive every time a track was followed by another one at a different resolution, preventing those horrible clicks through my speakers. This would play all sources I put at it, though I never got to try 24/192kHz through the Toslink, which was never designed for anything greater than 96kHz. DSD sources still wouldn't work, but this is something Schiit looked into doing in 2012 and after asking consumer opinion came out with the Loki. This is Schiit at its best; not frightened to attempt anything, and making sure it works. Just wish they'd allow HD sound from my Virgin Tivo box. Only ITV1 HD works.

The Uber audio specification is a very respectable 2-100,000Hz (-1dB) with a maximum S/N ratio of 110dB. Whilst another 34dB is theoretical though not possible today with 24bits, and my favoured Brüel & Kjær 4138 microphone has a dynamic range of up to 168 dB and hears from 6.5 Hz to 140 kHz, as a sound engineer I don't think we have yet reached the end of our search for the perfect sound systems, though I stress again, musicality is not just down to numbers. The Schiit deciphers the digits brilliantly in terms of detail, but just misses out in its analogue stage to stop me giving a really high sound quality number. But I know that Schiit will never stop searching for audio nirvana, and their overbuilt modular approach to design will mean they will always be up to date and "won't end up in the dumpster", and be something so well built that they are intended to be "passed down to your children". I'll say it here, though, I'm not letting my kids near my Hi-Fi. Period.

Conclusion This is a serious piece of kit for the price and well worth a listen to if you want to spend anything sub £1000. It has a depth of detail that is hard to beat at its price, only slightly losing out on musicality. But for that, you need to pay much more.

Sound Quality – 8.55/10

Value for Money – 8.8/10

Build Quality – 8.5/10

Overall – 8.62/10

Janine Elliot

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



Graham Slee Majestic DAC

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 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,

Graham Slee Majestic DAC

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 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.

Sound quality 8.45

Build quality 8.3

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

Total 8.28

Janine Elliott

Music first Audio - Baby Reference Preamplifier

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.

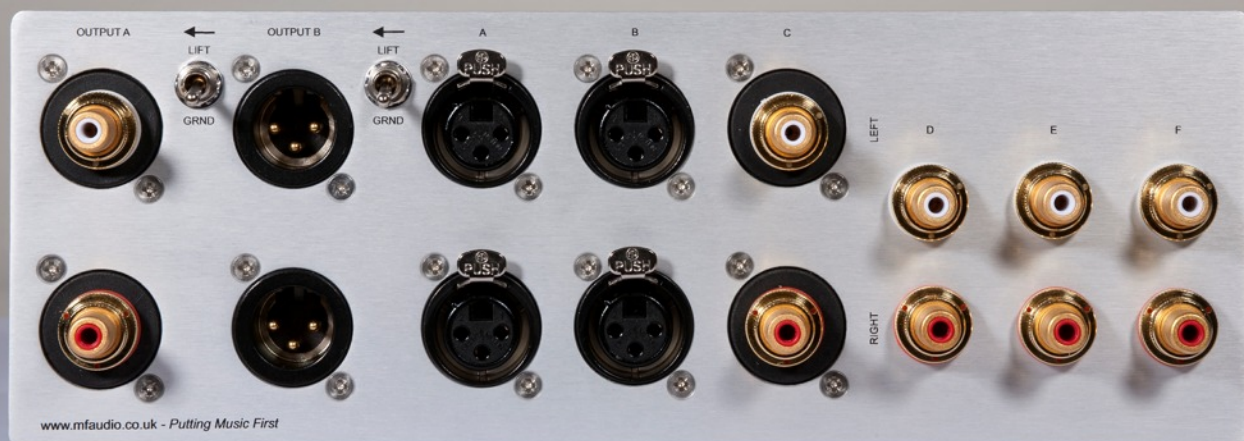
that job (I remember the one I built up in my bedroom when I was very young), even that will add its own sound-print to the original sound, changing impedance with frequency and failing badly in areas such as crosstalk and accuracy between left and right legs. Indeed, a dual-gang potentiometer to control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

Music first Audio - Baby Reference Preamplifier

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



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-

Music first Audio - Baby Reference Preamplifier

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.

Build quality 8.5

Sound quality 9.0

Value for money 8.4

Total 8.63*

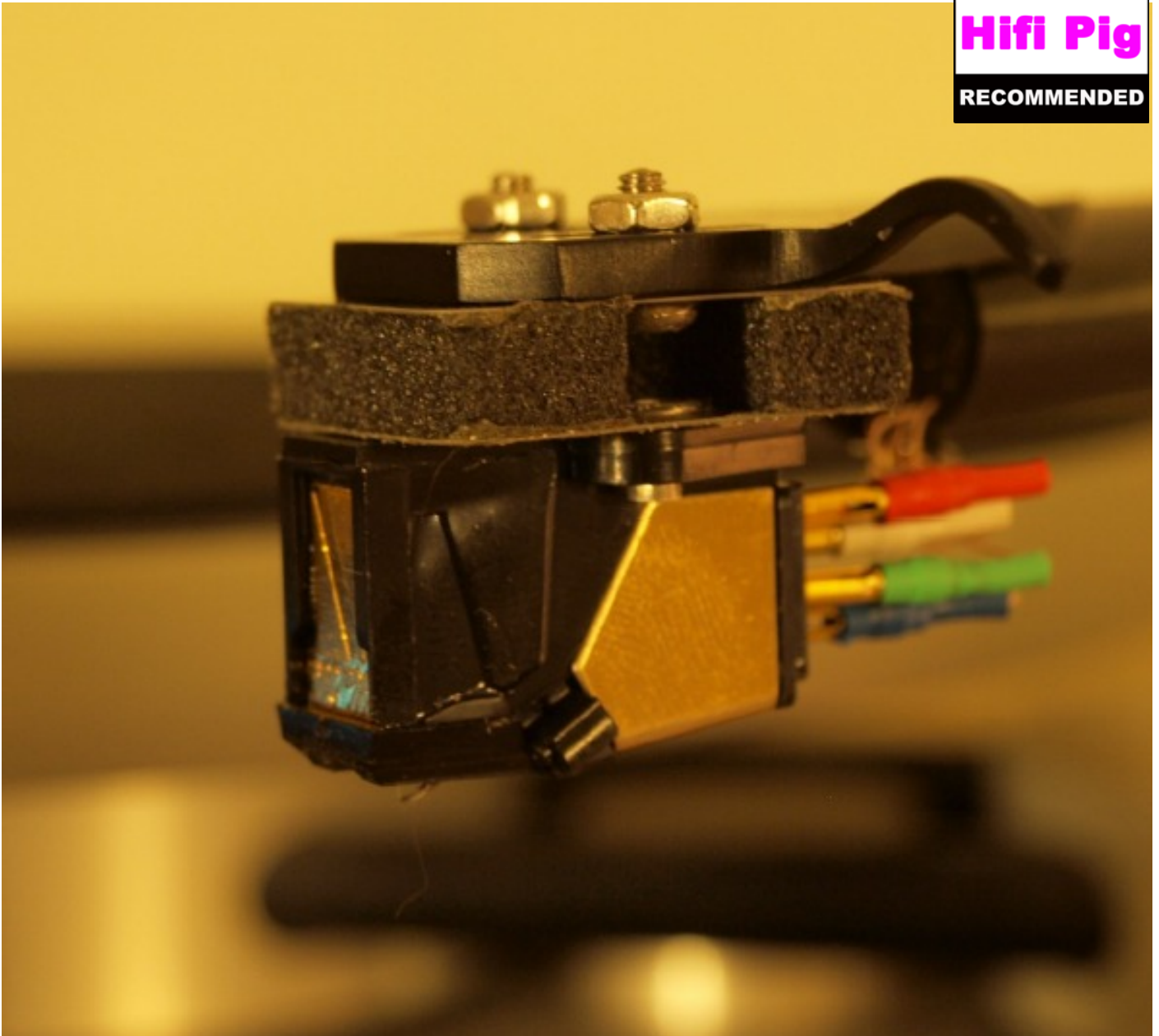
Janine Elliott

***The Baby Reference Preamplifier by Music First Audio will now go to a second reviewer to see if it will achieve Outstanding Product Award. Look out for this in 2005.**

The Cartridge Man Isolator

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



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

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

The change in sound is not as subtle as my description may point to and that feeling that what you are hearing is far better (more detail, more space, and more insight) than without the Isolator in place is immediately apparent.

The Cartridge Man Isolator

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

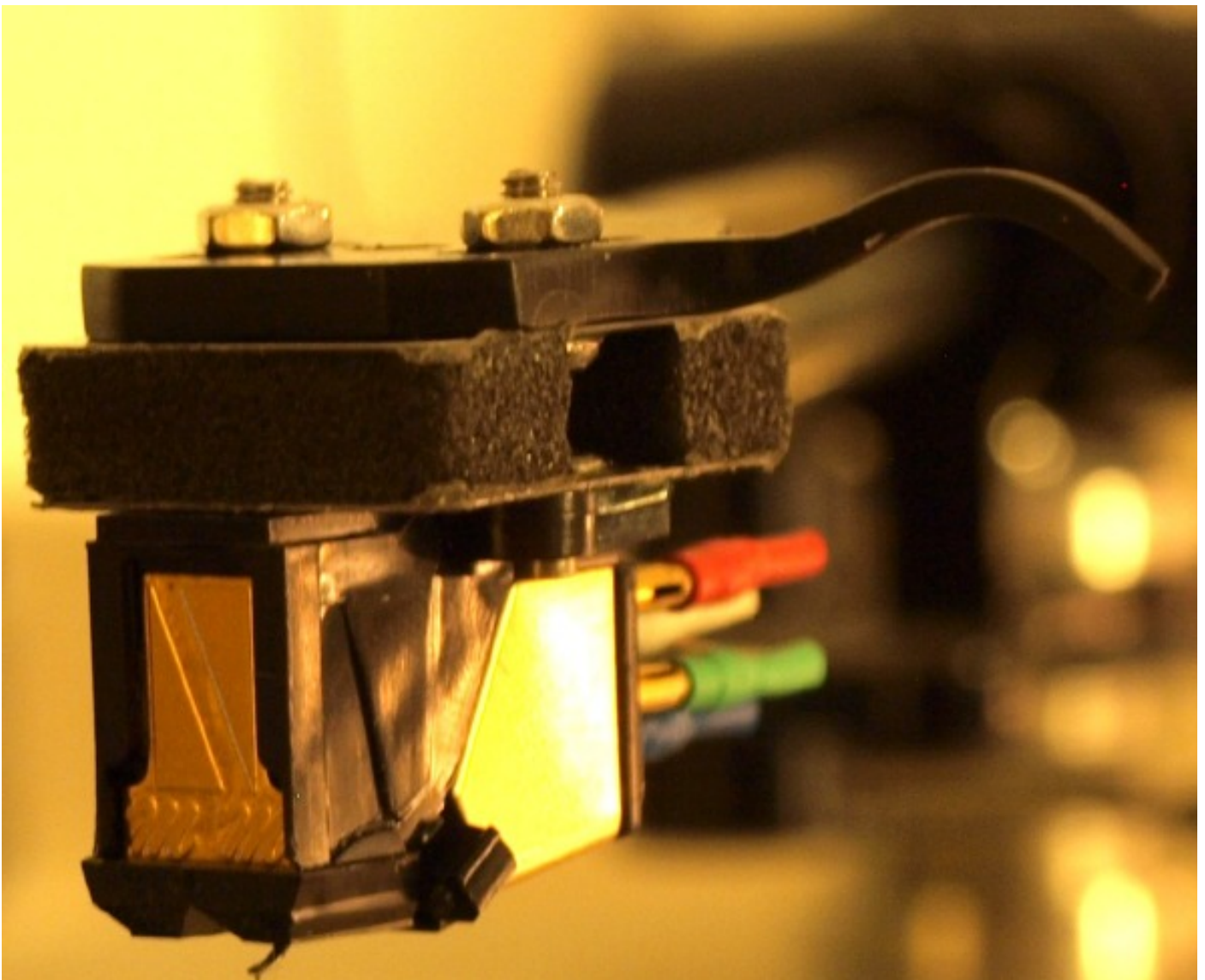
To fit it you basically peel off a bit of paper protecting a sticky surface, stick the sticky surface onto your cartridge whilst aligning the attached locating pins and then tighten the attached bolts to your arm with the supplied nuts. It's a bit of an odd experience not having the bolts go through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

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

On Neil Young's "Out on the Weekend" there appears to be a good degree more naturalness to the overall sound, particularly with the quieter guitar which now seems to be more apparent in the overall mix – there's also more insight into the recording space which I love to hear. I know that "naturalness" and "apparent" are pretty vague words to use in a

review, but overall the character of the music you're hearing doesn't actually change, there just seems to be more detail and that nth degree of magic that we strive for in our systems. On the next track "Harvest" there is more air and space around the instruments and in the mix as a whole. The soundstaging feels more true to life and there's that feeling of being in front of/in the recording space again.

The change in sound is not as subtle as my description may point to and that feeling that what you are hearing is far better (more detail, more space, and more insight) than without the Isolator in place is immediately apparent. I've striven for an analogy with this and the nearest I can get is an optical one. It's like being happy with your spectacle prescription and getting on perfectly well with it day to day and then having your new glasses with your new prescription arrive and only then do you realise that actually you were missing quite a bit of finer detail.



The Cartridge Man Isolator

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

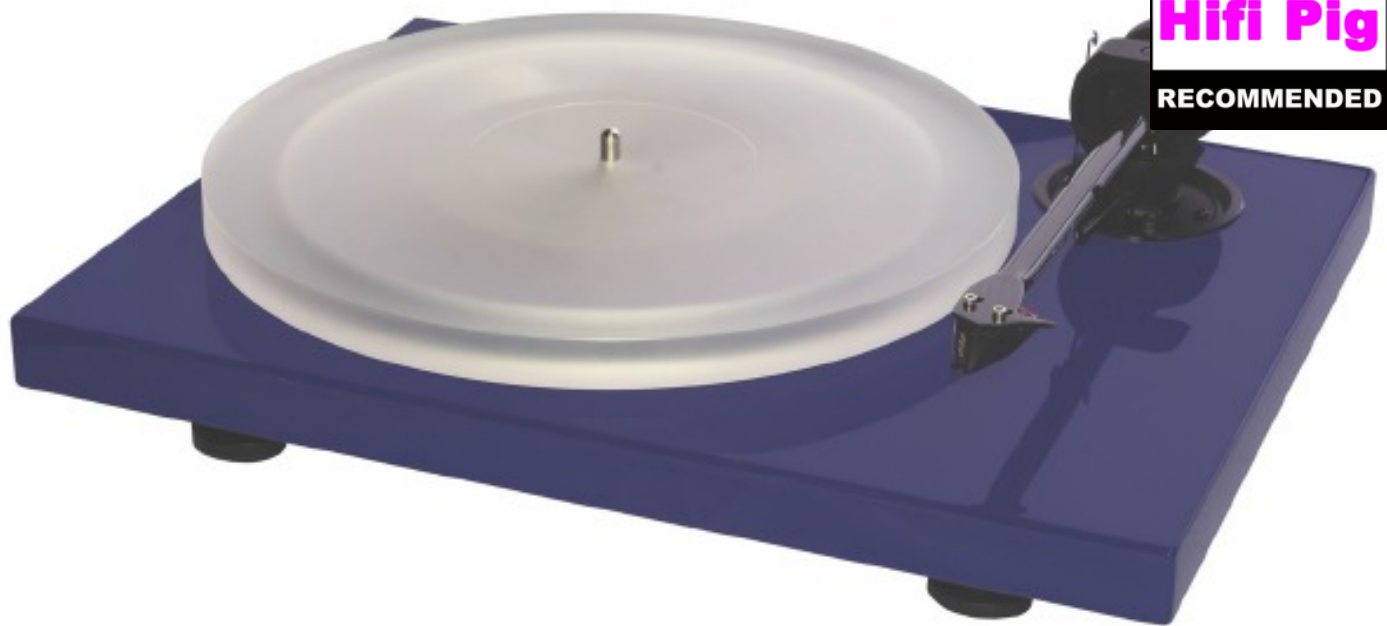
If you own a Music Maker III cartridge then I'd say that this is an essential purchase and I'm surprised it doesn't come bundled with the cartridge. If it has the same effect on other cartridges (I have no reason to suspect it won't) then, going out on a limb, I'd suggest it will be one of the best tweaks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

Ok, I'll be honest here and say that for £85 you don't seem to get a lot of hardware for your money, but the Isolator has been granted a patent and at the end of the day it's what improvements it makes to the sound that is important.

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

Stuart Smith

Pro-Ject Xpression Carbon UKX



This Pro-Ject Xpression Carbon UKX comes fitted with an arm and a good cartridge for true plug and play convenience. It costs just £575, but is it worth the asking price?

Let's get straight to the point: I have never seen a piece of kit show this degree of musicality for so little. For less than £600 all in, here is a complete turntable package that will show a clean pair of heels to almost anything digital that I have heard up to twice its price. I am also struggling to identify an analogue package in the same price range

that comes close to competing on sound quality or finish.

Listening to the UKX, I had to remind myself time and again of the cost as I found myself holding it to much higher standards than its RRP justifies.

WHAT IS IT?

The Xpression Carbon UKX is a belt drive deck, tonearm and cartridge package, specially produced for the highly competitive UK market with an RRP of £575.00.

WHAT DO YOU GET?

The Pro-Ject arrived well packed in a compact box. Inside the box are a turntable with pre-fitted carbon fibre tonearm and an upgraded Ortofon 2M Red cartridge which form the main parts. Also included are an acrylic platter, a Perspex dust cover, a pair of RCA connectors and earth lead, a wall wart power supply and two mats, one felt and one cork. Clearly, there is no desire to scalp purchasers with expensive after-market extras here. This really is a complete package.

The plinth for the UKX comes in two colours which suggest that this package is not aimed at the pipe and slippers brigade – my review sample was a Burgundy Red; a rather vivid Midnight Blue is the other. I found the UKX well finished, unobtrusive, low profile and visually neat. The paint finish on the turntable is well executed and the deck itself is designed to resist audio and mechanical feedback. Rapping the plinth does not seem to affect either

Pro-Ject Xpression Carbon UKX

speed stability or tracking in the slightest. Like most turntable users, I don't usually attach dust covers but for thoroughness I installed the cover; it can be a bit stiff and is liable to drop suddenly if not put up at a high enough angle.

The on/off switch is easy to reach on the front left of the unit, although it is tucked out of sight on the underside of the plinth. The music signal is output via 2 RCA phono sockets on the rear of the unit. The DC supply from a wall wart is changed to AC via a mechanically decoupled low-voltage custom-built 16V AC generator underneath the turntable. Pro-Ject claims that gives a very clean and stable power supply for accurate speed consistency. The low voltage generator is designed keep radio magnetic interference to a minimum.

At this price level, a credible fully suspended sub-chassis and platter would not be viable, and this approach brings its own problems anyway. Instead, the engineering solution for the suspension system is by the use of vibration absorbing spikes and a sorbothane-type material in the turntable's three adjustable feet. The motor is isolated from the plinth via two, Ortofon-designed, rubber grommets, designed to avoid resonance transferring from the motor to chassis. This is very simple and very effective engineering.

Obviously from the same stable as the Evolution version of the 9cc carbon-fibre tonearm, the supplied tonearm is well engineered. It has an oversized outer ring and one-piece carbon-fibre arm. The oversized outer ring is open to avoid resonance but is also very rigid to provide the most stable platform for the arm to work from. Carbon fibre is highly rated for its damping qualities and, when used in a tapered tonearm, can largely eradicate standing waves within the armtube itself. Carbon fibre is also very expensive.

The supplied MM cartridge is an uprated Ortofon 2M Red, tweaked here with silver spools for optimum signal generation. It has a tipped elliptical shaped stylus, designed for a low wear rate on the vinyl.

The platter has been upgraded from the standard model to an acrylic version with the aim of better matching the vinyl that sits on it, improving the timing and cohesion of sound and offering superior

I also checked that the cartridge was properly fixed in the tonearm, and found that the mounting had been done very well by the factory. No adjustments were needed for overhang, azimuth or VTA. The cartridge tracks very well.

detail over the standard platter. Two mats (one cork, the other felt) are provided and can be used according to taste. No clamp is provided or necessary.

SETTING IT UP

This package is as close as I have found to a 'plug & play' solution, given that the supplied cartridge arrived already mounted and accurately set up. I had the package up and running within fifteen minutes from opening, of which a full five minutes were spent with my digital stylus gauge, confirming that I had dialed in the correct tracking weight by following the Pro-Ject instructions (I had).

The instructions are clear and worth reading through before starting on set up, if only to locate where in the box the parts are. All the buyer has to do is take the parts out of the box; put the belt around the sub-platter and motor pulley; put the platter (with or without its felt or cork mats) on the centre spindle; loop the bias weight thread onto the short rod sticking out the rear of the arm; screw the tonearm counterweight onto the rear of the arm and balance the arm for level and then adjust the playing weight to suit the cartridge (around 1.75g for the Ortofon 2M Red); and, if so inclined, fit the clear perspex lid

Pro-Ject Xpression Carbon UKX

onto the two metal hinge rods at the rear. Attach the supplied (reasonably good quality) phono leads and ground wire to connect the turntable via its rear RCA sockets to your amp or phono stage and that's it – ready to go.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The build quality on offer here is extraordinary for the price. The platter, bearing and tonearm seem to be built to very tight tolerances. The platter is precisely balanced and it is hard to discern any motion at all while the platter is spinning without an LP in place. Speed control (33 and 45 rpm) is achieved by removing the platter and adjusting the belt on a two-step pulley. I tested the platter with a strobe light and it was rock solid at both speeds. Listening to a Satie LP later, the quality of timbre and decay of the solo piano notes rather confirmed by ear what the measurements suggested.

I also checked that the cartridge was properly fixed in the tonearm, and found that the mounting had been done very well by the factory. No adjustments were needed for overhang, azimuth or VTA. The cartridge tracks very well. Although I notched up

the counterweight to 1.8 grams, that is a matter of taste, and it was a new cartridge requiring a bit of breaking in.

The tonearm lowering mechanism is damped and works smoothly, although it is not as silky smooth an action as more expensive arms, but the arm does lower accurately, gently and safely onto the record.

I initially set up the turntable on my Townshend Seismic Sink Stand, checking all planes with a spirit level. Leveling was easily done by simply adjusting the three spiked feet. Also bearing in mind that likely buyers for such a turntable might not have specialist hifi isolation equipment, I also tried the unit out on a bookshelf and a table; neither caused any problems. Putting the plinth on either Isoplat or Dark Rock isolation platforms had little effect, either positive or negative, that I could discern.

I can only conclude that the decoupling engineering built into the unit is very effective and this turntable is very tolerant of most surfaces. As a result, unlike many much more expensive turntables, this one will not go out of kilter because there is an R in the month or because the CD player gave it a nasty look.



Pro-Ject Xpression Carbon UKX

ASSOCIATED KIT

For the purposes of testing, I used the excellent Whest RS30 RDT phono stage for most of my listening, although I also got good results from the Dynavector P75 MkIII, Electcompaniet ECP-1 and the Clearaudio Basic Symmetry phono stages. I used a series of Naim amplifiers and my Audiovalve System 20 for listening purposes. Speakers were a Sonus Faber Grand Pianos and a pair of Open Baffles (a la Bastani). I also used a pair of cheapo Eltax speakers for completeness' sake. The Pro-Ject was not obviously out of place with any of this kit.

SCOPE OF REVIEW

On first hearing, it immediately became plain that there was little point in comparing the Pro-Ject with either my Clearaudio Reference or my Kuzma Stabi S. They are both in a completely different class to the Pro-Ject, as would be expected given the many times price differential and any comparison would have been unhelpful and uninformative. I decided therefore to listen to the Pro-Ject on its own terms and also to compare it against a couple of digital sources where I had duplicate media.

THE MUSIC

Before getting on to the listening to music. I should report that on all (cleaned) records, the surface noise was low and rumble close to undetectable.

To put the table through its paces and to get some sense of the table's limitations, out of devilment I decided to put that audiophile favourite, Thelma Houston's 'I've Got The Music In Me' (Sheffield Lab 2), on. The Pro-Ject took the record remarkably well in its stride. I assumed that this highly dynamic LP would cause all kinds of trouble (much in the way of torture tracks on setup discs) but actually it gave a good account of itself. The transients and climaxes for which this direct-to-disc recording are famous worked well enough, for which I imagine the carbon fibre arm is most to thank. The treble was a little peaky and with a rapid high frequency roll off. The midrange was a little overshadowed by the mid-bass. The deep bass wasn't really there, but I wasn't expecting to hear it either, but there was enough painted in to give a rounded picture of the music.

What I did hear mostly, though, was a decent and stable if not especially deep soundstage, with a clear and consistent spatial positioning of instruments and voices. There was much more there than I had any right to expect from a budget MM. The downside

The transients and climaxes for which this direct-to-disc recording are famous worked well enough, for which I imagine the carbon fibre arm is most to thank.

was that drums and female voices could sound a little thin and brittle at times.

So onto some "normal" records - 'Sad Old Red' from the 'Simply Red' album has a full rolling bass line, up and down, which is a good test of how capable a turntable is in the bass regions. The UKX gave a good account of itself although the bass did roll off at the bottom end. The integration with the well-recorded vocals was also good.

Up next was Brubeck's 'Time Out' album: on 'Blue Rondo a la Turk', the cymbal on the left should have a different and very discernible emphasis on each strike. The recording is also good enough to highlight the sound of the reed when the saxophone is playing. On 'Take Five' the turntable should be reproducing the drum on the left but the drum's echo sweeping back from the right. The UKX managed to dig up and convey enough of all of these features to give a real sense of the playing. It also managed to convey the timing of the music very convincingly within a credible soundstage.

Bearing in mind the pricing and possible youth market for this package, I then put on the Black Eyed

Pro-Ject Xpression Carbon UKX

Peas' 'The END' and Li'l Wayne's 'Tha Carter IV' and compared them to the Redbook versions I had ripped into WAV files onto my Mac Mini and played back through my Naim DAC stage. I also dug out the original CDs to play through my TEAC VRDS. Both LPs were more authoritative in the bass and felt more airy than their digital counterparts. Interestingly, neither album sounded as musical, dynamic or convincing on my Kuzma/Cadenza Blue set up as they did on the Pro-Ject which suggests that the deck might be better adapted to, or more forgiving of, some more modern recordings than some more expensive decks. Whatever the reason, the UKX took the material in hand and made the most of it.

I am open to suggestions, but I am struggling to think of a turntable package below £1000 which, in my estimation, improves on the UKX package.

On to more testing types of music; Louis Auriacombe's Debussy orchestrations of Satie were an excellent test of speed stability. The spare tones of the piano are some of the easiest things to hear when they are "off", but among the hardest for any electronic equipment to reproduce well, let alone a budget turntable. The cartridge, assisted by a stable motor and quiet tonearm, made a good job of capturing the sound of the piano and the decays of its strings. The sound was recognizably a piano and the space it was playing in. This is quite a feat for a budget MM and I was impressed.

However, large-scale classical music, generally, presented more challenges. I think it was the cartridge that did not really have quite the prowess to decode busy orchestral scores, leaving a broad sense of what was on the disc, but not much detail and a little sense of clutter and congestion during busy periods. Some soprano voices could also sound a bit shrill and sibilant, but then I've heard the same from MC cartridges at thrice the cost of the whole UKX package.

In all fairness, however, I would suggest that opera lovers and Wagnerians might want to look elsewhere (and probably spend a lot more, too) for a one-stop solution, or at least consider my caveat below about upgrading the cartridge pronto.

All of the comments above are made by a reviewer spoiled for choice with a range of expensive turntables, arms, phono stages, step up transformers and moving coil cartridges. Of course, a relatively cheap turntable package will fall short in almost all technical areas against these. The interesting point is that it did not fall nearly as far short as I thought it might – and its virtues tended to mask its vices. I enjoyed having the UKX and really did not want to give it back...despite its shortcomings, the UKX really gets to the core of most music and then boogies with it. I cannot think of any other budget equipment I have had where I kept digging up recording after recording to give it a go and where I have found myself going to bed at three in the morning quite so often! The UKX is nowhere near perfect but it really does put a grin on the face.

Thinking of it metaphorically: it is like a modern diesel engine; it is only really in certain rev zones and at certain times that it is caught out and then suddenly it is clear why it will never beat a good petrol engine. But for most of the time it does the job very well and very economically.

WHO'S IT FOR?

There are, I think, two credible and distinct markets for the UKX.

I am open to suggestions, but I am struggling to think of a turntable package below £1000 which, in my estimation, improves on the UKX package. While extra expenditure on a dearer turntable might give better dynamic range, a deeper, more authoritative bass, better image focus and a more convincing soundstage, that is by no means certain until this

Pro-Ject Xpression Carbon UKX

threshold, and even then not guaranteed.

On that basis, the UKX should be considered a very good starter turntable – it has all that is needed (with a phono stage or compatible amp) to start playing and getting real pleasure out of vinyl. Any money left in the budget could then be invested in enough new LPs to start a respectable collection.

The other possible market is for those whose emphasis is more on the digital part of their systems but who wish to keep a small collection of vinyl. This machine is quite capable of providing a sound quality at least equal to any digital kit I have heard up to twice its price. I had it plugged into a £5000 amplifier designed for the digital world that I am currently reviewing and it did not feel out of place at all.

SCOPE FOR UPGRADE

Over time, and as budgets allow, I can also see that the UKX could provide considerable opportunities for tweaking. My first stop would be the cartridge. As would be expected, while good enough for a sub £100 piece, the 2M is very much the limiting factor in this package. If I owned the UKX, I would hesitate before trading up either 'table or arm until I had tried a better cartridge, possibly even an MC; keeping to the Ortofon theme, I see no reason why any of the new Quintet series would not partner happily with the excellent arm, but any medium mass cartridge might be worth a spin.

Although I do not imagine many people would stump up for this level of upgrade, I hear that another reviewer has fitted a Koetsu to very good effect on a Pro-Ject Carbon turntable and tonearm, confirming my view that the arm and table might well be worth sticking with rather more than the cartridge.

CONCLUSION

The UKX package provides great musical fun. It is much better for overall drive and general atmosphere than any digital source that I can think of in its price range and some way above.

It would be ridiculous to suggest that this package is a giant beater – it isn't. Clearly, the UKX package does not offer the highest resolution nor are its dynamics world-class, but the sound is smooth and reasonably well balanced over most of the range,

I'm genuinely astonished that Pro-Ject can bring this package to the market at this price...

with good imaging and tonal colour. Timing is excellent and, for most forms of music, it gives a very clear and coherent idea of what is on the disc. It does not get on brilliantly with large orchestral pieces and can make some sopranos sound a bit brittle, but show me a turntable package below the £1000 mark that does, and I do wonder if that is the limitation of the supplied MM. The arm is more than capable of extracting all the detail from the cartridge that it can dig up. The turntable is, of course, because of its relatively low mass, a bit deficient in the lower bass but it gives a reasonably convincing story generally.

Regardless of any cavils I may have, the UKX easily passes my main test of any hifi equipment – I found that I was able to listen to most forms of music for hours without fatigue and always wanting more.

I'm genuinely astonished that Pro-Ject can bring this package to the market at this price but this is not the place to muse on the economics of electronics manufacture. I'd simply suggest that anybody in the market for a turntable package in the sub-£1000 bracket should put the UKX on the audition shortlist. For the money being asked, I cannot think of a better source system – full stop.

Build Quality - 10/10 - (it really is hard to see on any standards, let alone budget kit, what they could do better)

Sound Quality – 8.5/10

Value for money – 10/10

Overall – 9.5/10

Price when reviewed - £575

Absurdly good value for money plug and play analogue system for people getting started in vinyl or who need a secondary analogue system for their residual vinyl collection.

Peter Stanton-lfe



The Analogue Works turntable is a simple looking affair costing £799 which puts it very much in the mid-market pricepoint. How does it sound?

I'll be absolutely honest and say that when the Analogue Works turntable turned up I was a bit jaded with the whole vinyl thing and had been rather enjoying listening to music using a dedicated computer as the source. However, when I was initial-

ly asked to review the Analogue Works Turntable One I thought why the hell not...and I was glad I did. Tim at Analogue Works was keen to tell me on the phone that the turntable was based on Tom Fletcher designs and was getting rave reviews from users, but the proof of the pudding and all that...

Analogue Works make just three turntables (The Zero, The One and The Two) with the One costing £799, the Zero £649 and the Two £1599 and they sell direct to the public to keep the costs down to a minimum. The turntables are made exclusively in the UK!

The One comes in a choice of two plinth finishes, with the one supplied for review arriving in furniture grade plywood (a black laminated version is available for an extra £50) and very nice in a minimalist kind of way it is too. You can get the turntable supplied with a variety of armboards, but I use the Origin Live Silver tonearm and so a Rega board came packaged. Fitting the arm is a simple affair and the armboard is nicely made out of what appears to be black acrylic.

Packaging is really rather good giving a high end feel immediately and the instructions are comprehensive yet very easy to follow. Set up is a piece of cake with

Analogue Works One

the separate Premotec motor unit resting on whatever surface you put the turntable on and fitting through a cutout in the turntable at the back left. The cutout is ever so slightly oversized so that the motor can be positioned so that it doesn't connect with the plinth in any way other than the belt!

It is a belt drive turntable unsurprisingly, offering both 33.33 and 45.11 RPM with the change being made with the accepted and widely used movement of the belt to a different "cog" on the motor. The low torque motor unit has a remote power supply box which can be sited away from the turntable itself which is a nice touch.

The platter is a hefty unit, weighs in at a not inconsiderable 6.7Kg and is made of an aluminium alloy. It looks rather pleasing set against the plywood I think and has a rubber "band" around it which I'd assumed was for dampening (more on this later) and tapping on the platter produces a solid thud rather than any ringing – this is a good sign! Supporting the platter is the bearing utilising a polished silver steel shaft with a precision ground nipple and a phosphor bronze sleeve with a hardened and polished roller... it's as smooth as silk and the platter rotates perfectly. You get a choice of mats to put on the platter, a thin rubber one, a foam one and one made from compressed cork so that you can play around and find the one that suits you best. I ended up using the rubber mat with the foam mat on top of that but the differences are marginal I'd suggest.

The One comes with three solid adjustable feet which make leveling of the turntable a much more simple process than

those using four feet and you can add suspended feet for an extra cost, though I don't think it's necessary. All in all and even with cartridge alignment, you should be up and playing your favourite black discs in a matter of an hour or so...probably much less.

Throughout the review I used the Cartridge Man Music Maker III and the Origin Live Silver tonearm both of which I have used for a good while and know well. The photographs used in

Despite its no nonsense looks and approach it does play music ...and it plays music in a way that really gets under your skin to the point where you stop analysing what the turntable is adding or taking away and just get on listening to the tunes...



Analogue Works One

this review were supplied by Analogue Works.

On With Some Tunes

And first on the platter is a bit of reggae in the form of Dub Syndicate's "Strike the Balance" LP. This is a good record to play to see what's going on in the bass department and there are certainly no complaints from me here. Everything is tight and deep, with the flute on the song "Mafia" sounding correct pitch-wise and with no wobble suggesting that the speed is accurate and stable on this turntable. I don't have a strobe disc to check this but I'd be very surprised if it's not cock on!

A fairly hefty knuckle rap on the unit the turntable was sat on didn't perceptibly travel through to the speakers (or headphones) and you can tap the actual plinth fairly hard before it's picked up massively by the cartridge. This was a bit of a surprise to me if I can be frank – this is a very simple (but well engineered) turntable with no suspension or clever gizmos aboard, but it seems that plywood is actually a pretty sensible material to be used in turntables – I'm not sure we'd have seen the same result with a solid piece of MDF!

In the spaces between the tracks I couldn't perceive any vibrations or noise coming from the motor and reaching the cartridge and it seems the simple method of isolating the motor from the plinth is effective as well as simply elegant.

Some guitar music to have another listen to the speed and next on the platter is Concierto de Aranjuez with John Zaradin plucking the strings. If speed is awry you'll hear it on this record, but I have to say there's nothing for me to moan about here! Guitar sounds like guitar and is pitch stable! Instruments are well separated in the stereo image and remain where they are supposed to.

Music has plenty of drive and, though it pains me to say it, I preferred the Analogue Works to my Wilson Benesch Circle as it just seems to connect you with



the actual music in a much more organic and involving way. I even preferred it to my heavily modded Technics 1210 with the same arm and cartridge arrangement which is high praise indeed coming from me! The One has plenty boogie factor and the music bounces along really nicely and it's a really addictive way to listen to your music.

The motor on this turntable is a low torque type that you have to spin above the desired speed and it then slows to the correct speed – this is what the rubber band around the platter is for I guess. Don't spin the motor fast enough and it will run slow. I'm aware this is the nature of this kind of motor but I found this took a bit of getting used to, but it's not an uncommon arrangement and you do get used to it after a few album sides.

I suppose this no nonsense motor arrangement is one area that costs have been kept low and it works perfectly well, but in these modern days of "give me convenience or give me death" this may be an irritation for some who would prefer an electronic speed shift. This is not to suggest the motor itself isn't more than up to the job...it is (and then some) and my comment is more about convenience than anything else! Most audiophiles and music lovers should be more than happy to forgo this convenience for the sake of getting great sounds from their records.

As I said at the start of this review, the Analogue Works turntable arrived at a time when I was getting a bit jaded with the whole vinyl thing, but it's had me reaching for album after album across loads of different genres which is a good sign – very often I

Analogue Works One

find a bit of kit can often lean towards (be tuned for) a specific style of music – not so here and it will do banging techno just as well as it does folk or acoustic music! Despite its no nonsense looks and approach it does play music ...and it plays music in a way that really gets under your skin to the point where you stop analysing what the turntable is adding or taking away and just get on listening to the tunes...and this is what the components in a hifi are supposed to do isn't it? In fact I don't think the turntable is actually adding very much to the mix at all!

Ideally it should be placed on a wall shelf (sadly we're having a move around and mine wasn't available at the time of review) but the One is surprisingly unaffected by normal footfall. I did try placing the turntable and motor on an isolation platform, but found that this utterly ruined the coherence of the sound making it muddy and so when you go out and buy one of these stick with a solid surface rather than shelling out on fancy platforms!

Conclusion

This is a simple turntable that has been put together using high quality materials and components without frill or frippery and using solid engineering principles. It does its job of spinning the vinyl at the right speed very well and brings very little of its own flavour to the party.

I found myself putting down the tablet and computer files and delving into my record collection once again and, as I say, this is something I've not really done in a few months.

Overall, what I think you have with the Analogue Works One is a good looking, straight-forward and well engineered turntable that is sensibly priced (very sensibly priced and hence its high score).

With the cartridge and arm that I used (and I think they're priced around the right price point to be the kind of things folk would use) you end up with a very capable analogue front end that just plays music for you and punches well above weight with regards its asking price. I'm certain that buyers could use a less expensive

arm and cartridge combination on the One and still get very acceptable results, but I'd suggest it warrants spending the extra and it will take arms and cartridge combos even further up the ladder than mine I'm sure.

Regular readers will know that I always ask myself "Could I live with this?" and the answer here is a resounding yes, to the extent the WB Circle has gone to make way for this much less expensive model in the reference system.

This is a very good turntable at a price that makes it something of a bargain and I think it fully deserves the scores I have given it!

Its solid and no frills approach will make it a turntable that should last you years and when you do want to upgrade I'd suggest you can do this by improving the arm and cartridge rather than needing to go out and buy a different turntable.

The Hifi Pig review process demands that this turntable now gets sent to a second reviewer, but had it been my decision I'd have awarded our Outstanding Product award independently.

Build quality: 9/10

Sound Quality: 8.5/10

Value For Money: 9.25/10

Recommended for people that want a simple to set up analogue front end that performs with exceptional musicality and at a price that makes it something of a bargain.

Stuart Smith





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Soulines Kubrick DCX



Based in Serbia, Soulines say their turntables are predominantly handmade. Hifi Pig takes a listen to their €4000, range topping Kubrick DCX.

Soulines are based in Serbia and make just four turntables, the Hermes DCX, the Dostoyevsky DCX, the newly released Elgar DCX and the turntable under review here, the Kubrick DCX.

The philosophy of Soulines is that the interaction between each component that makes up a turntable is equally important and so they balance the construction with a number of “good compromises” to ensure a finished product where all the individual parts come together to work together. Their engineering principles are solid and yet not over-complicated and their turntables are essentially hand made with the benefit of CAD and advanced CNC manufacture. Critical parts of each turntable such as the platter, main bearing and spindle are not manufactured in batches but individually made so they fit each other specifically.

The Kubrick is the top of the Soulines range and they say that it is their most advanced turntable. It is built around the company’s inverted main bearing and a 40mm thick, 3.2Kg acrylic platter (The same as on

Soulines Kubrick DCX

the Hermes DCX) and has a very rigid aluminium plinth and sub-plinth that is constructed from a series of “layers” or blocks that are coupled together and damped where needed using cork-rubber. The blocks used are put together according to the “Golden Ratio” and “Fibonacci Sequence” which the company’s literature says “gains uniform vibration damping and the reduction of the moment of inertia in all three planes (along all three axes) to the centre of mass”. The motor, mounted on the main plinth, is of high quality and you can adjust the speed between 33 and 45 with the flick of a switch located on the front left of the turntable. The Kubrick is a belt drive turntable. The inverted main bearing is machined from solid brass and stainless steel and, along with the solid aluminium armboard, is mounted directly onto the sub-plinth, which is in turn three point decoupled from the main plinth. The platter spins freely, smoothly and is perfectly flat.

The Kubrick is supported on three adjustable cones, is a doddle to get level and it comes with three interchangeable arm boards for SME, Rega/Origin Live and Jelco.

The supplied turntable came with a Jelco SA750 to-

There are little details such as the lovely little on/off and speed control switches that certainly add to the feeling that this is a well designed and high-aiming product.

nearm and I fitted my trusty Audio Technica EV33 moving coil cartridge. The arm is sub £400 if bought separately and is an S shaped arm with removable headshell. Whilst I do have the Origin Live Silver arm available I wanted to test the Kubrick as supplied as it is the turntable we are reviewing here. The price of the turntable including the arm is €4000



Soulines Kubrick DCX

...there's that coherence and play between drum and bass that just gets your feet tapping to the beat... yet loads of detail here too.

Packaging for the Kubrick is spectacular in its completeness and attention to detail and it even comes with a simple but effective removable Perspex cover – other manufacturers note that this is a good thing please. Also included was a set up disc for accurate cartridge alignment, which again is a useful and thoughtful addition – it has three different alignment methods. Instructions are clear and concise! All in all unpacking and set up takes around an hour with most of that being spent with the usual cartridge set up. Placement was atop the usual IKEA arrangement that serves as the hifi rack and no further isolation was used.

First of all let me say that I absolutely adored the look of this turntable with its brushed aluminium chassis and sub chassis, all set off with the substantial acrylic platter. It's modern looking and yet quite understated. There are little details such as the lovely little on/off and speed control switches that certainly add to the feeling that this is a well designed and high-aiming product. I can't see any but the most traditional not admiring this on their rack.

There is no extra box for a power supply, but there is a little wallwart.

The knuckle rap test on the two forward positioned supports has little perceptible effect on the cartridge, but when applied to the housing where the motor is located there is easily perceptible vibration reaching the stylus. However, when there is no music playing and the stylus is placed on the record there is no mo-

tor noise reaching the stylus that I could hear! The motor emits a very low volume whirr that you have to put your ear next to the unit to hear. The Kubrick is not particularly susceptible to foot fall and I didn't find myself needing to scream at people to tip toe around whilst listening to vinyl.

Some Tunes

Bass is often my first port of call when checking out a new bit of kit and so it was with the Kubrick. I found myself grabbing the excellent "SSSS" by Vince Clarke and Martin L. Gore on 180 gm vinyl. Well certainly no complaints at all here and the music forges ahead with the required drive and energy. In some ways, the bass the Kubrick brings is a little like my heavily modded Technics 1210 which suggests to me that the pitch is stable and rock solid...very similar indeed to the quality of the direct drive Techy and this is a good thing. The mix (stereo image) is solid and it is easy to identify individual instruments in their relative space, which again suggests to me that there are no timing issues that need concern us. In some ways listening to this record on the Kubrick reminded me of good quality digital playback, but with a much more organic and natural feel to it. There are no discernible pops and clicks displaying themselves overly which was nice!

On to some guitar music and Baden Powell's "L'Ame de". Here there is no wobbly pitching in the guitar which would otherwise suggest speed inconsistencies and what you are left with is just a natural sounding guitar. The attack and decay on guitar is correct and there are great levels of detail in the stereo image. The delicate and intricate finger work on the record is all there and this record really was a joy to listen to on the Kubrick. Like the Analogue Works One turntable I reviewed recently there's a feeling that the Kubrick really isn't adding a great deal to the music, but with the Kubrick I'd suggest that there's a



Soulines Kubrick DCX



smidgen more detail coming through – perhaps this is due to the more sophisticated isolation at play on the Kubrick.

On Fleetwood Mac’s “Rumours” there’s a firmness and sure-footedness to the rhythm section, whilst delicate taps on the hats come through in fine detail. Again I get the impression there’s more being pulled from the grooves with the Kubrick than the One, especially at the top end. Likewise with 10 000 Maniacs “The Wishing Chair” there’s that coherence and play between drum and bass that just gets your feet tapping to the beat... yet loads of detail here too. But that’s not to suggest that these frequencies are exaggerated or overblown and the mids are sacrificed...it’s just that these are the areas in music I especially enjoyed with the Kubrick.

I notice here that I’m reaching for quite similar styles of music - music with a strong backbeat and I think this is where the Kubrick comes into its own somewhat – solidity, drive, and rhythm suggesting again to my mind great timing from the Kubrick.

Sadly I don’t have a great number of 45s but reaching for an ancient copy of Timothy Leary meets The Grid proves the 45 speed seems to be spot on and constant too. With this record you get the impression again that the Kubrick is really driving the music forward and it’s certainly allowing the stylus to dig out the very deep bass on the record. I do like the fact that you can change the speed at the flick of a switch without faffing around with belts and pulleys. I also like the fact that the Kubrick starts up at the flick of a switch!

Conclusions

I liked the Kubrick turntable from Soulines a great deal and I shall miss it when it goes back to Serbia...which sadly it must... via Holland. The way it brings out the rhythm section and drive in records

The design of the Kubrick is such that it allows the cartridge and arm to do their thing and get the most out of the grooves as possible ...

is really very addictive and you will find yourself reaching for this kind of record just to experience this effect over and over. As I mentioned it’s very much like a very good direct drive turntable in this respect.

I don’t believe that the Kubrick favours one kind of music over another though and it is as happy playing funk as it is playing “classical” guitar. Likewise it’s as equally at home playing “audiophile” female vocals as it is banging techno.

The design of the Kubrick is such that it allows the cartridge and arm to do their thing and get the most out of the grooves as possible and I would definitely class the Kubrick as adding very little of its own flavour.

Soulines have gone to a lot of trouble to produce a turntable that performs very well as well as look great and this level of workmanship really must be applauded. It’s not cheap at €4000 including the arm, but neither is this an extortionate amount of money to ask for such a product.

Build Quality: 8.5/10

Sound Quality: 8.75/10

Value For Money: 8/10

Overall – 8.4/10

Recommended for people seeking a great looking, nicely engineered turntable, that is as plug and play as it gets at this level, but also delivers on sound.

Stuart Smith



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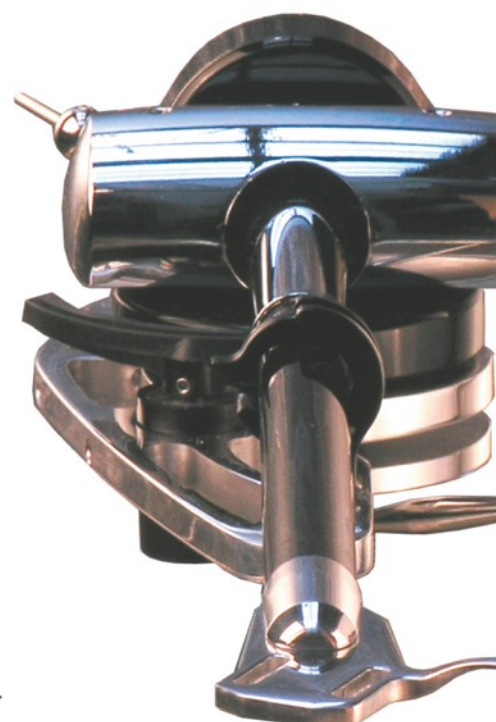


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Pluto Ultimate

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



The Pluto Ultimates are an active speaker, but as opposed to having the power amp(s) built-in, the whole system arrives as a package with its own multi-input integrated amplifier with crossovers contained within.

For my first review on HifiPig I really thought 'Excellent - they'll send me something entirely straightforward like a phonostage, or a small & cheap integrated amplifier' but no. What I actually ended up with was a pair of £2950 omni-directional loudspeakers in gloss red that look as though they're built from drainpipes. In at the deep end? Possibly, but nothing wrong with a challenge.

I'm not new to omnis, having had the chance to try some NVA Cubes a few years ago, and really falling for them, so was rather excited to hear the Pluto Ultimates.

The PU's are an active speaker, but as opposed to having the power amp(s) built-in, the whole system arrives as a package with its own multi-input integrated amplifier with crossovers contained within. It's also fully controllable via a solid, aluminium remote. About as plug & play as it's possible to get in other words - even down to being supplied with speaker cables (which are also very neatly made).

The finish on the speakers is impeccable, and the gloss lacquer flawless. Their bases are made from a single piece of aluminium, machined from billet into which the adjustable floor spikes are screwed. Setting up, and having them working, is but a matter of a few

short minutes' work - no more than any other conventional amp/speaker combination in fact. However, setting up the speakers' position within the room takes a lot more time and care although, as with the Cubes, this can be part of the fun. They're extremely sensitive to position but will reward the listener's time and effort by telling him/her when it's exactly right - everything clicks into focus quite beautifully. Worth mentioning though that the owner's manual is very specific, and extremely helpful with its guidance on set-up. Follow it closely and you really won't go too far wrong.

Anyway, enough of all that - how do they sound?

Pluto Ultimate

They're extremely sensitive to position but will reward the listener's time and effort by telling him/her when it's exactly right - everything clicks into focus quite beautifully.

I'll start off by saying that I've had a lot of fun with these - it's not all been plain-sailing but that's purely down to me having to think outside the box somewhat (if you'll excuse the pun). They sound best when used in a near-field setting, with the distance between them a good deal greater than that to the

listener. They will sound excellent wherever one sits/stands in the room but the true sweet-spot will be obvious.

In terms of balance, they're fairly neutral with strong bass output which goes remarkably deep considering the size of the driver. The strength of it is probably just about the only criticism I can level, and of course different rooms will react differently - our room is quite reactive. The up side of this though is that because the PU's are effectively a sealed box the bass is fast, with extremely well-defined pitch, and even throughout the range. The final few bars of Vaughan Williams Symphony No.5 (1st mov't) have two low notes played against each other - a D & E - which I've rarely heard as separate entities so naturally - they sound clouded on lesser speakers. Another good example is 'Song for Claire' from Dave Weckl's 'Rhythm of the Soul' album - the closing bars have a bass line, mostly on one note, made up of synchopated patterns which keeps the track alive with musical colour until fade-out. This really needs a speaker with both great timing, and the dynamic clarity to pull it off. On so many other speakers the track just dies away and as a result the listener misses out. Such a shame when there's more to come!



Pluto Ultimate

I've spent quite a few hours listening to symphonic wind music, one example being particularly tricky to sound convincing, namely Holst Prelude & Scherzo: 'Hammersmith'. Not only does the piece contain huge dynamic contrasts, but at the start the Tubas/low brass are playing in D minor, but are soon joined by French Horns playing against them in E Major (you'd think it was a recipe for chaos - but Holst is too clever for that). Each of these keys has a very different colour - the Minor is dark, brooding, sinister, yet the Major is much lighter and 'floats' across the top. The Plutos pull this off, keeping the colours separate yet not stripping the sound bare, or artificially detaching them - there's a natural interaction between the tonalities.

I'll lay my cards on the table here by stating I'm not really a soundstage or stereo imagery freak - it's not one of the major aspects I look for when listening to music through a hifi system. However, it should still sound natural. Now, I'm not sure if it's down to the Pluto's up-firing main driver (or just a consequence of the design of an onmi in general - the Cubes were the same) but I've really enjoyed - refreshingly so - how instruments which do 'project' (ie some brass instruments) do just that, as of course they should. However, those which don't (eg strings/woodwind)

However, I've had so much fun with them and as a result provided many hours of listening pleasure.

are allowed to breathe in their own space rather than being hurled at the listener - a Violin isn't a Trumpet after all (and vice versa).

In summary, I'll be honest the Plutos had me worried to start with. They look different, some would even say 'challenging', and will definitely need some user-input to get them singing at their best. However, I've had so much fun with them and as a result provided many hours of listening pleasure. They've also (as did the Cubes) opened my eyes to something that whilst different in so many ways, is a speaker which goes about its business in a very natural way and therefore gets a definite thumbs-up from me.

Richard Joyce



Simple Audio Go

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



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

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

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

The Bluetooth pairing is very simple. Press and hold the pause/play button on the speaker for 3 seconds

then select the speaker on your preferred device and you're ready to go.

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

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

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

The buttons feel a bit "flimsy" but this isn't a

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry Smith

LEEDH E2

A totally revolutionary technology for a simply lifelike sound

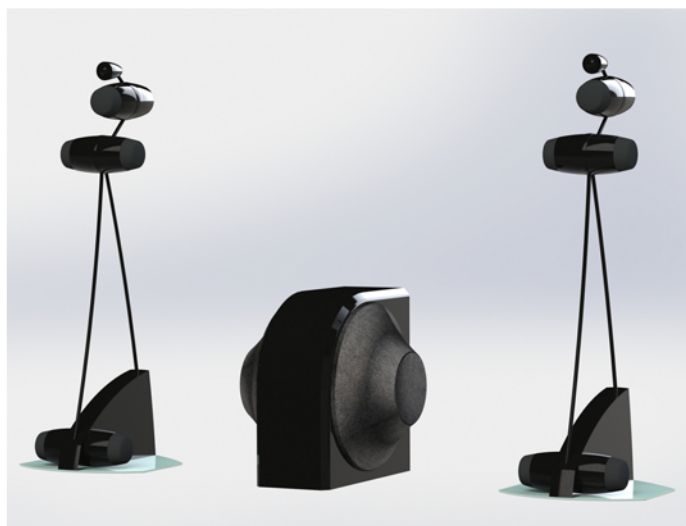
The ABD (Acoustical Beauty Driver) module was created from a blank sheet to eradicate defects of traditional loudspeakers :

- Iron free motor to transform the electrical signal into mechanical signal without distortion
- Ferrofluid suspension to transform the mechanical signal into acoustic signal without distortion and remove the speaker cabinet
- 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)

The LEEDH E2, built with 5 ABD modules, is the first deconstructed High End Speaker !

Low frequency reproduction (-3dB at 50 Hz) without speaker cabinet (total volume of acoustic load 1, 5L). Listening space integration optimised : organic design - no acoustic coupling at low frequencies - No parasitic vibration transmitted to the floor of the room, giving the opportunity to place the speaker near the wall. The Leedh E2 is also very light (15Kg) and so very easy to pick up and move to find its optimum position in your room.



THE LEEDH SYSTEM

Composed of a pair of LEEDH E2, the UNIVERSEL speaker cable and one 20.1 subwoofer, each of which could be used individually to optimize a system or together to allow a musical approach without artefacts.

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.

Its filter eliminates the capacitive effect so it could be connected with every kind of amplifiers even with long cable lengths.

Each wire has its own electric armor plating which are polarised by a lithium battery to eliminate parasitic electronic charges optimizing the connection of all every speakers with all amplifiers as the name suggests : UNIVERSEL.

ACOUSTICAL BEAUTY
contact@acoustical-beauty.com
www.leedh-acoustic.com



LEEDH E2 TEST **Hifi Pig**

The 20.1 is a subwoofer uses a revolutionary technology to optimize the push-push operation of two 15' drivers into an acoustic load volume of 16L.

This infinite load simulator technology used in our subwoofer is original as it mounts one giant excursion 9' driver behind each 15' driver.

In this configuration the two 9' and the two 15' work in push-push and each pairing of 15' / 9' drivers work in push-pull.

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.

The result is an ultracompact and powerful subwoofer able to reach 20Hz at -1dB that we logically baptised : 20.1

With the 20.1, each system sounds more natural because the ears are accustomed to listen to the sound and music without attenuation and compression down to 20Hz, at the same time improving significantly the reproduction of the high and medium ranges.

Looking for retailers
in Europe and
North America

Leedh E2

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



The Leedh E2 loudspeaker from Laboratoire Etudes et Developpements Holophoniques is a very interesting design indeed and quite unlike any loudspeaker I've come across. However, let's step back a while and explain how we first encountered this speaker. A couple of years ago we were at one of the Paris hi-fi shows and we'd seen them in one of the rooms, thought they were quite interesting but really thought no more about them thereafter. Fast forward to the Paris shows of September and November and several of the manufacturers were using them in their rooms and they were making a really great sound. I introduced myself to Gilles Milot, the guy behind the speakers and a review was arranged.

Now the Leedh loudspeakers are a bit of a revolutionary design to say the least as there are no boxes as such and each of the "drivers" is housed in

its own little "pod". The Acoustical Beauty Driver (ABD) is the key ingredient in the design

and it's able to operate in just 0.3 Litres of space and this is where the pods come in.

The driver is an ironless motor with a ferrofluid sealed suspension which is designed to reduce harmonic distortion and parasitic resonance modes of the diaphragm, the basket and the air in the pod. Without going into the technology too much (read the website if you want all the techy bumph) each of the ABD motors has 20 magnets and this allows the

This loudspeaker certainly looks like no other speaker we've encountered here at Hifi Pig, but we wanted to know what this French curiosity sounded like before we passed judgement.

Leedh E2

coil of the carbon/epoxy diaphragm to move in a constant magnetic field with an excursion on plus or minus 7mm. Ferrofluid covers the entire volume between the cylindrical interior of the external structure of the motor and the outer tube of the diaphragm, with the fluid being held in place by a magnetic field. The air in each of the pods (what the company call the box/basket) is compressed by the concave diaphragm and acts as a pneumatic suspension and this determines the ABD's resonance frequency of 90 Hz which, given the high magnetic dampening leads to a gradual cut off slope of 3dB/oct (50-100 Hz) to 12dB/oct below 40 Hz.

With regards to parasitic vibrations experienced by conventional loudspeakers the small volume of the pods allows them to be made very rigid and the vibrations caused by the diaphragm of the ABD is cancelled by a back to back (push push) mounting and the use of a silent mechanical actuator in the mid pods.

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

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

Overall the Leedh E2 is pretty compact being just 108cm high and

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

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

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



Leedh E2

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

20 Watts into 82dB... Surely Not!

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

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

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

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



Instruments are easy to distinguish from each other in the stereo space and the main vocal elements are positioned dead centre and forward...quite beautiful. Yes, the bass is a little compromised here and this may well be an issue for some, but let's not forget that this amp isn't something you'd usually partner with these speakers.

In this configuration, whilst having some very positive attributes, the Leedhs have their limits, but then many listeners will be just blown away with that exquisite openness and transparency and will be able to forgive these minor flaws of the pairing. Personally I could just about live with the Leedh/Iridium combination as it really does draw you into a recording and you do become literally enveloped in the sound they present, but regular readers will be well aware I'm a bit of a bass-head and so a different amp was plumbed in.

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

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

Leedh E2

Listening to “The World of Bleep and Booster” and their techno beats you’d be forgiven for thinking that you were listening to MUCH bigger speakers. The openness and the airiness are still there, as is that three dimensional quality to the stereo image I previously mentioned. The character of the different amp is also very evident. There’s just so much more drive and energy here and I have absolutely no idea how such small drivers manage to deliver this kind of dynamic performance. Yes the bass doesn’t trawl the very lowest depths but here we’re getting very close to what could well be a speaker I could definitely live with long term. It’s worth mentioning also how fast the speakers are – there is no overhang at any frequency and attack and decay is immediate where it should be, they are also a very dynamic and engaging loudspeaker in that edge of your seat kind of way. We listened to loads of different music and they really never failed to bring a huge grin to your face whatever the genre.

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

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

On his return to pick up the speakers Gilles had brought his own 3D Labs 1000W monoblocks to try so we hooked them up with the Coffman Labs

preamp, Gilles own prototype speaker cables and the subwoofer. Now this is a good pair of amplifiers, although little is known about 3D Labs outside of France, but I’ve heard a number of items in their portfolio over the last 5 years or so I’ve always been very impressed with them. From the outset it’s clear that the extra power on hand is welcomed by the Leedh E2s, but you can still hear very clearly the different character of these amplifiers coming through. Drum hits still have an immediate clout to them, cymbals still have sparkle and air around them, acoustic instruments still sound like...acoustic instruments and something has just hit me – what these loudspeakers are is as neutral as I’ve ever heard. They move the air leaving the listener with a feeling that the speakers aren’t really doing very much at all other than communicating what they are fed with and as such this makes them quite a difficult beast to review. How do you describe something that doesn’t really have a great deal of character of its own?

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

Leedh E2

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

Put quality electronics in front of these speakers and you will be justly rewarded with a wonderful representation of the music. Power them with poor electronics or poor recordings and they will show up any deficiencies in your system. They also manage to throw a hugely deep and wide soundstage with accurate placement of instruments and this only makes them even more attractive to me.

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

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

Stuart Smith

Spiders from Mars? No, insects from France!

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

There is a definite 'insectoid' look to them, kind of a robotic praying mantis, almost spindly with the

drivers contained in pods...a bit of a departure from the usual kind of loudspeaker.

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

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

We were fortunate to also have the prototype of the subwoofer that Gilles, the creator, has in development at the moment. I am hoping that when the sub goes into production it will be finished with larger grilles and will carry the insect theme through. So why do these speakers look so different, they use a completely different technology to traditional speakers, I'm not even going to try and go there with the science bit...a full and detailed explanation is on the LEEDH website. Basically the drivers are oil filled pistons, have a look with the grilles off when the speakers are playing, the movement is different to what you will have seen before.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leedh E2

defined and clean.

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

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

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

So what about the sub?

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

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

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

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

This works brilliantly, and the sub really comes into its own in a home cinema environment, adding to the overall pleasure of watching a film.

Summary

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Linette Smith

KEF X300A Loudspeakers

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



This £600 pair of speakers from KEF includes amplifiers and a DAC so you can plug them straight into your computer and away you go!

When we heard the X300A loudspeakers from KEF ever so briefly at Munich High-End 2013 we were pretty impressed by these powered desktop speakers and so when KEF approached Hifi Pig and asked us if we'd be interested in taking a listen to them at home we jumped at the chance.

The first thing you notice when unpacking the speakers is their physical size (they're pretty big for desktops) and then it's their weight, they're 7.5 Kg per speaker. The next thing is the finish which is a sort of metallic textured grey that looks pretty smart and contemporary and finishes off the black front baffle very nicely indeed. They look solid and well put together.

Pop them on the desk and you realise that these really are quite large speakers for the role they're supposed to fulfil – they're about the same size as the Q Acoustics Concept 20s we had for a while. I use an ancient child's double-width school desk that I've modified for a large person (I've stuck new legs on the bottom) and the KEFs take up a good deal of the available space leaving very little extra space for paperwork – I'm left with room for my laptop and mouse mat and that's about it, which isn't exactly ideal but then I'm aware my desk is a little unusual and most other people will have more conventional grown up spaces on which to work.

KEF X300A Loudspeakers

The internal volume of the speakers is 4.7litres and what you have essentially is a two-way bass reflex speaker using KEF's Uni-Q driver array which is a 25mm vented aluminium dome in the centre of a 130mm magnesium/aluminium alloy mid/bass unit. What this gives you is a point source arrangement and so I was expecting imaging to be pretty impressive...we'll see.

The X300 are active and each has twin AB amps that deliver 50 watts to the woofers and 20 watts to the tweeters. Of course, being active both speakers need to be plugged into a mains supply. Using the computer as source it's a simple matter of plugging the included USB from computer to the back of the left hand speaker and then connecting the two speakers together with another included USB cable. Set up takes a couple of minutes and on powering up JRiver Media player you've got tunes – you can also connect via a mini jack so you can connect to an ipod or whatever.

Controls are minimal and on the back of the left speaker you've got a tiny little knob for system gain and on the right speaker a similar knob for balance. I'd have preferred to have the controls for gain and balance more accessible on the front panel. Apart from the IEC, the port and an on/off switch (left hand speaker only) that's about it...apart from the heatsink and a switch for desktop or standmount positioning – I don't think the connectivity needs make these really ideal for standmounting and so it remained in the desktop position, as did the speakers. The only indication the speakers are turned on is a tiny and unobtrusive LED above the driver on the left hand speaker.

They're modern looking, nicely put together and I quite like them sat on my desk, despite their size and I'm quite happy to sacrifice the space given the music I'm hearing.

They'll play 96kHz 24bit files straight from the USB jack of your computer and so what they do take up in desk space you sort of make up in that you don't need an extra amplifier...they're still pretty big though.

First file on the player was Armand van Helden's "2 Future 4 U" and the imaging is an immediate (and expected) strongpoint of the X300As. OK, these speakers are around 70cm apart as I have them set up, but you get thrown up a nice and enveloping stage that is actually very 3 dimensional and you can pick a mix apart pretty easily. Cranking the volume

Essentially what you have here is a nearfield monitor that has been designed specifically for the home market.

up a bit gives you decent enough but not mega low bass which is never-the-less tight and controlled and all the frequencies seem pretty well how they should be here. If you listen to electronic music on your desk top then the X300As are really very good indeed...I found it hard not to just play this style of music if truth be known! My youngest son (you can read his review below) has had the KEFs for a week or so before I got to hear them and, given his taste in music, I know he will have loved them.

Essentially what you have here is a nearfield monitor that has been designed specifically for the home market. I had a play with Ableton Live mixing some of my own tunes and they're really rather good in that role and I suppose a good few people will use them as both desk top monitors for music making and for listening to tunes in a more conventional sense. It's a long time since I've listened to professional monitors if truth be known and so I can't really compare on this front to what's available today...and besides I don't think this is where KEF sees its market for these loudspeakers being.

The new David Cosby album "Coz" is a bit of a cracker and I have it as high-rez file and it has to be said that the little X300s sound pretty good with this album despite them only handling 96kHz/24bit. I have to say here that I'd have liked to be able to have the hi-rez files I have to play at their proper resolution and the DSD crowd obviously don't get a look in which will possibly put off a few desktop audiophiles I'm afraid to say.

There's that enveloping sound I mentioned before, which is a little headphone-like, but the speakers are

KEF X300A Loudspeakers

so close to my ears that there's little I can do about this – in fact I quite like it. However, push the chair back a foot or two and you get what is basically a normal stereo image but on a smaller scale than with the main rig. The imaging and staging of instruments in front of you is obviously quite narrow (but well beyond the speakers) in width, but it's really nicely layered forward and back as well as in the vertical plane.

The X300s are a dynamic, great fun and really engaging listen.

Mid ranges, as demonstrated by vocals are very well portrayed, as is piano as heard on Fleetwood Mac's Songbird. Crank the volume up and there's a little

breaking up of the sound at the very top end and things can get a little not quite right overall because of this but at normal listening levels all is well.

Phantom Limbs "Tumbling Down" sounds deep, resonant and there's an overall warmth to the sound that is really quite appealing and makes the X300As an easy listen in that it's not over analytical (perhaps precise would be a more audiophile word to use) ... in fact I found myself listening for hours whilst I was working and I know I'm going to miss these when they go as they surely must.

The X300s are a dynamic, great fun and really engaging listen. I wouldn't want them as my only speakers, but for a desktop speaker that sounds really great whilst I'm working they offer a great solution that is plug and play.

Here's the thing, with all hifi systems there are compromises and I think what KEF have achieved here is a system that will appeal to those folk who want the convenience of being able to plug in a pair of speakers to their computer and just listen to music without having to mess about or think about cables, amps and DACs.

The X300s do play music and they play it in a really engaging and enjoyable fashion and if the ultimate in resolution isn't a main consideration, but having a very good overall sound in a relatively compact



KEF X300A Loudspeakers

package is a priority then I think you will love these speakers.

£600 is quite a lot of money for a desktop system in many ways, but then you've got no amp or DAC...or cables come to think of it... to spend extra money on and whilst I wouldn't suggest these offer exceptional value for money they're certainly not outrageously priced. They're well built, solid and look the business in a cool and modern kind of way.

I've really enjoyed these loudspeakers a great deal and if I could justify spending another £600 on yet more speakers I'd buy them in a flash as I know they'd allow me to listen to loads more music and in a more enjoyable and more inclusive way than I currently do on the desktop headphone set up. Perhaps I've actually justified the spend to myself in that last sentence...

Build Quality - 9/10

Sound Quality – 7.5/10

Value for Money 7.5/10

Overall 8/10

Price when reviewed £600

Highly recommended for people who love music and want to hear it presented in a foot tapping and enjoyable fashion whilst at their desks.

Stuart Smith

Given that these loudspeakers are very much aimed at the computer generations we thought it would be interesting to get the opinion of a 16 year old so off they went to our 16 year old son Harry to give his opinions on them.

Ever since I started listening to music, I've been part of the "ipod Generation" and my primary source of music and entertainment has either been my PC or my portable audio device with mid to high end headphones.

The KEF X300A speakers make the transition from headphone to speaker very easy. I only used them in the desk configuration and coupled them up with my gaming/media PC setup (I should point out that there is a stand mode as well). The installation is pretty simple, but can get a bit messy with the amount of cables that are needed for them to function.(2 power cables and 2 mini USB to USB cables). The cables are nothing special, just bog-standard ones.

In conclusion, KEF have made a great first impression with me, showing me that entering the world of hifi isn't so complicated (or expensive) and that a pair of speakers can change the way you listen to music.

The speakers on the other hand are sublime. First of all they look drop dead gorgeous with their brushed metal sides and highly detailed drivers, the KEF logo sits proudly on the front of both speakers.

Moving on to sound, the X300A's sound very good, they give an all round punchy and dynamic sound without being over the top. They're also very versatile and can excel with all music from electronic to acoustic. I also tested the speakers with other types of media like films and games, where they performed just as well.

Some may say that £600 is a bit steep for a pair of desk speakers but being powered speakers they are the only thing you need to buy to have a fully functioning hifi setup (obviously you need a PC or MAC but I'm guessing that everybody already has one). The sound quality and finish more than justifies the price.

In conclusion, KEF have made a great first impression with me, showing me that entering the world of hifi isn't so complicated (or expensive) and that a pair of speakers can change the way you listen to music.

Build Quality- 9/10

Sound Quality- 8/10

Value for money- 7/10

Overall- 8/10

I would recommend these speakers to anyone looking for a well rounded speaker for their PC or for a secondary/ bedroom setup. For me as a teenager, they fit the bill perfectly.

Harry Smith

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"Do I recommend these loudspeakers, hell yes! Would I go out and by them...if I had the asking price yes I would.

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Linette Smith
HiFi Pig



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JoSound Ra

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



JoSound Ra

An unusually distinctive design the Ra from JoSound certainly look impressive and carry a £43 500 price tag. Stuart and Linette Smith live with them for a month and find it hard to give them back.

When Joe from Jersey based JoSound telephoned out of the blue a month or so ago and asked if we'd like to spend a month or so with the company's Ra loudspeakers I for one was really pleased. I'd really enjoyed the Cartouche loudspeakers we had in for review a while ago and we've heard the Ras a good few times at show too.

Okay, these are expensive loudspeakers at £43 500, but lets put things into perspective a little here. The drivers in the sample we have for review are the Voxativ AC-4A, and they come in a £10 000 a pair, and the craftsmanship in the actual cabinets is pretty stunning. Given their price tag these speakers are never going to be accessible to the vast majority of people, but then there are lots of things in this world that aren't. Some will be able to afford a product of this type and some will bitch about the price point to anyone who will listen. This is a high-end product and some people can access the high end whilst others can but dream...I put myself firmly in the dreamer camp here!

So let's put the price point to one side for a moment and look at what you are actually buying when you pull the trigger on a pair of the JoSound Ra loudspeakers.

They arrive in purpose built wooden crates, one for each speaker and once unpacked the first impression can be little but WOW! These are not for the timid or those looking for a loudspeaker to blend into their environment. The Ras pretty quickly establish themselves as the focal point of the room with their unusual and unique shape and proportions. Despite their size and shape they're actually quite an elegant design I think. They're basically a large cylinder about 72cm across and 40 cm deep sat atop a horn shape which opens to the floor. They stand 120cm in height and the single driver is sat slap bang in the middle of the cylinder....look at the pics. The whole of the speaker cabinet is, like the company's Cartouche, made of bamboo. The adjustable stainless steel feet (clearly very high quality and costly) fit to the bottom of the horn structure raising the whole speaker a couple of inches from the matching bass stand. Despite being a very heavy speaker moving them around on the stand is a simple affair of sliding them about until they're where you want them. Around the back is a beautifully crafted speaker terminal plate with a single pair of binding posts and a set of inputs that allow for the connection of the power supply if you choose the field coil drivers from Voxativ.

Now the drivers are interesting in their own right and as I mentioned make up a good proportion of the Ra's asking price. They're 8", full range affairs with the cones being made out of wood...yep, wood! Apparently which wood is used is a trade secret but they are seemingly put together by seamstresses which sort of makes a lot of sense.

Visually the art deco look of the Ras appeals to me, but I am sure that they will divide opinion quite dramatically.

Joe arrived and set the speakers up and once wired up to the usual reference kit there's an immediate impression that you are listening to a quality product. There's an immediate aural sensation of there being a little more stuff going on and in a more refined manner than our reference speakers (hORNS Mummy). The speakers were initially set up pointing straight forward about 190cm apart but I think that playing about with the positioning yields significant rewards and a slight toe-in snaps the soundstage into focus. I've heard these speakers at shows and to be honest the set up has not been ideal and I think JoSound could get much more out of them with a

JoSound Ra

little careful placement - that said the rooms I've heard them in are hardly conducive to careful loudspeaker placement!

Before we started to listen critically to the Ras I did a little search on YouTube to see what had been said about them and came across a video where the poster asked the question, where's the bottom two octaves? Whoever this was is one of several things, but whatever they may be it's certain he's never heard these loudspeakers at their best because they do have bass and they deliver it remarkably well. Bass is fast, it's low and it's really tight. It isn't overblown though and I think our YouTube friend is probably more accustomed to a boom and tizz presentation.

As regular Hifi Pig readers will know we listen to a lot of bass heavy music and playing as I write is Todd Terry's Blackout from the Resolutions album and I can say with honesty and conviction that there is certainly nothing lacking here at all. The sub bass synth is very well rendered but not over blown. Yes there are of course speakers that will go deeper (the Avantgarde Trios with Basshorns as one example) but in our relatively large by most standards living room this is often overkill and lots of nasty speaker/room interactions start to come into play.

Quality wise bass is, as I said tight, fast and a little dry with no bloom whatsoever. As a serious fan of the techno genre I really enjoyed this aspect of the Ra's performance. Moving away from electronic music and the opening few bars of Neil Young's Unplugged version of Like A Hurricane the organ is deep, resonous and with no over hang.

These are a hugely dynamic loudspeakers and on well recorded live drums the experience is somewhat exhilarating. There's a real visceral quality and a truly live feel but not at the expense of subtlety - gently hits on hats and cymbals are offered up with just as much expression of the snap of the snare and the individual player's character and style of playing shines through. With electronic drums the effect is similarly well portrayed with their being clear differences between the kick of a 707 and an 808.

With acoustic music, particularly acoustic guitar, there is a palpable feeling that there is a live guitar being played in the room. Decay of notes is just as it should be and there's none of this notes left hanging where they shouldn't be - the same with simple piano music. However, room reverbs and the acoustic of the recording space on well recorded live material is easily discernable and this only adds to

that in the room and live feel you get with the Ras and this kind of music.

As you'd expect from a high quality full range driver the midrange presented with the Ras is particularly strong and well recorded vocals were a real joy. There's again a real insight into the singers individuality and take on a recording and they offer up a true rendition of what they are being fed with. With this in mind I'd suggest that poor quality kit in front of the Ras will be highlighted...but then spending this kind of money on a pair of speakers you are unlikely to be pairing them with poor kit!

Overall the Ras are very well balanced with no one frequency band dominating the others at low to medium-high volumes, but turn up the dial to LOUD the very highest frequencies can become a little too much in the mix.

When a little time has been spent positioning the Ras they offer up a very realistic soundstage with excellent width and height but they are certainly not forward sounding - they do a similar thing to the Cabasse Spheres in that they present a natural stage



JoSound Ra

that presents itself in your mind's eye that is neither artificial or over done.

In many ways what you get with the Ra loudspeaker is what we heard with the company's Cartouche loudspeakers and in many ways this is a very good thing. However what you seem to get more of it and with a little more refinement. This really shouldn't come as any surprise as the speakers share the same family of drivers.

To my ears these loudspeakers are a very natural sounding speaker and able to take pretty much any kind of music in their stride. On real acoustic instruments they are superb and the dynamism of live drums has only been bettered by large bass horns and the Cabasse Spheres I mentioned earlier.

OK, the JoSound Ras are not going to be to everyone's taste and I think that the price is certainly prohibitive for most folk. People who love the single driver sound and the benefits it can often bring in terms of speed and dynamics will absolutely adore these speakers. For folk used to multi driver loudspeakers with complex crossovers then I think they will take a few tunes to appreciate their differences in presentation style.

Visually the Ras are an elegant and yet imposing design but sound-wise they seem to offer a pretty open window to the sound and add very little overall.

When reviewing any bit of kit the question we all find ourselves asking is can we live with these? With the Ras the answer is a resounding yes I could. However if I was in a position to buy these I'd want to be sure that their presentation was to my tastes in my own living space as the possibilities at this price open up a world of choices of presentation.

The Ras ooze high-end confidence, they sound terrifically natural and they deliver well on all genres of music but being somewhat impoverished (and finding it difficult to shake this mentality) I'd probably go for the company's Cartouche loudspeakers as they offer a good percentage of what the Ra offers at half the price...however, as always what we have here is the law of diminishing returns raising its ugly head and the Ras are, of course, a better speaker overall!

Sound Quality 8.5

Build 9

Value for Money 7

Overall 8.2

Visually the Ras are an elegant and yet imposing design but sound-wise they seem to offer a pretty open window to the sound and add very little overall.

Stuart Smith

And here's Linette's review. It should be stressed that, as always we listened together but wrote the reviews in isolation and without seeing each others copy...despite the remarkable similarities!

House of Bamboo part 2.

There is a whisper going around the world of High End Hifi.

Maybe not a whisper, more of an old wives' tale...but something that a lot of people seem to believe.

I guess it is fuelled by snobbery, in the same way that wine 'experts' scoff at those who quite like to neck a cheap bottle of cold plonk on a hot day..... rather than spending hours extolling the virtues of a pricey bottle tasting like freshly rain washed pebbles and a threat of cabbage patch.

And what is this nasty little untruth that is being touted a rule to listen by?

JoSound Ra

Joe has a real ‘open door’ policy at shows, as we have mentioned before he invites people to bring their own music to listen to when he exhibits.

‘You should only listen to classical music on High End Hifi’

Now, you are probably going to split into two camps here. Some of you will be with me and immediately jump up and shout ‘WTF, of course not!!!’

Some will say ‘yes, what’s wrong with that???’

I think this myth comes from the fact that yes, classical music can be very complex and very beautiful, it is moving and emotional and when played on a great system sounds incredible....but I’m afraid it just is not my bag.

I listen to a lot of different music, acoustic and electronic, but my big love is dance music.

You know when you hit a point in your life and the music and the social scene all comes together perfectly and just feels right? That happened to me in the very early 1990’s. The years of glowstick waving ravers and illegal parties in fields and warehouses. That was when I found my groove.

It happens to us all and it could be any genre of music in any decade, but whether it’s rock, jazz or disco you will have found your groove at some point and it will always be the music that you come back to.

The term ‘Dance Music’ covers a whole range of music and the name tags change and evolve...from the funkier disco and bounciest house to the deepest, darkest techno there is something for every mood.....rather like classical music.

And like classical music it can be complex, detailed and emotional.

So why am I wittering on about classical and dance music?

Well, Josound are breaking that High End mould.

Let’s make no bones about it...a £43 500 pair of speakers is pretty high end, whoever you are. There are still places where you can buy a house for that money.....or a pretty flash car.

The drivers alone cost around £10,000....that’s more than many people would even consider spending on a complete pair of loudspeakers.

But Mr. Sound doesn’t just want you to listen to classical music on his creations; you can play what the hell you like.

Joe has a real ‘open door’ policy at shows, as we have mentioned before he invites people to bring their own music to listen to when he exhibits.

Having the Ras ‘chez nous’ for a few weeks has been heavenly. I thought I was happy when we had their



JoSound Ra

little brothers, the Cartouches here....but these ones really made me smile.

I am going to find it very difficult to let them go when Joe comes to spirit them off to Munich...there may be tears!

There is a consistency with Josound speakers. They are all made from bamboo, have mainly Voxativ drivers, but the Ra is a bigger speaker than the Cartouche and it does have a bigger, fuller sound.

Looks wise they are even more impressive. The number of people whose jaw has hit the floor when they have walked into our house has been, well it's been everybody who walked in!

I love the 'sun rising over the pyramid' design and they have that same wonderful Art Deco styling as the rest of the range....no they won't be everyone's cup of tea but I think that is a good thing. The world would be a very boring place if all hifi looked and sounded the same!

They have the same 'moreish' quality as the Cartouche, the more you listen then the more you want to listen...but I found there to be more detail to the sound than I remember from the previous Josounds we had visiting.

'Real' instruments sound so incredibly real. It is a very natural sound. Listening to a piano one can hear everything, from fingers hitting the ivories to the hammer hitting the strings, if you close your eyes you are sat in front of a piano....not a hifi.

Proper goose bumps time.

Drums also were amazing; the sound of brushes on a snare drum whilst listening to jazz was incredible.

Like the Cartouches, guitar and female vocals were beautiful. There was a real emotional connection.

But let's get the crux of things here, the reason I've gone off on one a bit about dance music.

There is a track, a tune (or choon) of the hugest proportions.

It is an epic anthem of the dancefloor and a celebration of the legendary Roland TB-303.

But is also perhaps the best test of a hifi's performance that you can get....I think it gives a system a better workout than any classical music, Hardfloor's 'Once again back'

The Ras do more than cope with this tune, they bring it alive. There is so much bass in this track that it

Drums also were amazing; the sound of brushes on a snare drum whilst listening to jazz was incredible.

can sound awful, flabby, farty and downright nasty. The Ras sound superb with it.

They are tight and fast...no hint of flabbiness here, and they bring out every intricacy of the music, bass included.

We have listened to a lot of music on these loudspeakers, and like the Cartouche, I can't think of anything that didn't sound right, but I love the fact that the Ra is not just a refined speaker for lovers of classical and jazz, its also a loudspeaker for people who like to crank it up and have a bit of a party listening to Pete Tong, Todd Terry or Carl Cox.

I think there are some people who would be very happy to keep High End Hifi as their own little Classical club, don't let the plebs in, good lord what might happen then?

More and more people though are getting a taste for it and will be battering down the doors and making ourselves at home...bringing with us music of every genre.

Something other High End brands should bear in mind, just like Josound.

Build Quality – 9/10

Sound Quality – 8.5/10

Value for Money – 7/10

Overall – 8.2/10

Recommended for people that want something a bit different....and have a big budget. Amazing build quality and addictive sound.

Linette Smith

Roksan Darius S1



Roksan Darius S1

Many readers will remember the Roksan Darius from 1985 with its distinctive design and sprung tweeter. The Darius S1 from this British company is a very different beast!

Roksan has once again produced a speaker with the name Darius, however now adding S1 to the title.

The old Darius' were a rather large speaker in comparison to these more modestly sized standmounts. The older Darius model came in a frame which was also the stand and was cleverly coupled/decoupled to the speaker enclosure with a floating tweeter design, a high frequency driver mounted slightly forward of a recess in the front baffle via springs in the four corners.

Today's design is more conventional - thinner front baffle sporting a ribbon tweeter protected with a wire mesh and a 6" mid/bass driver with a metal cage which protects the driver from knocks, a brushing past the enclosure or projectile toys!

They have a deepish cabinet and are rear ported with bi-wireable binding posts.

The cabinets themselves are weighty and solidly made, they sound extremely well damped with the tapping of the knuckles test.

The Darius S1's are £4500 including stands and the ones I had for review were in a hard lacquered piano black finish (white is also available).

Unboxing everything was a chore, it took me a good hour and a half to get everything out of the packaging, set up and playing music and I'm not one of these people who puts on the white gloves (which Roksan do supply) and carefully inspects everything and gently peels open the tape and lids of the containers. Although of course I am careful with equipment.

Each speaker and stand has multiple layers of packaging, triple boxes, layers of Styrofoam, material bags, plastic bags and tissue paper.

Each component is meticulously packaged and the cut outs of the foam are a complete OCD on package design, absolutely no amount of care was spared when ensuring that the S1's arrive in the same condition they leave the factory in and this really adds to the initial perception of a quality product and pride of ownership.

What was in the box was an elegantly finished pair of speaker and stands with fantastic attention to detail, quality of finish and those small details such as the companies branding on the top of the speaker that exudes quality.

Assembly was simple and took less time than unpacking.

I set the speakers up on their three point stands which will generally self level by their very nature, however adjustments can be made on the gunmetal coned feet.

With four small balls of blue tack between speaker and stand I felt they were secure enough and positioning the speakers on the floor as whole piece was an easy task.

The finish of the speakers and stands is identical, both in the same piano black finish with Matt black metal outriggers at the rear bottom of the stand and a cable tidying void through the rear of the stand.

Roksan has even taken the care to address resonance in the outriggers by having an oval machined out of each arm, a touch which shows great care and attention to detail again.

The Sound

Positioning the speakers wasn't a fiddly affair to ascertain the best sound in my listening space, a foot and a half from the wall and about 7 feet apart was

Roksan Darius S1

the ticket. In larger rooms a few feet from the wall and a little further apart dependant on listening position would factor in good benefits I'm sure. Toe in made more difference in my room, most speakers I toe in to fire over each shoulder, The Darius I preferred a little less toe in than normal to open them up as much as the room would allow whilst still retaining good depth.

Speaking to Roksan prior to the review I asked how the Darius' would respond to valve amplification and I was assured that the 40wpc from the Emille would work very well with their 89db sensitivity and fairly easy to drive load and produce very nice results. I also asked for a solid state amplifier from them, to hear the companies electronic/speaker synergy. I have the Clones Audio AP1 and 55pm monos here at the moment also, so a couple good tests for the modern day Darius were on the cards.

As the Clones were already in situ in the rack, the obvious first listen to the Darius S1's was via them.

After a little warm up time whilst I was finding somewhere to store all the packaging the speakers arrived in, I went straight into ascertaining what the bass response was from these average sized standmounts, a real key decider for me when buying standmounted designs over larger floor standing speakers.

I went straight in for some serious pumping David Guetta dance beats and my oh my, where does that come from? was my first reaction. Bass has a rich weight to it with punch a slap to a kick drum that shocked me - really! There's a serious tonal quality to the bass, it's so rich, controlled, rhythmic, dynamic and bouncy. It's 47hz limitation has a smooth roll off which never allows for the bass to seem as if it's lacking by having a steeper cut off curve. Of course the very lowest frequencies are not there, but there is a sense of sub bass with the slope they have down low. The integration into mids and the reinforcement bass gives the other frequencies, is superb.

Driver dispersion is vast and wide and the harmonic sense of encapsulation is strong in these speakers. Details are produced very accurately, dynamically but with a controlled robust sense of flavour throughout the range, every note is under-pinned with weight, body and fullness.

Moving into some vocal work and acoustic material the Darius S1's had a chance to show off their mid-range.

Vocals, wow! Vocals were smooth, natural with top to bottom frequency correctness and all the clarity and vibrancy of the best female artist. Deep rich tones of male vocals are conveyed just brilliantly and again it's the overall integration and coherence of a 'whole' that prevails even when focusing on different areas of the sound. I found myself being drawn away



Roksan Darius S1

from one aspect of the sound so easily and unintentionally listening to the whole again, which is something which doesn't happen very often at all in my experience and just reinforces my previous comment on their overall coherence.

The midrange as a whole is just so liquid and delicious. Listening to favourite artists such as Chris Jones, Nils Lofgren, The Civil Wars, Loreena McKennit, Norah Jones and many others their vocals have a balance and quality that puts the S1's down as one of the best standmounts I've had the pleasure to listen to, even if they just did 'this' type of music right, but there is so much more to them, so before I get too caught up in writing the whole review with the Clones feeding them, I think it's time for an amp change.

A quick note on the higher frequencies first though, just to be consistent. In one phrase - sparkly, airy and utterly refined yet ready to dance with decays that add such 'trueness' to the overall presentation and amalgamates the last portion of the overall picture into one.

Valves - Emille KI40-L

The Darius are recommended to be driven by amplifiers rated between 40-200 watts per channel at 4 ohms, the Emille is rated at 40wpc.

With Emilly heading the system, notes marched into space which seemed to have been freed up at her command, overall resolution and retrieval was a fair step ahead of the Clones which produced a soundstage of such satisfactory proportions I almost didn't plug her in on the same day, as I was enjoying the performance so much.

Vocals gained added texture and a sense of greater umpixelated control. Guitar strings rasped and the wooden body resonated so naturally. Precision was really at the forefront of this coherent window into the music. Decay which had been so well conveyed took on an almost luxurious roll and a grace of beauty was presented right through the S1's frequency range.

Theres a realistic integration of organic detail which is woven into the musical fabric.

There's a definite synergy at work here that has me questioning my Ayons somewhat, their speed and attack is fantastic, however sometimes I wish that they would slow down just a little. The Darius seem to have more ease with various genres and partnering equipment, so far even though the two amps used

At this point I can not fault the sound of the Darius one bit, really.

have different characters and different levels of obtainable performance the S1's haven't seemed to change their core flavour proving to be incredibly well voiced. The Ayons can sometimes show up little nasties in the top end with some amplifiers, whereas the Roksans almost say 'I'll take what detail you can offer me and just let me do my thing'.

Soundstage depth was better with the more capable Emille and centre focus was solidly portrayed with a nice bit of layering leaving a good void for the vocal to present itself with solid stature.

Smaller transient nuances, reverb and inner details seemed to emerge more strongly now and acoustical space was more apparent on live recordings. The S1's really have the ability to convey micro details and subtle shifts of texture within the performance and the soundstage never became over saturated or muddy in any way and what people relate to as a valve distortion or I'd say quality, gave an embodiment to the sound which was fantastically musical and harmoniously flavoured.

Bass did gain another level of texture and layering, a more organic embodiment of the representative sound... a typical characterisation of valves of course. I am dreaming of a good hybrid to cover all music types with an even better potential, maybe a valve pre and class A power? That would make for an interesting listen indeed.

At this point I can not fault the sound of the Darius one bit, really. It does give me fond memories of what I liked about the MK1 Caspian. I always enjoyed it with whatever gear I partnered it with at the time, I always have referred to it as a completely non-offensive amplifier, but in truth that doesn't do it justice, it was a lot more than that and always punched above its weight in terms of refinement and musicality.

Pairing with Roksan's Caspian M2 Integrated

Roksan Darius S1

Which nicely brings me onto the latest M2 version of the Caspian. I've wanted to hear the new model for a while and being offered the Darius was a great opportunity to make the most of the opportunity to hear how the newer version compared to the MK1 (the M1 for me was not as special as the earlier amp) and also try the companies speakers with one of their own amps.

Candy Dulfers 'Nikki's Dream' Live In Amsterdam sounded magical on the Caspian, generous amounts of controlled bass coupled her Sax as it tore through the air with textural vibrancy, emanating from deep in the soundstage, which was accurately portrayed with Ulco Bes's electric guitar just to the right of her and layered with applause from the crowd. The sense

of liquidity remained strong through the Darius right through Roger Happel's vocal.

In Lauryn Hill's MTV Unplugged performance of 'Adam Lives In Theory' she refers to the context of the lyrics being about all mankind without exception and one phrase she uses is; "Fantasy is what people want but reality is what they need"

This is a fantastic quote which for me relates to how the Darius S1 performs. Audiophiles talk about resolution, dynamics, big bass slam and huge sound staging, often being initially fooled by a piece of equipment or a pair of speakers when auditioning them by their initial, what we refer to as 'wow factor'. Yet find when the equipment is in their own homes

for a prolonged period of time it becomes tiresome. The Roksans simply don't, they just continue to grow on the listener as he/she explores their music library further and in more depth - the S1's are "reality".

The overall flavour of the Roksan combination was great, soundstage was completely solid and realistic. Detail retrieval was strong and the integration of frequencies was harmonious and didn't lack anything at both ends of the musical spectrum.

Conclusion

During my time with the Darius S1 standmounts I can confess I fell in love with them. With their cohesive well tempered rhythms, their detailed and engaging approach, with the ability to handle delicacies and beats with ease, the S1's offer a tonal completeness which will put an immediate smile on your face.

Depth was a notably exceptional attribute to point out from a soundstage which conveyed natural timbres and transients, without an artificially over emphasised edge, unless it was demanded of the speakers when listening to heavy electronic dance music.

They may not be the absolute pinnacle of resolution but any hifi product which boasts these claims in my experience tends to be lacking in musi-



Roksan Darius S1

cality and generally has a hard edge, swapping it for a wow factor which very quickly become unlistenable. Roksan have spent some serious time listening and fine tuning these to reproduce a sound which lacks nothing musically and conveys an awful lot more.

These are simply one of the best standmounts I have heard.

Style, fit and finish as well as attention to detail, right down to the efficient use of and complex nature of the packaging adds to that pride of ownership and compliments their high end sound.

It has been a very long time since I have heard a speaker of this calibre able to reproduce music in such a sensational way, I really cannot convey the joy of my experience enough. Well done Roksan, well done!

Build quality: 9/10

Sound Quality: 9/10

Value For Money: 9/10 - in today's market these will give many higher priced speakers a real run for their money.

Overall - 9/10

Highly Recommended - For simply being a truly outstanding conveyor of music (full stop)

Dan Worth

Having achieved an overall score in excess of 8.5 the Darius S1 loudspeakers from Roksan was sent for second review to Stuart Smith to see if it would score 8.5 again and get the Hifi Pig Outstanding Product Award

This is going to be a relatively short second review as I think Danny has conveyed pretty accurately what I've heard with the Darius S1s from Roksan.

The packaging is indeed outstanding and the fit and finish is exceptional on the speakers. The gloss piano finish is really lovely. They have good weight to them and the stands match them perfectly – if they were

staying I'd be tempted to fill them with lead shot or similar. Bolting the speakers to the stands is a relatively painless task, but tolerances are very tight – which is a good sign that there has been a good deal of care taken over the construction. They are made in England!

Speakers were set up 1m from the back wall and 1.5m from side walls with a small degree of toe in towards the listening position. We tried them nearer the back wall but found a little into the room opened the staging up nicely for us.

The Tellurium Q Iridium amp with its 9W into 4 Ohms produced a really lovely tone overall with the speakers, but it's clear that the Darius demands a bit more power to really get them singing. So with no



Roksan Darius S1

further ado I plugged in the excellent Soul Note SA 730 we have in for review which delivers a healthy 115W into 4 Ohms.

Doug MacLeod's terrific album "There's a Time" comes alive with the guitar being portrayed in as real a fashion as I've heard in the house. There's a real feeling of "being there" and the stage is wide and deep. There's a bass drum kick on his Black Night tune that's very dry sounding and the Darius portray this perfectly...as well as the little touches on the hats. Bass guitar sounds deeper than the specs would have you think and this was one area I thought I'd find these loudspeakers to be lacking – I needn't have worried - it is tight and accurate! There's texture to the vocal and you hear all the little inflections and intonations in MacLeod's voice which brings you emotionally closer to the feeling of the blues style of this record. Danny is right in that it's easy to appreciate the tonal coherence of these speakers across the whole frequency range, though you can't ignore that the open and airy top end is really rather special in these speakers and this is down to the ribbon tweeter! The way the tweeter integrates with the woofer is really wonderful and the crossover design and implementation is clearly very clever which is not something that can be said of some.

Our bass test track is Hardfloor's "Once Again Back" and this can leave a lot of speakers all a fluster with the extremes of bass and electronic hats. With the Darius you get that the bass is pretty much all there other than the very lowest frequencies, though you do get a sense of them being there...if that makes sense - I've just read Danny's review back and he says pretty much exactly the same here. To me a speaker needs to be able to reproduce bass with realism and be fast (no overhang or unreal decay) and the Darius' do this brilliantly which is surprising given they only have a six inch driver!

These are very much like a very high quality monitor speaker in that they don't accentuate or push forward any one frequency in the mix and I like this a lot! They also sound a lot bigger than their relatively small size would suggest. You do find yourself turning up the volume to quite high levels, but at no point do the Darius' become tiring or too much as some speakers can – they just keep their composure and just go ...well, louder! Our room is relatively large, but not once did I feel the Darius were out of their depth!

Kathryn William's wonderful album "Crown Electric" is again brought alive when played with this set up and I really loved it! The vocal is represented accurately and there's a real silkiness to her voice. Likewise the vocal on Melphi's "Through the Looking Glass" album - the Darius' just never get flustered at all and the music and vocal sound correct.

Soundstaging is really great (deep and wide) but not over done on all the tunes we listened to and this gives you a very non-hifi sound. You can listen to these off axis and away from the hot seat, but sit in the sweet spot and what you are given is a very realistic portrayal of the stereo image.

Conclusion

I've listened to the Darius non-stop for the last week or so and they are very good indeed. My personal preference is for large floorstanding speakers, but I would be more than happy to live with these had I a more powerful reference amplifier – my current speakers would be up for sale if I had a suitable amplifier and I'd love to try them with an American muscle amp or Roksan's own Oxygene amp we reviewed a while ago.

They are a great loudspeaker for a reviewer as they are just so accurate, but at the same time not clinical or fatiguing so you do find yourself listening for hours on end.

With the Darius' you are given more of the subtleties of the recording, which is particularly notable on vocals, though the steel stringed guitar on the Doug MacLeod album I mentioned is absolutely believable and somewhat stunning!

I like these speakers a lot!

Build Quality – 9

Sound Quality - 9

Value For Money – 9

Overall - 9

Highly recommended for anyone looking for a speaker that delivers an accurate representation of the recording without being clinical or fatiguing and they fully deserve their Outstanding Product award and despite their asking price I do think they offer great value for money in comparison to the competition!

Stuart Smith

Ophidian Solo

The Ophidian Solo is an unusual looking loudspeaker system that costs £1795, but what does it sound like.



Arriving in a smallish single box with some serious weight to it the new kid on the block Ophidian Audio sent for review a set of standmount speakers named Solo.

The finish I received was in black Ash, with a gun-metal toned aluminium grill design to the front baffle which conceals both the tweeter and the recessed mid/bass driver.

The main driver is loaded into a tuned chamber and aperture which improves dispersion and integration. The drivers themselves are high quality Scanspeak units.

The reflex port arrangement is also novel wherein the port is built as part of the cabinet and includes anti-standing wave devices.

I initially rigged the Solos up with an old Inca Tech Oberon amplifier, a good old trusty solid state amp from Colin Wonfor. After about 200 hours of burning in time I began to listen to a mixture of music to gauge a feel of what these heavy little boxes were all about before exploring things a little further.

The top end is incredibly airy and clean sounding with an unmistakeable first class presentation with

pop, dance music and crisp cymbal work, projecting elements with excellent timing and precision.

The midrange is clean also and with a brightish amp I thought "these could run into problems". Bass is extremely tight with no overhang or boom at all, detailed and fast.

Listening to some complex string work the intricacy and detail the Solos extract is nothing short of incredible for its price point in the upper frequencies, but I missed the fuller nature of instruments and lower-end roll off seemed a little steep which limited decay somewhat. I wondered if it was due to the tighter punchier nature of the Oberon after playing around with speaker positioning for half an hour or so.

I plugged the Emille in and fired her up listening to some more string based acoustic material again. Yes! Much better! Detail retrieval was still excellent and the cleaner airier top end of the speakers prevailed.

Midrange now took on a more natural rather than clean and neutral presentation with the valves injecting that magic that they do into vocals and instrument undertones which to my surprise matched the Solos perfectly. I was convinced that they would be a

Ophidian Solo

speaker which would bias strongly towards solid state amplification! How wrong I was and how glad I was that their character shifted from clean to more natural as the midrange did become too sharp at increased volumes (not to discount a warmer solid state amp of course) but with what I had to hand on the day solid-state wise it proved that the Solos like that added bit of flavour offered by the valve amp.

Bass now also became more natural and less of that steep slope which I interpreted to be their stated characteristic was true now, a gentler and softer roll off at the lower end was clearly audible yet it retained some good punch with faster more beat driven music.

Listening to a variety of beat driven music really showed that the little Solos have great rhythm and timing capabilities, although with comparisons to larger floor standing speakers and larger stand mounts they don't have the SPL's, or go as low, but

Dynamics for the same music were also very strong throughout the frequency range, there were even times where I felt and heard a bass note flare out and suck back in again which I've generally only heard with larger speakers.

just listening to the Solos on their own I never felt that I was lacking anything. Using the Oberon gave a tightness to the bottom end which rocked the symmetry and exposed their capabilities, but with the valves they seemed more coherent, bouncy and enjoyable and the mids or top no longer outshone or ripped the balance of the presentation.

I recently listened to some Art Stiletto Monitors here on the same rig and they did lean more towards a mid/treble enthusiasm and I felt that they just couldn't reproduce quite the coherence or impact that the Solos have.

Another note in the Solos honour is their holographic nature. After just a slight toeing in dispersion was at its peak in my room and they did convey a very good three dimensional and holographic soundstage with more manufactured Electronica which is good test for a speakers ability in this department. Although artifacts were a little softer than the best, their solidly controlled edges of details in the forefront of the soundstage was the real draw in, pin pointing artifacts wonderfully strongly.

Dynamics for the same music were also very strong throughout the frequency range, there were even times where I felt and heard a bass note flare out and suck back in again which I've generally only heard with larger speakers. The Solos have a way of drawing you into the full music spectrum without even being able to reproduce those lowest of notes. I attest this is due to their cabinet design and driv-



Ophidian Solo

The Ophidian Solos are absolutely rhythmic, fun and bouncy and can also do delicate and engrossing, immersive and musical. I for one was extremely surprised by this new kid on the block.

er implementation, with the bandwidth they offer. I really couldn't hear any attenuated portions or a sense of over filtered areas due to their unique design, which I can imagine some may expect from understanding their construction. I personally think that they are very cleverly done and admit I didn't expect the level of coherence and quality that I heard from them.

I also played a whole heap of music from Spotify, 320kbps MP3 and the top end was still great and didn't over expose any nasties in poorer recordings at this level. I would imagine that anybody buying a set of speakers bordering on £2k wouldn't be throwing nasty recordings at them so the lower quality Spotify is what I consider as a fair test for lesser recordings and they coped admirably.

Conclusion

In conclusion I can firmly state that once a bit of fiddling with positioning is done (which I think is largely related to the width of the room more than the depth due to the speakers' wide dispersion) to attain a strong centre stage and that holographic nature which I mentioned, the Solos will really sing.

Be careful not to partner them with amplification that is too clean or bright and punchy, it will spoil the broth in my experience and to look at them they immediate-

ly say, powerful solid state to me with their modern and clean styling. But do not let their appearance fool you, get some good valve watts up them and their own characteristics of excellent clarity, timing and punchy presentation will really give a most enjoyable performance. If you're a bit of a bass monster the Solos don't have the room pulsating character and lack the lower octave reproduction, though the addition of a subwoofer would solve this.

The clarity in the top end is standout, so airy and clean without edginess and absolutely up there in its price bracket at retrieving everything the recording has to offer.

The Ophidian Solos are absolutely rhythmic, fun and bouncy and can also do delicate and engrossing, immersive and musical. I for one was extremely surprised by this new kid on the block.

Price at time of review - £1795

Build Quality - 8.0/10

Sound Quality - 8.0/10

Value For Money - 8.0/10

Overall - 8.0/10

Recommended for their coherence wonderfully detailed top end and ability to explore many genres very well.

Dan Worth



Focal Aria 906

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



French loudspeaker manufacturer Focal are perhaps best known for their megabucks Utopia range of speakers, but they also address the needs of the less well to do that still want high quality audio in their home such as the £758 Aria 906 standmounts.

Focal are a well known, French loudspeaker manufacturer and as such will need little introduction here but they do have a philosophy which I really like in that they produce a range of loudspeakers to suit most pockets and are keen to bring audiophile reproduction to the masses.

Focal build their own drivers at the facility in St Etienne, France and they use these drivers as the foundation upon which they build the rest of the speaker – I like this approach as it means less concessions have to be made with the crossovers.

The Aria 906 we have here is a new loudspeaker that uses the company's 6.5" flax sandwich mid/bass driver which is essentially flax fibres sandwiched between two sheets of fibre glass (*see close up pho-*

Focal Aria 906

tograph). The concept here is that the driver is stiff and very light, another Focal philosophical standpoint. We visited the Focal factory a few months ago and found that the quality control on the production line is high with each driver being checked by ear before being released.

The inverted dome tweeter is a magnesium/aluminium alloy and again this is designed to be both light and very rigid.

These are a front-ported, two-way, largish stand-mount that looks quite smart with its glass top, leather front baffle and non-parallel side panels. Looking around the back of the Arias there's a single pair of binding posts and these are of a high quality and accommodated the bare wires of our chosen 4mm cables easily. Finish on the speakers is good as you would expect for a speaker costing £758.

Throughout the review process we used high quality FLAC files from a computer feeding an inexpensive DAC and a Clones i25 amplifier. Cables used were 4mm Van Damme Blue and Gotham interconnects. I wanted to put these loudspeakers into a system that would be indicative of something someone in the real world might use and the system, including the loudspeakers, comes in at around £1500, which I would suggest is pretty much "entry level" and certainly not an exorbitant sum to spend on music reproduction.

I was also very careful to place the speakers in what I consider a realistic living space with them set around 2.5m apart and well away from walls. In fact, they were placed either side of a settee and firing across the room at a second settee about 3m away. The Arias were placed on modified, 50cm Target stands which put the tweeters at ear height when in the main listening position.

Getting away from the speaker specifics I have to say I was really surprised what this little system could do with the Focals out front. I know the amp and DAC well enough but was certainly not expecting to have the speakers elevate the whole to something I'd certainly be more than happy to live with. I found myself really enjoying listening to music and this is proof that you do not need to spend a King's ransom to put together a system that plays music really well.

Some Music

The ubiquitous Random Access Memories by Daft Punk is presented with really good extension to the lower frequencies with the bass being fairly well controlled and fast/tight. Top end frequencies come together nicely to give an overall feeling of "rightness" to the music. In some circles Focal have a rep-

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utation for producing loudspeakers that sound overly bright but I'm clearly missing something completely in this regard!

The soundstage thrown by the Arias is within the speakers and so not exceptionally wide, but there is good front to back depth with height that is really rather pleasing. What stand out with these speakers is a sense of tonal balance that doesn't over emphasise any particular frequency and this makes for an easy listening experience that isn't at all fatiguing. In comparison to the Q Acoustics Concept 20s which are a couple of hundred quid or so cheaper when their stands are factored in, the 906 goes lower and is overall a bigger and more dynamic listen which I preferred.

In absolute terms there's a sense of something missing in refinement but then that's when comparing to speakers costing many times the asking price of the Arias and so like comparing apples with oranges.

Focal Aria 906

However, crank up the volume to high levels with the Arias and things can get a little much with the speakers not feeling fully in control of the music, but let's face it, these speakers are designed for relatively small spaces - when we did put them in the main rig and firing down the large living room they were a little out of their depth I think and if you do have a bigger room you should perhaps be looking at the larger floorstanders.

Playing Ti-an-guis' eponymous album on Snip Records there's good reproduction of the acoustic instruments and a solid feeling of the recording space. Instruments don't necessarily have the air around them as when using the Roksan Darius S1s but then the Darius are six times the asking price and in reality there's little to moan about at this price point. Female vocals are reproduced with clarity and there is good snap to percussion instruments. I've found myself listening to loads of music on this little system with the Focals being the main event and they don't seem to favour one kind of music over another which is a good thing to have a broad appeal in the market.

At low to medium volumes they really do deliver and I believe they do punch above their relatively modest asking price.

However, the Aria 906 is not a high-end loudspeaker (and to be fair, at this price it was never going to be) but what it does offer is an unpretentious, good value introduction to proper high fidelity reproduction of music around which to build a modestly priced play-back system for the music lover uninterested in getting involved with all the audiophile malarkey.

The Focals look pretty conventional but aren't unpleasant to look at and they should find favour with those looking for a loudspeaker that doesn't stand out like a sore thumb in the domestic environment. They're not the smallest of standmounters (certainly bigger than the Q Acoustic Concept 20s in dimensions) but then I find that standmounts tend to take up a similar amount of floorspace to one another anyway!

There's an even-handedness with these speakers and whilst I wouldn't suggest that they are absolutely neutral in their reproduction of music they are a thoroughly enjoyable loudspeaker. High-end on a budget? I don't think so, but partner with a good budget electronics and you will have a system that you can enjoy for years to come without feeling the need to upgrade or change if listening to music is your main priority.

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Focal should be applauded for the Aria 906, it's a good value, good sounding loudspeaker that is well finished. It offers music lovers a product that is well thought out and designed from the ground up and delivers musically. Focal's philosophy of getting the drivers right and building a loudspeaker around them certainly seems to have paid off.

Build Quality – 8

Sound Quality – 8

Value For Money – 9

Overall – 8.3

Recommended for those looking for a good value loudspeaker around which to build a modestly priced system that plays music very well.

Price as reviewed £758

Stuart Smith

Neat Motive SX1

British loudspeaker manufacturer Neat Acoustics have a reputation for building good sounding speakers that have proven to be consistently popular with music lovers for many years. In this review we take a look at the company's floorstanding Motive SX1 model at £1888.



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

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

Coming in a large range of real wood veneers and any other specialist finish to order, you can rest assured that whatever any significant “other” may

deem fit for the living room then the Neats can accommodate!

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

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

The cabinet which houses the drivers leans backwards by a few degrees helping to aim the tweeters more towards the ears and to control time alignment. The cabinet is pretty inert and the overall finish is very nice indeed from top to bottom where a set of spikes raise that downward firing port above floor level.

Neat Motive SX1

Setting Up

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

Running In

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

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

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

The Sound

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

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

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

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

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



Neat Motive SX1

then for me it's a strongly projected vocal and the SX1 for their size and price point do tick that box with a thick marker pen.

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

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

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

Conclusions

The Neat SX1 is a small speaker for the big music fan. Combined with some good solid state muscle they will deliver good strong notes across a broad range of musical genres, giving an exciting and engrossing sound which will keep the avid listener satisfied.

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

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

Build Quality - 8/10

Sound Quality - 8/10

Value For Money - 8/10

Overall - 8/10

Price at time of review - £1888

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

Dan Worth



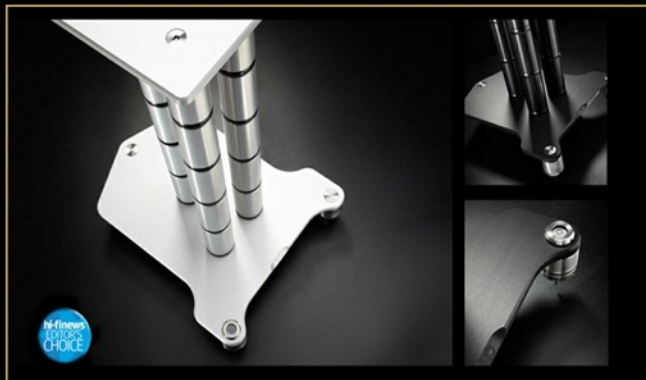


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Robson Audio Opulus Prima

The Robson Audio Opulus Prima is a small monitor type loudspeaker with a rear firing bass port.. Robson suggest they could be the ultimate desktop loudspeaker...



They comprise of a 140mm Magnesium Alloy cone covering bass and mid frequencies and atop this driver sits a ribbon tweeter. The crossover is a second order affair. They really are a small speaker standing just 33cm high, with a width of 16cm and a depth of 20cm. They weigh in at 6Kg. The review sample came in a black textured paint finish that I'd initially assumed was some kind of leather/pleather covering, however, you can have them made in striking red and yellow colours too. Sensitivity-wise they're 86dB, are a nominal 8 Ohm load (minimum 50ohms) and they will handle up to 150Watts.

Inside the speakers are wired with silver plated copper to the tweeter and copper for the woofer.

With their gold fittings they certainly look pretty stylish in an understated and classy kind of way and the lack of grilles is certainly no loss...I rarely put grilles on speakers anyway, preferring to see the drivers at work. For £750 (factory direct) I certainly think the fit and finish is above average and the nicely finished plate for the speaker binding posts really finishes them off – you don't see this in use obviously, but it's this attention to detail that inspires a degree of confidence even before firing the speakers up.

On their website, Robson ask if these could be the ultimate desktop speaker and I'm sure some may very well use them in this kind of nearfield situation, but for the duration of their stay here at Hifi Pig they were placed on our custom built 50cm

Robson Audio Opulus Prima

stands...which were actually the perfect height when slouched in my Ikea chair, but I would suspect that for people listening from a standard height chair/settee then 65cm would be a better proposition. That said, their foot print is slightly smaller than the powered speakers I use on my desktop.

Initially we placed the Opulus speakers in our large main listening area and it was clear that they were a little out of their depth trying to fill this space effectively...it's a big space. Fortunately we have a smaller listening space off the main room which is more realistically proportioned at around 3m x 4.5m and it is here I did most of my listening. I had them firing down the length of the room, 150cm apart and around 20cm from the back wall, with the main listening position around 3m away. I believe this is a realistic position for these speakers and probably typical of the kind of environment they are likely to be used in.

Sound

I spent a good deal of time listening to these little speakers without really taking much notice, taking notes, or playing the test tracks I like to throw at speakers and I have to say that I thoroughly enjoyed them. Whilst my preference in the main listening room is for large floorstanders (or larger stand-mounts) I could perfectly happily live with the Opulus Primas in this smaller space. There's a really nice feeling of balance to the speakers that really lets you relax and get on with just listening to your tunes, whichever genre. I found myself delving further into my collection than I've been for a while and playing loads of different music (even some classical) and really connecting with it...which, the critical review process apart, is surely what hifi is all about. No, these little speakers don't do trouser flapping bass, but they do go pretty low and the bass is tuneful and fast...no one note wonders these!

Anyway, the "job" here is to try and pull these speakers apart by giving them something to challenge them and search out their strengths and weaknesses, so on with Leftfield's Rhythm and Stealth album which has deep basslines aplenty. Actually it's surprising how much bass information these speakers convey. Phat Planet, which many will know from the Guinness adverts a few years ago, has complex beats and sub-basslines that can get quite confusing and incoherent on some loudspeakers. Not so here, the integration between that little woofer and the ribbon

No, these little speakers don't do trouser flapping bass, but they do go pretty low and the bass is tuneful and fast...no one note wonders these!

tweeter is seamless, offering up a sound that works as a whole, but still with the ability to pick out individual elements in the mix. On the dubby Chant of the Poor Man, I have to be fair and say that any more bass output would have been too much for the room. Soundstaging has decent depth and height, but does not extend massively beyond the sides of the speakers. Playing with toe in was interesting and I found the most pleasing image was when the speakers were firing directly at my head – slightly toed in...the classic set up. The feeling from a spatial point of view is very much like listening to a large speaker only on a smaller scale...if that makes sense. With electronic music I really expected the Opulus Primas to struggle, but they really don't and that tightness of the bass and the crisp top end really compliment this style of music. Within the stereo image individual elements in the mix are properly positioned, sit stable and it's easy to see why these are described as a "reference monitor" by Robson Acoustics.

Popping on the nicely produced, eponymous Natalie Merchant album there's that speed to the sound again...and a feeling of integration too. Whilst Merchant's voice is clearly the main event, the rhythm section's interplay and feeling of "integrated yet separate" sound the Primas give, adds pace and bounce to proceedings, with the tweeter rendering hi hats crisp and shimmer. Merchant's voice is ren-

Robson Audio Opulus Prima

dered very nicely and accurately with the Primas seeming to add very little character of their own.

Regular readers will know that one of my pet hates is a sloppy/slow sound and this is where these little speakers really shine. Rage Against The Machine's Killing in the Name is a good example of a tune that can sound messy on some loudspeakers, but here it is punchy and hard hitting. Likewise Deep Purple's Smoke On The Water from their Made In Japan album with the grunty bass being well produced.

I mentioned the soundstage being quite narrow and not extending far beyond the speakers earlier, but put on Talvin Singh's Traveller from the OK album, where the width of the soundstage is exaggerated and it's all there. Jerry, who used to review for Hifi Pig,

often said where a particular pair of speakers would make him feel he was sat in the concert hall and with the Opulus Primas I got the impression of being fairly far back in the hall with a clear stage being portrayed in front of me. Indeed, referring back to the Made In Japan album it's easy to "see" the musicians on the stage, or rather where they had been placed by the engineer on the desk.

Conclusion

This is a good loudspeaker when not pushed beyond its limits! In the right sized space it offers a level of refinement and coherency that should be applauded for the asking price. In the average sized living room, or smaller space, it will perform perfectly well.

The Opulus Prima's stand-out attributes are speed and integration and for these reasons it's a speaker that really appeals to my tastes. There's a distinct feel that you are listening to a quality near/mid-field monitor that has been refined and made fit for domestic use. There's an accuracy to the sound that really does deserve the monitor description.

Given my saying that these are accurate and monitor-like speaker, you'd be forgiven for thinking that they are clinical and fatiguing...they're not at all. On every kind of music I threw at them they performed really well and I found myself listening for hours on end and just relaxing into the music.

All in all I heartily recommend the Opulus Primas, they sound great for such a small speaker, have surprisingly low, fast and tuneful bass and the way in which the woofer and tweeter integrate makes for a really entertaining and engrossing listen.

Build Quality – 8.15

Sound Quality – 8.25

Value For Money – 9.1

Overall – 8.5

The Opulus Prima loudspeakers are a good value for money, great sounding loudspeaker, which will suit listeners looking for a fast and detailed sound.

Stuart Smith



Robson Audio Opulus Prima

Having achieved a score of 8.5 the Opulus Prima have been reviewed a second time by a different reviewer, Janine Elliot, to see if they warrant our Outstanding Product status.

Getting the chance to give a second review on a pair of speakers with ribbon tweeters was something I grabbed at gently – well, ribbons are very fragile beasts. As a lover of Townshend Maximum Supertweeters, I like their unfettered clarity and speed. Whilst for the majority of the review I stuck to one particular amplifier and source, I did initially listen to several systems and interconnects, knowing their idiosyncrasies and therefore what I knew was possible. This included powerhouses from Krell, Quad, Manley and Sony. I finally decided to do my listening via the Propious mono blocks from Graham Slee (another 'cottage' British company better known for small headphone amps and phono stages) and using their Magestic DAC preamp. I chose the Slee amps because their Class AB design, following proven old-school transistor topology, giving a faithful, flat and full frequency response in a pint pot 25W design, a bit like the sound I found from these minute speakers them-

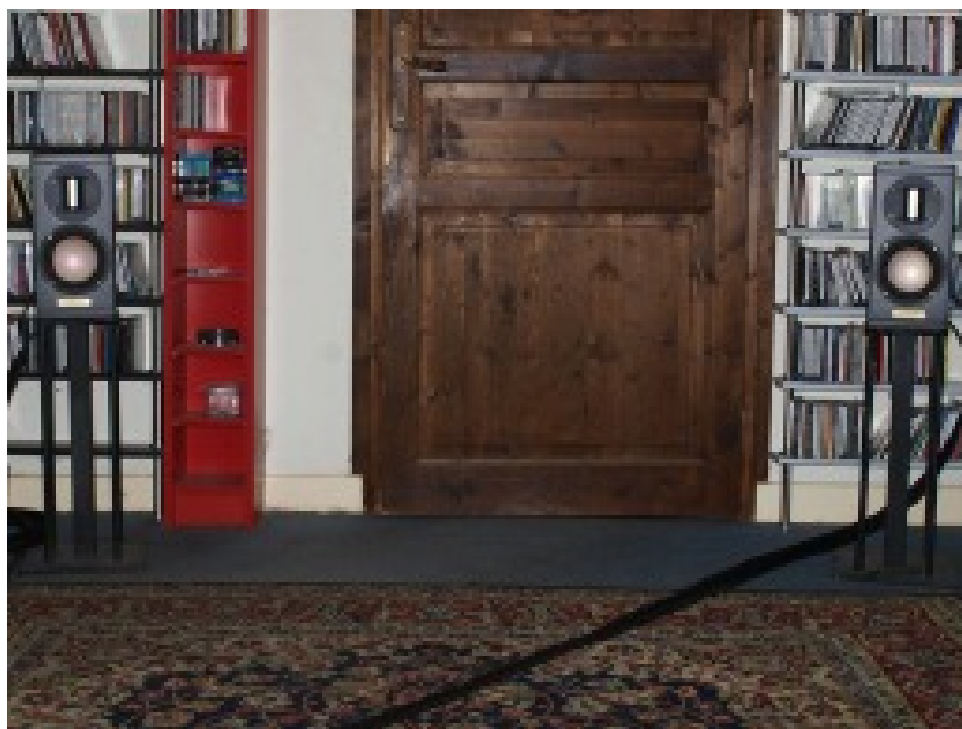
selves. It reminded me of my Videotone Minimax speakers of the 70's. Their introduction amazed the hi-fi press with the amount of sound available from such a small space. This speaker, however, has come a long way from my 70s youth. Mid and top frequencies were bullet proof. Hence, I decided for this review to use sources digital 24/192 sources as well as digital outputs from CD, digital radio via TiVo box and some vinyl.

Rob Hudson, founder of Robson Acoustic, is firmly of the belief that amazing sound quality shouldn't have to break the bank. Indeed, the Opulus Prima comes in at only £750 if bought direct from their factory. Unpacking this Northumbria company is like a pandora's box of toys. There is so much that this company is producing; this includes no less than 8 speakers - all with ribbon speakers costing up to £12,000+, a power amp, passive preamp and a media server. Me thinks I need to look into this company a bit more.

The Opulus Prima is their cheapest speakers, but in no way do they look cheap. Finished in a strong nextelle type paint in either black, red or yellow, they are certainly tough little boxes. The ribbon tweeter uses a specially chosen Clarity Cap capacitor giving them incredible high frequency detail and dynamics belittling their size. The sample I received was beautifully finished, though the screws holding the bass unit into the "box" were loose after traipsing across La Channel from their first review in France. Easily screwed back in. Maybe the company should look at

a different air-tight fixing system. The rear ported 2-way unit looked smart, but as your stereotypical female I found the rough surface could attract a bit of debris and dust. A small cost for such a mightily good design. Topped off with a classy metal name print on the front of these cover-less monitors, this tall narrow design fitted beautifully on top of my weighted Atacama stands. At last a company that does away with the pointless fabric covers.

Compared with aged and modded BC1 and my LS3/5a's these monitors had a slightly narrower soundstage, though instruments



Robson Audio Opulus Prima

were clearly defined no matter what I played at it. Even with the 25W Slee these speakers punched for England. Using a top-end Sony transport feeding bits into the Slee DAC I could sense a slightly warm mid-range in Mike Valentine's Chasing the Dragon tracks. The Bach Cello prelude recorded out door could sense the atmosphere and hear the birds but there was a little compression heard in the louder sections, which I didn't hear in the delicate LS35/a's. The student orchestra on track 13 with the Decca-tree mic'ing, didn't do the musicians much favour, but you felt you were there in the audience. It just lacked the depth and deep bass available in larger and more expensive speakers. Whilst bass end was limited due to physics, the top end, thanks to the ribbon tweeters, was quick, precise, and tireless. Indeed the accuracy at all frequencies, and its depth of soundstage, would make excellent studio near field monitors.

Continuing my look for badly recorded music, David Bowie album **'The Next Day'** sounded less cluttered than I was used to, for example the forward and rear soundstage on track 3 **'The Stars are Out Tonight'**, though it was more 'tizzy'. Whilst my Graham LS5/9 might offer extra space, and of course an extra octave, I found the Robson Audio's were faster. The next track showed just how good the forward and rear soundstage was for such a small size, and price. As an introduction model in the RA fraternity it left me wanting to hear more. Swapping again with my prized Chartwell LS3/5a's was not easy to compare - they were just so different despite similar size. The bass was better in the Robson, but the soundstage not so clear as the BBC Chartwell LS3/5a's. I couldn't reach out and touch the musicians, as I could on the BBC design. On some music the sound compressed when pushed, where my 15ohm 15W Chartwells handled with ease.

'Pictures at an Exhibition' (Minnesota Orchestra, "Tutti! Orchestral Sampler) was amazingly strong, and **'Walking in the Moon'** by The Yuri Honing Trio had a surprisingly powerful baseline, that managed to keep itself tight and well controlled. I'm always in favour of small bass/mid units as they can keep a tighter bass. The drum solo mid into **'Cotton Tail'** Dee Dee Bridgewater was tight and all correctly placed in front of me.

So, how do I conclude my prognostication on this piece of equipment. To say I was surprised is an understatement. Whilst these 140mm Magnesium Alloys can get pretty low (42Hz +/-2dB is stated) and

**These speakers
are so clear
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for me.**

the ribbons get to frequencies my bat might like, they are low output by today's standards at 86dB/metre, meaning levels need to be risen a wee bit. But if that means I need to turn a knob just once that is not a problem to me. These speakers are so clear and precise they put many speakers at least twice the price to shame. They tick all the right boxes for me. Working best in smaller living rooms and away from walls and with power amplifiers with enough grunt to push them a bit when needed. My only criticism is a slight compression in sound with some music I played.

Build quality 8.2 (despite the bass/mid driver fixing)

Sound quality 8.3

Value for money 9.0

Total 8.5

Janine Elliot

Graham Audio LS5/9

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

The £3450 Graham Audio LS5/9 loudspeaker is a speaker built very much in the tradition of the well loved BBC monitors, indeed this is a recreation of the loudspeakers originally made by Rogers for the BBC.



The thought of reviewing a pair of BBC speakers was, to me, like being offered a packet of jammy dodgers. Let me explain, having spent many hours, and nights, broadcasting and mixing at Her Majesty's Broadcasting Corporation (and eating jammy dodgers) I had got so accustomed to the sound it was like reliving old times when reviewing this modern incarnation.

The BBC in its heyday designed their own speakers, because no other speaker was good enough, particularly for 'speech'. When I joined the corporation as a studio manager (incidentally the same year as the LS5/9 was conceived), their premises were full of all variants of speakers designed by them, some dating back to the 1950s. There were near and far monitors numbered as LS3/ and LS5/ respectively. Generally the latter appeared in the larger studios, hence considered as "a" grade as opposed to "b" grade office speakers, where the LS3/5a were widely used. That

was confusing in the LS5/12a, being the last near-field BBC speaker - the size of an LS3/5a. That one has been reborn by Spondor, but was not used much at all at the BBC. By the time BBC speakers reached the end of their broadcasting life I worked in my capacity as Resource and Development Manager to look at their replacements. In the end the BBC opted for domestic stock Dynaudio speakers.

The LS5/9 was a smaller loudspeaker to replace the goliath precursor LS5/8, and work began on developing this excellent speaker in 1983. Regrettably it never saw service until the 90's. Harbeth later sold their own variant Monitor 30 and later still the 30.1, which is used by a number of major recording studios/professionals. Whilst the older LS5/8 was finding itself more and more unlikely to make it to the studios, and certainly the recording suite vans and lorries, as it was too big, it could also sound too slow and lacking top end frequencies. Hence the

Graham Audio LS5/9

LS5/9 was designed to match as closely as possible the "sound" of the former iconic speaker, but at 28litre much smaller than the 109litre LS5/8. Indeed, the original tweeter was identical to that in the 5/8 to aid that similarity. It also needed to have the ability to acoustically measure 100dB(A)/1m. Whereas the earlier LS3/6 and LS3/5a were 50litre and 5litre respectively, the new speaker needed to operate at a higher sound level, and be midway in cabinet volume. No mean task, and all done at only the cost of one quarter of an octave of the lowest tones of the LS5/8.

Derek Hughes, son of Spencer and Dorothy Hughes, who of course formed Spondor, was brought in to help with the Graham LS5/9 project. His dad, Spencer, had many years earlier left his job in BBC R&D to build the BC-1 after developing the LS3/6, and son Derek worked in the company, too. His experience therefore was vital in the new Graham Audio LS5/9, in understanding the original design, and to help reinvent the original design. This was done over two years. British manufacturer Volt, who make the woofer for this incarnation worked closely with Derek to create a design similar to the original BBC 200mm unit made by Rogers, and using the same translucent polypropylene diaphragm material. The original could change its frequency curve with age, so time was spent creating a design that would last forever. The original 34mm Audax tweeter is still in production in a similar guise today, protected in a mesh housing, just as it was in the original BBC safety feature. Similarly, the speaker cabinet continues the original strategy of thin walls, largely because the BBC wanted to make them as cheaply as possible. It is important to say that it is a complicated design with bitumen damping, highly braced and with Rockwool-type insulation held together with black cloth. It is highly engineered, despite looking just like a box! The target was to create a cabinet with short resonance within a limited Q, so that resonance didn't carry across a large frequency range, as in many loudspeakers. As the original was designed for all types of music, including classical which has many small individual instrument sounds across a wide frequency bandwidth, it was important that it wasn't masked by cabinet sounds.

Whilst many within the BBC tried, and eventually won, to get rid of the 'BBC sound', including engineer and colleague Peter Thomas, who built some brilliant unusually shaped speakers using transmis-



When testing during manufacture their objective performance is recorded for future support, and each pair is carefully matched, just like in old BBC days.

Graham Audio LS5/9

sion line "porting", and then who left to form PMC, I still wanted to hear the traditional BBC sound. Call it 'pipe and slipper' sound, I don't mind. If anything, the sound should be called 'Old Faithful', as will become clear throughout my spiel. The sound is very forward with a feeling of slight accentuating of mid-range, and being very easy to listen to for long periods, something which sound-engineers obviously found to be very important. Placed correctly in an isosceles triangle, slightly toed in, then these near field monitors' sound is just so right, with nothing missing or added as is the case for many expensive speakers. Indeed, one can get so used to too much top end in modern speakers that these could sound lacking. Actually, putting my meter across the output these are impressively flat, all the way to the top. At



The LS5/9 was a smaller loudspeaker to replace the goliath precursor LS5/8, and work began on developing this excellent speaker in 1983.

£3450 Graham Audio's remake on the theme is very reasonably priced for the sound you get and for me certainly an incredibly cheap revisit down memory lane for my days at Aunty. It can be bought with a tidy looking heavy, and typically BBC, metal stand at an extra cost, which ensures it is the correct height and is securely held.

During this test, I brought out in tribute my own LS3/5a and Spendor BC1 (closely connected with the LS3/6, but that's for another day). I always found the Spendor had a highly coloured mid frequency, and this was particularly evident testing now up against the Graham model. The aged speaker felt overworked and fragile in comparison, plus, as an early variant I was worried in case I over-drove it, so I therefore decided to mod the internal wiring with silver cabling and add, after a few calculations, a uniquely designed 3.75" length/2" diameter port, rather than the simplistic "hole of hope" on the original. What an improvement. I'll share my design with you all soon.

Back to the Graham Audio. When testing during manufacture their objective performance is recorded for future support, and each pair is carefully matched, just like in old BBC days. The model is made from birch plywood and available in 3 finishes. It has a magnificently built enclosure in cherry, rosewood and ebony maccasa. Whilst many might laugh today at building a traditionally shaped box speaker, favouring something with curves, carbon, plastic, glass or perhaps with a baffle and no enclosure, this one really does work, and you get a piece of acoustic history thrown in. The box is critically braced in a different way to that of the original BBC model. The speaker is single-wired, and it has a 1dB adjustment panel for the tweeter level, but this is factory set. This is done to account for minor variations in the tweeter design.

I found it happier playing classical and jazz music, being a wee stodgy on some of the pop music I played, especially when loud.

I found the speaker to work better with the front grille removed, which was easily done, since it is cleverly held on magnetically (not on the original LS5/9s, I might add). I found it happier playing classical and jazz music, being a wee stodgy on some of the pop music I played, especially when loud.

Graham Audio LS5/9

Naim's 'True Stereo' CD with its uncluttered and unprocessed recording was just that; it sounded just as the engineer would have wanted it to come across to the listener, relaxed and not rushed. The flutes, whistle, guitars and drum in Mark Knopfler's vinyl album "Get Lucky" were all clear but very, very, powerful at the same time, largely because the sound was forward. For me, being used to soundstage behind the speakers, these monitors could perhaps be tiring if listening to at recording studio levels - which is what I wanted to do, all the time. At low and normal levels nothing stuck out, and bass was punchy like the drinking-straw-tuned bass ports in those Meridian M2 powered speakers, from 30 years ago. Many speakers fail miserably at low level. These certainly didn't. When going back to my reference Wilson Benesch Arcs, suddenly the sound went back to third gear as the soundstage disappeared behind the speakers and the lower octave needed support from the Torus infrasonic generator. Eagle's 'Long Road out of Eden' was so in control; the sweet vocals contrasted the punchy drum 4 beat in 'I don't want to Hear Anymore'. Ironically I *did* want to hear more, and whilst I was reliving my BBC past, I wondered why the world had ever advanced from NICAM and flared trousers. Both were statements of their time. These speakers were a statement of quality, and of a time when things ran a little slower and more relaxed. These speakers did the same for me; nothing was hurried, and all the music showed total command. For example, 'A Taste of Honey' from Patricia Barber's 'Cafe Blue' has a relaxing but informative lilt. This was how life should have sounded. The depth in recording was absolutely right; being forward speakers didn't mean the sound was two dimensional. I was amongst the musicians, not sitting back in the 10th row. These speakers are, however, like Marmite. You will either love them or not. They are worthy of a listen to fully appreciate just how good sound used to be.

The soundstage has an exceptional stereo spread, and with its clear but polite footprint it can make any music sound pleasurable, whether driven from my Krell, Roksan, Musical Fidelity, Leak, Sony, or anything else I threw at it. It works best on understated amplifiers, though whatever I connected to it gave a really accurate reading of the music. Compressed music sounded compressed, and real vinyl sounded, well, real. Whilst I perhaps would have preferred Scanspeak tweeters, doing so would render this

The depth in recording was absolutely right; being forward speakers didn't mean the sound was two dimensional. I was amongst the musicians, not sitting back in the 10th row.

speaker a fraud, and hence not a LS5/9, and ultimately not get that BBC accreditation. And it gets better, Graham Audio will be releasing their 21st Century LS5/8 in November.

In conclusion, this is one hell of a good speaker, and one which is so hard to evaluate. With my BBC hat off this time, I have thought much about the sound as well as build. Indeed, it is incredibly well made and boxed, and gives an equally good and honest musical rendering, though it can sound a bit boring with certain music. This is not a criticism, as there was nothing missing; it was just honest, something we are just not used to in many speakers. I was no longer listening to speakers. I was listening to the musicians, or the singers, or the spoken voice, just as the BBC sound engineers, myself included, would have needed to hear. Forget all those fancy boxes or new technologies. It was all right, back in 1983, and it's still all right now.

Sound Quality – 8.5/10

Value for Money – 8.6/10

Build Quality – 8.6/10

Overall 8.57/10

Janine Elliot



TRIANGLE

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Triangle Signature Alpha £6000



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Triangle Signature Alpha

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

Hugely well known and respected in their home country of France, Triangle make loudspeakers to suit most pockets. Here we take a listen to the company's Signature Alphas costing £6800.



I've always enjoyed Triangle loudspeakers ever since I first heard a pair on the end of some valve amps at an enthusiasts hifi show about four or five years ago. Since then I've had the opportunity to hear several more pairs including the range topping Magellans and have never been disappointed with their sonic abilities. I also like the ethos of the company; they're inclusive and as well as having the relatively mega-bucks Magellans, they have the cool,

funky and very affordable Color range and several ranges in-between to suit all pockets. Triangle loudspeakers, in France at least, are available not only in the rarefied atmosphere of the high-end retailer, but also in more down to earth "high-street" outlets.

Triangle Signature Alpha

Here for review we have the top of the Signature range, the Alpha, which is certainly an impressive looking three-way loudspeaker. It stands 1.3M high, has three fibre glass bass drivers, a paper cone mid-range driver and Triangle's die-cast aluminium horn tweeter which sports a 2mm titanium dome originally developed for the Magellan. The Alpha has a front firing port, a nominal impedance of 8 Ohms (down to a minimum of 3.3) and a sensitivity of 92dB. For the duration of this review I've been using our Tellurium Q Iridium that gives out around 17 Class A Watts per channel.



The review pair arrived in white in very substantial and well thought out packaging that is certainly a two man job to get the speakers out of. In the box is a cleaning cloth, a pair of white gloves, a very basic but detailed enough owner's manual, a warranty coupon and a little metal key device that I never really found a use for. Set up and placement is a doddle with the Alphas having a substantial plinth of their own built in, with an adjustable footer at the front to change the angle the speakers point in. The Signature Alphas are stable enough on the floor and should be safe enough should you have small children running around. Around the back are some very high quality and simple to use binding posts – two pairs to allow for bi-amping or bi-wiring.

The Signature Alphas proudly sport a "Handcrafted in France" plaque and the whole of the Signature range is conceived, designed and implemented in France at the company's facility in Soissons. The cabinets themselves are constructed from seven high density fibreboards of 3mm each which are press bent to shape and bonded to give an overall thickness of 21mm. The knuckle rap test has the cabinets sounding pretty much dead which is reassuring. The finish on the speakers is really rather nice and blemish free. They're a big speaker but they're pretty narrow so they don't dominate the room and the cabinet itself bows in the middle making the narrower at the front and back than they are at the sides – have a look at the pictures to see what I mean.

Sound

Upon plugging the Signature Alphas in for the first time I have to say that I was a little underwhelmed at

I must confess that this review has been a long time coming as I know that once it's published the Signature Alphas will be winging their way back to Triangle...I've really enjoyed my time with them....

what I was hearing. There was a feeling that the Alphas were constrained and closed in and they certainly sounded nothing like I've heard Triangle loudspeakers sound before. A distributor friend who knew the Triangles were arriving for review phoned and asked what I thought of them and I said at the time that I thought they sounded pretty dull and lacklustre. However, I kept playing the speakers and they do loosen up and start to sound better (*lots*) pretty quickly. With this in mind I'd suggest that straight out of the box you are not getting the real deal from these speakers and it is worth spending a little time banging some tunes through them for a few days before really starting to listen with anything

Triangle Signature Alpha

I did find myself reaching for harder dance music like the stuff that Bonzai used to put out and the Triangles do this style with aplomb – the sound is perhaps a tad more refined than is absolutely necessary for this style of tune but the speakers' punchiness, oomph and slam really do play to the strengths of this genre.

like a critical ear. To temper this paragraph I must confess that this review has been a long time coming as I know that once it's published the Signature Alphas will be winging their way back to Triangle...I've really enjoyed my time with them.

For the duration of their stay here at Hifi Pig the speakers have been set up in our main living space, well away from side walls and back walls and toed in towards the listening position. To be fair to these loudspeakers they have been pretty unfussy with regards to positioning, but they do prefer to have a little space around them. The best seat in the house obviously gives you the best soundstaging and there is a pretty narrow window here, but off axis listening is pretty enjoyable too.

Once the speakers have had time to loosen up for a few days the first thing that hit me was how much like the Magellans they sound. They're perhaps not perhaps as ultimately sophisticated and refined as their bigger siblings, but there is definitely a family sound going on here – lively and dynamic - which I really enjoyed.

At lower volumes and listening to Massive Attack's Blue Lines record there is a really nice and energetic feel to the sound with the Signature Alphas. Nothing is overly emphasised or over done as can sometimes be the case with some loudspeakers, as if they are trying to over compensate for something being



lacking at low volumes. Crank the volume up and you simply get the same feeling only louder. Stereo image is solid and whilst it is not as wide as some, it is still very good front to back. Bass extension is good and low with good control and even with the bass heavy Blue Lines there is never a feeling of boom or their being too much of the lower frequencies, which can lead to a mushy and uninvolved listen with some loudspeakers.

At higher frequencies there's sparkle and shimmer to the hats and I think this is a positive aspect of the Signature Alphas – chatting with some people there was a couple of folk who suggested the Triangle sound was over the top at higher frequencies, but I just don't get this accusation in any way! To me this alleged "over the topness" is just that they are experiencing more high frequency information and as such more detail across the board than they are used to .

The Signature Alphas have a big sound that at the same time has poise and balance which when combined with their speed and excitement makes for a toe tapping listening experience.

Flipping over to the recently released Cheek to Cheek by Tony Bennett and Lady Gaga (a great album with a classic big band sound) you really get a sense of this being a live orchestra playing in front of you, albeit on a slightly diminished stage. On the tune Anything Goes you are presented with the band positioned behind the vocalists with each of the individual sections and instruments being easy to pull out of the mix. Drums are tight which add to the great timing and feeling of rhythm and pace that these speakers add to proceedings. On the vocal, which here is slightly forward sounding, there is a good insight into the little inflections and intonations

Triangle Signature Alpha

of the singers' voices – Lady Gaga has a great jazz vocal style by the way!

I did find myself reaching for harder dance music like the stuff that Bonzai used to put out and the Triangles do this style with aplomb – the sound is perhaps a tad more refined than is absolutely necessary for this style of tune but the speakers' punchiness, oomph and slam really do play to the strengths of this genre.

Switching back to real instruments such as with Goblin's Beyond The Darkness and there is a naturalness to the instruments with huge amounts of detail being brought out of the recording across the spectrum. I do think the horn tweeter employed in these speakers is responsible for much of this apparent detail and resolution. Much in the same way that a super tweeter adds space and airiness to a loudspeaker, the tweeter on the Signature Alphas adds something that is indefinable but effective. On the Goblin record there is a tune called Trumpet's Flight, which needless to say has a trumpet featuring as the main instrument, and the Triangles allow this instrument to cut through the mix to appear more prominent, but without overshadowing the rest of the instrumentation.

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, I kept hold of the Signature Alphas for a long time and so thanks to Triangle for their understanding. Truth is I could have had this review finished a good month or so ago, but I really have enjoyed my time with them so much I didn't want to give them back with any haste.

The speakers as reviewed are hugely entertaining in a dynamic and punchy sense, with an ability to bounce along through tunes in a fashion that is sure to get your feet tapping to the music, but that is only really half the story with the Signature Alphas. As well as this punchiness you also get the impression that this is a really refined speaker that can do subtlety too. I'm really inclined to say that these offer a good deal of what the big Magellans bring to the party at a fraction of the cost... and that is high praise indeed.

The Signature Alphas don't prefer one genre over another and are equally happy to pump out techno as they are to playing more subtle music and this is a good thing for those with a wide taste in music.

On the negative side the casing which covers the tweeter (the bit that sits on the top of the speaker) is a



bit "just stuck on" and I'm not a huge fan of the driver surrounds or the plasticky bass port (*you can cover the fronts with the grilles but I didn't even have them out of the protective covering*), but then round the back the plate for speaker binding posts and the posts themselves are amongst the best I've seen... Overall fit and finish is very good other than my issues with the casing for the tweeter and given the finishes available there will be a style to suit most tastes.

Build Quality - 8.25/10

Sound Quality - 8.5/10

Value For Money - 8.15/10

Overall – 8.3

Price as reviewed £ 6800

Recommended for listeners looking for a serious loudspeaker that delivers excitement and subtlety in equal measure when needed.

Stuart Smith

The Varios Jr Loudspeakers

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



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

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.

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.

The Varios Jr Loudspeakers

They stand out from the crowd despite their small size. Very stylish and 100% unique.

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

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, handmade 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.

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!

Harry Smith

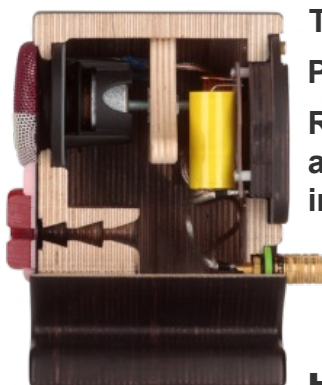


The Vario Jrs proved to be very versatile across many genres of music.

bright and mids are rich. It is definitely favourable to the 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



Monster iSport FREEDOM

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Headphone manufacturers seem to have cottoned on to the fact that it's not just performance focused audiophiles that will be buying their products, the whole Head-Fi market is opening up the world of high-fidelity sound to a broader spectrum of people, people that want the feeling of luxury and quality in every aspect of their purchase.

Oooh lovely, stuff in the post for me! Monster wanted a bit of a Bird's Eye View of their new Pussycat Doll-fronted headphones....so they rushed a pair over to me, even if I am a bit more Madcat Lady than Pussycat Doll!

Now, any of you that have read my reviews before will know that I do put a lot of emphasis on the whole package, not just performance.

I like things to look and feel right and that starts the minute you get presented with the box.

Headphone manufacturers seem to have cottoned on to the fact that it's not just performance focused audiophiles that will be buying their products, the whole Head-Fi market is opening up the world of high-fidelity sound to a broader spectrum of people, people that want the feeling of luxury and quality in every aspect of their purchase.

The packaging is lovely, well designed and with everything that you need for your headphones including cable, USB charging cable, neat carrying bag and even an antibacterial cleaning cloth.

So it should be because at £240 these are not cheap.

Monster iSport FREEDOM

Living up to the packaging the phones themselves look pleasing and, even though they are made predominantly from a rubbery/silicone material, they have a satisfying weight to them, not too heavy but not throwaway plastic tat either.

They feel rugged enough to cope with being folded up and slung in your bag without worry that they will disintegrate!

To my eyes they look a lot nicer than the much maligned Beats headphones with which I am sure the FREEDOMS will be compared – of course Monster used to manufacture the Beats by Dre until the end of 2012.

They fold up rather niftily and also the headband extends if you need it to.

They were never going to be an understated headphone coming from the company that brought us a £20k gold and black diamond encrusted pair of headphones, but I like bright colours and think that they still manage to look tasteful.

I was concerned that as an on ear rather than over ear headphone these might be a bit uncomfortable.

We have all tried headphones that clamp your skull in a vice like grip and leave your ears feeling like you've been in a rugby scrum but I needn't have worried, the wearability of these headphones is excellent, my ears felt cushioned and cradled rather than clamped.

However, they also fitted snugly and didn't dislodge even with some rather furious head shaking!

They also...and this may seem a trivial thing to non spec wearers, do not interfere with your glasses or push them into your head.

The cocooning feeling is enhanced by the fact that these really do close you off from the outside world, even with no music playing outside sounds are significantly muted...I may just take to wearing these all the time so I can't hear what Stuart is rattling on about!!

The headphones are actually Bluetooth enabled so that you have the choice to use them with the supplied mini jack cable or wirelessly. This means they have to be powered and the battery charges pretty rapidly (under 30 minutes from flat to full) from a USB port using the supplied USB to micro USB cable. Both the micro USB and cable socket are hidden when not in use by little flick up covers. The blurb that came with the phones said a 30hr playing time could be expected from 1 charge with up to 100hrs on standby.



So, let's play some choons!

First of all I paired them with the ipod touch to test out the Bluetooth, this was a painless affair.

With the control buttons on the right hand headphone you feel for, rather than look for the buttons....this could be tricky but the layout actually makes it pretty intuitive so that you get the hang of skipping tracks and changing the volume really easily.

You can also turn off the music instantly by hitting the centre button.

I did use the headphones for a while before actually doing some critical listening and really liked the fact that you could leave the ipod where you liked and wander about while listening...also worth noting that there was little or no sound 'leakage' so would be perfect for on public transport too.

With the styling of the phones and the fact that they are designed for 'working out' I expected them to be good with dance music so I kicked things off with a bit of Deadmau5 and >albumtitlegoeshere<.

On 'Closer', a track featuring the iconic communicating-with-the-aliens 5 note sequence from the film Close Encounters of the Third Kind, the sound was anthemic, good deep bass...possibly a

Monster iSport FREEDOM

little bass heavy for some people's taste but I rather enjoyed it. Top and mid did not suffer...there wasn't bass and nothing else as I have seen complaints about for other headphones of this kind of genre.

Of course, the ipod meant I was using MP3 but the sound was overall pretty good and bearing in mind that these are designed to be worn when exercising and give you the freedom of Bluetooth wirelessness ...it was not a bad compromise.

I ran through quite a bit of dance music from Calvin Harris to Daft Punk and was impressed with what I heard.

I then swapped over to some more acoustic and vocal music, the 2012 Radio 1 Live Lounge CD always sounds well recorded to me, and even on MP3 sounded great on these, Emily Sandé's voice was particularly beautiful and clear and acoustic guitar was a pleasure to listen too. The sound was very natural, which did surprise me.

It is worth noting that I did compare these to the NAD Viso headphones that we reviewed recently, although the NADs are over ear rather than on, they are priced similarly to the Monsters. I found the

sound detail slightly better on the NADs but not by much and the FREEDOMS are headphones clearly aimed at a very different market and with extra features.

Wired for sound?

I did try the ipod using the supplied cable but did not notice a difference in the sound quality, though using the cable disables the on ear controls

I then switched to the Hi sound music player to listen to FLAC, going through many of the same tunes I had just heard on the ipod.

Of course the sound was much better, this little music player blew the ipod out of the water when I reviewed it. The sound stage opened up becoming much more 3D and the bass was more detailed, overall very impressive.

I purposefully did not use a headphone amp with them as...well, it kind of defeats the portability purpose that they are designed for; I can't see many people using them with a headphone amp, more



Monster iSport FREEDOM

likely straight from the music player on bluetooth.

Would I recommend these headphones? Yes, but with a couple of caveats.

Despite their styling they are not just for the 'yoof', if you are looking for headphones that you can use for exercising and perhaps you travel on public transport a lot they would be really handy...especially if you want great quality sound.

I would not recommend them if you are just going to sit and listen to your home hifi with them, that isn't what they are designed for.

I also did not test them with classical music so can't comment on the suitability there.

Now perhaps I am not the target market for the iSport FREEDOM headphones, I am neither a Pussycat Doll or a Gym Bunny, but I feel that the wearability and comfort of the headphones would suit anybody looking for the convenience of headphones that you can put on and forget about...go for a run or a walk without worrying about getting rained on (or sweaty...no perspiring ears with these!)

To get the maximum performance with them then pair them with a device that can play high quality music files AND has Bluetooth, that way you will get to experience the true freedom that they offer the user.

One tiny little gripe....perhaps a few different colours please, Hifi Pig Pink would be rather fetching.....

Linette Smith

Hifi Pig's teen correspondent Harry Smith takes a listen to the Monster iSport FREEDOM headphones.

As I knew that Monster used to make the Beats by Dre headphones, which I feel don't have a particularly good build or sound quality, I was a little sceptical about how these new Monster headphones would perform.

Monster have extended their iSport range of headphones to the over-ear category with the new iSport FREEDOM, a headphone that offers high performance audio and that is easy to use when doing sport.

As the other reviewer Mrs HiFi Pig (AKA my mum) doesn't do a lot of running, I was asked to test these out as I do frequently run in the local countryside.

The FREEDOM's felt heavy to hold at first but they had plenty of cushioning in the headband so felt very light once over my ears.

The sound is very good when the headphones are charged, the bass is heavy but unlike the beats by Dre the top end doesn't suffer as much.

The build quality is quite impressive, the main construction feels strong and sturdy and the rubber used for the ear pads feels very comforting. They also feel 'airy' and don't make your ears sweat...which is a common problem with many headphones when using them for sport.

The Blue-tooth works very well I was able to connect to my Ipod in under 10 seconds and the battery lasted a long time.

The sound is very good when the headphones are charged, the bass is heavy but unlike the beats by Dre the top end doesn't suffer as much.

However when the battery is flat the sound loses its oomph and falls short of what I expect from a headphone of this price (around £240). I would make sure to use them charged and switched on, even if using the cable.

All in all the Monster iSport FREEDOM's are a very well built, easy to use, comfortable headphone. I think the styling and the bright colours are great and stand out from the crowd. They look very 'sporty' and trendy, but more individual than some other brands.

I recommend them to anyone who likes doing sport to great sounding music, just remember to keep them charged, which is really simple and remember to plug them in between uses.

Harry Smith

Resonessence Labs Herus DAC and Headphone Amp

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Mark Mallinson is President of Resonessence Labs and along with his brother Martin, launched the company in 2009. Prior to this Mark was the Operations Director for ESS Technology where his team was responsible for the design of the company's Sabre Audio DAC chips. Mark left ESS in 2009 to start Resonessence Labs...a coincidence?... Mark laughed and said 'not really!' The brothers saw a business opportunity.

Sabre Audio products from ESS are now employed in many high end systems, but back in 2009 Mark and Martin noticed that some audio companies were not doing a particularly good job of designing the chip into their products and felt that they could do better.

Resonessence launched their first Audio DAC product, [Invicta](#) in 2011 and now have 6 DAC products ranging in price from \$350 CAD to \$4,995 CAD.

Mark states, 'Our goal is to produce audio products that we can all be proud of. To this end we design, manufacture, assemble and test our all of our products locally.'

Resonessence Labs' products are 'Field Upgradeable' giving the end user the ability for hardware and software tweaks and changes, which presents interesting options for those in the know and with the required skills.

Review Overview

I have a few options in the way I could use the £299 Herus in my system:

- As intended from a USB source such as the Mac or Squeezebox Touch (SBT) then with an iOS and Android tablet (Resonessence claim compatibility with IOS and Android devices) with a range of different headphones to throw into the mix.
- Secondly I planned to use the Herus as a standalone DAC feeding the Icon Audio HP8 valve headphone amp.
- Lastly as standalone DAC into my main rig.
- I also have a few different USB cables ranging from the modest in price Chord Silver Plus and Wireworld Starlight 7 to the more expensive Tellurium Q Black Diamond and another option the Astintrew Concord which has a split data and power cable.

Using the Herus as intended (as a combined DAC and headphone amplifier)

Firstly was to use the Herus fed by the USB of my SBT using the free 'Enhanced Digital Output' software. Plug in the Herus (red backlit logo) and

Resonance Labs Herus DAC and Headphone Amp

enter the Audio settings on the SBT, navigate to the Digital Output menu (where the Herus now shows up as a selectable device), a quick click and the SBT reboots with the Herus showing as the device ready for use (now a blue backlit logo on the Herus to inform the user of lock on). I plugged in a pair of AKG K702's into the device and the Chord Silver Plus USB and unchecked the fixed volume control on the SBT in order not to damage the headphones - the Herus as it has no volume control itself and is fixed at full output. Without going into all the techy details, basically the source's volume control becomes obsolete and the on screen volume slider actually is the Herus' internal volume which is transposed onto the screen so to speak.

I began to play some Stevie Nicks. The presentation of the sound was crisp and clean, with a great openness to the vocal, a typical sound for these headphones I felt. I continued to play on through some more vocal and acoustic based albums from the likes of Chris Jones, Norah Jones and Jack Savoretti concluding that the Herus was extremely transparent to the character of the source and headphones, but I was concerned that the top end was a little too sharp and the headphones, although extremely revealing even with the Icon valve amp, has a tamer top end which can be exploited and refined to expose some beauty in the detail and so I tried swapping out the Chord USB for the Wireworld Starlight 7.

Playing Annie Lennox's 'Little Bird' proved that a simple change of the cable calmed down a slightly spittier response, yet still retained the source's character along with the revealing presentation of these headphones. I have a tendency to listen to headphones very loud, not great for the lug-holes but it's a fetish of mine. Even if it's late at night and I'm just intending to play some gentle background type music within 6 or 7 tracks the volume is cranked right up, so for me at louder volumes I need to be able to hear the clarity of a track especially with these cans, otherwise it's headache time after a while. The Herus in this respect came across to me fantastically, the amplifier inside is very powerful and belies the units size, driving these headphones to volume levels I really never expected, distorting minimally as the full volume was nearly reached and remaining clean and neutral.

Using the Herus with the [Tellurium Q Black Diamond USB](#) cable was a step up in performance again, cleaning and expressing a midrange that breathed with presence in the soundstage and giving a noticeably greater width to the sound. Smaller

details were more defined and cymbal work especially shimmered very realistically. Bass which had been taut and tuneful gained more detail and rhythm which was gratefully received especially with Electronica.

The last USB option I had with this rig was to try Astintreus 'Concord' USB with has split power and data cables and their patented power supply design. This gave a punchier and little leaner upper-bass/lower-mid response, most noticeably a lower noise floor which added a really nice spaciousness to the sound - to be expected I guess from what I have heard with this device partnered with my Mac already.

The modded SBT is already very quiet, but the Concord did take the background hash down a little further and due to the AKG's having that extremely revealing presentation they were ideal for this part of the review and the Herus was left as the true heart of the system, decoding and amplifying a sound that was complete in resolution and powerful enough to really drive the AGK's very well indeed.

When listening to the Civil Wars 'I've Got This Friend' the Herus presented remarkable detail in the string work and each vocal was beautifully rendered



Resonessence Labs Herus DAC and Headphone Amp

in harmony stating their own position on the track, clearly defined and wonderfully recorded.

The transparency, accuracy and robust presentation of the Herus is absolutely astonishing, each piece of music sounds the way it should. Listening to specific music for certain attributes when testing equipment is something we all do and I can quite confidently say that the Herus ticks virtually every box for me. Critically against much more expensive headphone and DAC combos there will be flaws of course, but I have ticked way more boxes than I ever expected and more than with my previous PS Audio DAC combined with other standalone headphone amplifiers around the £300-£500 mark. The resolution, detail, excellent dynamics and balance that the Herus has is pretty awesome.

Further testing with other headphones

An obvious next test to confirm some of my initial thoughts would be for me to try other headphones, fortunately enough I have a pair of Sennheiser HD598s and some [Beyerdynamic DT-990s](#), both very different from each other and from the AKG's. Leaving the Concorde USB in to exploit the best of the Herus and reveal as much of the other headphones character partnered with the amp/dac as possible I plugged the Beyers full size jack into the tiny Herus.

I'm not a great fan of these partnered with the Icon amp, I feel they thrive with good solid state amps, They can be a tad laid back, have a gorgeous midrange but can lack that bit of air in the top end. The Herus really exploited the midrange as suspected, darker than the AKG's but wonderfully rich and fleshed out, I like the Beyers on the [Epiphany Acoustics](#) head amp very much but found the Herus to transmit better low end grip into them, the top end never got that air like with the AKG's, yet still had a nice sharpness and sparkle with great clarity and control, it was all just a little darker and not as transparent sounding, still very true to the source I feel and the character of the headphones, fantastic for some genres and poorer recordings, but after listening to the 702's just lacked that bite and punch, I'm sure if I listened to them first I would have raved about how well the Herus drove the 300 Ohm load and how fantastic I thought they sounded, but then that has to simply be down to me and my personal preference of cans and in no way makes light of the Herus' charms.

Onto the Sennheiser HD598's which are a great and not too expensive, fun headphone and on the little

Resonessence amp these for me are a great match both sound-wise and price point-wise. Clarity and vocals are at the forefront of their presentation with a fantastic volume level that would be more than adequate for anyone - even me!

Back in went the Wireworld cable and the smoother and less clean sound that it gave against the Astintrew was actually preferable - overall a more fun, musical and bouncy sound rather than a more revealing type of sound that has you listening out for details and attributes. I spent a fair bit of time with this combination in place, writing part of this review and surfing around the net on my iPad, feet up and rocking backwards and forwards in my computer chair, probably with a daft grin on my face!

I even put a stock USB into the Herus from the SBT as I realised I hadn't done that (I always use a better than stock USB cable for piece of mind for build quality on everything) and even with that in place I was happy with the presentation of the Herus, although I would recommend something mid priced as it does help performance.

Indoors and listening from a PC or Mac or as an upgrade to a gaming rig the Herus is simple to use and sounds very 'audiophile' and extremely musical.

Android and IOS device tests

Resonessence Labs claim on their website that the device is compatible with iOS and Android devices – fantastic, so I can take the Herus anywhere I go and enjoy my Spotify playlists in their full glory!

I'd ordered the camera connection kit for the iPad Air assuming that this must be the way to connect the USB type B connector on the Herus to the iPad. Plugging the adapter into the iPad with a normal A to B USB cable illuminated the Herus' logo in red and then quickly into blue to confirm that a lock and compatibility was made. Next I simply chose the device from the Airplay menu and I was away. Sound wise the Air sounded fantastic through the little DAC/amp, the Herus' balanced and powerful sound drove the three sets of headphones great, though I found the iPads physical buttons when streaming Spotify gave larger than preferred volume

Resonessence Labs Herus DAC and Headphone Amp

increases/decreases but moving the volume slider in the software gave a more precise control to the listening levels.

I had a little bit of a setup issue initially using the Android based LG G Pad 8.3" V500. I had bought a few variations of adapters and connecting cables to achieve what was a micro USB to required male B into the Herus. Using a micro USB 'Host' adapter cable which had a female A socket to micro USB male cable proved the answer, although its simple adapter duplicate did not work so make sure it is the 'Host' cable type adapter you use.

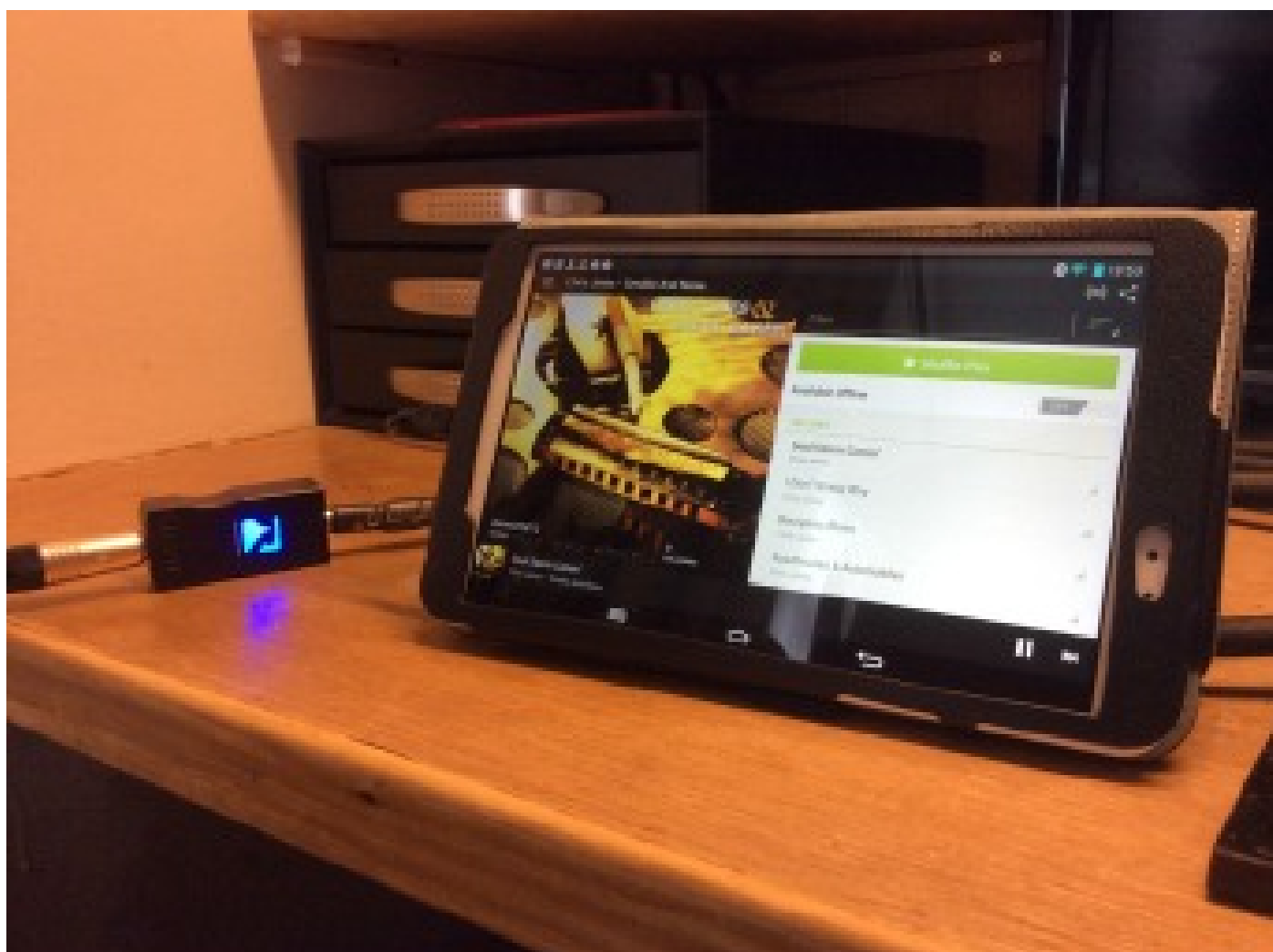
Again no complaints with the sound, the Herus sounds great in all tests and only has moderate levels of increased performance with the more expensive USB cables and I would be satisfied with a well made and inexpensive cable. Characterisation of the sound does vary dependant on source, but the control and balance of the Herus' DAC and amp's sound prevails to keep everything neutral and very musical.

Using the Herus as a Standalone DAC (Icon Audio HP8 Headamp)

To achieve the connection to the Icon I used a 6.3mm headphone jack to stereo RCA adapter from the Herus and my [Oriton Symphony Orange RCA](#) interconnects and as the Astintrew cable was still on the desk I re-plugged it in to the Herus from the SBT feeding the AKG headphones.

A very similar character as previously mentioned was heard through the Icon as I revisited tracks and albums from this review, the Icon added some great liquidity to the vocals with the Civil Wars playing and gave more control to louder listening levels in the upper regions. Lower mids and upper bass were fuller with transients a little more energetic. Not big differences in the performance really just the flavours.

Comparing the presentation to the Totaldac through the Icon was interesting, there were differences in performance and a slightly different character, an obviously perceivable tonal difference between valves and transistors but to the credit of the Herus I thought 'well I could definitely live with this'. Popping in Chords Crimson Vee3 with the Wireworld cable again for sensibility against price point retained my previous thoughts. I also tried the



Resonessence Labs Herus DAC and Headphone Amp

recently reviewed [QNKTC DAC](#) in placement of the Herus and found its upper end to be quite sharp considering my favourable comments about it in the main rig. I found the overall enjoyability and musicality of the Herus to be closer to the Totaldac than the QDAC which isn't as transparent and doesn't allow the SBT to show its character.

Using the Herus as a Standalone DAC (main system)

Using the SBT to Herus via the Asintrew cables and into the Emille KI40-L integrated via the Oriton interconnects connected to the Herus via the adapter I immediately took note of the superbly balanced and detailed sound. Consequently whilst using the same setup through the Mac using Amarra there was a noticeable bass hump around the lower mids/upper bass, a trait of the Mac which in the QDAC review was most favourable to its character but here, hearing the difference between the SBT and Mac, the hump does get a little irritating in comparison to the modded SBT's extremely detail driven bass which is neither too tight or loose.

The Herus with its ability to pass through what's in front of it accurately really gelled well in this context and supplied the amp and speakers with a tremendous amount of information and imaging with a great tonal balance across the frequency range. I would conclude that the DAC, although not as critical in exploring the finest of details, the extended handling of notes, or the dynamic shifts of the much more expensive Totaldac, was a very respectable achiever in conveying a solid and most enjoyable music performance from 16bit and 24bit music streamed from the NAS.

Conclusion

Using the Herus as a portable device outside of the house is of course possible but it would require some careful laying out of the cables in a pocket as there would be a couple of connections from an iOS or Android based smartphone and of course the headphone connection itself. My concern would be with the connection to the phone itself as most smartphones these days have the smallest of connectors which could easily break or damage the sockets, so not ideal. I myself would still prefer a small Fiio for outdoor purposes, however if there was an option for Resonessence to add a small Bluetooth module with the correct USB socket and an integrated rechargeable battery then for outdoor use it would be a winner.

With headphones I have to have a shining midrange and an open and airy top end and the Herus caters to this perfectly.

Indoors and listening from a PC or Mac or as an upgrade to a gaming rig the Herus is simple to use and sounds very 'audiophile' and extremely musical. The Herus can perform how you would like it to with a good chunk of its character being source and headphone dependant, it has enough power to please even the daftest of loud listeners. If there was any sort of characterisation I could pin on the Herus apart from its obvious transparency it is that with all the headphones and USB cables I used I never got a bass heavy approach to any of the combinations or genres - bass is very evenly balanced and never overblown in any way but it's all there. I have heard more bass from these headphones through other amps but not as detailed and taut a bass in some cases. With headphones I have to have a shining midrange and an open and airy top end and the Herus caters to this perfectly. Coupled with fantastic detail and tone the tests on this products primary intended use are extremely positive and the fact it requires no external power supply means it can be taken anywhere with the above caveats about cabling?

As a standalone DAC with the Astintrew Concord supplying a clean power source the Herus was elevated in performance, although in standard form without upgraded cables made for a fantastic companion and upgrade to any computer streaming rig with a solid, detailed, robust sound which completely took me aback for its size and price point and with the ability to simply whip out the connecting analogue cables and pop in the headphones it covers both areas of listening with a computer based audio system wonderfully. Highly recommended for its ease of use, flexibility and high fidelity sound quality.

Dan Worth

Carot One Fabriziolo Pre/Head Amp and Titta Earphones

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Italian brand Carot One's €49 in-ear headphones and €199 valve pre and head amplifier.

After using a headphone amp for a couple of months now I couldn't go back to just using my headphones. The Carot One Fabriziolo stereo tube preamplifier/headphone amplifier is a good example of a well rounded amplifier.

To start off the packaging is good, plenty of padding and protects it very effectively. Postage is free worldwide! In the box is the Preamplifier, some no frills cables and a power-brick.

The Fabriziolo is 65mm x 25mm x 98mm. It has a front panel jack for headphones and another for the input of an MP3 etc. Around the back there are a pair of RCA inputs and a line out jack. The Carot One is CE stamped!

Here is all the technical spec provided by Carot one:
Vacuum Tube: 6DJ8/6922 series or 12AU7 series

Carot One Fabriziolo Pre/Head Amp and Titta Earphones

(exchangeable)

Signal-to-Noise Ratio (SNR): 92dB

THD + Noise: 0.05% @ 10k ohm 0.15% @ 33 ohm

Input Audio: CD IN RCA (Left/Right) x 1 [3Vpp max.]

Power Socket: (5.5mm/2.1mm) x 1

Output Audio: OUT 3.5mm x 1

Headphone: OUT (3.5mm) x 1

Knob Audio and power switch x 1

Power Indicator: (Blue LED under Tube Socket) x1

Volume Knob x 1

Power Supply DC 12V-13V (max.)

After taking a close look at the preamp you start to see that the finish isn't great: The screws look cheap, the valve is lopsided and the sound knob feels flimsy. These are minor problems however and could easily be fixed by the manufacturer. This isn't to say that it looks bad. It looks great! I love the way it glows blue when turned on and its a very well thought out design to fit in such a small enclosure. The design is also very bold with the signature Carot colours of orange and highlights of blue. The single valve sits proudly on the top and makes it stand out from the crowd.

To test the sound I ran the preamp though a PC playing FLAC audio files. I ran the Fabriziolo though a Schiit Modi DAC and used NAD Viso hp 50 headphones (I also compared it to a Schiit Magni preamplifier though the same setup). You can also play your Mp3 player through the unit using the front mounted socket or as a preamplifier if you have powered speakers.

The audio performance is amazing and unexpected. The music sounds crisp and clear without any interference. The sound isn't particularly bass heavy but it's personally just enough. I listened to many genres of music (Rock, Electronic, Blues, Funk...) and it came alive especially with electronic music. I could hear many layers to the music and discovered parts of a song that I couldn't hear with just my headphones.

Compared to the Schiit amp I personally think the Carot amp sounds better.(This could be something to do with the valve) ...But this is to be expected as the Fabriziolo costs more than twice as much as the Schiit.

It's a shame that the Carot One preamp couldn't make the 100 pound price point but it's price still isn't too off-putting.

Carot One is a brand that needs recognition for their great sounding and standout looking audiophile products.

I was also Given the Carot One Titta to review, a pair of in-earphones that follow the same design of the Fabriziolo (and all the other Carot One products). These earphones are great value for money. They are extremely comfortable, they're light and isolate pretty well from outside sounds. They are very well rounded and are a good all purpose in-ear headphone. They work perfectly with, and looks wise really complement the Fabriziolo preamplifier. If you are an audiophile on a small budget these earphones are for you!

In conclusion Carot One is a brand that needs recognition for their great sounding and stand out looking audiophile products. (based on what I've heard)

Carot One Fabriziolo preamplifier: Price at time of review 199€

Sound: 9/10

Price: 7/10

Build quality: 6/10

Overall - 7.3

Recommended for people looking to improve their headphone experience without breaking the bank.

Carot One Titta earphones: Price at time of review 49€

Sound: 8/10

Price: 9/10

Build quality: 8/10

Overall - 8.3

Recommended as a good value all round in-ear headphone that works well with the Carot One Fabriziolo

Harry Smith

Audeze LCD-XC

At £1500 the Audeze LCD-XC are a serious purchase, but do they warrant being perhaps the most discussed headphone out there?



You can't explore the world of headphones too far without coming across the Californian manufacturer Audeze sooner or later as they seem to be just everywhere. I'd been speaking to Jonathan Scull who handles the Audeze PR in the US for a good while on social media and finally managed to get hold of a pair of their LCD-XC headphones whilst at Munich High-End earlier this year.

The £1500 (1799 USD) Audeze arrived in a well padded, moulded plastic carrying case that looks all but bombproof and is a neat solution for transporting the headphones from place to place. Along with the headphones there's a useful quarter inch to minijack adaptor that I think thoughtful addition to the pack. The 2.5m cable attaches to each of the cans via a mini XLR jack with a rugged quarter inch jack on the amp end... I believe a number of aftermarket alternatives are available for those looking to explore this particular route. Overall this packaging really does it for me as it is both practical and attractive in an industrial kind of way – it certainly screams high-end. If you are buying these headphones you'll also get a wood care kit, a personalised frequency response graph and some warranty documents in the box.

The LCD-XC are the second to top price-wise of the Audeze hierarchy and are the companies only closed back design. Like the HifiMan HE560s the Audeze are a planar magnetic design and they have a 38.9cm

sq diaphragm. However, they are a heavy headphone tipping the scales at 650g which is considerably heavier than any of the headphones we have in for review. Appearance-wise the LCD-XC are BIG and, despite their luxurious Bubinga wood cups and lamb skin earpads, their looks will certainly divide opinion... I think they look pretty cool and have a retro sort of vibe about them. Needless to say at this price point the Audeze headphones are for serious headphone enthusiasts and whilst their closed-back design certainly isolates you from the world and it from your music, I'm not sure I'd personally feel comfortable hopping on the bus with them strapped to my head... but if you do I'm sure you'll get both the odd "what the hell" gawp as well as a few admiring glances. That said I did wear them pretty much non-stop for the ten hour train journey from Munich to Paris and despite their weight I found them fairly comfortable for the whole journey.

The cans themselves are big and cover the whole of my ears and the earpads are very thick and very comfortable indeed with no sense of them rubbing, itching or becoming sweaty. The earpads are thicker at the back than they are at the front in the same way the HifiMan HE 560s are...only more so. They press fairly tightly onto your head and to some extent your face, but they do move around a bit when you shake your head about. The headband adjusts fairly simply to the correct size and is pretty comfortable given

Audeze LCD-XC

their weight, though not as comfortable as some of the other headphones we have reviewed.

The LCD-XC are 20ohms and have a sensitivity of 95dB and seemed to be easy to drive, though I opted to use my reference headphone amp over the output on the reference preamp. With the little HiSound Studio portable player and our son's iPod they went loud enough, but there seemed to be a little missing and I'd suggest a good quality portable headphone amplifier to be the order of the day whether at home or on the go.

The Sound

The first thing that grabs you about the Audeze' is the size of the sound, the second is that you are completely isolated from the outside world and all you hear is the music. There's certainly a good impression of the soundstage and out-the-head feeling and instruments sit within the mix as they should with fabulous separation and space. I'd suggest the soundstaging is better than the Final Hope VIs which surprised me given the Audeze's closed back design and I can only put this down to the fact the actual drivers are a way from your ears – whatever, it's pretty impressive.

There seems to be a greater weight to the music with these 'phones across the frequency range and popping on David Crosby's "Croze" there's simply more detail than with any of the other phones we have in for test. Drums have dynamism with the toms being precise and hard hitting, whilst bass kick hits and then stops with no overhang. Bass guitar is tight, punchy and plays along with the drums to create great rhythm.

Sonically on this kind of music it's really hard to fault the Audeze LCD-XC and it's difficult not to perhaps suggest that these are the best headphones I've ever heard...but then that would

make for a pretty short review and there's an awful lot of 'phones I've yet to experience.

Despite how gorgeously the Audeze 'phones play the likes of David Crosby I found myself pulling loads

There just a feeling that the Audeze bring a dynamic feel to this kind of music that really makes it...rock. I know this is petty vague but, apart from the weight of the phones, you can forget to some extent you're wearing headphones at all.



of harder edged rock from the virtual shelf. There just a feeling that the Audeze bring a dynamic feel to this kind of music that really makes it...rock. I know this is petty vague but, apart from the weight of the phones, you can forget to some extent you're wear-

Audeze LCD-XC

ing headphones at all. The grunge sounds of Bush's "Everything Zen" is visceral and raw and this is down to the way the LCD-XCs do dynamics. If you like rock then you're gonna really enjoy these headphones, just be careful about the headbanging as you'll end up with a severe case of "Headbangers Neck".

Fleetwood Mac's "Songbird" is one of the tracks I use to listen to how a bit of new kit puts out the feel of a room's space as it's recorded on a large stage in an empty hall and with the Audeze you get a really good sense of the space. It's not as pronounced as with good loudspeakers, but then it was never going to be. When the dry kick of "The Chain" (the next tune on the record) comes in it sounds correct and when the rhythm section gets going there's speed and control displayed that drives the beat – other headphones we've reviewed have speed and control, but I can honestly say it's a notch above both the HifiMan HE 560s and the Sennheiser HD800s with the Audeze in place.

On electronic music the bass lines are deep, whilst all the little intricate noises and effects come through... and then there's the kick drum which gets me to thinking perhaps the bass is a little over done on these headphones. I toyed with this concept a good while and came to the conclusion after listening to loads of tunes that it's not over done, it's just powerful and the 'phones are capable of giving a great sense of what they are actually playing across the frequencies – there just seems to be more of everything.

Comfort

These are heavy headphones and you do know you are wearing them, particularly when sat typing I found as I lean forward to look at the keyboard which led to a little neck ache, but they're also pretty comfortable all-round when sat in your armchair.

The headband is well padded and comfortable over long periods (though not as comfortable as the HifiMans nor perhaps the Sennheisers mentioned) and whilst the cans are big and do press onto your face a bit you get used to it.

For long periods of listening I found the earpads were very comfortable with no irritation as with the HifiMan HE 560s, but they were certainly less comfortable than the Sennheiser HD800s over longer periods. As with most things you lose with one thing and gain with another.

Conclusion

£1500 is in most people's book a good chunk to throw down on a pair of headphones and yet the Audeze seem to be selling very well, so clearly there are people out there who can justify this kind of expenditure.

This is both an audiophile product and a luxe product



and when thinking about them you need to keep this in mind. The fit and finish is very good and there's the attention to little details that set them apart from the competition.

I suppose the question that needs to be asked is does the extra expenditure bring you a suitable increase in perceived sound quality and whilst I'd suggest that there's the dreaded law of diminishing returns coming in to play here, these are none the less a very, very good headphone indeed.

There's something almost unfathomable about the Audeze LCD-XCs that stands them apart from the crowd. Yes they do stonking basslines with aplomb, but they also manage to temper this with being able to be subtle where required. No one area of the music stands out and to me they seem almost perfectly balanced, giving a wonderfully musical experience.

If headphones are your only source and you want the best then you ought to audition these immediately! If you don't have this kind of money to splurge then there are alternatives for you (look out for lots of reviews in the days to come), but be aware you may be missing out on that nth degree of magic.

Audeze LCD-XC

Sound – 9.25
Comfort – 8.00
Fit and finish – 9.00
Value – 8.00
Overall – 8.56

Recommended for those wanting a no compromise headphone listening experience.

Stuart Smith

And now Linette's thoughts on the Audeze LCD-XC headphones.

I had been itching to get my hands on (and ears in) these headphones since we picked them up at Munich. They very much seem to be the audiophile flavour of the month and I wanted to find out for myself if they lived up to the hype.

They have a very different look to them than most headphones with their Bubinga wood cups and black lambskin earpads, they look like they mean serious business, especially as they come in a very robust 'ruggedized' carry case...resembles something that Ironman might use to take his butties to work. There is a definite air of 'manliness' about them.



Picking them up it was a case of 'whoa, these are REALLY heavy!' (650g according to the Audeze website)

I had visions of developing a neck like an F1 driver if I wore them for any length of time...surely these were headphones for big, beefy men, not a delicate flower like myself!

Putting them on for the first time made me realise that although they weigh a lot for a pair of headphones, they are actually perfectly balanced and extremely comfortable.

It's kind of like having your head firmly hugged.

The leather earpads are exceptionally soft and probably the most comfortable I have ever felt on a pair of 'phones. They sit nicely around the ears with no 'lobe crush' or hard bits digging into you, plus the headband is well padded and caused no discomfort and I could leave my glasses on without them being pushed into the side of my head....I was impressed!

It felt like sinking into your favourite, soft leather armchair....cocooning is probably a good word to describe them....and I hadn't even turned the tunes on yet!

So enough about how these feel, how do they sound? First impressions were great and I spent quite a bit of time listening to tunes from my laptop, particularly memorable was a stream of Carl Cox DJing at Space in IbizaI scribbled down the notes 'feels like a nightclub on my head' which just about says it all!

On goes Hardfloor's 'Once again back'. This is my go to track to test out a system, it's especially tricky with deep sub bass, swirling 303s and skippy top end. It is a track that has the possibility to make things sound terrible if they are not up to the job.

With the Audeze the bass was dynamic and interesting, not just a splodge of sound...great definition and that proper 'in the music' feeling.

I really love Rudimental, their album 'Home' gets a lot of play here, I have a lot of respect for a dance act that can play and sing

Audeze LCD-XC

live and have a real horn section.

This is uplifting music, hands in the air time and I got a big case of goosebumps listening to tracks like 'Feel the love' and 'Right Here'. With the Audeze I got a sense of just wanting to sit and listen and not actually do anything else.

I do love a bit of disco so appropriately 'Lost in music' by Sister Sledge went on next. Driving bass, funky guitar and breathy, sweet vocals all sounded perfect. The sound stage with the Audeze is big and 3 dimensional and I get the feeling that I am really hearing what I should be hearing...this almost as good as listening to the main system to my ears.

Still feeling the Nile Rogers vibe I put on 'Get Lucky' from Daft Punk. Again, funky and crystal clear ...I've heard this tune many, many times but I'm hearing things in the backing vocals that I haven't heard ever before...fantastic detail.

A bit of Gil Scott Heron and his 'Ghetto Style' album next and once again I'm struck by the depth and clarity I'm getting from the music, there is a real sense of where each of the artists is playing or singing in the soundstage and little nuances in the back-

ing vocals and from the drums that I haven't heard brought out so well before.

So have these headphones got it all? Well crafted, comfortable and incredibly engaging to listen to.....and then there's the elephant in the room ...the price.

At around 1800 US\$, and retailing around £1500 in the UK, these are not cheap headphones by any stretch of the imagination.

But have a think about it. Would you balk at spending over a grand and a half on a pair of loudspeakers? Probably not. Probably, if you are an audiophile, you would be happy to spend quite a bit more than that.

But what if you have a love of listening to your favourite music, on your great hifi....and you have neighbours who just don't share your enthusiasm? Short of becoming the vilified 'Neighbour From Hell' what options do you have?

And I guess this is where exceptional sounding, incredibly well-made, expensive headphones come in. I wouldn't use these to walk about in, or go jogging in, they really aren't made for that (for a start the Ironman Lunchbox would be a bit inconvenient to

cart about) I would wear them to sit down, chill out and get lost in music. Perfect playback of your tunes, from your desktop system or from your main hifi, even when you can't crank up the volume using your speakers.

The Audeze LCD-XC certainly live up to the hype.

Sound – 9/10

Comfort – 9/10

Fit and finish – 9/10

Value – 8/10

Overall – 8.75/10

Highly recommended as an exceptionally well made extremely comfortable, enjoyable to listen to headphone, for those wanting an alternative to using loudspeakers in the home or who want the best from a desktop system.

Linette Smith



Oppo PM-1

Oppo are perhaps most well known in audiophile circles for their well regarded Blu-ray players, but they also make a couple of pairs of planar magnetic cans and a headphone amp. Here we test the £1099 PM-1s.



Although Oppo are known for their bluray and cd players (and mobile phones, outside of the audiophile market), I didn't know they made headphones....and they didn't until recently. So, is a high end, £1099 pair of planar magnetic headphones what you would expect for a company's first foray into the headphone market? Not really.....this is certainly going to be interesting!

Right from the off you know Oppo have gone high end. The box arrives...surely this can't be headphones, its too big and heavy?! But headphones it is. Nestling in the Oppo branded box is another box, in an understated silvery finish. Sliding off the lid and its Christmas morning and my birthday all rolled into one. Oppo have obviously made a mistake and sent me a beautiful, shiny wooden box with some luxurious jewellery instead of headphones!

The understated, luxury vibe continues as I open the box and lift out the 'phones. Cool, sleek and minimal...and very light for planar magnetics, just 395g.

I love the feel of these headphones. The leather is soft and flawless and everything, twists, pivots and

moves just as it should do with a effortlessly smooth action, they put me in mind of a well oiled, top of the range Mercedes...perfection!

There is also a very nice, denim carry case for taking them out and about, an extra pair of velour earpads and the choice of a long cable and a shorter one for portable use.

They slip onto my head and the feeling is one of complete and utter comfort, indeed rather like settling into the seat of a high end car. They fit me like a glove, like they were tailor made for me; I really like how the earcups pivot in their mountings to achieve this. The leather feels soft on my ears and, even though they are an open backed design, I feel cosseted and cocooned.

Are these the most comfortable headphones that I have ever tried? They are, I thought that the Hifiman were the pinnacle but these are even better for me, and even with extended wear they remain exceptionally comfortable, my ears don't sweat and my glasses cause no issues.

This does surprise me because looking at them, the PM-1s do not appear to be 'over padded' in the way

Oppo PM-1

that the Audeze are, a little investigation reveals that they use a hypoallergenic natural latex for padding, so perhaps that has something to do with it.

As soon as I turn the music on I get chills in the same way as I do when I listen to a high-end horn system...this is weird! And I'm listening to Deadmau5...which is not really the most 'chill inducing' music in the world...it's brash and banging, but the Oppos bring so much detail and feeling it is really uncanny.

I described my first experience of listening to the Audeze LCD-XC headphones as being 'like a night-club on my head' Oppo take it one stage further, this is total music immersion. To be fair, I didn't think that anything could blow me away more than the Audeze, much less an open backed pair of 'phones, but Oppo have done something VERY clever here and are starting to seriously justify their grand+ price tag

The soundstage is perhaps the most 3D I have heard, the music is all around me with an incredible depth and clarity, there are layers to Deadmau5's tunes that I never knew existed or expected.

It extends in every direction but still retains the drive in the centre of my head; there is a sense of the sound coming from many different directions.

The bass is very controlled and again detailed and fast...and there is plenty off it, enough to satisfy even a basshead like me!

Don't get me wrong...I love, love, love the Audeze but I just feel that where they seem to shout with a sharper brightness, the Oppo's whisper and reveal more detail...with the Oppos the dimensions in the soundstage are unsurpassed and I feel that I could walk around quite happily in a way I could not in the Audeze...yes there is sound bleed from the open backs, but I'm feeling a bit selfish and don't care about that right now.

The chills are back again as I put Rudimental's album 'Home' on.....'Feel the love' is elevated

to epic status, I love this tune...I hold my hands in air to it and I just feel that the Oppos have the edge...best headphones I've ever listened to? Right here right now..... I would say yes.

Of course Hardfloor are back for the serious bass test with 'once again back'....again I am getting incredible levels of detail and clarity and serious, serious bass...better than the other headphones I have reviewed? Yes, and bear in mind that I have them all on my desk and am switching between them to gauge my aural memories.

I switch to Gil Scott Heron and his 'Ghetto Style' album, again, something I have listened to with all the headphone reviews this month. With more natural than electronic music the 3Dness of the soundstage is even more apparent...I pick out 'No Knock' because the bongo player is sat about 4 feet diagonally behind my left shoulder....I have to look round to check he is not really there!

I need to rock out a bit, Eels 'Beautiful Freak' goes on ...I forget that I am supposed to be 'reviewing'



Oppo PM-1

Probably as close to a perfect ten as I can give.

and just lose myself in the music in the way that I have only really done before with the Audeze. The connection with the music is incredible, combined with the comfort and the fact that you could wear these headphones 24/7 if you were so inclined makes me very, very happy. I could go on...I've listened to loads more music on these headphones but I am just drawn into listening and enjoying rather than reviewing, that has to count for something.

So which would I pick? They are both stunning in their own way; I guess it just comes down to personal preference, if they were cars then the Audeze would be a seriously rugged Jeep and the Oppo a slick, silver Mercedes...horses for courses and hard to decide between; but for me the emotion and detail coupled with the slickness of the design and supreme comfort puts the Oppo PM-1 as the best headphone I have used.

Yes the Audeze are a bit more expensive, but basically the two are competing for the same market, they are both £ grand plus planar magnetic headphones from California, but where as you probably haven't heard of the Oppo PM -1 you can't have avoided Audeze if you have any interest at all in Hifi.

If the Audeze are the A list celeb, posing for the paparazzi at the VIP lounge in the airport, Oppo will have already slipped discretely through security and be sat on their private jet sipping champagneAudeze are what all the cool kids say we should buy, Oppo are what the cool kids haven't discovered yet.....go figure, be a leader not a follower.

Sound – 9.5/10

Comfort – 9.5/10

Fit and finish – 9.5/10

Value – 8.75/10

Overall – 9.3/10

**The best headphones that I have heard....I'm putting my neck on the line and saying it.
The ultimate combo of sound and comfort...**

would happily live on beans on toast for a month to pay for them.

Probably as close to a perfect ten as I can give.

Linette Smith

...and now Stuart Smiths thoughts.

The Oppo PM1 headphones have gained quite a reputation as a very well regarded set of cans since their launch and so we thought that Headphone Month at Hifi Pig would be incomplete without taking the opportunity to take a listen to this £1099 pair of planar magnetic headphones.

They arrive packaged in a luxurious, polished wooden box with a good quality, long OCC cable that is wrapped in a black fabric and terminated with an Oppo branded quarter inch jack. The cable is terminated on the headphone end with a pair of minijacks which means you can have a play with aftermarket cables. There's also a handy denim carrying case which allows the headphones to be popped in your hand luggage when travelling about (the PM1s fold completely flat which I think is a useful and advantageous feature). Topping off the accessories is an alternative set of velour pads which OPPO say offer users a slightly different presentation over the lamb-skin pads the headphones come fitted with. All in all this is a good start for the Oppos, initial impressions count for a lot and at the asking price buyers should expect to feel they are buying a lavish product.

The cans themselves are over the ear, a squared oval in shape and pretty much cover the whole ear, but are actually relatively small in comparison to the likes of the Audeze cans. I'd have preferred the cans to be a smidge larger so they did cover the whole ear as I found they rubbed slightly on the outer part and to the back of my ear.

I'd certainly be happy to walk about with these on my head and the design is relatively understated so you don't stand out like a spare part at a wedding. They also leak very little noise into the surrounding environment which will be a boon for your fellow passengers on public transport. They are well padded with natural latex and sit fairly firmly on your head but not with too much clamping effect – though shaking your head about does move the phones about so they'd not be ideal for vigorous exercise.

The headband is well padded, covered in the same lambskin as the earpads which coupled with the relatively light weight of the PM-1s (395g) makes them extremely comfortable on the top of the head.

Oppo PM-1

They're not as comfortable on the top of the head as the HifiMan HE 560s but you can wear them for long periods without any problems at all. Altering the headband is nice and easy and can be done while the PM-1s are on your head, meaning you can get the perfect fit quickly, even if you share your headphones.

Along with the Audeze and HifiMan headphones we've been sent for review the OppoPM1 have a planar magnetic driver and here it's 85 x 69mm with a symmetric push pull neodymium magnet system. Oppo also say that they are a 32 ohm load and 102dB (1mW) sensitive and I found that they were easy enough to drive from both the output of the preamp and the headphone amplifier. Plugging them into my portable player I found that they were a much easier load to drive than the Beyer Dynamic T1s with me struggling to get the volume above 20/30 without it being too loud. Indeed I'd be really happy to have these connected to this whilst out and about as the sound quality was really rather good.

The Sound



Relaxed and unforced are the first words that come to mind when you first listen to the PM1s. Nothing seems to be at all shouty and there's an evenness to the way they reproduce the music. You put these on, turn the music on and it's as if a feeling of calm descends. There's also really good isolation from the outside world with the PM1s that add to this feeling of calm.

Emiliana Torrini's Fisherman's Woman sounds absolutely gorgeous and there's detail in her breathy vocal that is certainly up there with the very best headphones I've had the pleasure to hear. The simple arrangements on this record play very much to the strengths of the PM1s with every little nuance of the guitar work being audible and you find yourself really drawn into the recording. This isn't to suggest that these are an over analytical headphone, they're not, but there is a natural easiness to the sound without the feeling that you are missing out on any of the detail on the recording.

This story is repeated on Kathryn Williams' Crown Electric record and whilst this album has more going on than the previous it's the velvety smooth vocal that is the first thing to grab your attention. Strings are lush and hats are crisp and sparkling with the bottom end having good weight and authority. It has to be said that it would be easy to go to female vocals constantly with the Oppos but convention suggests I ought to seek out tunes that I think will test these headphones and find out any weaknesses.

And do it's on with Smoke On The Water from Deep Purple's Live in Japan album that I've been listening to as a bit of a test track whilst reviewing headphones this month. The guttural bass guitar is difficult for some headphones to reproduce with any sense of realism but I'm happy to say the PM1s do a good job here. They perform similarly well with the other bass check track from Hardfloor that I've been using, with the growling bassline and drum kick sounding as it should. Indeed here there is a really good sense of what the musician's were doing in reinforcing the bassline with the kick; the kick is clearly apart from, but enhancing, the bassline if this makes

Oppo PM-1

sense. There's also good speed with the bass notes, and particularly the electronic drums starting and stopping on a pin. Like the Audeze and to a lesser extent the HifiMan HE 560s, there's pace and rhythm that brings the bass and drums together to create a really exciting listen, despite my fears that these would sound a touch lack lustre and polite with this style of music given my comments about them being relaxed and unforced. Indeed, there's a real dynamic feel to these cans that makes them really quite addictive. I'm no scientist by any stretch of the imagination but I'm guessing, given the similar qualities of the Planar Magnetic headphones we've been playing with, that something in the way this driver system works adds to the dynamic feel they have.

Herbie Hancock's One Finger Snap goes on next and you do really get a great sense of soundstage. It's not over exaggerated though and the musicians do stay in their place between you head with a reasonable feeling of front to back space too. Moving onto In-Duologue's Blue Skies record there's excellent sense of the recording space and a great insight into the way the recordings were made.

Comfort

These are a pretty light headphone and so over the top of the head they are pretty comfortable, not the best but very acceptable.

Now here's where I fell out with the PM1s a little and it must have something to do with the shape of my right ear because whichever way round I had them (right can on right ear, or left can on the right ear) I was getting a degree of discomfort, but only on my right ear and in one particular spot. I asked Linnette to wear these for an afternoon before I continued the reviewing process and she reported no discomfort at all, so, as I say, I reckon this is down to some issue with these particular headphones and my right ear shape. On the left they were as comfortable as you'd like. They do get quite warm after extended periods but this is pretty normal with any headphone in my experience.

Conclusion

At over £1000 OPPOs PM1s are not a cheap headphone by any stretch of the imagination, indeed they are the second priciest headphones I've heard and only beat in this respect by the Audeze's. That said they aren't massively more expensive than the Sennheiser HD 800s or the Beyer Dynamic T1s and so compare very favourably with them.

At first you get the impression that they are going to be polite and a little bit on the boring side but then you listen further and realise that this is only a very small part of their presentation because presenting them with dynamic and complex music really gets them singing.

There's a sophistication to the sound of the Oppos that is hard to ignore. At first you get the impression that they are going to be polite and a little bit on the boring side but then you listen further and realise that this is only a very small part of their presentation because presenting them with dynamic and complex music really gets them singing. Add to this a great level of detail speed and you really have a headphone that is difficult to better I'd say. Yes, overall the Audeze are a better headphone, but they cost more, are heavier than and not as portable as the Oppos, so you takes your pays your money and you takes your pick.

They are easy to drive, even with a portable device and they fold flat into their nifty little denim carry case and so a good choice for those looking for a high quality sound on the go.

From my perspective I wouldn't buy the Oppos because of the issues mentioned with comfort on my right ear, but then not everyone experiences this.

The Oppos are a luxurious product with very careful attention to detail being made in the packaging and fit and finish and this should be applauded.

Sound – 9

Comfort – 7.5

Fit and finish – 9

Value – 8.5

Overall – 8.5

A very good sounding, refined headphone that is portable and offers a level of pride of ownership that will be hard to beat.

Stuart Smith

Final Audio's Heaven II at £69 and Heaven IV at £139 are put through their paces by Hifi Pig's teen correspondent.

Final audio is a Japanese company that make unique looking earphones and headphones. I was given the Heaven II and Heaven IV to review that are both in-ears. The Heaven II are the cheaper option retailing at £69 look identical to the more expensive option apart from the slightly more limited colour choices. The Heaven IV is the more expensive option retailing at £139.

So what are the key differences between these 2 in-earphones?

Heaven II

Starting with the Heaven II it's a very well priced product. I love its unique "futuristic" design and it has got a nice weight to it. Its stainless steel construction gives it a very solid feel. The earphone comes with a number of silicone ear buds to accommodate all shapes and sizes of ear I tried all of the different ear buds and found that the smallest ones were the most comfortable and gave the best sound. I never felt any strain on my ears even after many hours of listening.

The cable is flat which means that it doesn't get tangled up in your pocket. The build quality is second to none and there were no faults or flaws in the construction.

The Heaven II, being the cheaper option, should not sound as good as the Heaven IV. That being said they still sound impressive. They have great presence and have rich lows and mids.

I felt however they were a bit lacking in the top-end. They sounded best with bass heavy dance music tracks.



All in all, these earphones are a good and I would personally use them as my daily in ear monitor.

The track that brought out the best of these earphones for me was "One more day" by Example. The baseline and piano sounded rich and punchy and the vocals were not overshadowed by the bass thankfully. There was also great noise isolation from outside sounds and let me hear the music even in loud public spaces.

All in all, these earphones are a good and I would personally use them as my daily in ear monitor. They might be a bit bass heavy for some but I like that and for the low price of £69, you can't really complain.

Heaven IV

Final Audio Heaven II and Heaven IV In Ear Monitors

I think it is as they are one of the best sounding in-earphones I have heard in a long time and even outperform some more expensive headphones.

Final Audio Heaven IV:

Price as tested £139

Sound – 8.5/10

Comfort – 9/10

Fit and finish – 9/10

Value – 7.5/10

Overall – 8.5/10

I would recommend the Heaven II to someone on a tight budget but I would suggest they save up a bit more and buy the highly recommended Heaven IV as they are a huge improvement and are almost everything that I look for in an in-earphone; Even if the Heaven II is better value for money. I highly rate both of these earphones!

Harry Smith

The Heaven IV improves on what the Heaven II lacks. First of all they come with a very nice stainless steel carrying case. The sound brings the bass and mids from the Heaven II but greatly improves on the top end and adds a lot of depth to the music. The combination of the rich and sparkling top end produces an almost perfect sound for me. The stand out track with these was definitely "Right Here" by Rudimental. The vocals were a lot more prominent than with the Heaven II and the bass and mids sounded even better. The guitar riffs sounded really vivid. I also felt that the response was a lot more efficient on the Heaven IV. After listening to the Heaven IV I would find it difficult to go back to the Heaven II, but is the jump in sound performance worth double the price of the Heaven II?

I think it is as they are one of the best sounding in-earphones I have heard in a long time and even outperform some more expensive headphones.

Final Audio Heaven II:

Price as tested: £69

Sound – 7/10

Comfort – 9/10

Fit and finish – 9/10

Value – 8/10

Overall – 8.25/10



Sennheiser HD-800

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

Sennheiser is a name that has been synonymous with headphones for decades, here we take a look at their range-topping HD-800s.



Sennheiser are one of the first names that come to mind when speaking about headphones and so it would be remiss of us not to have taken a listen to at least one of their offerings in what is “Headphone Month” here at Hifi Pig and where better for us to start than at the top of their range and the £999 HD800s.

They arrive in a large flitop box lined with a silky fabric that as a whole screams big brand marketing savvy – understated and corporate. There’s a glossy instruction manual and attached the headphones 3m plus cable terminated with a quarter inch jack which is “specially tuned, symmetrical, impedance matching with low capacitance”. The cables can be replaced with aftermarket examples should you feel the urge, but the supplied cable does seem to be well manufactured with a twisted configuration. For home users this is a proper length which in the main should do away with the need for the use of extension cables – a positive, if small, detail from my perspective.

Straight from the box the HD800s look very different from other designs we have in for review. First of all they are very modern looking with their silver and

black colours giving an industrial looking design – some will like it whilst others will see it as being a bit over the top. However, thinking about it this is a design where form follows function as these are basically loudspeakers for the ears – the drivers are the biggest used in headphones to date say Sennheiser. They are a physically large headphone, not as big as the Audeze cans we have in at the moment, but they’re not the kind of thing you could wear on a bus without standing out somewhat, not that you’re likely to do this with the HD800s without attracting unwanted attention of fellow passengers, as they do leak music into their surroundings – much as you would expect from a large pair of open back drivers. The headband is nicely padded and coupled with the Sennheisers’ relative lightweight (they are just 330g) is comfortable on the top of the head – perhaps not quite as comfortable as the HifiMan HE560s. Positioning of the cans on the headband is very simple and a case of moving them up and down with your hands whilst on your head – certainly a better solution than the HifiMans’. The cans themselves are massive and comfortably cover the whole ear with a thin, but very comfy padding around them covered in

Sennheiser HD-800

micro-fabric to protect your head – they're also deep so the driver is sitting a good way from your ear. The cans are slightly sprung so that when you place them on your head they clamp inwards ever so slightly to ensure there's a tight seal between the padding and your head. This is effective and not over tight, but this does mean that if you shake your head about with any force they do move about a little – not sure I'd be comfortable running in these...but then that's not what they're made for!

The HD800s have an impedance of 300Ohms and were driven very loud and very easily by the Coffman Labs headphone amp on the GA1 pre, with me having to turn the volume down from the previous 'phones I had been using. The little HiSound portable media player certainly had no problem driving the Sennheisers to very loud volumes and I imagine you'd be fine running these easily from an iPod or whatever player you choose. However, they are large, come with no carrying case and so how practical it is to use these 'phones whilst travelling is open to debate...as it is with most of the non-IEMs we have at our disposal.

The Sound

As mentioned, listening was done using our normal preamplifier and we used our normal DAC fed with FLACs from the computer using our reference player with JPlay.

Whilst the perceived soundstage thrown with the HD800s isn't as wide as with the Final Pandora Hope VIs there is still a good feeling that the music is in its own space and with a good out-of-the-head feel. Doug MacLeod's bluesy "Rosa Lee" displays them to have a very good feel to the bass with it being deep, tight and controlled – which you'd possibly expect from the large drivers used in the Sennheisers. However, this increased bass extension is certainly not at the expense of the other frequencies and guitar and hats are bright and sparkly with a natural sound to them. Some may prefer the upper frequencies to be rolled off a little, but then I enjoy the Grado 325i headphones which some perceive as being overly bright. The vocal is accurate and correct in the mix without being over emphasised and this leads to a very pleasing and overall easy to listen to sound that is nicely balanced. There's good separation to the instruments too which adds to the detailed accuracy of the sound.

Hardfloor's "Once Again Back", as many readers will be aware, is one of the tracks we regularly use to checkout a loudspeaker performance in the bass de-

The vocal track is agreeably reproduced and again I found it to be slightly forward. Bass was nice and bouncy too which I enjoyed and added to a feeling of the HD800s being rhythmic and foot-tappingly exciting.

partment and with the HD800s I was certainly not disappointed. There's a good hint of the feeling you get when listening to the growling synth-bass performed through a proper pair of loudspeakers, with the associated low level 303 bass being very pleasing also. There's speed and there is punch to the sound which I like a lot and whilst the Final Pandora Hope IVs lacked a little in the lower bass registers you sacrifice a little of the 3D presentation they give with the HD800s – horses for courses then. I found searching on the tablet for a lot of techno and dance music and I think if you listen to a lot of this kind of music the HD800s will be an excellent choice.

The outstanding In Duologue "Blue Skies" album on Snip Records is recorded in a small chapel and there's a good sense of the space's sound particularly on the vocal track. Again there is a sense of a nicely balanced sound with the HD800s with the female vocal being slightly to the fore and playing nicely against the contrebass. The whispered, normally barely audible, background vocal sound at the start of the opening track is clear and it's nice to hear this. Contrebass is tight and percussive with good slap and it has the feel that it goes lower than most of the other headphones we have in for test.

Pink Fairies' "Kings of Oblivion" album can sound quite bright to these ears (or my CD copy does), so I wanted to see if the HD800s exaggerated this at all. It's still a record that's slightly exaggerated at the top-end a little I think, but I don't believe the Sennheisers are over emphasising this and what I got from listening to this album on these cans was heaps of

Sennheiser HD-800

detail in the mix and a “live” feel to the music – which is about right I’d say. The vocal track is agreeably reproduced and again I found it to be slightly forward. Bass was nice and bouncy too which I enjoyed and added to a feeling of the HD800s being rhythmic and foot-tappingly exciting.

Comfort

As previously mentioned, the HD800s from Sennheiser fit over the whole ear which I like a great deal and I think you’d have to be particularly well proportioned in the lughole department to have any issues with them. There’s also a good deal of space between the drivers and the ears which means that there’s no fear of any part of your ear rubbing on the driver, or its protection.

The padding between the body of the cans and your head is minimal, but, given that the HD800s don’t clamp to your head aggressively, they are very comfortable to wear.

They are a light headphone and easy to wear over long periods of time without feeling any discomfort. However, the headband can become “evident” after long periods of time and in this area I preferred the HifiMan HD 560s.

Conclusion

The Sennheiser HD800s are clearly a very good headphone that will please people who enjoy a monitor type sound. Some may find the upper frequencies to be a little much, but, like with the Grado 325is, I perceive this as accuracy rather than anything to criticise... you pay your money, you take your choice.

They don’t have the “luxurious/audiophile” sound of the Final Pandora Hope VI, but I think this is to the Sennheisers’ credit actually and they do have an overall better balance to their sound than the Finals, with bass being especially more pleasing and strong. Soundstage is pretty good and there’s a reasonably good out-of-the-head experience but this is not the best we’ve heard. For extended listening they are non-fatiguing and a pleasure to listen to.

They are an easy headphone to drive and have no issues with being played by portable music players, despite them not being

particularly portable themselves because of their size and lack of case.

From the perspective of comfort these are great and the large cans fit over the ear completely making them easy to wear for extended periods. My only niggle comfort-wise is the headband can become “evident” (if not uncomfortable) after long periods of wear.

On the negative side they are big and I’d have liked to have seen a carry case included in the price to facilitate being able to pop them in a bag when away on business. Looks will also divide opinion.

At £999 these aren’t cheap headphones but they do sound very good, are comfortable and they should last you a lifetime if looked after.

Sound – 8.75

Comfort – 8.25

Fit and finish – 8.25

Value – 8

Overall – 8.31

Recommended for serious headphone listeners who want plenty of detail, coupled with good quality bass reproduction and a lifelike interpretation.

Stuart Smith

And now Linette’s thoughts on the Sennheiser HD 800 headphones



Sennheiser HD-800

Well August seems to have turned into Christmas at Hifi Pig towers with headphones, headphone amps and in ear monitors arriving in droves.

Next on my review schedule were the open backed Sennheisers which retail at about £1000.

These arrived very nicely packaged in a black presentation case and on unboxing them, my first impression was that they were big....but really light.

Having previously tested the Audeze and Final Pandora headphones, these seemed exceptionally light, according to Sennheiser they weigh in at just 330g. They look big because they fit around the ear, rather than on it at all, which I have to say, coupled with the lightness, makes for a very comfortable fit. They seem to curve around the head, hugging it but not in a stifling embrace.

The only problem that I had with the fit was I couldn't keep my glasses on as the earcups pushed them into my head.

The easily adjustable headband is also well padded adding to the comfortable fit. They are also supplied with a good quality, long cable that has robust connectors and is apparently reinforced with Kevlar. I found the design pleasing, and I felt a bit Cyborg-like while wearing them but in my opinion, they did look a bit 'plasticky'. I guess this is the payoff though for them being so light for their size.

I started things off with Primal Scream's 'Screamadelica' album. 'Movin' on up' is an uplifting track with gospel backing vocals, piano, organ and rocky guitar riffs. Everything sounded in its place and I would say the overall feel and impression of the soundstage was really big and open, like listening in a concert hall.

On 'Loaded' the bass was deep and defined but the mids and tops were there as well, the 'country' twang of the guitar sounded great.

'Damaged' sounded beautiful, the vocals were sweet but gravelly with a perfect balance between piano and guitar and the background organbut it was starting to get to the real bass test time.

I always itch to hear Hardfloor's 'Once again back' on new bits of kit. With the HD800s the sub bass was tight and defined....all the detail that I wanted to hear was there and they presented the swoopy swirly top and mid range perfectly.

Slowing things down a bit, I put on John Martyn's 'Solid Air', a track that I hear a lot at hifi shows ...for good reason, it shows off a system that is 'right' really well. This sounded smooth and hon-

All in all, they came across as very accurate and comfortable headphones...

eyed on the HD800's with the vocal and instruments all beautifully placed...it sounded very accurate to me.

Back to Gil Scott Heron and 'Ghetto Style' which I have used in all my recent headphone reviews. This album did sound very good, again with the sense of accuracy and definition but I did find I was having to turn things up louder than when using the Audeze headphones.

I tend to prefer my headphones with closed backs because if I am either out and about or listening at home I like to keep my music to myself and not force those around me to listen to it too.

I perhaps did not feel as 'lost in music' as I did with the Audeze LCD -XC which I again put down to the Sennheiser HD800s being open backed so they didn't give me the isolation that I prefer when listening on headphones, I also found that in a noisy environment I was cranking the volume higher on the headphone amp to drown out exterior noise interference.

All in all, they came across as very accurate and comfortable headphones (minus the glasses conflict) but they didn't excite me as much as some of the other headphones I have used, they seemed to me to be a little too clinical for my taste, everything perfectly done, but just missing the 'wow' factor.... For some people this will be exactly what they are looking for.

Sound – 7.75/10

Comfort – 8/10

Fit and finish – 7.75/10

Value – 7.25/10

Overall – 7.69/10

Accurate, comfortable headphones with a very good build quality, suited to people not looking for complete isolation from the outside world when they listen to music.

Linette Smith

Final Pandora IV

Japanese Pandora Hope VI headphones that have a novel driver implementation. They cost £550.



I first had a brief listen to the Japanese made Pandora Hope VI headphones at Munich earlier this year and thought they sounded pretty nice in far from ideal surroundings, so was pleased to be offered a review pair to try at home.

The £550 Hope VIs arrive in a hexagonal box which opens at the top to reveal the headphones surrounded by black faux-fur which lines the box and is a pretty nice touch which adds to that “Christmas morning” effect. Inside the box you’ve got the very basic instruction pamphlet, the removable 1.5m cable and the headphones themselves.

Pulling the headphones out the top of the box the first thing that strikes is that these are a pretty heavy headphone, coming in at around 480g. The second is that they look pretty classy with their silver and black finish (stainless steel and ABS resin). Popping them on your head they’re immediately comfortable with a well padded headband and position nicely over the whole of the ear – smaller over ears can sometimes be a problem for this reviewer. The earpads (and headband) are covered with faux leather and well padded. Positioning is by way of a simple slider mechanism and the cans themselves pivot nicely so you get a comfortable fit automatically – they also rotate slightly, but more of this later.

The cable is well made and has two minijacks that plug into each of the cans on the headphones and one that pops into the amp’s socket. Now these are pretty heavy headphones and I can’t see me wanting to walk about the town (or heaven forbid exercising) with them and I do most of my listening on head-

phones at home, so would have preferred to have seen a quarter inch jack on the end of these. On the positive side of things the fact that the cable is “independent” will allow, for those so inclined, to experiment with after-market cables. I also realise that many use headphones when traveling on business and in hotel rooms using computers and portable audio players and so this mini-jack does actually make sense in the real world.

From a design perspective the Pandora Hope VI headphones are an interesting concept. They are a hybrid design that uses a balanced armature along with a 50mm dynamic driver and this is where the slight rotation of the cans comes in – you can position the balanced armature so you get the sound that suits your ears best. Personally I preferred them turned full forward, but it was interesting to experiment.

They are 8 Ohm closed design with a sensitivity of 105db and as such an easy headphone to drive.

Sound

Listening was predominantly done using Flacs from the computer using JRiver and JPlay via the VAD valve DAC and the headphone amp on the Coffman GA1 preamplifier we use daily.

Popping on the excellent “Coz” album from David Crosby you’re immediately aware of there being a nice wide soundstage with decent a three dimensional feel to give a good to very good “out of the head” experience that is sometimes really lacking when using some headphones. Clarity of the sound is very

Final Pandora IV

good, with piano, guitar and vocals shining out from the mix. The sound is tight and accurate with Crosby's distinctly toned voice being instantly recognisable. Individual little percussion sounds are very evident and overall you get a great insight into the mix with slight effects on the guitar being easy to hear.

Overall the sound is really rather pleasing and very easy to listen to with this kind of laidback music and it's very difficult not to reach for the tablet and pick more of this from the virtual shelf.

The beginning few bars of David Bowie's "Ziggy Stardust" are crisp and precise and when the vocal comes in it's a real delight to listen to. Bass is tight and, whilst not as deep as some other headphones, it presents itself well: There's a tendency these days to over exaggerate the lower frequencies with cheaper (and some more expensive) headphones to appeal to the younger generations of listeners desire to conform to the "beats" sound. The Pandora Hope VI will certainly appeal to the more mature (in experience rather than years) listener who appreciates a balanced sound over and above the boom and tizz offered up elsewhere. "Smoke on the Water" from Deep Purple's "Made in Japan" record has a great electric bass sound that is a bit of a highlight of the record for me and here, despite it being a little light overall, it's well toned giving a good impression of the effect used.



Square Pusher's "Ufabulum" album is clever drum and bass at its very best with complex sounds coming and going in the mix and with the Hope VI you feel that there's an accuracy to the sound. The snappy snare hits cut through the intricate mix and there's that out-the-head sensation to the soundstage again. Do you miss the very lowest bass registers?...well no, not really you don't. Personally I'd rather have the tight and well toned bass the Pandoras give up

With the Pandora Hope VI there's a sense of separation of the instruments in space that allows you to listen critically should you want to, but the overall feeling is one of a cohesive and enjoyable listen.

rather than an overblown, dominating and, in the final analysis, artificial sounding bass "the youth" seem to crave. Here you have speed, control and tautness that is a delight to listen to...really musical and enjoyable!

On the funky disco of Salsoul Orchestra's "Street Sense" record and particularly listening to "Burning Spear" the infectiousness of the groove comes through brilliantly and the horns, when they begin, cut through the mix just as they should. Bass kick has that tightness again as does the electric bass guitar which, given the overall balance of the Pandoras, sounds right in this context.

Moving onto a bit of jazz in the form of Herbie Hancock's "Cantaloupe Island" the sense of the recording space is apparent and Freddie Hubbard's cornet soars to the fore. There's an overall "liveness" to the music and Tony Williams light touches on cymbals and hats glimmer through the other instruments.

With the Pandora Hope VI there's a sense of separation of the instruments in space that allows you to listen critically should you want to, but the overall feeling is one of a cohesive and enjoyable listen.

Plugging the headphones into the little Studio portable player from HiSound they prove to be really easy to drive and you can crank them up to outrageous volumes should you wish. If I was popping off for

Final Pandora IV

the weekend on business I'd be more than happy with the sound of this combo.

Comfort

These fit nicely over the ear enclosing it and ensuring good sound isolation from the outside world, but the faux leather earpads can become a little "sweaty" on warm evenings when you're wearing them for extended periods – I would have liked to see a fabric alternative in the box. *There is also a tendency (with my ear shape) for the hard plastic mesh inside the can to rub slightly on the antihelix (I had to look that up), part of the ear – this could be simply cured by having deeper cushions on the earpads, though I've experienced this with other headphones and so, as I suggest, it could just be my ear shape. They fit quite loosely on the head and if you do move your head about over enthusiastically they do move about. All that said they were pretty comfortable on the whole and I managed to spend a good few hours at a time wearing them.

Conclusions

The Pandora Hope VI from Final are a superior product both from a finish and sound quality perspective.

Sonically they perform very well with all genres of music, offering up a clear and cohesive sound that's a real pleasure to listen to. There's a sense that they have a balance and sophistication to them that clearly puts them in the audiophile bracket. Bass is tight and tuneful (though not massively low), mids and tops are clean and precise. Soundstage is one of their really strong points and they really do that out-of-the-head thing really well with instruments clearly separated and in their own space.

Comfort-wise I found them to be fairly comfortable with the caveats mentioned. Given their loose fit I don't see them being suitable for the very active, but great for the commute to work or for when away on business.

At their price-point they are not in any way a budget or impulse buy and whilst I do think they punch somewhat above their weight sonically, I'd suggest you see if you can get a pair to try on before you buy, or take advantage of current distance selling regulations, to see if they fit your ear-shape properly.



Sound – 8.25

Comfort – 6.75

Fit and finish – 8.5

Value – 8

Overall – 7.88

Recommended for those looking for a well made an “audiophile” sounding headphone that punches above its weight and has a fabulous soundstage.

Stuart Smith

And now Linette's thoughts on the Final Pandora Hope VI headphones.

I have said it before and I will say it again, the whole process of buying a new bit of hifi and then bringing it home to unbox should be a bit of an event. A cracking product carefully packaged and boxed will make more of an impression than something just slung into a plain box with a bit of bubble-wrap.

Final Audio have nailed it with these headphones; they come in a hexagonal black box, with silver embossed logos, like something you would get jewellery or expensive perfume in. The inside of the box is lined with a thick, black (fake) fur and acts as a headphone stand which the 'phones nestle into, very nice.

Taking them out of the box I was impressed with the stylish, minimal design and the build quality. They have a quietly retro feel to them with polished black ABS plastic that has a matte finish and stainless steel. The headband is broad and well padded and the earcups slide easily up and down to adjust the fit.

Final Pandora IV

The detachable cable clips in, in a satisfyingly solid fashion.

One thing I would say, these are not really grippy headphones and I don't think they are designed for anything much more active than sitting and listening to music. They are not for running about in (which is fine by me!)

They also sat comfortably on my head while wearing glasses, if I'm sat using my computer whilst wearing headphones, this is pretty important to me.

Although the earpads were pretty thick and comfortable I did have a bit of an issue with some parts of the driver or driver housing that were not covered by the pads and were slightly uncomfortable on my ears.

The Final website states that the Pandora Hope VI feature 'a hybrid design that merges balanced armature with a 50mm diameter dynamic driver unit coupled with BAM (Balancing Air Movement) mechanism' and that they have 'achieved an extraordinarily vast sound stage'

Have they? Well it sounds pretty good to me! 'Papua New Guinea' from Future Sound of London soared through my ears with plenty of detail in the mid and top and a huge punch of bass.

The soundstage did sound wide and deep...maybe Final have something here.

Not quite on the same level as the Audeze LCD – XC but the Pandora Hope VI are a third of the price at around £550 UK retail.

The Hardfloor 'Once again back' test was next....this tune really does get played on every piece of review equipment that comes in. Again they seemed really bassy, but controlled and tight with everything else present in the top and mid that I was looking for from this track.

Wanting to listen to some of the same tracks in each headphone review I put on Gil Scott Heron's 'Ghetto Style' again. It was engaging to listen to with a well defined soundstage and the bass/mid/top mix sounded right to me.

I would have happily sat and listened to the whole album but things were starting to get quite uncomfortable in the ear department.

I was pretty disappointed, the Final Pandora Hope VI sound very good....but they are just not the headphone for me. Comfort is really important to me with a pair of headphones.



*I found them quite uncomfortable after wearing for a while, I think the way that the driver and housing is designed makes the part not covered by the pads stick out too close to the ear, I imagine this could be overcome by increasing the earpad thickness to take the driver a little further back away from the ear. However, headphones are not a one size fits all and I would definitely suggest trying them to see how they feel on your own ears....just because they didn't work for me doesn't mean they won't for you.

Linette Smith

Sound – 8/10

Comfort – 5/10

Fit and finish – 8/10

Value – 7/10

Overall – 7/10

A great sounding, beautiful looking set of headphones, just not a recommended from me because of the comfort issues, which other people may not have a problem with.

Linette Smith

***Robin from KS Distribution, who are the UK importer of Final Audio products, contacted Hifi Pig to tell us that "larger earpads are available if someone doesn't like the original earpads – these were produced specially for those who find the original pads uncomfortable. The larger pads were produced for western markets and one of the guys at KS who experienced some discomfort said they resolved the issue completely".**

HifiMan HE-560

The £650 HifiMan HE-560 headphones are causing quite a stir in some circles. We take a listen to see what all the commotion is about.



Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

The £650 HE-560 from HifiMan open-backed, planar magnetic headphones arrive in a smart looking wooden box with a metal nameplate taking up the slide-out lid's top surface. Inside you are presented by a very nicely cut out foam insert that protects the headphones during transit, the owners manual and the detachable cables. This is a good start – first impressions count for a lot with lots of people and it's good to see another headphone manufacturer realising this.

Taking the HE-560s from their packaging it's immediately apparent that these are a relatively light weight design and they come in at 375g which is more than 100g lighter than the Final Pandora Hope VI headphones we reviewed recently but slightly heavier than the Sennheiser HD800s. I'd certainly be happy to use these whilst moving about or doing mild exercise. They look pretty cool with a wooden banding around the outer circumference of each of the cans and this looks pretty classy.

The cans are nice and big and fit over the whole of the ear (or most of it in my case) pretty comfortably – they aren't as big as the Sennheisers but should be good for most folk. The headband is simple band of plastic material and not actually part of the metal "headband" making it very comfortable indeed and it can be adjusted by sliding little black plastic blocks located on each side of the headband. This adjustment is a bit fiddly, but once it's set you're done un-

less you share your headphones with your family. They fit pretty firmly to your head too so you can move about quite freely which is a good thing! The actual earpads themselves are made of what looks like faux leather with the surface that touches your head being a smoothish velour fabric. The earpads are thicker at the back of the ear than they are at the front which positions them correctly over your ears.

The cables are a decent 2m length and terminate at one end with a good quality Neutrik quarter inch jack and on the other with faffy little things that screw onto the bottom of each of the cans' – I personally didn't like these at all, but again, once they're in... they're in. Cable enthusiasts on the other hand will be pleased with the non-captive design so they can play with cables from other manufacturers. Overall I really like the sleek design of these and the finish looks to be pretty good, though I wouldn't like to be altering the headband overly often due to the nature of the mechanism.

As a departure from previous Hifi Man models the drivers have their magnet at only one side of the driver's membrane which is good for weight and means there's nothing between the driver membrane and your ear, but it does mean that they are pretty inefficient at 90dB and have an impedance of 35 Ohms. The output from the Coffman pre didn't really drive the HifiMan HE560s and I'd suggest that a

HifiMan HE-560

dedicated amp with a more healthy output is the order of the day. Fortunately I own a reference of a prototype solid state design from Epiphany Acoustics that pumps out a healthy 2W should you need that much. Plugging into the Studio portable player from HiSound means having to crank the volume a fair bit, but I'd suggest you'd be better off with a decent quality portable headphone amplifier.

The Sound

First listen straight from the box weren't very impressive at all with the HE-560s sounding a little brash and yet closed in...but then to be fair the user guide does suggest 150 hours of breaking them in so there they sat for a few days playing along to themselves, which made me realise just how little these open backed designs bleed sound into their surroundings. I'd be cautious on public transport, but I reckon you'd get away with it if you sat at the back of the bus and kept yourself to yourself.

After a suitable running in period the sound does change pretty dramatically and very much for the better. I'd been listening to the "Kings of Oblivion" from Pink Fairies on the Sennheiser HD800s and noticed that the bass on the HifiMan headphones seemed to be a little tighter and more akin to a real bass guitar and if anything I'd say they were even better in this department which is surprising as I liked the bass on the Sennheisers a lot! A very brief introduction but very positive none the less.

Natalie Merchants eponymous album is a bit of favourite with me at the moment and I just love the opening track "Ladybird". Here her vocal is really quite beautifully rendered. It's silky smooth and projects from the background instrumentation as nicely as I've heard it on headphones.

Bass is punchy, tight and dynamic. I don't think the HifiMans go as low as the Sennheisers but there is a quality to it that is really pleasing to listen to and which appeals to me. There seems to be a slightly warm presentation overall, but there's equally tons of detail with these headphones. The soundstage is difficult for me to express in words – it's not as wide or deep as the Sennheiser HD800 or the Final Pandora Hope

Given their speed you are presented an accurate and realistic impression of the overall mix with no overhang of sounds and with each instrument having its place on the stage.

VIs, but there does seem to be a better forward to back sensation if that makes sense.

On to some electronic music, which I actually really enjoy on a good set of headphones, and VCMG's "SSSS". To enjoy this kind of music I think you need headphones that do speed and dynamics really well and the HE560s don't disappoint. Whilst they don't go mega low (or as low as the Sennheiser HD800s) they do that start and stop thing on the bass that is essential for me and there is bags and bags of information in the higher frequencies making this album in particular come alive with all the little synthesised bleeps and twitters in the mix.

Nolwenn Leroy's "Brettone" album emphasise the nice balance these headphones have, but also highlight the fact that you need to drive them pretty hard to get the very best from them. There's snap and im-



HifiMan HE-560

pect from the drums and the traditional Breton instruments, which tend to be pretty highly pitched, cut through the mix without being over emphasised and taking over. Given their speed you are presented an accurate and realistic impression of the overall mix with no overhang of sounds and with each instrument having its place on the stage. Leroy's version of "Greensleeves" is naturally a simple rendition and the HE560s perform this tune really beautifully with the simple instrumentation layered in the mix to accentuate her voice. She is singing in a language that is not her own (she's Breton/French) and it is quite easy to pick out slight American inflections in her voice.

Comfort

Over the top of the head the HifiMan HE560s are the most comfortable we have in for review and this is down to the simple headband arrangement – in this respect you are hardly aware you are wearing them at all.

The cans themselves are pretty large but don't cover the whole of my lugs and this can become evident, if not actually uncomfortable, after long sessions with them.

They clamp quite tightly to your head which I reckon would make them useable when doing light exercise, but the velour covering to the earpads did get pretty warm and a little itchy after long periods of use – perhaps an alternative could be included in the future.

Conclusion



There's a quality to the sound of the HifiMan HE560s that really draws you in and makes you sit up and listen. They are balanced and detailed in the top end and, whilst the bass doesn't go as low as some others in for review (notably the Sennheiser HD800s), I do think there's a punchy quality to the bass that is in balance with the rest of the frequency range they convey and it's really quite endearing. That upper frequency detail isn't at all over done and many will actually prefer this quality of the HifiMans over the Sennheisers.

Mids and vocals are really nicely done and overall there is a hint of warmth to the HE560s which many who listen to headphones for extended periods will enjoy a great deal.

The out-of-the-head experience isn't as defined as the Final Hope VI and there is a feeling of them being slightly closed in left to right, whilst on the flip-side there's a feeling of front to back space.

Although I feel the soundstage is quite narrow the instruments in the mix do have position and a degree of space around them.

Overall the sound the HE560s make is really rather special and they play a wide variety of genres without issue and they don't demand anything from the listener.

I personally found them a little uncomfortable on the ears after a long session and they do need a decent headphone amp to get the very best out of them. That said, they are light, relatively portable and the box they come in is of a size you can pop in large hand luggage when traveling. I do worry that the little clips for adjusting the headband will not be robust

enough over time if used a lot.

At £650 the HifiMan HE560s come in at £100 more than the Pandoras and I believe this is justifiable as they do offer, for my tastes, a more coherent and less "audiophile" sound. At almost £350 less than Sennheisers and £849 less than the Audeze LCD – XC they are a serious contender that will surely get a lot of attention from headphone enthusiasts and serious listeners looking

HifiMan HE-560

for a more cost effective alternative.

Sound – 8.5

Comfort – 8.0

Fit and finish – 8.0

Value – 8.5

Overall – 8.25

Recommended for those looking for a light-weight headphone with a high quality, detailed sound throughout the frequency range and at a price-point that is attractive to those not wanting to spend mega-bucks.

Stuart Smith

And now Linette Smith takes a listen to the Hifi-Man HE-560 headphones

I was expecting good things when the Hifiman headphones arrived in their very stylish and sturdy box. Well constructed wooden box with a slide off lid that comes with an aluminium panel on the front...very stylish indeed and the headphones are perfectly protected in transit.

Taking them out of the box was a bit déjà vu.....these headphones seemed to have a touch of the Audeze to them looks wise, was I getting a cheaper interpretation from China? I hoped not!

The first thing that strikes me is the weight; these are actually a pretty light set of 'phones at 375g. Despite the lightness they feel well built and durable with a definite solidity to them, these are no cheeky rip off, they are a well made set of headphones.

I really like the suspended head band. Slipping them on they feel very, very comfortable, with just the soft band on my head I can only actually feel the earcups, sure, the metal frame of the headband does make me look a bit like a cyber man....but I like the design.

The earcups themselves fit my ears perfectly and feel supremely comfortable. Not as big as the Audeze and not as heavy so they don't need as much padding. They are definitely cocooning and even though these are open backed I get the isolation from the outside world that I look for in a pair of headphones. They even work well with my glasses, no conflict at all.....I have to say I am pretty impressed by Hifi-man so far!

I'm really excited to actually hear these so I put on Blondie's 'Parallel Lines'. 'Hanging on the telephone' is rocky and lively and slips nicely into 'One way or another' with Debbie

Wow! This is great, the bass is much deeper and all the little nuances in the rhythm are clean and detailed with nothing lost from the mid and top.

Harry growling seductively in my ears. The soundstage is big and I get all the detail that I want to hear....drums sounding particularly good, everything is tight and well balanced and I am drawn in to listen more....actually I forget that I'm supposed to be writing a review and just enjoy listening!

I switch back to Primal Scream's 'Screamadelica' which I last listened to with the Sennheisers that I reviewed a few days ago.

Wow! This is great, the bass is much deeper and all the little nuances in the rhythm are clean and detailed with nothing lost from the mid and top.

I'm getting the 'lost in music' feeling that marks out a great pair of headphones for me....a lot of fun! I am very impressed that Hifiman have got such a great balance with the HE-560s.

Comfort, lightness and a great sound and all for around £650not a cheap pair of headphones by any stretch....but they are coming across as very good value for money.

It's Hardfloor test time again so on goes 'Once again back'. Driving basslines with lots of sub.....what's not to love? Tight and detailed.....perfect, the Hifi-man 'cans pass with flying colours, I think someone will have to prise them from my head when it's time to send them back, I am hooked!

I was impressed right from opening the box, but if you buy these headphones they will spend a lot more time on your head than in the box! Thoroughly enjoyable.

Sound – 8.75/10

Comfort – 9.25/10

Fit and finish – 8/10

Value – 9/10

Overall – 8.75 /10

Excellent sounding, comfortable headphones that give much more expensive headphones a run for their money. Definitely recommended.

Linette Smith

Stax SR-407

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

Stax seem to have been around forever with their interestingly designed Earspeakers that require a special energizer to work. We take a listen to their £1695 SR-407s



Talk about headphones, and there is one name that always springs to mind. When I was a teenage hi-fi fanatic I always wanted to own a Stax. I remember then the company were adamant that they should actually be called 'Ear Speakers', and I could see why with the Lambda. These monsters of the day looked more like speakers tied to the head with a vice rather than headphones. Whilst the original conventionally shaped Stax was in 1960 it wasn't until 1979 that the Lambda – if you like, the original baby of the SR-407 – was born. Indeed, many of the original exterior parts, such as headband, driver yokes, earpads, and outer casing still play a part in the current 207, 307, 407 and 507 incarnations. Only the Jecklin Float offered an alternative electrostatic design, but that particular offering was prone to fall off your head if you leaned forward. Koss, Sennheiser and PWB did produce electret and electrostatics, but that's for another day. These ear speakers couldn't be

plugged directly into your standard headphone socket but rather had to be connected to a special electrostatic generator, known as an 'Energiser', in the case of the Stax using a 6 pin, and later 5 pin, connector. The energiser was itself connected to the line output of your pre-amp. Quite unique in design, the high voltage Lambda transducers were angled inwards, rather than being parallel to the ears like most cans.



Stax SR-407

This gave it a distinctive soundstage, as if the instruments were in front of your head, rather than cramped inside between your ears. This made listening to music all that much more realistic and less tiring than most others, particularly when listening to centralised vocals. Coupled with the electrostatic diaphragms, it made for a quick and extended frequency response. Many years later I bought my first pair, and have never looked back. Having been brought up on Quad ESL57 and 63's these cans could do everything that those speakers could, only much louder.



Looking more like something from the Second-World War with its distinctive rectangular brown plastic scaffolding to keep weight down and faux leather ear-cups, the 2011 Stax SR-407 usually gets mated up with the two 6FQ7 valve SRM-006ts energiser to make up the SRS-4170 system. Interestingly, both parts can be bought separate though they are useless unless mated together, and when bought as a pair aren't any cheaper, either! With a specification to die for (frequency response 7-41,000 Hz) and the prospect of a fully balanced audio path from the XLR output of my Krell CD all the way to my ears via the custom-made double axis 4-gang volume controller I knew this was going to be special. After

The sound was all around my ears, not just a centralised pinpoint. This made it much more realistic to listen to.

a long run-in to get some flexibility in the tight 1.35 micron plastic membranes, I began to listen. By the way, the human hair is at least 40 times thicker! Compared with the original Lambda, the 2011 model has many changes to the inside, making for a much better bass end, though the slightly more expensive SR-507 (which is black, with real leather) gives a much more confident lower end than this model, and is £250 more as a consequence. With that extra bass this psychologically makes you feel the top end is inferior, which of course it isn't. Perhaps the original Lambda was a little bit more comfortable, but with its large design fitting around my ears I was still able to listen for extended time.

Listening to the Dadawa 'Sister Drum' it was evident that my ears would probably hurt before the electrostatic membrane did. The thud of the bass drums was very quick and precise and the wide dynamic range made my Krell KPS20i, renowned for its excellent bass production, sound better than I ever thought it would. Everything was there, crystal clear. Listening to my own album 'Get Over It', I could hear elements of my recording that had not been apparent when I made it; things like slight level changes or changes in perspective mid-verse. This led me to Dire Straits 'Love Over Gold', an old favourite that I know has a few bad edits in it that many headphones and speaker systems will miss out. The opening track 'Telegraph Road' has a terrible sound stage shift of Knopfler singing at 3'38". The SR-407 precision was still very musical, however, and that finding this spot on the music was a doddle. These were musically clinical, if you hear what I mean.

As well as the extended horizontal sound stage, with their large curved rectangular diameter fitting over the ears these ear speakers had a massive vertical

The Stax made it far easier to discern the different piano melodic lines, which don't sound correctly placed as if you were listening in the audience...

soundboard as well. The sound was all around my ears, not just a centralised pin-point. This made it much more realistic to listen to. Their size was particularly evident playing J.S. Bach organ tracks which made this sound like St Pauls, rather than the local village church organ. Conversely quiet decays of instruments were allowed to do so in their own time, not being quickened by the limitation of a conventional heavy cone driver. This was precision stuff. My ears felt like I was listening again back in my twenties. I wish. The soundstage of The David Rees-Williams Trio 'Classically Minded' had always

confused me with its width and multi-pianoforte 'layering', which sounding quite claustrophobic and confusing. The Stax made it far easier to discern the different piano melodic lines, which don't sound correctly placed as if you were listening in the audience, making me wish I'd actually done the mix myself. It just didn't sound natural; a fault of the 2001 album, and not the Stax. Nothing could get past this kit! Also, as is often in a lot of recordings, the drum kit had a "large" fingerprint, but not as wide as had the diaphragms not been angled to my ears, as they are on the Stax. The valve energiser gave a precise velvety sound to the badly mic'd piano that was quite compelling. I just didn't want to stop listening.

Time to switch over to vinyl. To test the power and bass I listened to the last two tracks of the new remaster of Pink Floyd 'The Division Bell'. There was no end to the musicality, with precise cymbal highs and a bass just went lower and lower. Finally I put on Patricia Barber 'Live in France'. I felt like I was in the audience, and I listened tirelessly to all four sides of the disc. I was in love with these cans, I mean, Ear Speakers. The sound was transparent and focused. It was 'so easy', that the only problems were the slightly incorrect bias on my Rega arm distorting the vocal to the left channel a tad. Easily rectified whilst 580 volts between my ears.

If I have to criticise this product it is the slightly plasticky feel, though this keeps down the weight, and weight of the ribbon cable if left dangling. With the prospect of balanced all the way through, two XLR inputs rather than just one in the Energiser would for me be preferable. Small price to pay. Combined with the energiser this outfit costs five pounds short of £1700, and for me is the starting point for serious listening in the Stax family. Cheaper outfits including the SR-207 or SR-307 ear speakers lack much of what is possible. The SRS 3170 combo, for example, comprises the SR-307 with a less able transistor energiser. The price of the SR-407 on its own is £495, but useless without an appropriate energiser. But, at little more than the cost of a very decent pair of headphones and headphone amp, this weird contraption is to my ears easily the winning combination.

Sound Quality – 9.2/10

Value for Money – 9/10

Build Quality – 8.2/10

Overall – 8.8/10

Janine Elliot

Stax SR-009

At £3495 the Stax SR-009 headphones are intended for the committed headphone listener.

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



The thought of swapping the review of a £60 pair of headphones to a £3,495 Stax monolith was like getting out of a 2CV and taking off in a McLaren F1. There was just going to be no competition. So, what I decided to do in this review was to compare the SR-009 with the £495 SR 407 combined with the £1,295 SRM-006tS and £2,295 SRM-007t II Kimik vacuum tube energisers, which are needed if you wish to hear any music. The Kimik, with its play on the letter K (just like Linn), is £200 more than the standard 007t II, but has better quality selected old/new stock 6FQ7 cryogenically frozen tubes fitted with EAT dampers, and the pins are 24 carat gold plated. Before getting to the customer the bias and balance is adjusted over a five-day period. Lots of TLC, then.

The SR-009 is the flagship of the extensive range which starts with the £275 in-ear SR-02. Whilst I personally prefer the gold finish of the cheaper SR-007, the conventional shaped aluminium SR-009 is of improved build quality. This ear speaker was pure class. Lambs wool, and a comfort that makes the plastic, rattley, rickety, cheap finish of the SR-407 feel more like something from another manufacturer. The SR-009 differs specifically from the £1500 cheaper SR-007 in that the drivers are angled, as in the Lambda based' 207/307/407/507 fraternity. Be-

The clarity, in a rather clinical track, was as if my ears had just been syringed. I didn't realise CDs could be this good; power, channel identification, frequency response. And in the 32ft pedalboard of the organ of Nicolas de Grigny – Recit de Tierce en Taille (Dorian DOR 90134) couldn't be any clearer, or deeper.

Stax SR-009

lieve me, this extra £1500 is worth every penny in order to gain a more realistic sound-stage in front of, rather than inside, the listener! Similarly the SRM-007t II Kimik is the very top of their range, though I personally think the additional two valves duplicating the output circuitry somewhat veils the sound quality. I believe in keeping things simple.

For those unaccustomed to Stax ear speakers, the sound is generated between two “parallel-arranged fixed electrodes” – the electrostatic transducer -between which is suspended a low-mass, high-polymer film that is less than 2µm thick. This is basically a push-pull driver system. When the fluctuating voltage of the audio signal is applied to the electrodes the diaphragm is pulled and pushed. With frequency response from 5 to 42,000Hz and a maximum sound pressure level of 118dB, this needs a premium source fed into it to even start to appreciate its sound quality.

Whilst the product has gone through the most extensive research and building, commemorating 50 years of its electrostatic ear speakers (excluding electret models), the sales brochure is a lot more confusing. I mean, tell me what all this is about;

“It will exactly be as a result of “work” each predecessor piled up, if a race, a company, and an individual have “pride”. And it clearly depends on the way of life we live now to inherit it and to bear “enhancement” and “evolution”.

Just saying a lot of pride and craftsmanship has been put into what is our most iconic and best ever ear speaker would have been good enough for me. Luckily the posh-card manual inside the wooden-box-adorned SR-009 was a lot more specific. At the outset I have to say that this product is nothing short of ‘out of this planet’. The head pad is extremely comfortable and, unlike the SR-407, has a lockable slider mechanism for different size heads that actually stays put when you’ve set it. Comfort matches my favourite Audio-Technica ATH-W1000X, but that is where the comparison ends.

So to the tests. First of all I listened to both Stax models through the cheaper SRM 006tS energiser, with Krell KPS20i CD and Townshend Rock 7/Merlin, Rega/Ortofon Kontrapunkt, Manley Steelhead vinyl. After this I used the Kimik energiser.

Playing Eva Cassidy ‘Fields of Gold’ was mind blowingly open. The cheaper energiser had a thinner,



So, to conclude, the SR-009 are the best sounding ear speakers, cans, headphones, or whatever you or Stax want to call them, that I have had the pleasure of listening to.



Stax SR-009

brighter sound and made the difference between the SR-407 and 009 greater than when both were fed through the Kimik. The sound in both ear speakers was highly accurate, with the guitars sounding as bright as the title in the song, Golden. The SR-009 had far more space between instruments and the singer; I mean in front of me, not just middle, left and right. Listening to a live version of Dire Straits' Private Investigation there was a wider ambience and I felt I was in the audience. The SR-407 were claustrophobic in comparison, even though compared with most other gear out there the SR-407 is streets above. I would be scarred for life (if you're my age and know the words, you'll realise the play on words here....) if I had never listened to these marvels. This was not confidential information. Enough.

Bird song repetition between the first and second violins in The Four Seasons was much more open and crisper, and therefore easier to listen to in the SR-009. There was more in front of the listener. The Battle from The Gladiator was far cleaner on SR-009; open, precise, easy to listen to, but more than anything, musical. The sudden loud 'rages' don't sound as muddled or as heavy, even though there is more bass, as they do on the SR-407. Yes, more bass apparent on the SR-407 than the SR-009! The thing is, because the sound is more muddled on the SR-407 you think there is actually more of it! Believe me, the SR-009 is not lacking in anything. The sound is further forward from the ears. A sudden edit at 5'17" mid-phrase has an increase in level that the SR-407 can't pick out. Indeed, it is more noticeable through the SRM-006tS than on the Kimik. Indeed, if I were to make a really radical statement here; I actually prefer the £1000 cheaper SRM-006tS! Interesting then, perhaps, that Stax themselves are presently designing a new energiser to replace/be an alternative to the SRM-007t Kimik.

Vocal "ums" in Jennifer Warnes "Bird on a Wire" (Cypress Records 258418) were much clearer identified in space. The whole soundstage appears much less cluttered. Donald Fagan "I G Y" from the album 'The Nightfy' (Warner Bros 923696-2) made me wonder how much I had been missing for 32 years. The clarity, in a rather clinical track, was as if my ears had just been syringed. I didn't realise CDs could be this good; power, channel identification, frequency response. And in the 32ft pedalboard of the organ of Nicolas de Grigny – Recit de Tierce en Taille (Dorian DOR 90134) couldn't be any clearer, or deeper. Nothing could get past these, not even the real canons firing off in Tchaikovsky 1812 overture

**If you were to
spend money
on a
comparable
loudspeaker
based system,
expect to spend
£30,000 plus.**

(Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Telarc CS 80041). In contrast Deep Blue Sky from John Lee Hooker was so laid back with velvety warmth and musicality that I wondered if life could get any better.

So, to conclude, the SR-009 are the best sounding ear speakers, cans, headphones, or whatever you or Stax want to call them, that I have had the pleasure of listening to. They, combined with the Kimik, were well worth the combined £5,790 if you wanted the very best in sound quality. If you were to spend money on a comparable loudspeaker based system, expect to spend £30,000 plus. If cost were an issue, then I have shown that the SRM-006tS, at £1,000 less, is more than a match for these cans, and I actually did prefer them in much of my listening tests. The SR-009 and energiser do need significant run-in to get to their best, but even at their worst were as exciting as UK importer Nigel Crump, Symmetry, sounded every time he talked to me about them. He has every reason to be very proud.

Sound Quality – 9.5/10

Value for Money – 8.5/10

Build Quality – 9/10

Overall – 9/10

Janine Elliot

Focal Spirit One

Focal make loudspeakers, everyone knows that, but can they make headphones too? Here we try their 179 euro Spirit Ones.



French manufacturer **Focal** aren't the first name that comes to mind when you think about headphones but perhaps they should be given Harry and Linette's ears think of buying their first "quality" headphone, they often look at a brand that is quite infamous with most audiophiles, Beats by Dre.

So why do people buy Beats?

Well first of all they look good, there are plenty of colour choices and they have loads of BASS!!!! Apart from this however the build quality is poor and the sound suffers from the bass overload. You can barely hear the highs or mids.

But this isn't a review of Beats so I'll tell you why I'm talking about them ...

Many Hi-fi companies have failed in trying to knock beats of its pedestal by bringing great sound and build quality to the "on the go" headphone market. But is that about to change?

Focal are a big French name in the Hi-Fi business and are world renowned for their speakers. The Spirit One S is Focal's big leap in to the head-fi world and an upgrade from the previous Spirit One Headphone. I briefly listened to the Spirit One at the High End Munich show earlier this year. Both headphones are designed for "On the go" usage.

Starting with build quality. The Spirit One S feels solid and there were no faults with the example that I was given. Focal have combined high quality plastic and brushed metal in the design that give it a great

weight and feel. The cable provided is thick and doesn't get tangled up in your pocket. You can also detach it completely from the headphone which helps for carrying it around your neck. There are also in-line controls to that can be used on most mobile devices for pausing the music, skipping tracks and answering calls. There is also a very nice hard carrying case that comes with them.

The Headphones are also very comfortable, there is plenty of foam padding on the ear cups and headband. They feel a bit tight at first but they adjust to your head size after around an hour. I had them around my neck or on my ears for most of the day and never felt any strain on my head or ears. I love the over-ear design that provides plenty of noise isolation from outside noises.

Personally, I think they look very stylish and stand out from most headphones. I think however that they could benefit from a better choice of colours.

When it comes to sound, the Spirit One S wipes the floor with any pair of beats. The bass is warm and there is plenty of it without losing too much out on the highs and mids. The sound is very balanced maybe leaning in favour of the bass a little. The sound on the whole is dynamic and caters for most genres of music.

The stand out song with these headphones was 'La La La' by Naughty Boy. The heavy bass line really complimented the high notes of Sam Smith's voice. A lot of headphones struggle with this song as there is

Focal Spirit One

such a huge contrast between the bass of the instruments and the high pitch voice but the Spirit One S handled it perfectly.

They actually performed very well with more or less anything I could throw them. A great all rounder!

Build quality – 8/10

Comfort – 9/10

Sound – 8/10

Value – 9/10

Total – 8.5/10

Price when tested: 179 euros

Focal have created a great headphone for use in home and out and have designed something that (with the right marketing of course) could steal the Teen market from its competitors. A Beats killer indeed!

Harry Smith

And now Linette takes a listen and gives her opinion.

Having been lucky enough to visit the Focal factory and offices in Ste Etienne, France earlier this year, I know how much work goes into their R&D. They also 'filter down' the technology developed for the higher end products into the cheaper ones, so that you know when you see the Focal logo, you are getting a quality item.

That certainly goes for the Focal Spirit One S headphones. Properly packaged, they come with some nice accessories like a rigid carry case and a soft bag, along with a cable with a remote on it that will work with your ipod or phone....if you are that way inclined. There is also a full sized jack adapter and an adapter to use on aeroplanes.

The 'phones themselves are very stylish looking in tones of dark grey, black and brushed aluminium with a pop of red inside the earcups.

They have a modern, slick look to them and I imagine they would draw admiring glances from the younger generation....there is good but discreet use of the Focal logos and branding. They fit very comfortably on and

around the ears, with a good grip so that you would feel safe walking or doing exercise whilst wearing them, but they are not so tight as to be uncomfortable. There is the sense of isolation from the outside world that I like to have with a set of headphones. They are also very light for what feels a very solid and well made set of headphones at just 280g. They adjust easily and feel 'right' on the head; overall I am very impressed with them straight out of the box. After wearing for quite a while, I can tell that I have them on...but they are not uncomfortable at all.

I want to kick off listening with something bassy, on goes car Cox's 'Phuture 2000'. Right from the start there is the big 'whump' of bass that I expect to hear from this album, but it sounds controlled and tight rather than woolly and though these come across as bass heavy there is still plenty of top and mid to prevent the bass from becoming too much. I'm getting all the little breakbeat snaps and jumps in a nicely defined manner.

The soundstage is not as big and open as with some of the other headphones that we have reviewed, but it



Focal Spirit One

is pretty damn good, especially when you take into consideration that these cost around 179€.

Feeling 'at one with da yoof' I stick on Deadmau5 and 'Albumtitlegoeshere' This sounds great on the Focals, driving, bassy and energetic...particular one of my favourite tracks 'Professional Griefers'....a banger if ever I heard one. Not just a wall of noise though, great detail too.

Before I try something a bit calmer I have to put on 'Once again back' by Hardfloor. It sounds tight and fast with plenty of growling sub bass.... Not quite as 'out of the head' as some of the headphones I have reviewed recently, but some of those were up to 10 times the price of the Focals.

I switch to 'Beautiful Freak' by Eels and the track 'Susan's house' sounds excellent, guitars and vocals come across well. These are not just a set of 'phones for fans of electronica, they sound great with more rocky music too as is further proven when listening to 'Rags to Rags' with its grungy guitars and vocals.

For the sake of comparison Gil Scott Herons 'Lady Day and John Coltrane' goes back on again. Once again it is obvious that the presentation is better with some of the other headphones I have listened to...however the difference is not as big as you would think from the difference in price, overall I am very, very impressed with how the Focal Spirit One S perform for the money.

The whole Beats by Dre phenomenon has opened up a new market for headphones, now, rather than just using a cheap pair of earbuds, loads of teens want 'proper' headphones...and Beats filled that marketplace.

Hopefully if we can get today's teens using something much more well built and better sounding they will develop a much more educated ear and not just immediately go for that little 'b' logo.....we need some good headphones to fill the gap in the market at a price that kids can aspire to.

With their Spirit range, Focal seem poised to do just that, perhaps a few more colours would be a good thing, but I think the more discerning will be more concerned about the build and sound quality of these



headphones than whether they come in a rainbow of colours.

Not only for the kids though, these are affordable, comfortable, portable and stylish and have benefited from the Focal legacy of great design and sound....I reckon if you buy them for your teenager this Christmas you will end up pinching them back again!

Sound – 8/10

Comfort – 7.75/10

Fit and finish – 8.75/10

Value – 9.5/10

Overall – 8.5/10

Great all-rounders, with a build quality that I would expect from much more expensive headphones, a lot of headphone for your money! Heartily recommended.

Linette Smith

HifiMan RE-400

HifiMan's £79 RE-400 in ear monitors are put through their paces by Hifi Pig's teen correspondent.



Hifiman are a Japanese company that make headphones, earphones, media players ... Ranging from the affordable to the not so affordable. The RE-400s are a very small form factor in-ear that packs a punch for their small design and affordable price. (£79)

In the box you get the earphones (obviously), a carrying case and plenty of earpieces that can fit all shapes and sizes of ear including ones made out of memory foam that are the most comfortable for me. I think it's great that Hifiman took the trouble to including so many extras for customisation.

The earphones themselves are very well built and feel solid, although the aluminium on the back is prone to scratching. The cable is braided which you don't see much on budget earphones.

When listening to the RE-400s you often forget that you have something in your ears. The memory foam does a great job of filling your ears so no sound can escape. Hands down, the most comfortable earphone I have ever used. The highs and mids are crisp and are very well balanced. Personally I feel that the bass could be a bit lacking but these are tuned to an audiophile's ear and not a teen bass nut. The RE-400s sound best with acoustic pianos and guitars. Female and high male vocals sounded sublime. Whatever you listen to they do a great job at layering the music and make it feel like a live band.

I don't often take the time to listen to classical music but it actually sounded very good. Not that I would listen to it again, but violins had an amazing resonance.

The stand out track for me was "Within" from Daft Punks newest album. I could hear everything 20-56-13742-

ea4a7f7e3bbaae79ca8fa81e8b1c01a6 individually whether it be the drums, the piano, the organ or the trademark Daft punk vocoder voice. All the individual sounds combined into a huge orchestra. I felt that I was listening to the music in a huge concert hall. The earphones performed just as well with the entire album.

When listening to more bass heavy genres like dub-step it sounds different to what I'm used to. You hear more of the top end and it changes the whole character of the music.

All in all, there is not much to say about the Hifiman RE-400 as they do barely anything wrong and so many things right. Its comfortable, sounds very good and has solid build quality. You can't do much better for its price. I recommend these to any audiophile who wants great music on the go and on a budget. £79 well spent !

Build quality-8/10

Sound quality-8/10

Comfort-9.5/10

Value-8/10

Overall – 8.38

Harry Smith

GOJI Tinchy Stryder On Cloud 9

At Hifi Plg we're keen not only to bring you reviews of the high-end, expensive products but also like to point out the odd bargain that is out there. Here we review of a £60 set of headphones available from the high street.

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



The thought of me walking into the local electronics store and spending £250 on the latest designer headphones with unrealistic bass-heavy response would only appear in my worst nightmare. Just as I love the idea of owning the latest designer sports footwear, I only buy something that fits well, whatever its colour or name engraved. So with audio, sound comes before the brand.

I take my non-designer hat off to Dr Dre for managing to sell unrealistic sounding, but highly enjoyable and good looking headphones. But £260 for an over-ear white, red or black iPod attachment is as cost effective as me putting on my central heating and opening all the windows. So, reluctantly I decided to try out a number of headphones designed for the young iPod trendy. Names included Sony, JVC, Sculcandy, Beats by Dr Dre, etc.

For the purposes of this review I'll just say they were all bland, boring, too trebly, too bass heavy, uncomfortable or too expensive. None of them made me enjoy listening to music on the move and, with some, the bass just made me ill. Except for one. Ironically, this designer named, brilliantly packaged, well accessorised (non-tangle cord, carrying pouch), comfortable, pleasant to listen to and good looking little number is actually made exclusively in

Hemel Hempstead for Currys/PC World. Well, made in China, actually.

Coming in white, black and, if you're lucky, in red, this foldable over the ear Goji Tinchy Stryder is amazingly good value and £200 cheaper than some Dr Dre's, yet it's handling of bass without distortion, and crispier top end is without equal. In use whilst walking the noisy streets of London, I could actually get more out of the music than my expensive inner-ear phones. The closed back covers the ear with enough energy to stop most of the traffic getting in, yet not too much to make them uncomfortable for long periods of time. Only in really hot conditions did I find the faux-leather construction a bit sweaty. I disabled the EQ settings on my iPod, as the increase in bass and top end equated to the "R&B" or "Rock" settings that I could have selected. It should be main-



GOJI Tinchy Stryder On Cloud 9



tained flat, or on “Electronic” setting at the very most.

Made by ‘Goji’, they are designed in collaboration with Tinchy Stryder, the stage name for 1986 Ghanaian-born Kwasi Danquah III. As well as founder of the headphone and phone accessories label, he is a musician, investor, and even oversees his own clothing range. The MOBO award-winner now has three hit albums under his belt and his CV is longer than the small print on my bank account.

This was an amazingly musical headphone for the price. The droning lower bass D at the start of The Division Bell, Pink Floyd, was there, clearly defined, but not so prominent as I perhaps had expected. The gentle cymbals and bass drum at 4’27” were just right; not OTT. Only in the next track did I feel any saturation, and at high level I could feel the wind blow like the 18” drivers of my subwoofer. Some people like this, especially the young Vauxhall Nova drivers outside my house at midnight. But I didn’t need any extra equipment for my ears to get the same effect, and this was much more musical. However, switching over to Slee Voyager (also under test this month) through my open back Sennheiser HP650s, the soundstage widened enormously and the cymbal rim shots had a completely new lease of life. The bass was still there, just cleaner, quicker, painless. In the normal world, when you set up your subwoofer, it should be just loud enough not to be individually noticed. Low bass in the £60 and £70 (for white or black, respectively) GOJIs were noticeably loud at low frequencies, and hence worked better on popular music or watching an action movie, rather than classical music, where the positions of instruments was less easy to define as were they on my much more expensive cans. However, the dynamic range, particularly in the lower end, was magnificent.

I don’t normally speak so fervently about products like this. It goes against all 25 years of my BBC sound engineer background. But this product is actually pretty amazing for the price.

I don’t normally speak so fervently about products like this. It goes against all 25 years of my BBC sound engineer background. But this product is actually pretty amazing for the price. Having it only available to the DSG empire (the largest electrical retailer in the UK) also based in Hemel Hempstead), keeps that price down. Whilst I won’t want to listen like this for too many hours, it’s a bit like coming away from the dentist after fillings. You just so want to tuck in to sweets, but know you just daren’t do it.

Sound Quality – 7.3/10

Value for Money – 9/10

Build Quality – 8.5/10

Overall – 8.3/10

Janine Elliot

Lehmann Audio Traveller Headphone Amplifier

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



German manufacturer Lehmann Audio have built themselves an enviable reputation over the years but does their Traveller headphone amplifier continue this tradition?

Let's say you have bought yourself a new music player and a nice pair of headphones for on the go but you feel there is something... missing. Most people overlook the need for an amp on the go as most are impractical and oversized. With the Lehmann Audio Traveller, the size and practicality are a huge improvement from other "portable" amps. The Traveller can also be used as a preamp for speakers but I just tried it with a media player and a range of earphones and headphones.

The build quality is great and there are only 2 screws showing on the back. It feels solid and I love the brushed metal chassis that obviously helps with cooling. The front is made out of black soft touch plastic. It's a nice contrast from the cold metal (the metal did get warm after a few hours of use but it never got hot) The amp has 2 inputs and 2 outputs though 3,5mm headphone jack.

In the box, you also get a very nice cable to connect to your media player.

Battery life is not a problem with the Traveller and it will last around 20 hours of audio playback.

The Traveller uses lithium ion batteries (the same

Lehmann Audio Traveller Headphone Amplifier



was improved thanks to the Traveller.

This amp can also help you hide the fact that you are using a cheap music player. I put a £100+ music player against a HTC Desire phone, playing the same audio file and playing though the amp. I couldn't hear any noticeable difference ... However when I removed the Traveller from the equation the smart-phone fell far behind the sound quality of the music player.

The stand out track using the Traveller was "Can't stop" by the Red hot chilly peppers. The iconic guitar

that you would find in your smart-phone) and it will probably outlive your phone on battery life. If you do run out of battery you can use the micro USB port to charge it.

When you use it for the first time you can hear an instant difference with all headphones. It performed very well even with power hungry headphones. I think it performed best with my own pair of NAD Viso hp 50s. The bass was deep and responsive. The mids had a great richness and the highs where bright and crisp. The whole sound stage

rhythm of this song sounded much less monotone than without Traveller. The bass line was not over-powered either. I could hear every instrument. Just as the artist intended.

It performed best with rock songs but that is not to say that it did not perform admirably with most other genres of music.

With very bass heavy tracks it can fall behind what I am used to but I do love a lot of bass and I don't think this will bother most audiophiles.



So is the Lehmann Audio Traveller worth the £400 price tag? If you are looking to upgrade your headphone set up and also want an amp so versatile it is a good price. A bit on the expensive side for a teen though. Despite this the Lehmann Traveller amplifier is a must buy for your portable Hi-Fi as it brings the expensive sound of a full size Hi-Fi to you on the go.

Sound quality-8/10

Build quality-9/10

Value for money-7/10

Overall-8/10

Harry Smith

Lehmann Audio Traveller Headphone Amplifier

As the name suggests the Lehmann Audio Traveller is a headphone amplifier intended for use whilst out and about. I first came across this amp in its prototype version at the 2013 Munich High-End show where details were scant, but interest from the public and competitors to Lehmann High. Now available the Traveller costs £400 and available widely.

I like the idea of great quality audio on the go and always have my little player with me when away on business, but despite the decent output of the player I often feel I'm missing out a little – enter the portable headphone amplifier.

In the box you've got the diminutive (80mm x 90mm x 25mm and 196g) but very nicely finished Traveller itself, a very well written operating manual, a USB cable for connecting to the computer and charging the Traveller and a short, well made minijack to minijack cable to connect your player to the box. The Traveller feels sturdy and decidedly solid and purposeful.

Around the back you've got an input for the USB cable, a mini jack input and a mini jack output. Up front you've got another minijack input and output, a trio of LEDs which indicate the status of the amp/battery and a pair of little buttons to turn the volume up and down and control other functions such as balance which I thought was a nice and thoughtful touch.

The inclusion of inputs and outputs on both the front and back is a nifty little touch and one that shows that there's a good deal of thought gone into the Traveller. This feature means you can use whichever is the most convenient or use the amp to power two pairs of headphones from one portable player which is another useful touch. For those using active speakers you can put the Traveller between your source and the speakers and it will work as a preamplifier.

Using the Traveller is pretty intuitive and the controls are responsive. The Traveller has a battery run time of a claimed 20 hours (volume dependent) and charges from empty in six hours. Another clever little feature is that the volume will return to its last



Again, there's that driving percussive-ness, but listen more closely and the Traveller seems to be allow-ing you to delve deeper into the mix with little details you didn't notice before coming to the fore.

Lehmann Audio Traveller Headphone Amplifier

setting when tuned off and on again, with the caveat that there must be charge in the battery.

The Sound

I listened to the Traveller using a wide range of headphones we have in for review, both in-ears and conventional headphones, and it drove every pair I threw at it to volumes suitable for those with a deaf wish. Most of the review process was done using the Audenze LCD XC cans.

Immediately on plugging the little headphone amp in there is a perceived improvement in the sound than with the standalone player; Bass has a more authoritative punch with basslines seeming much easier to follow. There is a clearer definition between individual instruments in the mix, with an apparent increase in the amount of detail present. Clearly the amplifier can only amplify the signal with which it is fed, but you do get the feeling that there is more going on in the mix with the Traveller inline.

This is a very good start and I found myself flicking through loads of tracks and many different genres. Hawkwind's Astounding Sounds has the mix split into its component pieces with everything being easy to pick out and identify. This is a complex record in parts that can sound very busy and sometimes comes across as a blurred jumble, but the Traveller seems to improve separation of instruments. This effect is apparent most in the interplay between bass guitar and drums giving the music drive and rhythm.

Comeme's compilation album Gasoline is a hard hitting, electronic album which needs to be driven to get the very best from it and with the Traveller inline you certainly get that feeling that you are listening as it should be heard. Again, there's that driving percussiveness, but listen more closely and the Traveller seems to be allowing you to delve deeper into the mix with little details you didn't notice before coming to the fore.

Reading what I've just written back to myself you'd be forgiven for thinking that the Traveller just emphasises the bass frequencies, but that's certainly not the case with all the little nuances on the hats on Nebel Dance from the same compilation coming through really well. On female vocals the Traveller just seems to give you more of an insight into the singers particular inflections and tone.

At this point I thought I'd try out the Traveller using the headphone out on the laptop and again I was rewarded with a big improvement in perceived drive and quality of the sound and I think this will be of

One of the features I particularly loved was the ability to attach two pairs of cans at once and also the unit returning to the last volume you had it set at after turning it off and on again.

interest to many business travellers who don't particularly want to invest in a potentially expensive media player but always have their laptop to hand. I'd be quite happy with this arrangement and would be happy to leave the DAP at home.

Conclusion

The Traveller is impressively well built and solid feeling with a good set of features that should appeal to both headphone aficionados on the go and for less dedicated listeners who none the less want a great sound whilst away from their main source of music. One of the features I particularly loved was the ability to attach two pairs of cans at once and also the unit returning to the last volume you had it set at after turning it off and on again. Its compact size and flexible inputs/outputs make it a perfectly portable and usable product.

Sound-wise the Traveller performs very well and is a clear step up from some of the less expensive portable headphone amps I've tried, with an ability to give the perception of there being much more going on in the music. The Traveller's strong points are the drive it gives to music and the detail of a recording it manages to bring out.

Sound Quality – 8.8/10

Value for Money – 8/10

Build Quality – 9/10

Overall – 8.6/10

Stuart Smith

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

**At a penny off
£180 the little
EHP-02Di DAC
and Headphone
amplifier
certainly looks
to offer great
value for money.**



So, a little while back now I got myself an Epiphany EHP-02 portable headphone amplifier. The unit was very handy being of a portable design with it's built in rechargeable battery which lasted across many days of decent length listening sessions. I subsequently recommended the unit to a few friends who still cherish them to this day.

A month ago during the build up to this months Headfi Special at Hifi Pig, Epiphany contacted us to let us know about their latest model of headphone amplifier with built in Dac the EHP-02Di. So naturally after enjoying the standalone portable amp I was happy to have a look at the 02Di.

Epiphany Acoustics have not just had a eureka moment deciding to add a DAC to their already award winning headamp, they have in fact as many will be aware already have a DAC/amp in the product line up namely the EHP-02D. User feedback to Epiphany was extremely positive in the performance stakes but many people found as I did with the portable device that having the power input jack socket on the front of the unit was an eyesore and also a little uneasy in use, most of us have our power sockets trailing off of the rear of a unit or desk.

Epiphany has addressed this issue by moving the socket to the rear now. Another user friendly

want/upgrade to the existing 02D is a pair of stereo phono jacks on the rear. What's clever about these sockets is they act as an input for an analogue signal to the headphone amplifier or when the USB DAC is utilised from a computer (which is plug n play and doesn't require drivers) automatically switches to an output to any normal system as a usable standalone DAC with integrated headphone amplifier. The two devices can be used simultaneously.

Power to the DAC is via the USB host computer and filtered on board. The data is controlled by the on-board crystal oscillator to improve performance. The DAC is based on the TE7022L UAC1 engine and ES9023 24 bit DAC chip. It supports 16 bit and 24 bit at sample rates of 44.1kHz, 48kHz and 96kHz.

The Setup and Sound

After leaving the EHP-02Di on 24 hours a day for week through my AKG K702's fed via USB from the DAC to ensure good burn in time as I was fairly busy so wanted to make sure it had some good hours on it I was ready to rock and roll.

As well as having the AKG's running from the dac/amp I also made use of the analogue outputs running a set of Harman Karson Soundsticks which sat on the desk. This would give me an idea of the DAC's performance against the analogue connection straight from the Mac to the Soundsticks.

As a Headphone Amp

Epiphany Acoustics EHP-02Di DAC & Headphone Amp



First impressions were very nice top end detail, vibrant mids and a good bouncy bass when listening to Spotify's Top 100 list which consists very extensively of the world top pop music. A good mixture of dance, rock and vocal work adorned the list and was a great way to see how the EHP-02Di would fair without being overly specific.

Vocals were extremely pleasing sitting a little bit forward of flat, allowing them to be projected and vibrant in nature. The top end is very neatly handled, remaining controlled with wailing females and intricate when listening to synthesised dance music. The treble doesn't slope severely, cutting off high frequency extremes, they do seem to keep going on and on. As far as bass is concerned I would say its a bit bouncy, a little tight and fast. The lower end could be said to have a more neutral tonality, it's not dry or weighty nor is it coloured. The cleanliness in this area depicts details well and those of you out there who are not bass heads will appreciate the extra detail here.

Flicking over from Spotify to Amarra increased performance and rendition of a higher quality bit depth and better recording.

The EHP-02Di shows better delicacies in the mix when fed with quality recordings, midband presentation is a little more fluid with better undertones. Top end is a tiny bit more refined and bass remains clean and explicit.

Singling out the DAC

I use the Harman Kardons very often when sat at the desk, whether it's to use them for music, tV or Film. They are normally plugged into the headphone output of the Mac Mini. The wonderfully versatile feature of added RCA's on the 02Di allowed for me – the user to be able to have the Soundsticks always plugged in to what was originally just a headphone amp/dac in the first incarnation of the product the EHP-02D.

Improvements were decisively apparent and immediately noticeable. The Mac itself is fairly modded, has the fan removed, runs three linear power supplies, is solid state and has OS tweaks. These improvements made a difference at the time to the Soundsticks (and the main system) but utilising the dac from the Epiphany was a larger step up in performance.

I've had many high end active and passive speakers in the alcove where the desk is but the Soundsticks are of a size that just compliments the space so well. The EHP-02Di didn't change the presentation totally, it does seem to be extremely neutral, what it does offer tho is a far better detail retrieval, a stronger presence of bass characterisation and a vocal which stands out and doesn't get so lost in the mix.

The headphone amplifier itself can be as mentioned ran from the RCA sockets on the rear. Using the device in this manner is just like using the standalone portable EHP-02 which Hifi Pig has already reviewed if you wish to check it out.

Conclusion

With a compact and attractive design the Epiphany Acoustics EHP-02Di is a terrific desktop unit which can be implemented as the main hub for a computer. Whether it's music, games or films through a set of powered speakers or a set of headphones for the same for more intimate listening the EHP-02Di won't fail to impress.

Build Quality – 7.5/10

Sound Quality – 8/10

Value For Money – 8.5/10

Overall – 8/10

Price at time of review – £179.99

Recommended for – it's ability to run headphones and speakers simultaneously and having a terrific sound to pound performance which is neutral, detailed and involving.

Dan Worth

Graham Slee Voyager Headphone Amp

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



The Graham Slee Voyager is a portable headphone amplifier costing £190, how does it perform amongst stiff competition.

Headphones are of course used whilst on the move and so Janine Elliot takes a listen to the £190 Graham Slee Voyager headphone amplifier.

Graham Slee is renowned for putting big ideas in small packages. His large collection of low-to-mid priced phono stages and headphone amplifiers began in 1998 and has received rave reviews in Europe and the States. Graham is always keen to advertise his products as 'Made in Britain', and his ability to get the best from the components he uses is truly inspiring. As a happy owner of the Solo headphone amp, I hoped that his battery operated Voyager would also offer an equally precise and extended audio-stage into my choice of cans.

There are, of course, a wide range of Walwart-fed headphone amplifiers around, largely introduced to extend the feeble output levels of the iPod fraternity, particularly when paired with inefficient high impedance 300ohm professional headphones such as Sennheiser HD650's. I regularly used these cans as a reference point in my last years at the BBC, but when connected to my iPod these needed to be fed at full volume to get anything approaching a nominal level of sound. By adding an extra 'oomph' via an external amplifier a reasonable 320kbps of mp3

Graham Slee Voyager Headphone Amp

could actually sound quite musical. But, I kept asking myself, what is the point in playing compressed audio in the home? Much as I loved my Solo, it was only ever used in the house when I was too lazy to present its parent compact disk into my main Krell CD player. No, what I needed was a portable unit I could carry around with me when I wasn't in the confines of my sofa.

In the last few years numerous portable battery operated headphone amps have appeared as we get on with our busy lives. We need our music in the streets, on the bus, train or tube, and as a teacher am often finding it playing merrily away during lessons in my students ears, until of course I confiscate it. To get that greater sound output for inefficient cans, more and more companies such as FiiO are coming out with really good looking kits and supplying proprietary Apple 30 pin – to – 3.5mm connectors which allow you to mitigate the degrading EQ section of the amplifiers via the headphone socket.

The Graham Slee Voyager is another addition to the family of portable headphone amps. What makes this unit different from many is the use of discrete components hand soldered by, as Slee puts it, “time served engineers” from premium through-hole Nichicon capacitors, to the two highly reputable op-amps from Analog Devices. Unlike most headphone amps gracing the pages of Amazon, this product oozes quality when viewed from the inside; high quality Jalco 3.5mm jacks for input and headphone output, Alps switches, and a miniature Alps “velvet” potentiometer similar to the Alps AC27/30 that is often found on expensive amplifiers, complete the work.

The soundstage was powerful and it wasn't chaotic despite all that was going on in 'Repentance' (Dream Theatre; 'Systematic Chaos').

Even a little red LED warns you when the Voyager is switched on during the conservative 50 hours battery life. As well as on/off switch there is provision for the unit to be powered by USB or mains. A contour switch (more on that later) completes the mechanics.

Quality also exudes in the audio. A velvety, almost valve-like quality of sound immediately becomes apparent, and improves the longer I listen. All tops

and bottoms are there; the Sennheiser demonstrates just how good its bass end is when listening to Mars, The Planets, Karajan (Deca 417 709-2). It's not so much the double bass or kettle drums, but more the sounds of the lorries driving past the cellos outside of the Sofiensaal concert hall in Vienna, before it got burnt down in 2001. I could sense the windows, brick walls and the raised wooden flooring. Even where the microphones were placed, and when the conductor turned the page.



Graham Slee Voyager Headphone Amp

Top ends are very precise and not tiresome with extended listening. Indeed, that is what makes this unit so much better than many I have listened to. Only the tight headband of the HP650 forced me to change to my comfortable closed-back Audio-Technica ATH-W1000 Sovereign's. The latter are unusually mid-band heavy, but the Voyager didn't make this painful at all. Indeed, the midband opened up with a clarity I had not heard from the iPod alone. This was getting fun. To check this further I played The Dave

Brubeck Quartet at Carnegie Hall recording, a recording fully of mid frequency weightiness. Even the close-mic'd cymbals sounded pleasant and not out of place. Of course, I could turn on the contour switch which adds further bass and treble weight (just like those 'Loudness' controls in ancient hi-fi amplifiers), but I didn't want my £600 cans to sound like Beats by Dr Dre. That said, it wasn't at all bad when I had a go; ideal for low level listening, or when competing with traffic noise, or making a crass recording or bad headphone sound more exciting. This unit did it with aplomb and without the added distortion that a loudness control can often bring. The soundstage was powerful and it wasn't chaotic despite all that was going on in 'Repentance' (Dream Theatre; 'Systematic Chaos'). The distorted bass guitar and syncopated rhythm sounded quite natural as had the 11/4 and 5/4 time in Brubeck earlier. This was quite some kit.

It was solid but not forceful, precise but not clinical.

Yes, there are better portable headphone amps around, but at £190 you get more than your money's worth with the Voyager...



I mentioned earlier about the exuding quality inside the box. Unfortunately that is where it ends. The outside lets it down a tad, giving it the impression of being more of a Maplin kit; made of plastic and at 12.5 x 6.7 x 2.8 cm, whilst it matches an iPod girth it is quite deep in order to house the 9v PP3 battery, and even deeper when you sit the iPod on the top. However, an off-the-shelf box is inevitable in a budget non mass-produced product such as this, and the unit is actually very well constructed and protects the circuitry inside. A specifically designed case including a thinner lithium-ion battery would increase the cost substantially. A metal stamp on one side labelled with all the connections and company logo do give it a professional feel. It's ironic that the Slee Solo headphone amp in its metal box is so revered in China, yet the bucket loads of Chinese-made portable headphone amps deluging Amazon at lower cost look so much better than the Voyager. BUT, and I stress but, they do not sound anything as musical or inspiring. Yes, there are better portable headphone amps around, but at £190 you get more than your money's worth with the Voyager, and if you're happy to put up with its distinctive looks, then this product certainly warrants my take on the famous statement "Never mind the width, feel the quality".

Sound Quality – 8.7/10

Value for Money – 8.2/10

Build Quality – 8/10

Overall – 8.4/10

Janine Elliot

AudioValve Verto & RKV III Headphone Amps

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



A Pair of headphone amps from AudioValve with considerably different pricepoints.

I was rather surprised when the Verto squeezed through the front door, particularly as this product itself is only the size of a very large wallwart power supply. Luckily, my surprise turned to excitement when I dived down to the bottom of the massive box between the foam to find the RKV Mk3, a heavy eight-valve headphone amplifier behemoth accompanying this unit. During my few weeks with these products I had many more surprises, lots of excitement, and a lot of questions to ask.

The Verto is a small black 110 x 105 x 165mm box with two Neutrik 6.3mm & XLR Combi sockets for XLR or dynamic and planar headphones, a three position silver knob to select the correct impedance,

and a permanent short lead ending in a 6.3mm jack which is then connected to one of the two headphone sockets of the RKV (or to the headphone socket of your integrated amp). That is all quite normal. As well as a pair of loudspeaker connections what is slightly unusual is the Teflon 6-pin socket to power 300V and 580v 6 pin and 5 pin Stax electrostatic ear speakers. As a passive unit, and costing a reasonable £690, this unit uses transformers in step up mode with an array of capacitors to store up enough power to drive the electrostatics. Because the input wattage is very low (around 400mW) this can take several minutes. This technique is nothing new. Passive energisers like the Verto have been around before. Indeed, I remember with affection the late 1970's PWB electrostatic headphones that took their power from the speaker terminals of your power amplifier. That was Peter Belt at his very best, before he and his wife got into somewhat questionable audio tweaks like sound-changing furniture polish and silver paper.

The Verto was originally designed for the RKV mark 1 and 2. Those two models only have the unique OTL output (Output Transformerless), a bit like my old EarMax headphones, so the switch for 8 and 32 ohm headphones on the Verto was quite useful. The RKV iii has provision for a wide range of low impedance cans as well, which therefore means a bit of duplication of features if both are used together. Since the Verto can be switched to 8 ohm you can connect loudspeakers to those speaker terminals,

AudioValve Verto & RKV III Headphone Amps

though with the Mark 3 RKV, with its own speaker outputs, there was no point in using this facility.

Whilst the VKR was a beautiful looking product the Verto was in comparison a Friday afternoon job, being made of two halves joined together, and those joins were easily evident and spoilt my first impression of product build (see photo).



The first two clicks on the silver knob on the front select 8 and 32 ohm impedance for the conventional headphones with the third position, OTL, for a Stax ear speaker. Unfortunately my Verto wasn't going to play music for me. The 6.3mm jacks only worked on the left leg and whilst I sat waiting endlessly for the LED on the front of the box to light up to tell me there was enough voltage to work the Stax, it was never going to shine. It reminded me of university days looking endlessly at my knickers revolving at 200mph in the campus washing machines. I really needed to connect a DAC with enough oomph to get this thing playing games, I mean music. I then con-

nected the speaker jacks in reverse mode to my 250W Krell leviathan to see if that would drive the Stax but after 10 minutes there was no light and all I got was a very low level and no bass. Selecting conventional headphones did give me both legs working this time, but there was some hum, suggesting earthing damage on its trip across the English Channel. My role was as a reviewer, and not as fault finder, so I continued my review looking at the RKV mk3 as a conventional headphone amplifier. Such a shame, as I know this unit can sound so good.

AudioValve, not to be confused with Valve Audio, is a small German brand who has been making some quite iconic and mid-priced valve based audio since 1982. Like many an audio CEO, boss Helmut Becker was a musician, himself a guitarist and music enthusiast who began building amplifiers 40 years ago when he was 15. Indeed, his father was the owner of a small electronics business, and even as a 12 year old, Becker would often be seen tinkering with tube televisions in his father's shop; taking them apart and getting to grips with the way they worked. Interestingly, his career has not just been devoted to audio, as it has also included numerous medical patents, including to fundamentally revolutionising analysis techniques for the detection of blood coagulation times.

Taking my first look at the RKV mark 3 was certain to increase my own blood pressure. The model in this test was the third incarnation of the RKV, the original dating back to 1982. Just like the predecessors this larger 10kg 400 x 340 x 150mm monster was a sea of blackened steel and plastic (also available in silver or limited ivory editions), with large front and top Plexiglass windows that proudly re-



vealed everything inside. You could sense the importance of showing the machinery that made it all 'work', and in this case included 8 valves towering from a bright red PCB, the terrain for a city of individually soldered components. It looked magnificent and needed to be seen! The components were all top class with a Pikatron transformer,

AudioValve Verto & RKV III Headphone Amps

I then turned to an equally complex hotchpotch, Martyn Bennett's Grit, though this 'busy' album was a handled a lot more panache than in many headphone amplifiers. Pat Metheny Group The Way Up was as sweet as treacle; perfectly executed, with warm but musically precise cymbals, and again everything is up front, a very full sound, but just so right.

OPA134 op amps, and a fully automatic biasing servo controller circuitry, which he has in all his amplifiers to regulate the valves. And the valves themselves, number PCL805, he designed himself. The previous incarnation had four of them.

Having listened to and owned a sizeable collection of headphone amplifiers, the £3262 RKV is one of the most expensive. The instruction manual was very detailed, though the German to English translation was amusing in places; particularly the way it went from highly proficient and poetic nuances to phrases usually seen in the Chinese to English translations of cheap Amazon purchases. Apparently "the care tensions are won from a strong, free of litter, Torodial-transformator". Whether you

are a big or small company the instruction manual is a core part of the package, and as such, detail should go into this vital component.

The top acrylic plate is machined with an array of ventilation slots for the tubes. The rest of the chassis is crafted from laser-milled stainless steel, rather than aluminium, as Becker says it 'sounds' better. The large red PCB and components are of the highest quality and hand soldered liberally and sensibly, and with affection.

On the front panel there are two combi headphone sockets, just as on the Verto, and below these is the Mode switch. This switch selects either high-impedance headphones (> 100 Ohms), or in the second position allows you to select from five low impedance (8, 16, 32, 64, 128 ohm) settings in the next knob. Why a single 6-position knob wasn't used, I didn't get a chance to ask.

With the last of the three rotary switches, you could select the source you want to listen to. The manual suggests that there were 45 RCA inputs at your disposal, but my limited algebraic knowledge brought that figure down to 5, or maybe 7. Let me explain; there are 5 RCA sockets (the fifth being a very simple, but useable "old school design" MM phono-stage input), and inputs 1 and 2 were paralleled with two XLR balanced inputs. There is a pair of speaker terminals, should you wish to drive the respectable 5.8W output into efficient drivers, though for my 4 ohm B&W 804s the output level was insufficient to drive them. Indeed, the sound quality was nothing to write home about. Completing the socketry is a pair of male XLR sockets to connect to a power amplifier. This piece of equipment was festooned with possibilities, and could easily be placed at the centre of a



AudioValve Verto & RKV III Headphone Amps

respectable hi-fi set up. Perhaps Mr Becker was trying to do too much in the reasonably priced £3262 presentation.

So to the tests. I wanted to ensure that, despite the imposition of Verto testing, this product was given an opportunity to shine. Not only did I listen to CD and vinyl sources, but I also included mp3 and FLAC.

One of the drawbacks of listening on headphones is that because of the closeness of the source to our ears we only hear an exaggerated sound stage, because none of what is in the left gets to the right, and vice versa, unlike with our ears when we are listening to live sources or loudspeakers. Angled ear speakers, such as Stax Lambda electrostatics, go part the way into making the experience less stressful, but this AudioValve unit has the provision to allow some of each channel's information to reach the other channel, and which can narrow the soundstage, making it more realistic and, in their words, "less mental stress". However, unlike those wonderful ambisonic recordings I listened to back in the 1970's, there is no time delay, as there would be in reality. Indeed, it caused me a bit of mental stress trying to work out where exactly this facility was on the AudioValve. Again, an unclear instruction manual.

Now, you might be starting to think that all I do is criticise. I'd like to think that actually I just make sensible observations, and, once I started to listen to the sound, I wasn't that bothered about my qualms anymore. Once I was constrained between the earpads of my Sennheiser's, Audio-Technica's and Grado's, all I wanted to do was experience more and more of my vast archive of music. I found that with impedance adjustment my Audio-Technica's sounded better than I had managed on any other headphone amp, though the Sennheiser HD650 was a bit too bass heavy. I listened to my Holst Planet Suite, Karajan (Decca 417 709-2), just as I had with the £190 Graham Slee Voyager test. There was much more weight in this offering, and the sound was more forward. It was more far more authoritative, largely due to the larger available output stage, and I had to be careful to set the impedance correctly and not turn the volume up too much. I felt at times the enormous powerhouse led to a little confusion in some of the music, compared to other amplifiers, and especially electrostatics. For that reason I then turned to a composer 8 hours away across the pond and a work composed 15 years later, Ferde Grofe and his Grand Canyon Suite (Naxos 8.559007). Both are program-

matic works; this one is about donkeys wandering across the Arizona desert. It is a powerfully creative drama, something I fell in love with at the age of 10, when my imagination could whisk me across the Atlantic in an instant. This CD would be a great example to test the depth and power of soundstage and separation of instruments, particularly with a varied collection of distant brass instruments, glockenspiel, celesta, coconuts, wind machine and thunder maker. The instruments all came to life; the woodwinds sounding like birds and the trumpets like crickets. This was as real as it could get. There was richness in all the harmony, and at times it could sound a tad carried away in this powerful recording. The third movement has a lovely solo violin part, which, particularly through HD650's, seemed to wander from left to right depending on whether there were low or high notes. Maybe it was a windy day in Arizona. The intense instrumentation in the fifth movement during the storm scene was, for most of the time, only a storm in a tea cup for this player.

I then turned to an equally complex hotchpotch, Martyn Bennett's Grit, though this 'busy' album was a handled a lot more panache than in many headphone amplifiers. Pat Metheny Group The Way Up was as sweet as treacle; perfectly executed, with warm but musically precise cymbals, and again everything is up front, a very full sound, but just so right. Tube hiss was virtually non-existent (100dB S/N ratio) and, with a bandwidth from 10 – 150,000Hz, no instrument would be spared. This was more than fun, and took listening on headphones to a completely new level. This was no side salad; this was thick stew and dumplings. It was able, as its creator suggested, to render unparalleled "harmonic richness". This machine was no slouch. It had the energy of the Scottish Independence YES voters. This was more than just an acoustic statement, more than just a headphone amplifier, and it was beautiful, too. My only worry was that it was perhaps though trying too hard to be everything to everyone.

Sound quality 8.55/10

Value for money 8.4/10

Build and design quality (RKViii) 8.5/10

Overall 8.5

Price RKV Mk III £3262

Verto £690

Janine Elliot

Tisbury Audio CA-1 Headphone Amp

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Tisbury Audio are a small company based in the UK that currently makes just two products, the Mini Passive Preamplifier that we took a listen to and enjoyed a few months ago and the product on test here, the CA-1 Headphone Amplifier costing £349.

On the Tisbury Audio website the company make a point of stressing that the majority of the parts that make up the CA-1 are sourced from British manufacturers. The price of the unit is £349 including free international shipping and a three year warranty which all seems to be very reasonable indeed.

Out of the box the first thing that strikes you is how light the CA-1 is and this is in no small way down to the fact that a wallwart power supply is used. The second thing you notice is that it's actually quite an attractive beast with its solid American black walnut side cheeks and bottom "plate" which compliment the 3mm aluminium enclosure pretty nicely. OK, this isn't going to win any international awards for its aesthetics but it's simple, functional and good looking. Size-wise the CA-1 is 204 x 170 x 74 mm so it's pretty compact and bijou.

Round the back you get a couple of good quality RCAs for inputting your source, in this case our reference Valve Audio Devices DAC 10 fed via USB from a dedicated laptop running JPlayer and JRiver and playing FLAC files, there's an on off toggle switch and the socket for the power supply to plug into. Flip it round to have a look at the front panel and this too keeps things to a functional minimum. There's a proper quarter inch jack Neutrik socket, an

Tisbury Audio CA-1 Headphone Amp

Alps Blue Velvet pot, a toggle switch for the high and low gain output modes (6 dB (2x) and 16 dB (6.3x) gain) and an LED to show you it's plugged in and functioning. Build quality looks to be simple and of a good quality. The CA-1 has a nifty little muting circuit onboard which essentially disconnects your precious headphones if the AC power supply is interrupted or switched off.

For the purposes of this review the main cans used were the 20 Ohms Audeze LCD-XC headphones we have in for review and have listened to extensively but we'll also be trying it out with some other cans.

Sound

Tisbury claim the noise floor is very low with the CA-1 and it is, there's no distinguishable noise whatsoever as far as I can tell on the low output or high output at normal listening levels and with no music playing you have to turn the volume pot all the way to the top to get any noise at all. With regards volume it goes plenty loud enough with the Audeze' and I wouldn't think anyone but the most hard of hearing, or those with a deaf wish would need to crank this up to anywhere near the max –Tisbury give a figure of 3.4V and 725mW at 16ohms and 8.3V/115mW at 600ohms. With the more demanding HifiMan HE 560s you need to crank the volume pot a bit but again all is well and likewise with the Sennheiser HE 800s and their IE 800s.

Immediately on plugging in the 'phones and putting on the tunes it's pretty clear that this is a good sounding little box with good transparency that allows you to get on with listening to the tunes. Eels' Novacaine For The Soul shows there to be a really nice sleek sound in the upper frequencies and vocals. The strings are lush, full and luxuriant. In the lower end

The piano is natural sounding and there is a good insight into the performer's very distinctive voice.

there's bass there but I'm not sure it has the required heft to it that I enjoy with this kind of tune. Likewise on the Body Count track Bowels Of The Devil I just feel there's something missing, as if the amp is being a little on the polite side.

However, popping on the wonderful Kathryn Williams' Crown Electric album you are rewarded with absolutely gorgeous vocals and a great lush feel to the strings (again) that defies the moderate asking price of this little unit. I'm reminded here of my old 300B PSE amp (no bad thing) and it comes as a bit of a surprise as it's clear that what we have here with the CA-1 is a refined and sophisticated sound that will immediately appeal to those that listen to "audiophile" type music or enjoy a more well-mannered sound.

Reviewing kit can be a soul destroying pass-time at times as you need to concentrate and listen in a critical way, but with the little CA-1 I genuinely found myself just listening to Williams' record the whole way through and loving every minute. Bass isn't the deepest I've heard but it's ok for this kind of music.



Tisbury Audio CA-1 Headphone Amp

The layout is very simple: one knob to increase or decrease the volume, a switch to change between high and low gain and an ON/OFF switch on the back. Couldn't be more simple!

Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson's *Winter In America* is one of my go to records to get an idea of what's happening with relation to getting a feel for the recording space and with the CA-1 in place it's a pretty good effort. Not as good as the best I've heard, or as good as my own reference, but very acceptable for the asking price. The soundstage is not as wide as I would have liked but again, at this price it's very acceptable. Vocals appear to be slightly pushed to the fore but the tops are smooth and slightly rounded out.

Chie Ayado's version of the Beatles *Don't Let Me Down* from her *Good Life* record again plays to the strengths of the little Tisbury unit. The piano is natural sounding and there is a good insight into the performer's very distinctive voice. And this is what I mean about this unit appealing to those that like to listen to audiophile music; push it too far with music that demands a more dynamic sound and it loses out to the competition a little – here I'm thinking of the likes of Deep Purple's

Made In Japan version of *Smoke On The Water* which although sounding OK didn't inspire me and get me rocking as it should.

Conclusion

The Tisbury CA-1 is a fine sounding little headphone amplifier that does have some limitations when presented with rock and more complex bass heavy music. Some will enjoy this some won't.

For those looking for a relaxed but accurate presentation without bells and whistles then this is a very good choice for the money.

Jazz fans will love it and with female vocals it's a lovely little unit with an audiophile sound that will surely appeal to a good number of people.

It drove all the headphones I used with it admirably and with good control over most of the frequency range and does have a slight valve feel to it- think 300B midrange.

Overall the Tisbury is a unit that deserves to do well and given its price point I'm sure it will.

Build Quality – 8/10

Sound Quality – 8/10

Value For Money – 8.5/10

Overall – 8.17/10

Price at time of review – £349

Recommended for those looking for a smooth, audiophile sounding headphone amplifier that gets on with the job at a good price.

Stuart Smith



Tisbury Audio CA-1 Headphone Amp

And now it's over to our tame teenager in residence Harry to give his perspective on the Tisbury CA-1

Tisbury Audio is a relatively new company that only makes 2 products at the moment (the CA-1 and a passive preamplifier).

I was given the Headphone Amp, the Challenge Amp 1 to review that retails for just under £350. For my review I used it with a Schiit Modi DAC and various pairs of headphones.

The amp looks great and stands out from the crowd with its bold design.

The brushed metal chassis is enclosed with wood which gives it a “retro” look. It is very tactile with the contrasting use of materials. It's also not too “in your face” and can sit proudly on any desk or Hi-Fi rack.

Most importantly this amp is handmade in the UK. It's great to see that Made in England stamp on a relatively low priced product.

The layout is very simple: one knob to increase or decrease the volume, a switch to change between high and low gain and an ON/OFF switch on the back. Couldn't be more simple!

Not only is the design fantastic, the build quality is also exceptional. It feels solid but also surprisingly lightweight (thanks to the external power supply.) To be fair this is the level of build quality that I expect from a Made in England product, though sadly this is not always the case.

To test the sound I tried to listen to as many music genres as I could (dance music, folk, rock, jazz, dub-step, and hip hop.) Obviously avoiding classical music (which I can't listen to for more than 2 minutes...)

This amp is very “true to the music” and can easily show the flaws in a cheaper pair of headphones. Thankfully Tisbury offer a 30 day free trial so you have the time to find what sounds best with it before you actually buy it.

I personally thought it sounded best with my own pair of NAD viso hp50s which I also feel are very “true to the music”.

The sound is tailored towards strong female vocals and punchy guitar riffs. It also brought dance music beats to life.

However I thought the track that sounded the best with the CA-1 was ‘Loose yourself to dance’ by Daft punk, the signature Nile Rodgers guitar rhythm has never sounded so good. I could actually pinpoint

All round the looks and sound combine to an almost perfect headphone amp for the price (£349 is a lot of money but considering the quality that you are getting it is valid).

where all the instruments were in my head which is very impressive.

The sound stage is very wide and provides plenty of bass. The mid and the top end are very bright and colourful. It brings a lot of life to the music and is versatile enough to be enjoyed by lovers of all kinds of music.

I didn't experience any background noise and no irritating buzz that you can find with a lot of amps.

There is no “pop!” when turning the amp on and off that I have found with other amps, both of which are great plus points in my view.

All round the looks and sound combine to an almost perfect headphone amp for the price (£349 is a lot of money but considering the quality that you are getting it is valid).

A definite recommendation for anyone wanting to enter the Head-Fi world, on a smaller budget.

Sound- 9/10

Value- 8/10

Build quality- 10/10

Overall- 9/10

Harry Smith

Beyerdynamic T1

Hifi Pig
RECOMMENDED



**Family owned
Beyerdynamic
launched in 1924 and
have since become
synonymous with the
production of
headphones and
microphones for pro
studios, but they also
offer a wide range of
cans for home use like
their top of the range
T1 headphones costing
949 EUR.**

Beyerdynamic were my favoured headphones when in the recording or radio studio back in the day and so it was great to get the opportunity to try out some of their headphones made specifically for the home and audiophile marketplace.

Here we're taking a listen to the top of the range T1 semi-open headphone which retails at 949 EUR.

The T1s arrive in a stylish aluminium box designed to look a little like a professional flightcase and is well padded inside. This inspires confidence immediately and gives you some indication of Beyerdynamics' professional and studio heritage. There's a certificate of authenticity and that's it – straight forward, no messing.

The cable is a good length for home use at around 2.5m and looks to be a no-nonsense (thick) design terminated at the end with a Neutrik quarter inch jack. The cable is fixed to the headphones and so there are no opportunities for playing with alternatives.

Looks-wise the T1s are pretty conventional looking with circular cans that cover the whole ear. They are an attractive champagne colour for the most part with the cans being attached to a metal frame. It's a simple enough design that works well with the cans piv-

Beyerdynamic T1

oting vertically to ensure the correct fit over your ear. They clamp firmly but not uncomfortably to your head and you can shake your head quite vigorously without them moving about, so those predisposed to exercise should be fine with these. The earpads are good and thick and made of a velour material which is pretty comfy over longer periods of listening. The head band is well padded and covered in leather – it's not as comfortable as the HifiMan HE-560s but it's pretty good and should cause no one any issues. Adjustment of the length of the headband is a simple slide affair which you can do whilst the T1s are on your head. They weigh in at a 530g which is pretty light when compared to the likes of the Audeze headphones we've had in for review. All in all these look like well thought out and built to do what they are supposed to do which I really like.

The T1s have drivers that are angled towards the ear and are quite a bit off centre and to the front of the can with each driver achieving over 1.2 Tesla (the SI derived unit used to measure magnetic fields) which Beyerdynamic say is twice the value of traditional headphones. As a result of the increased magnetic field the voice coil used in the T1s is more compact than in traditional headphones but still efficient. The actual membrane that makes the sound is what Beyerdynamic call a three layer "compound foil" and all in this makes the T1s a 600ohm load.

Using my reference headphone amplifier on the end of the Valve Audio Devices DAC10 using the computer to deliver FLAC files the T1s went plenty loud enough but plugging them into the HiSound Studio DAP required cranking the volume pretty much up to the max to get a decent volume. With this in mind I'd suggest that if you are considering using the T1s whilst out and about you will need to use an external portable headphone amplifier.

The Sound

These headphones throw a really good soundstage that feels quite natural and not overemphasised and I think this is down to the way the drivers are angled towards your ears. The soundstage isn't as wide as the

final Pandora Hope VIs and yet there is a good out of the head feeling that seems very natural. There is a definite accuracy to the positioning of instruments in there without any exaggeration, some may think that this is a narrowing of the stage but I thought it gave a more "real" feel to the music. There is also a good front to back feeling to the soundstage, particularly around the ears (if that makes sense) which is again down to the positioning of the drivers.

Clarity is really very good with T1s and whilst the midband is really gorgeous it's not to the detriment of other frequencies. On David Crosby's Croz his vocal is presented very nicely and with a little warmth that seems about right for his vocal style. There's a part of the vocal on Time I Have which is obviously an edit and it's very easy to spot this on the Beyerdynamics. Bass is really nice and tight but not overblown or bloated – this leads to a very nice and natural sound on this record which I really enjoyed. Other headphones we've tested have the feeling that they go lower but on this kind of music I certainly never thought I was missing anything at all.

However, popping on Daft Punk's Homework album I did need to push the volume a little higher than normal to really get the full effect of this album. Once the volume is cranked up though, you are given a



Beyerdynamic T1

really dynamic and balanced sound which again really appealed to my personal taste. Again, it's a feeling that nothing is over done and what you are getting is a pretty much straight forward interpretation of what is going on on the record. Some will prefer a headphone that pushes to the fore a certain frequency band and others will love this no messing approach.

With the Made In Japan version of Deep Purple's *Smoke on the Water* I again found I needed to turn the volume up quite a bit to get the full effect of the record. There's bags of detail at lower volumes and it's all there, but to get real excitement from these headphones I believe you need to turn up the volume a bit.

I think a really good test for headphones is listening to house and techno and so to Deep Dish's *Yoshiesque Vol II*, an absolute masterpiece of a mix album. You get a total insight into the record from the very opening lines of *Finally* and the slightly effected vocal. All the little nuances to the mix are there and when the beat does kick in it's powerful and taut which is just right for this kind of music. The little touches in the mix fly around your head and there's a good deep feel to the basslines. Some headphones struggle to keep pace with this kind of music and get lost in everything that is going on but to the Beyerdynamic T1s credit they manage to stay up with the action and are an exciting listen.

The obvious comparisons here are going to be the HD 800s from Sennheiser as they come in at around the same pricepoint, the Sennheisers are slightly more expensive at £999. It's a very close call indeed but the Beyerdynamics have it by a short nose I'd say. I loved the bass on the Sennheiser cans but with the T1s it just seems to be subjectively more appealing. They're a tad more explosive and exciting to listen to. On the negative side they're not as comfortable.

Comfort

By no means are the T1s an uncomfortable headphone and I found myself able to listen for long periods without any discomfort at all. The HifiMan HE-560s were better on the headband but worse on the ears and the Sennheiser HD 800s were better on the ears and slightly easier on the top of the head (they're lighter after all).



The earcups cover the whole of the ear very comfortably indeed, but the velour fabric can become a little "itchy" after long periods of wearing them. They clamp firmly to your head but this isn't overly done and so they remain comfortable in this aspect.

Conclusion

I liked the Beyerdynamic T1s a great deal and in some respects they could be the final headphone you'd ever need to buy. When paired with a headphone amplifier they come alive and offer a dynamic and explosive sound that is full of detail.

They don't have the lushness of the Final Hope Pandora Vis and overall are a more balanced headphone with a slight warmth to the midband. The Sennheiser HD 800s offer a crisper top end but I prefer the more balanced approach of these cans, but only by a hairs breadth.

Bass is good tight and powerful without being over done in any way and whilst the soundstaging is better on some of the headphones we've had in for review (Final and Audeze) it's up there with the best with the little nuances of the stage being particularly apparent around the ears in a front to back sense.

I believe the T1s are suited to a wide range of musical styles and offer a clear window into what is happening, with bags and bags of detail but not so much that they become a pain to listen to.

Beyerdynamic T1

Beyer Dynamic are perhaps best known for their studio kit and it's clear that the T1s have benefited from this experience, but to their credit they also manage to bring their credentials to the living room too.

On the negative side, you will need to have a good headphone amplifier on hand if you want to get the best from these as they do need to be driven quite hard.

Sound – 8.85

Comfort – 8.15

Fit and finish – 8.25

Value – 8.5

Overall – 8.44

Recommended for those looking for a dynamic and yet balanced headphone that is very good across all the musical styles we tried them with.

Stuart Smith

And now Linette's thoughts on the Beyerdynamic T1 Headphones

Beyerdynamic have been making headphones and microphones for a long time....the company was founded in Germany 90 years ago and has become a bit of a byword for Germanic excellence.

The T1 was the first headphones in their range to use their Tesla technology which, without going into the entire science bit, makes the drivers more compact and more efficient.

Straight out of the packaging and the presentation case really does scream understated German class....they come in their own embossed, brushed aluminium flight case.

The 'phones themselves are also very classy looking. Again brushed metal but with a slightly golden grey hue. They are industrially sleek and I really like the subtle styling like the 'herringbone' detailing on the earcups and the cut out T1 logo on the sides. They are described as semi-open, whatever that means...I thought headphones were either open or closed, but apparently these are somewhere in between.

The padding is generous on both the earpads and the headband but the way the Tesla drivers are placed means it seems to take a while to find a comfortable listening position with them....I also found myself adjusting quite a bit while listening.

Tremendous and defined bass and a sound that is very driving and detailed, I guess that's thanks to the Tesla tech then.

They actually feel quite light on the head, even though they weigh in at over half a kilo (530g). Worth noting though that they actually became more comfortable the longer I wore them.

Happily they pass the 'glasses test' and sit comfortably with my specs on.

Once slight annoyance that I noticed was that the velour on the pads 'creaked' quite loudly when I moved my head...I'm guessing this is down to the velour not the actual pads so I imagine it could be cured by changing for a leather pad?

So, feeling in a Germanic frame of mind I decided to listen to some techno, one of Ben Klock's sets from the infamous Berghain club in Berlin. Now, seeing as this is a club that you can queue hours and hours for....only to be turned away by the fickle doorman

Beyerdynamic T1

when you finally make it to the entrance, I guess a recording of one of Klock's sets from the main room is a more guaranteed way to actually hear some tunes!

The sound is big and intense, giving a real sense of being in a club in what was a power station. Tremendous and defined bass and a sound that is very driving and detailed, I guess that's thanks to the Tesla tech then.

The 'phones do feel very isolating from the outside world but the soundstage is very open, perhaps not as 3 dimensional as the Oppo PM1 but I love the big sound that I am getting.

Florence and the Machine's album 'Lungs' is next. Florence's voice on 'Dog Days Are Over' ranges from ethereal to powerful and sounds perfect throughout. The music sounds as defined when it really gets going with very energetic drumming and vocals as it does in the more simple and stripped back parts of the song.

I put on Florence's version of 'You've got the Love'....which sounds great, but it makes me want to listen to the original (and in my opinion, best) version...the epic Source featuring Candi Staton tune was the song me and Mr Hifi Pig got married to after all!

The Beyerdynamic T1s really deliver on bass, vocals and everything else in the mix.

The good mix of vocal and bass without anything being too much is again evident when I put on Rudimental's 'Home' album...the way this album has been recorded it can often come across as far too bass heavy but it works with the T1s.

Speaking of bass...yep, time for 'Once again back' by Hardfloor. The bass is dry and rumbling, right through my head, tops are skippy as they should be and the mids are good too.....I am overall very impressed by these understated, German headphones...a bit of a dark horse.

So in the interest of equality I get Gil Scott Heron's 'Ghetto Style' on as I've listened to it with all the headphones I've reviewed recently.

'Lady Day and John Coltraine' is very engaging to listen to, I am left wanting more, which has to be a good sign. There is that sense of being in the studio...not quite as much detail in the soundstage as the planar magnetic headphones as I mentioned be-

The Beyerdynamic T1s really deliver on bass, vocals and everything else in the mix.

fore, but there is definitely something there that makes me really enjoy these headphones.

They are very well styled, well made with great materials and perhaps a bit more wearable out and about than some of the headphones that I have listened to recently, quite understated.

The detail and 3 dimensional immersion into the music is not up there with the top of the range planar magnetic headphones that I have tried but I do think they come out better than the Sennheisers HD800. Euro for euro or pound for pound I like the looks, build quality and sound of the T1s best out of the two.

Yes again these are expensive headphones at 949€, however there are plenty of people wanting to spend that kind of money to enjoy their music privately....the T1 just adds another choice of flavour to the top level available.

I would suggest to anyone in the market for a pair of great quality 'phones, read the reviews make a shortlist and then get down to your hifi dealer, headphone specialist or get to a hifi show and test listen to a few different ones and pick your favourite.

Sound – 8.5/10

Comfort – 8.2/10

Fit and finish – 9/10

Value – 8/10

Overall – 8.4/10

Very well made, high quality and reliable headphones. High end without screaming it in your face.

Linette Smith

Beyerdynamic T 5li

The Beyerdynamic T 5li is a compact and good looking on-ear headphone with a healthy pedigree, costing £246.

Hifi Pig recently reviewed the T1 headphones from Beyerdynamic and liked them a great deal and so I was curious when we were sent the £246 (279 EUR) T 5li on ear headphones from the company. I'll not repeat the preamble in the previous review other than to say I've been a fan of Beyerdynamic for a good while and have used their cans at home and in the studio in the past.

In the box you get a nice and compact nylon fabric carry case which looks rugged enough to pop in your hand luggage when travelling, but is small enough to carry about in its own right too. As well as the carry case you get an instruction manual, a male to female minijack cable (I wasn't sure of the use for this I'm afraid) and a doodad for using the headphones on planes. The T 5li are clearly meant for portable use and the permanently attached cable has (*lost on me*) in-line controls and mic for your iPhone 3GS or later, iPad, iPod touch 2nd generation or later, iPod

Classic and 4th generation or later iPod nano; this cable is a good length (1.2m) - short enough to not get tangled, but long enough to reach your media player in your pocket. Also labelled on the pack is a quarter inch adapter but this was missing from the supplied headphones.

The construction of the T 5li is pretty straightforward and they look minimal and quite stylish, but I don't know if they will appeal to the youth given their distinct lack of blinginess....though I like their understated aesthetic a good deal.



Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

The first thing I noticed when popping these cans on my head was just how comfortable they are and how much isolation to the outside world they provide allowing you to really get lost in the music.

The headband is metal and padded with a thin cushioning... as are the cans themselves. Despite their relatively modest padding the T5li are very comfortable indeed and easy to wear for extended periods without experiencing any aches or pains. They also fit on the ear with very little pressure and so are very comfortable in this respect, though they also feel surprisingly secure in the headshake test.

The German made T 5li are marketed as a "premium portable headphone" and utilise the same Tesla technology as their bigger T1 siblings. They have a

Beyerdynamic T 5li



closed design with an impedance of 32 Ohms and weigh in at just 174g.

Although clearly a headphone for the portable market I used them pretty much exclusively with my little day to day desk set up of Schiit Modi and Magni being fed with FLACs from JRiver Media Centre.

The Sound

The first thing I noticed when popping these cans on my head was just how comfortable they are and how much isolation to the outside world they provide al-

They are comfortable, light, easy to pack away and offer pretty good value for money I'd say.

lowing you to really get lost in the music. Being closed back they also isolate folk on the outside from your music, which is a good thing for those wanting a set of cans for on the go.

Popping on Neil Young's Harvest album there's clearly an endearing quality to these headphones from the outset. The opening lines of Out On the Weekend have the bass nice, punchy and tight and with enough detail in the mix coming through – there's a reverb on Young's voice that's easily lost, but here it's pretty much all there. There's nothing in the mix shouting out "Listen to me, listen to me" and as such, on this kind of material, they are even-handed and quite a smooth sounding headphone. Given their diminutive size I'd expected these cans to sound closed in but they're really not at all – they have a good and wide soundstage that sounds natural and unexaggerated. Some will prefer a more artificial sounding soundstage, but I like this naturalness to the image. This naturalness of the sound was a feature of the more expensive T1s too and Beyerdynamic must be congratulated on this.

Given the recent death of LFOs Mark Bell I thought it fitting to virtually reach for Bjork's Homogenic record on which Bell collaborated. Here the (easily overdone) electronic, low-bass notes are again tight, taut and enjoyable if a little more pronounced than other frequencies. There's reasonable insight into the

Beyerdynamic T 5li

recording again and whilst I'd not be comfortable doing a mix on these cans, they offer a standard of reproduction, detail and openness that is very good for their price-point. Again it's clear that there is no one part of the frequency spectrum being pushed to the fore, though arguably they do err on the side of bass a tad.

The Ship Of Fools' record Let's Get This Mother Outta Here goes on next, a sort of space rock/psychedelic album, and again there is an even handedness to the sound these little cans produce. There's a little harshness (perhaps breakup would be a better word) at the very top end of the frequencies, but the music bounces along in a highly enjoyable fashion that is a great deal of fun to listen to. There's not the refinement of the T1s, or other more costly headphones for that matter, but these are a hoot to listen to and for the money there's very little to moan about. There's good dynamics and punchiness and I could easily see me using these as my go to headphones of choice whilst traveling given their diminutive size and big sound, though I enjoyed them most when turned up loud rather than at low volumes.

On female vocals such as Lucinda Williams (Happy Woman Blues) the mids are nice and open with a little drift from overall neutrality and a slight warmth which I enjoyed and which made for an easy and non-fatiguing listen.

Time and time again though I kept going for the harder techno and dance tracks which really play to the strengths of these cans - low and tight bass with reasonable if not perfect fidelity at the top end of things, but that's not to say they will only appeal to the bootsncats (*bootsncats n bootsncats*) brigade...there is enough detail and finesse here to satisfy listeners of more sedate music too.

Conclusion

Given the asking price of these little headphones there's not a great deal to criticise if truth be known and a good deal to praise.

Build quality is reasonable, if a little utilitarian and sound-wise you are presented with a nicely balanced feel that is slightly on the warm side of neutral. Bass extension is good and not too over blown and whilst at the very top end of the frequency range things can become a little unstuck, it would be churlish to moan excessively.

The question is could I use these on a daily basis and the answer has to be a resounding yes when they are used as cans for on the go.

They are comfortable, light, easy to pack away and offer pretty good value for money I'd say. No, they are not in the same league as the likes of the Audeze and Oppos of this world, or even Beyerdynamic T1s, but they offer a great deal of enjoyment for relatively little outlay. Of course the T 5li have their limitations and aren't the last word in being totally neutral (they're not a monitoring headphone) and they're not bad at all on a wide range of music, but particularly I enjoyed these when banging out techno at loud volume.

The question is could I use these on a daily basis and the answer has to be a resounding yes when they are used as cans for on the go. In the home I think the majority of readers would want something more sophisticated/neutral tonally, but if you are looking for a reasonably priced out and about headphone that you may use occasionally in the home, then these little Beyerdynamics offer a great compromise.

Sound – 8.10

Comfort – 8.05

Fit and finish – 8.0

Value – 8.30

Overall – 8.11

Recommended for users looking for a good sounding, reasonably priced headphone that is genuinely portable but that can be used for the occasional listen at home.

Stuart Smith

Geek Out 1000 Headphone Amp/DAC

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



At £299 the Geek Out 1000 is an affordable, compact and sleek headphone amplifier and DAC. The Audiophile world seems to love it...will we?

Following on from last months Headphone Special you were warned that we had even more to come...

The world of audio is going crazy currently over a few things, the vinyl revival is one, computer based audio is another and portable headphone amplifiers is right up there with the latest must haves of consumers wanting the best discrete sound for their high quality music downloads.

Take a bow the Geek Out 1000 which combines a portable headphone amplifier and a HD High Resolution DAC in one dinky little device.

The Geek Out 1000 arrived this week in a nicely designed box with good artwork and inside was another box which resembles a necklace case with soft foam inserts cut out perfectly for the Geek itself, the umbilical cord (a USB A female to USB A male) and a small nylon drawstring pouch.

The Geek 1000 is the most powerful of the three offerings from LH Labs boasting 1 whole watt of Pure Class A Amplification which in headphone terms that's a lot of welly! It's recommended that if your

Geek Out 1000 Headphone Amp/DAC

headphones are over 100ohm to choose this model for the best performance.

Each of the models are constructed with an aluminium body and comes in a range of stylish colours, the review sample is in anodised red and looked pretty cool.

The unit has only two buttons on it, used for volume and 3D mode. For 3D mode simply press both together. Both buttons are different to the touch with the down volume having a recessed dip to its centre and the up volume a raised bit - a very thoughtful touch making it easy to determine which button is which. It's unsurprising that such a simple little thought has been included as LH Labs strictest policy is listening to their customers and producing products which they really want, suggest and give input towards. Common sense you say? Of course! But you will be surprised at how many companies offer consumers what they think they want.

Plugging the Geek into a computer can be achieved via its in built USB A male Asynchronous 20 socket or with the aid of the including trailing 6 inch cable attachment for an easier placement.

The Geek has two rows of lights on its front, the first to show sample rates and the second for indication of 3D Sound being on ...around the rear of the Geek there's a corresponding key as to what each light is indicative of.

There are two 3.5mm headphone output sockets on the Geek Out 1000, one labelled 0.47ohm for In Ear Monitors and a 47ohm socket for those big bad boys of rock!

So Geek is ready to go wherever you go...

When I say portable, more to the point I mean the Geek only requires USB power to function from a laptop, thus making it portable.

However if you wish to connect Geek to an IOS or Android device I'm afraid this is not possible -I did try and unfortunately there is currently no driver support for these devices. This is in fact a good thing as the Geek gets tremendously warm! Anyone with experience of Class A amplifiers will know how hot they get but how good they sound. I wouldn't fancy having it in a breast pocket or in a pair of shorts connected to a phone. Some sort of belt clip would be an obvious choice if LH ever decide to widen compatibility.



Vocals on Geek are very nice indeed, they have great tone and texture and that little sprinkling of clarity that I personally prefer.

High Resolution File Playback

Chances are if you're buying a Geek you're not listening to crappy MP3's ruining all the musical enjoyment and hopefully you have ripped your cd collection and are downloading high quality music files online.

Geek will support:

Bit rates from 1bit to 32bit

Geek Out 1000 Headphone Amp/DAC



Sample rates from 44.1khz to 384khz and DSD 64 and 128 protocols.

Not bad for a device the size of a lens out of a geeks spectacles!.

So, what does the Geek Out 1000 sound like?

Ummm, pretty damned awesome! I'm really surprised at how good this device sounds. At the start of this review, whilst writing the introductory part I have been listening to a playlist of many genres of music which I created on the Mac using Amarra Symphony 3.0.

I don't think at any point during writing the previous paragraphs my head and body has stopped moving. Geek Out 1000 is extremely musical and is reminiscent of quality Class A amplification - a warm mid-range, concise highs and a deep informative bass line.

I'm listening through a pair of AKG K702 headphones with a custom Tellurium Q headphone cable, which produces a fantastically clean and articulate sound.

Adding the Geek 1000 over say the Resonance Labs Herus, or the recently reviewed Epiphany Acoustics EHP-02Di headphone amp/DAC, the Geek 1000 really seems to suit these headphones tremendously well, adding texture and warmth to the midrange, body to the bottom end and a thicker yet still incredibly detailed top ends which just seemed to have gained more confidence and rapport with one another.

The detail is very realistic and whilst listening to Alt-J's new album, for the first time I quickly pulled the headphones off and slapped the side of my head... During the track Nara there is a bumble bee which flies from ear to ear and hovers about a bit to the right and with this being out of the blue and so realistic I honest believed I was being attacked as it's late at night now here and I have a large fluorescent tube

There's no doubt that it's not like listening to speakers, but the improvements are worthwhile and add a clear positive to the headphone experience for me.

light on above my desk and a large window open next to me... and I'm generally attacked by all sorts of flying monsters!

The Geek Out 1000 has this uncanny ability to do switching between left and right of the soundstage, the entire image is very stable, but a few times on a few tracks I've had this sweeping effect from left to right and a silence left each side as if one ear has dropped out. Obviously it's a trick of the song played but the silences here on quiet passages and gaps between tracks is really very black.

Vocals on Geek are very nice indeed, they have great tone and texture and that little sprinkling of clarity that I personally prefer. I've got to have a little projection and vibrancy in a vocal, hence my headphone choice, but having this requires great care to the mid-range undertones to express tonality correctly otherwise it's popped ear drums time, or at least that last female artist you played high pitched vocal ringing your ears late into the night whilst your trying to sleep.

Geek Out 1000 ticks this box with a magic marker.

3D AWESOMIFICATION!!!

Geek Out 1000 Headphone Amp/DAC

**Bottom line is
Geek Out 1000 is
easy to set up,
compatible with
virtually any ear
sound devices and
sounds fantastic.**

What a name hey? Sounds like someone in the factory got ever so excited when they named this feature haha. Oh well, let's allow them to have their moment of fame...

The idea behind this feature is to take the sound out from being trapped inside your head and have it sounding like the performance is in front of you.

Does it, well, yeah, kinda. For me there's a definite improvement on having a mini band trapped I between your ears which is the main reason I do not listen to headphones on a regular basis.

There's no doubt that it's not like listening to speakers, but the improvements are worthwhile and add a clear positive to the headphone experience for me. The sound has gone from 9 and 3 O'clock to between 10-11 and 1-2 O'clock. Outer and rear cues and nuances are more apparent now as the main focus of the sound has shifted forward. 3D AWESOMIFICATION, ok, I'll let you have that one!

Using Geek as a standalone DAC

During my listening tests with the Geek I had a chat with Alan Rosen of AVS (UK Distributer) regarding some functionality of the unit.

Alan asked if I had tried it as a standalone DAC yet, I answered "no".

Alan went on to describe that at a dealer evening he had recently he had the Geek playing in the system as folk arrived. It was simply hanging down the back

of the rack connected to his laptop whilst the main DAC was perceived to be on in the rack. The usual chat moved on towards the sound of the system in the room and many commented on the excellent sound and were left gobsmacked when he revealed the Geek to be the DAC in use.

In light of this I connected the Geek 1000 to my amp via an Epiphany Acoustics Atratus 3.5mm to twin RCA cable. I continued to listen to my previous playlist sat on the sofa.

I too was very impressed by its performance. I was presented with a soundstage which imaged extremely well. Detail retrieval was a stand-out point for me, renditioning decays on delicate notes in extremely big boy fashion. Bass notes were full and secure, leaving small amounts of bloom to warm through the presentation and allowing for a smooth lower mid-range that gave body to the vocal.

I didn't have any intention on trying the Geek 1000 singled out as a DAC but I was pleasantly surprised and equally fascinated at how LH manage it.

Conclusion

To conclude my time with the Geek Out 1000, I can truly say how impressed and taken in by its quality of sound. It's like getting a pair of tiny bookshelf speakers, plugging them in and saying out aloud holy shit, where the hell does that sound come from.

For a tiny portable device the size of the Geek to have a pure Class A amp and a DAC inbuilt had to be a somewhat tricky feat, especially what with having on-board controls, lighting indicators and twin output sockets. Most manufacturers leave the extra features to software.

Plug and play on Mac and Linux and a driver for Windows, well that's Windows for you and I'm sure you guys are used to it so not the end of the world.

Bottom line is Geek Out 1000 is easy to set up, compatible with virtually any ear sound devices and sounds fantastic.

Build Quality - 8/10

Sound Quality - 8.6/10

Value For Money - 8.8/10

Overall - 8.46

Recommended for - great size, great sound and great price, oh and it comes in snazzy colours too!

Dan Worth

Grado PS500es

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



At around £600 the Grado Professional PS500es cost a good deal more than the company's 325is but they look pretty much identical. Will the extra money be well spent?

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

The Sound

Grado PS500es

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 instruments 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 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.



Grado PS500es

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 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 my-

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.

self, 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.

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.

Stuart Smith

Henry Audio 128 MkII Asynchronous USB

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



The Henry 128 MK II is an Asynchronous portable USB DAC that costs £210. In this busy marketplace how does it do?

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

Henry Audio 128 MkII Asynchronous USB

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.

The Sound

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.

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 separate power cable as the current and former models



Henry Audio 128 MkII Asynchronous USB



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 degree of depth presenting their vocal. Never secluded

ed 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 exposed 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.

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.

Dan Worth

Lindy HF-110 Headphones

Lindy were a new name to us, but at less than £85 for a pair of headphones we just had to give them a whirl.

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, developed 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.

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.

Lindy HF-110 Headphones

Popping on Massive Attack's Be Thankful 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 Always 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.

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.

Stuart Smith

IsoTek Evo 3

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



At £95 or so for a 1.5m length, reasonably flexible and looking very well made and presented, this cable is by no means expensive as such things go.

I hadn't planned to review this cable at all, but one was supplied by David Brook at Mains Cables R Us (MCRU) as part of the package with the excellent LongDog Audio VDt1 DAC that I recently reviewed here. Swapping out this mains cable for one of my own favourites produced an unexpected diminishment in sound quality. "Hmm", I thought, "interesting".

Solidity and control, dynamics and resolution, clarity and precision. All seemed to benefit from this cable on the LDA DAC.

At £95 or so for a 1.5m length, reasonably flexible and looking very well made and presented, this cable is by no means expensive as such things go.

It's available in any configuration of plugs you care to think of, including high current, Schuko, Figure-8, UK 3-pin, US 2-pin etc

Technicalities

Three 2 sq mm conductors made from silver-coated 99.9999% OFC (oxygen free copper) are used to carry the current. The dielectric covering is extruded Teflon and the conductors are given a rotational twist to improve RFI rejection.

IsoTek Evo 3

The Isotek EVO3 Premier sounded closest to my old MusicWorks mains cable, the latest version of which retails at around £350 for a 1.8m length.

A cotton filler reduces microphony and bolsters the internal strength of the cable and a paper wrap is used to secure the construction prior to the application of the flexible PVC jacket

The moulded IEC and three pin mains plugs are designed and made by Isotek, and the solid copper conducting components are coated in 24ct gold.

Comparisons

Ah, the 'sound' of mains cables. One of the more contentious issues in hifi!

How can mains cables affect the sound of a component? - I have no idea, but experience demands me to accept that they do. I could list a discouragingly large number of mains cables that spoil a component's sound for me.

I tend to keep several brands, each with their own sonic characteristics that suit some components but that do not necessarily synergise with others.

Here's a comparison between the Isotek cable and a couple of my established favourites

Nordost Magus (re-branded as Blue Heaven at around £150 for 1m) has been one of my 'keeper' mains cables for quite a while. As well as looking great with its lovely deep blue outer sheath, it also performs admirably sonically! It has a slightly relaxed but fluid take on the music; there's a natural flow and tonal richness that is very appealing. In comparison to the Isotek, though, it seems a bit too laid back, less tonally neutral and missing out on some of the excitement, boldness and solidity of more rhythmically propelled music.

The Isotek EVO3 Premier sounded closest to my old MusicWorks mains cable, the latest version of which retails at around £350 for a 1.8m length. Similarly



controlled and dynamic, it was actually quite difficult to tell them apart on small to medium scale music. When the music really gets going, though, and with higher powered amps like my 250wpc Krell, the benefits of the more expensive cable can be heard as a further expansion of dynamic freedom and heft. With a lower powered amp like a Topping TP-60 27wpc t-amp, or with low powered source components, differences of this kind were marginal at best.

Summary

All 3 of the power cables mentioned here are fine examples of the cable maker's art, and I would happily commend any and all of them to you. The Nordost has a bit more 'flavour', and that may suit your system or preferences. The MusicWorks is similarly neutral, defined and explicit as the Isotek, and is capable of taking a high powered amplifier's dynamic freedom even further - but it also costs several times as much!

So, the Isotek EVO3 Premier power cable is a bit of a no-brainer as far as I am concerned - the benefits of high end power cable design, but without the high price.

Jerry Jacobs

Wireworld Starlight 7 USB

The Wireworld Starlight 7 is a well constructed, flexible and pretty snazzy coloured cable. Sitting in the lower mid-price band of USB cables (£99.95 for a 1m length) it is the next up the Wireworld line to the multi-award winning Ultraviolet which is a cable which I had previously owned for a prolonged period of time with my Mac Mini due to its warm and pleasant easy listening character that is very favourable to digital playback.



I received two Starlight cables from The UK distributor; one had an ordinary type B connector on the end and the other with a mini B connector.

The cable is very easy to route around the back of a rack and due to it being flat, bends around other pieces of equipment and shelf edges very easily. The cable is lightweight, very well built and has nice gold connectors.

The Sound

Connecting the Starlight to my Mac and streaming music with Amarra 2.5 the cable has similar qualities of presentation as the UltraViolet but with a fair gain in detail and sparkle in the top end, a warm rounded mid-range leading into a firm bass, solid and full. I found the Ultraviolet to be much warmer throughout the range and not as revealing of smaller inner details as the Starlight.

Male vocals were strong and fleshed out and women's vocals had a good smoothness to their upper registers. Instruments had good timbre but not as naturally true as the likes of the higher priced TQ Black Diamond. Due to the warmer nature of the cable it can lack that extra little ring or rasp at the end of a note to give the most convincing of

performances but what it does put forward is an utterly musical and enjoyable presentation.

Dynamics from the cable are fairly average really, not huge and fatiguing nor too soft and gentle, so I may sound like a politician when I say they're just "nice".

I go into detail in my Q N K T C review about the DAC being fed by the Starlight with the mini B type connector and how the overall 'Class A' flavoured sound of the combination was extremely enjoyable and very musical so I won't touch on it too much here, although I will mention that I found the Star-

Wireworld Starlight 7 USB

light to be great with upper frequency detail and air which coupled with mid and lower end warmth sounded great.

Comparing the Chord Silver Plus with the Starlight7 into the TotalDAC was interesting. The Chord has more of an emphasis on a detail ridden sound - a bit more crash, wallop bang whilst the Starlight just cruises along in an easier fashion reproducing all the details I had heard from the more revealing Chord but in a less forceful and smoother manner. Hearing the Chord allows the listener to really pick out details and dynamics and on first inspection I thought 'there's more going on here' but hooking the Wireworld back up proved that it was a characterisation difference not a lack of ability. Deeper rolling extended bass was an advantage of the Starlight, a more natural rendition of an instruments trailing edge. The Chord is exciting and great for lower listening levels but for vocals and instruments the a Wireworld really explores the music better.

Once again in detail on the Resonance Labs Herus review I explore the Wireworld further, I concluded that out of all the USB cables I used I found the Starlight 7 to be a very musical match for the little DAC/amp adding a nice bit of smoothness to some quite revealing headphones I had partnered with the device.

The sound could be referred to as 'safe' but is also one of detail, balance and warmth.

Conclusion

The Wireworld Starlight performed admirably in my system using the two configurations sent to me and with the products tested. The sound could be referred to as 'safe' but is also one of detail, balance and warmth. Forgiving may be a good phrase to use with this cable - it has a very forgiving nature which takes away any edginess which digital equipment can inject into the system and also lends its hand to a similar take with poorer recordings.

The Ultraviolet was a great award winning cable but the Starlight is a bit of a leap ahead in detail retrieval and resolution, yet still having that gentler, easy to listen to character than that of the Chord Silverplus.

Overall the Wireworld Starlight is a solid performer at a great price point.

Recommended for build quality and sound per pound.

Dan Worth



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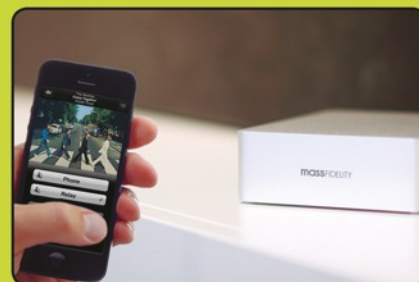
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Astin Trew Concord

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

Somewhat different to other USB leads of this nature the Astin Trew has a patent which covers the power supply, which is quite intriguing and leaves one wondering about the exact technology utilised within the boundaries of the patents broader description. The cosmetics of the power supply itself are very appealing indeed, a fantastically well constructed design with quite beautiful lines. In the blurb from Astin Trew it's stated that the power supply will sit neatly at the rear of the rack or on the floor, I quite proudly had it sat next to the Mac so it was clearly visible on a shelf as it looked great.

The cable which comes with the Concord is user selectable on purchase. There is an option to have what I would deem 'the standard' cable - which is a USB split into the two portions (data and power) with data connecting the music source direct to the DAC

Astin Trew Concord

and the power having a DIN plug which firmly connects to the power supply.

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

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

The Sound - using the Standard cable

First up I plugged the Astin Trew Concord into my Mac using the 'standard' cable, fed into the Totaldac D1 Tube - I used a standard power cable.

Creating a usual run of the mill playlist in Amarra 2.5 I sat back and began to have a quick listen not expecting much due to the unit being new and not burned-in yet.

Tones were nice and relaxed and unforced, there was an ease to the sound, a silky flow to the music and, most importantly, the nasty upper bass hump that the Mac has was smoothed out beautifully giving a far

The midrange especially had an added openness and vocal depth was greater, the top end had a little more air and was actually a little bit smoother and refined but did seem a little sparklier with a cleaning up of grain.

better balance to the sound overall. There was possibly a little more openness to come from the sound and I felt a bit more width and depth could be a plus point, so I left the Mac switched on with Amarra on repeat for four days in order to put about 100 hours on the unit before listening again. So, four days later and time to listen again, I turned on the amp and walked away concerning myself with other "to do's" and allowed the amp to warm up for a little over an hour at a moderate to low volume. Walking back into the room during Chris Jones' 'Angel From Montgomery' which is one of my



Astin Trew Concord

favourites from the Moonstruck album, I was extremely pleased with the sound that presented itself.

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

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

Gutsier vocals had a cleaner lower-mid to them with the Concord sounding more natural and truer. There was also a better range of perceivable detail. Bass notes also had more detail and conveyed a more substantial layering effect after cleaning up of this dirtier area of the Macs presentation.

With the nature of its presentation becoming very apparent and even though not my first choice of music, I could imagine that the Astin Trew would be excellent with classical music. I have the odd album and compilation along with the option of Spotify, so I played some classical tracks and was correct in my assumption. Instruments once again had a natural timbre and reverb, soundstage placement was correct and dynamic transients were wonderful. The ease of approach the Concord has and it's openness really (and to my surprise) allowed dynamic shifts to slam, leaving smaller details to flow in open space with the timing being very much on point - no muddiness or confusion of layering in busier passages was audible

and I felt if anything that the dirty power supply of the Mac itself would be only contributing a smallish percentage to what could be an even more engaging performance.

Using the Enhanced Digital Output software on the Squeezebox Touch (SBT) connected to the Totaldac I connected the Astintrew Concord. I thought that this would be an interesting test as the SBT already uses a very high quality Paul Hynes power supply.

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

The Option Cable

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

So what would these two flavours be like once combined?

Into play come the 'option' cable from Astin Trew, the one which I mentioned before which can utilise a listeners own USB cable for the data side of things.

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

Dan Worth



LessLoss DFPC Signature Power Cables

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



LessLoss Audio is an American/Lithuanian based company headed by Louis Motek and a team of individuals who are extremely passionate - bordering on bonkers about audio!

The LessLoss website has enough technical information, graphs and tables about their products to give even Steven Hawking a headache!

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

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

The Products Under Review

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

LessLoss DFPC Signature Power Cables

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

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

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

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

So you can now imagine the considerable size of the Signatures! Each one I received was 1.5m and to be honest I expected them to weigh a little more than they actually did. The flexibility of the cable is fantastic and very unexpected, as soon as I looked at them in their packaging my immediate thoughts were “oh Christ I’m going to have problems here!” But it simply wasn’t the case at all.

Burning In

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

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

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

Every few days I would take the fourth cable and plug it back into the amp and have a listen to the system briefly. After about 75 hours the cables opened up further revealing more expression to the midrange and air in the upper registers and after about 150 hours the bass began to fill out further too. A matter of about two weeks in total passed by before I sat down to have what I would call my final listening days where I noticed a greater liquidity to the midrange and a slightly more fleshed out upper-bass lower-mid. Top-end was a little more atmospheric and controlled but during these days of critical listening I really didn’t notice any further changes.

The Sound

Playing Loreena McKennits 'Raglan Road' it was immediately clear that the midrange of the Signatures were highly developed, her vocal sits back in the soundstage and has a

strong projection of width which can be localised from it's source point in the performance. Her tones were very liquid and silky and the upper registers had a quality of control that gripped me into the performance. The album is of a live performance and the atmospheric presence of the stage could be felt - airy and spacious.

Contrasting her vocal with a male artist such as Nils Lögren and the 'Acoustic Live' album, the fleshed out lower-midrange is expressed very naturally indeed and the li-



LessLoss DFPC Signature Power Cables

quidity heard previously didn't wash over his tonal character.

The speed and attack of Nils' guitar solo in 'Keith Don't Go' highlighted a strong degree of control in the upper frequencies and the layering of decay on notes where a fresh note started was easily heard. I felt I have heard the guitar with a little more richness to lower notes in the past, maybe a slightly more accentuation of cabinet tone on a lower notes, but the ease of presentation across the board made for such an interesting and harmonically complex listen focus was drawn primarily to other areas of the music.

Chris Jones' 'Angel From Montgomery' is one of the most addictive of tracks for me, an extremely musical and enjoyable piece which is actually fairly complex in micro details and harmonic artifacts on a nice system, it's one of these songs you can have a good singalong to when busy with something else, but when you sit down and really analyse it, it has some good key aspects to use for auditioning components. The Signatures made good work of the extension in bass, again a little gentler or easier in the upper bass but informative nonetheless. Chris' vocal comes across wonderfully with the enhancement the cable adding to the quality of midrange sculpture. The cable also seems to extract a certain magic from the ambiance of the recording, helping to give a natural nature and almost lifelike take on the music.

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

I went on to play a variety of dance music to look further into the bass. Playing music from Tiesto, Mikado and Armin Van Buren gave good slap and kick to the music. Firm bass registered, as did extended bass notes, but there wasn't a real solid driving force to the sound at lower levels, crank up the wick and the cleanliness, pace and kick of those upper bass registers were fantastic, a real metallic feel. Ambient harmonics and dynamics were great and the processed nature of the music really showed off the layering ability of the Signatures.

Listening to some of the big film soundtracks from the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra the Signatures displayed a window to each instrument that was nev-

The LessLoss DFPC Signature Power Cables have a sonic signature of ease and stability; they open a window to individual portions of the music yet still remain locked on to the performance as a whole.

er closed and allowed for reverbs and decay from the neighbouring musicians to wash through with me noting that complexity of rhythm and structure is a key accomplishment of the LessLoss cables. Cymbals shimmered and were well controlled with the first hit but had enough presence to loosen and dissipate the sound correctly. Large dynamic shifts (in bass especially) sat across the performance rather than explode in height and confusion which linked nicely with the atmospheric presence.

Conclusions

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

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

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

Dan Worth

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

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

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

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

MS HD Power Plugs

grip, but my eyes were drawn towards the rear of the plug (the smoked plastic part) where I could see through the outer body at what looked like three larger than normal conductor tightening screws side by side and horizontally along the inside.

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

The plugs meet every British Standard and are fully compliant with all the necessary regulations - this has been a controversial point amongst some enthusiasts with regards some UK plugs that have been marketed as suitable for audiophile use.

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

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

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

Fitting a Thick Cable

The DH Labs AC Power Plus cable which is made up of 12 gauge conductors fit with ease and the thicker 10 gauge conductors from the companies Red Wave also fit nicely, so what more can I say than I was extremely impressed. The pathways to the pins were unobstructed and wide enough to take a substantial thickness of cable without any trouble at all. Three screws secure the three conductors, there are

The plugs meet every British Standard and are fully compliant with all the necessary regulations.

two screws to clamp and two screws to fit the case back together - it really couldn't be easier.

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

Sound

As far as the sound is concerned I can only submit my view of the gold plated version I received, against the Furutech 1363G with both sporting a 10 amp Bussman fuse. I found the MS HD to be a bit fuller sounding on the Red Wave cable with a tiny bit more weight which had a nice effect on the treble. There really isn't much in it to be honest and one could argue the Furutech had a bit more air in the top end, but then it has been used for a long period of time now and fully “burned in” so I guess it would really come down to styling and cost at the end of the day as to which you would prefer to spend your money on.

Conclusion

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

Highly recommended!

Dan Worth

RFC Pluto II Interconnects



The first product to win the Hifi Pig Outstanding Product Award since its introduction, the £105 RFC Pluto II interconnects certainly wowed some.

I reviewed the original Reference Fidelity Components (RFC) Pluto cables for Hifi Pig some while back and I think it is fair to say that I gave them a rave review! I know of quite a few folks who subsequently bought a pair and were very happy indeed with their purchases.

It is only right to remind you that I know Paul, the proprietor of RFC, well. But that cuts no ice as far as reviewing his gear is concerned - as always, I tell it like I hear it!

The Pluto Mk2's use the same conductor cables as the originals, but take advantage of the latest RCA

connector technology with the new Eichmann Harmony copper plugs.

Technicalities

Eichmann claims the following features and benefits for the Harmony plugs;

- Signal/Ground pins are pure Copper and >101% IACS (not Tellurium Copper (95% IACS) or Brass (28% IACS).
- Signal/Ground pin optimization to enhance electron flow
- Signal/Ground pins are now much stronger and shaped like a tag, which makes soldering small/large/multiple wires, very easy.
- Signal/Ground Anti-Short shield has been added between the Signal/Ground solder tags.
- Signal/Ground pins are arranged to maintain a maximised distance from each other, and the utilised foil technology ensures that Capacitive, Inductive, and EMF effects are minimized.
- The Head Assembly jaw structure has been redesigned and mechanically improved, to allow an easy snap-like connection to a Phono/RCA socket, ensuring the ultimate connection with easy removal.

RFC Pluto II Interconnects

- Ground pin includes thread teeth which ensures that a metal Housing is star-point grounded.
- The Housing Assembly uses 2 screws to retain and secure the Cable.
- Extremely high temperature melting point thermoplastic polymer has been utilized.

If you're a technical specialist the above will certainly mean more to you than it does to me, but RFC says that connection to sockets is much improved ... more positive and plug is more durable, they are lower in capacitance, too, for a cleaner signal and use pure (5 or 6 nines pure) copper rather than using the commonly found pitch or tellurium based coppers, which has then been silver plated.

Oh, and personally I think they look damn sexy, too!

The Sound

Well, the proof of the audiophile pudding is, as ever, in the listening

They are stunningly transparent cables. A new level of detail has been resolved for me in recordings I have played dozens of times.

Bass is deep, powerful, vibrant and superbly defined. No fat or flab, just the music.

They lock on to rhythms like a hungry python, just amazingly foot-tapping.

Imaging is naturally focused and in-the-room 3D.

Treble is extended and pure, not harsh at all, sibilance is naturally presented.

This is one of those happy occasions when comparisons become difficult, because the component is unequaled in my experience, so superlatives become mandatory!

The Pluto Mk2 are not a 'nice' cable like some, colouring and smoothing or accentuating the signal in a euphonic manner. They just allow the most transparent pathway for the music signal that I have yet heard.

They take the excellent Pluto mk1 and just do it all even better.

At £105 for a 1m pair the value for money is completely out of sight.

They are the best cables I have heard at any price and I have bought the review pair. No way was RFC getting these back!

Build Quality - 10/10

Sound Quality - 10/10

Value for money - 10/10

Overall - 10/10

Price when reviewed - £105

Jerry Jacobs

The Pluto MK2 is what I would deem as a highly accomplished and resolute cable for the money.

Following Jerry's recent enthusiastic review of the RFC Pluto MK2 interconnects I contacted Paul for a second listen, which is now common practice at Hifi Pig when a product receives a score of 8.5 or over overall.

The cables arrived the following day sporting the new KLE (Eichmann'esque) plugs which look and feel great and were an extremely snug fit into my amp and dac, which is how a quality plug should be made.

Sound wise, I have a few cables I can compare them to, which due to Jerry's comments will be ones in much higher price brackets and to get straight to the point I know many readers have been asking 'are they the best cable I have ever heard at any price point?' No they're not in my opinion but do read on...

The Pluto MK2 is what I would deem as a highly accomplished and resolute cable for the money.

It's a bit forward in the top end and very clean sounding. Midrange is very much of the same flavour, which would have left the cable to sound extremely lean if it wasn't for the ample serving of bass.

The bass notes are fairly extended but lack the overall drive, presence and information conveyed with the Oriton Symphony Orange cables which also hold a strong coherent spread and never sacrifice tonal complexity for perceived resolution, which with some cables equates to an emphasis on top end registers or a certain brightness which is slightly evident in the Plutos.

RFC Pluto II Interconnects

Sound staging is exceptional with these RFC cables. Central focus is strong and soundstage width and height is a great attribute to the cables. Indeed I have heard cables costing way more than the new Plutos that are not as keen to spread their wings as wide and some other cables which have the ability to do so but can mask the finer details with overwhelming coloration.

My Audioquest Sky interconnects, have a hugely developed harmonic graduation to rolling off room boundaries beyond the physical parameters and explore micro dynamics in a far more developed manner whilst still drawing the listener in the centre of the stage and pulling your gaze back towards the next cue whilst your following the decay of the previous note. The Plutos show the bigger picture so convincingly but just don't have the fine inner details on the further points of the stage.

There is a definite sharpness to the sound of the Plutos, very similar in presentation to the Acoustic Zen Matrix Ref II, in fact I'd go as far to say in many systems I have heard with the AZ's in I think the better control of the Plutos leading edges would lean me more towards them rather than the AZ's which cost considerably more.

I would say that the AZ's have a little more weight and presence to vocals but the Plutos have an encapsulating effect to them which is unmistakably awesome. As I mentioned before they don't have the complexity of the Sky's spread/resolution, but the direct sphere of sound which I find myself sat in is absolutely incredible - you could argue that its three dimensional capabilities and imaging is right up there, never over exaggerated width wise but front to back I'd firmly say that they do it better than most other cables - I'm throwing in the mix here and I believe that this where the MBL's that Jerry has are making this cable sound pure magic.

To accompany the marvelous soundstage is the sheer control that the Plutos have and their sibilant free nature which makes for an extremely accurate yet non analytical sound.

Bandwidth registers the top end miles beyond many cables I've heard costing many times the price. However, I would have liked it to have more refinement and the ability to have discerned the higher and lower frequencies with more rendering, displaying notes with more individual tonal detail to deem it 'the best cable at any price point'.

The cables have fantastic speed and timing, one off the best cable I've heard for absolute precision in this area is the Graditech Kides - the Kides have a better rendition of inner detail, being more accurate to each detail, instrument or vocalist. Although the Plutos once again have a trait of a high-end cable their overall capabilities are masked a little, but I am finding this slight trade off a small factor in comparison with its sheer imaging capabilities.

I could sit here all evening and keep throwing comparisons at the Plutos, as I could any cable I might add so I think it's best to now concentrate on what I think about them as a whole.

The Plutos delve into the music way further than their price could even begin to suggest, there is huge amounts of detail which manages to remain strong through the central focus and can still remain prominent enough to fill a huge soundstage convincingly, displaying great height, width and three dimensionality. The absolute rendering of the details is not as 'grown up' as some of the big boys and where as some individual frequencies are displayed perfectly they don't all have that trait and one minute sparkles will sound incredibly clear and natural and the next a guitar rasp would sound a little muted, but in comparison with cost the Plutos take bounds and leaps to push themselves closer to the high end completion that no other cable anywhere near this price point has ever achieved for me.

Conclusion

There is no doubt in my mind that the Pluto MK2 from RFC is ridiculous value for money. Its performance is second to none in its class and can even play with the big boys without being out of its depth. The overall refinement of the detail it displays is slightly lacking, but its overall presentation and magically immersive soundstage will have many people trading in their more expensive cables for a pair I'm sure.

In their price range, popular mainstream branded cables simply sit in awe of the Pluto's capabilities and comparing them to the rest in this review should be a joke.

Build quality - 8.5/10

Sound quality - 8/10

Value for money 9/10

Overall 8.5/10

Highly recommended for their bewildering performance to price ratio.

Dan Worth

SKOGRAND CABLES

Your final cable upgrade.



Skogrand Centaurus A Speaker Cables and Interconnects

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



The Skogrand Cables workshop is situated all the way up a mountainside at the end of a steeply climbing dust road in the rural parts of Eastern Norway not too far from the Olympic village of Lillehammer. It is a place of peace and the quiet and serene surroundings offer a harmonic backdrop to the humble building housing the Skogrand team.

As a child owner Knut Skogrand was brought up listening to classical music on vinyl with his Father and it was his Father that taught him how to feel the moods, colours, patterns, dynamics, overall structure and intent of the creator of the music.

Knut says;

"I am originally – and at the core of my being – a musician. Working as a musician for decades I have performed within many settings live, in studios and at rehearsals, always feeling a kind of urgent lack of silence. Growing up in the peaceful countryside and living in the serene mountain hills of Norway I have grown accustomed to filtering sound through a mesh of tranquility and sonorous peace – having sounds around me standing out as meticulously shaped entities from a perfectly silent background. This is something I have strived to reconstruct in my musical thinking and performance"

Skogrand Cables is supported by two branches of the Norwegian government for their global research and findings in the field of effective and unpolluted energy transfer.

SC Centaurus A (Speaker Cables)

The Speaker Cables are very large in diameter, they are thick, heavy and need a little careful management when routing. Their construction utilises 12awg copper with a complex array of air and Teflon structured dielectrics leaving one part of the cables two twisted cores thicker to the touch than the other.

Replacing the Audioquest K2 speaker cables with the Centaurus A into my system was quite simple considering the dominating size of them. The small spacers at the each end of the cable act like bending notches allowing the user to gently bend the cable to aid routing at set increments for ease of connection which was great for my amp as my rack is fairly close to the wall.

Routing of the rest of the cable isn't as easy but there is a good amount of flexibility but there is no chance of hitting right angles with the main bulk of the cable.

Once sited and the system switched on keeping Orion's interconnects and power cables in place to single out the Skogrand's feeding my Ayons from the Emille, I began to play a few tracks from the SSD

Skogrand Centaurus A Speaker Cables and Interconnects

fed, modified Squeezebox Touch into the Totaldac d1 tube.

Initial impressions are one of a clean and delicate highly resolving sound, a little 'over airy' with a very slightly forward top end and a taught and light bass compared with the K2's. The Centaurus A also seemed to excel with speed and rhythm.

Over a period of about 200 hours I felt comfortable that the cables were burned in and ready for some serious listening. After this time I found the cables were retaining all the qualities of my initial listening experiences with the plus point of the top end thickening up to give a more solid higher frequency sparkle and cleaner, tighter edge.

I will say that although the cable seemed a little more relaxed and even more resolving and more harmonically developed, I wouldn't go as far to say I felt that there were dramatic changes, especially in the tonal balance of the cable which was still clean, tight and fast.

The cables strengths lie in detail retrieval, delicacy and the ability to express through to the listener harmonically accurate nuances and transparency with ease and an unmistakable finesse.

Listening to Keisha White 'The Weakness In Me' her vocal was so refined and sensual, piano notes were accurate in tempo and had good leading edges, although I felt they lacked a little fullness in undertones which is a difficult task for most setups to recreate absolutely correctly. Bass showed a slight lightness to me, yes it was textured and extended but it didn't have the overall presence and richness of tone which I am used to hearing in my room.

A raspy almost scalping of the strings could be heard on the acoustic version of Fleetwood Mac's 'Big Love' which in my reference cabling setup doesn't quite have that edge as cleanly defined as it has a somewhat richer tone. Each pluck of a string had a twang which could only be described as having more in the room appeal. The speed of the cables really came through on this track through the guitar solo as it did with the intense solo on 'Keith Don't Go' by Nils Lofgren a track which I always play for speed and accuracy tests. I found the bottom, most fleshed out notes were slightly sacrificed for the crispness of the strings leading edge accuracy and the pin point imaging of the guitar. Vocals on both tracks fell into the same scenario, pronunciation of each word and phrase was clean, completely non sibilant and expressive, but the tonal characteristic lent to a more

clean nature whereas my system is tuned to lean more to the warmer side of neutral which is more to my personal taste.

Swapping the Ayon loudspeakers out for the Frugel3 speakers, which are around a 10th of the cost but with a very different tonal character, was pleasantly received. The more textural presentation of instruments came through wonderfully with the Centaurus A speaker cables in the system. The expression of notes and vocals with the 1/4 wave enclosure were conveyed more naturally and the cleanliness and brighter side of neutral tone favoured the Frugels better than the already clean sounding Ayons.

Imaging and layering of sounds was superbly accurate with both speakers and harmonically both have a huge spread of micro detail, but now using the single drivers there seemed to be a more fleshed out tonality to the sound and the speed of the cables 'hurried up' the bass response of the cabinets wonderfully giving more attack to a speaker design which is renowned for having a slower and less taught bass than a conventional design.

The Frugels don't do Electronica or rock very well and in my system I didn't feel that the Skogrands did either, but for vocal and instrument reproduction a single driver design hooked up with these cables was an absolute match made in Heaven!

I could imagine very large multi driver speakers to have a wonderful touch with the Skogrands with their natural spls and horns would also be an absolute joy to listen to as well as single driver speakers.

I don't think my ceramics were the best match for the Centaurus A speaker cable but there are so many attributes such as the airy detailed and delicate top end, the beautiful midrange and soundstaging which absolutely shone, there was just the shift of the tonal balance the wrong side of neutral that didn't suit them.

SCI Centaurus A (Interconnects)

The complimentary Centaurus A interconnects are constructed from 22awg solid copper conductors in Teflon tubing with a suspended shield of tinned copper lightly twisted up the length and with gold plated plugs.

The overall size of the interconnects is bewildering compared to their tiny conductors and this is due to the dielectrics and shielding used. They are fairly stiff and need a good 6 inches plus of space behind the connected equipment before they will bend

Skogrand Centaurus A Speaker Cables and Interconnects

around safely to another piece of kit. So beware as smaller Dacs and headphone amps will need to telephone the tower to be given clearance for take off!

Once again singling the cables out by removing the speaker cables and adding my Audioquest K2 back into the system (after around 150 or so hours of burn in time) the cables displayed a very well balanced and solid sound, if not a little touch of bass lightness much as the speaker cables did. Never sacrificing the taut and extended performance of the lower notes the interconnects have a great ability to inform the listener of soundstage placement in busier brassier passages as if the room had been further damped to rid any wobble and of bloom.

Exploring the midrange with some stronger vocals I expected to hear the slightly leaner character and the tipping of the scales towards the brighter aide of neutral as I did with the matching speaker cables - either this or a warmer tone which would compliment the aforementioned speaker cables.

In fact I didn't hear either of these expected characteristics! Instead I was presented with an almost dead on neutral and clean presentation, again with an in-

formative amount of layering and spread. Vocals were a little larger than pin point which allowed for more perceived depth and height without losing focus and were conveyed naturally.

I like a little bit of warmth in the lower mids to tickle my own tastes and I didn't find this in either of the cables. However the clean, controlled and strongly edged flavour of the sound (which can stop and start on knife edge and has a certain quality of silkiness rather than the warmer feeling I like) never sacrificed texture in the music.

Again I'm feeling that the cleanliness of the Ayons is not best suited to the slightly cleaner Skogrand interconnects as they do like a little bit more body to sound completely cohesive to me and I would imagine some good paper cones would be more of a suitable match.

Using the Frugels was a better balance and the slight lack bass of their cabinets really tightened up wonderfully and created a far more detailed and developed presentation to their character.

Using both cables together into the Frugels (while we're on the subject) was nothing short of beautiful.



The Skogrand Centaurus A are like a good single malt... delicate on the palette, able to convey each detail of the ingredients and flowing across the palette like silk.

The textured and expressive nature in the midrange was a joy, especially allowing for previously mentioned guitar solos and vocals to take on a silkiness to the sound that I've never heard in such a clean manner before. For me it seems to be a key characteristic and standout attribute of the Skogrands. I can't say I've heard a cable combination that can achieve this combination as well before without sounding bright at the same time.

The top end mirrors the midrange perfectly in its attributes and nature. It's open, transparent and airy, fast and clean with a silky leading edge and a very 'clear' and 'articulate' way of decaying notes without distracting the listener from the main body of the music.

I found the bass in both cables to be identical in isolation and when paired together - obviously a purpose made choice of characteristic by Skogrand.

I would conclude that using the Skogrand speaker cables and interconnects together does give a little more of a balanced presentation from midband upwards. The combination fleshing out the vocals slightly, gaining more of a pronounced and precise timing to instruments and I much preferred the cue-

ing and decay of instruments which for me with just the speaker cables was a little aerated and softer in precision and tonal representation.

The absolute balance of the sound for me as a whole was more palatable and enjoyable, although bass notes were refined and had fantastic finesse for my own tastes in my own system and I would have enjoyed a little more emphasis on drive rather than flow.

Conclusion

The Skogrand Centaurus A are like a good single malt... delicate on the palette, able to convey each detail of the ingredients and flowing across the palette like silk. They are excellent in absolute finesse and display details in one of the most non-offensive and yet highly resolving nature that I have heard from a cable at this price point.

For my own personal tastes I would have enjoyed a little more of a fleshed out lower midband and upper bass and the whole presentation was just a little too beautiful and graceful for me with the Ayons. Using the single drivers the synergy was more palatable and a warmer more robust speaker suits their character better for me.

Encapsulating the music and the listener is their trick, they are very seductive and alluring, displaying a wide, deep and high image that doesn't leave any voids or blank spots in the listening room. They have a way of energising the listening space with absolute grace and precision.

If you can accommodate their very generously proportioned size and pride your systems attributes on vocal representation, clear and clean imaging, precision and realism, the Centaurus A's will enthrall you.

Build Quality - 8.5/10

Sound Quality - 8.5/10

Value for money - 8/10

Overall - 8.3/10

Speaker Cables - \$4,750 - 3m Pair

Interconnects - \$3,250 - 1m pair

Recommended for its beautiful finesse, ultra quiet background and encapsulating characteristics.

Dan Worth

Since this review the whole of the Skogrand range of cables has been renamed.

Tellurium Q Ultra Black Interconnects

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



British cable manufacturer Tellurium Q have quickly gained a reputation for making great sounding cables. The Ultra Black interconnect tested here cost £380 for a one metre stereo pair.

I've actually had a chance previously to try the Ultra Blacks from Tellurium Q in my system, however it was at the same time as I had the opportunity to listen to the Iridium amp and so in all honesty everything else went out the window and my concentration was unintentionally fully focused on the Iridium and nothing else for the time I had with it.

So now with nothing else to stray my ears from the target I once again have the Ultra Black interconnects in for my undivided attention and review.

First of all I'll pass judgement on their build quality which is very nice, flexible and they look sleek. I like the locking Tellurium Q TeCu RCAs as they are lightweight and low mass, something that some manufacturers fail to address all too often.

Routing them into the system is completely simple and I didn't need to pull the rack out into the middle of the room to accommodate them or employ a two man team to bend them around to the neighbouring component.

Tellurium Q pride themselves on a simple "suck it and see" philosophy when offering their products rather than filling the mind with jargon and science to attain a somewhat preconceived idea of what to expect, so let's switch on and have a listen...

THE SOUND

Tellurium Q Ultra Black Interconnects

The first impression I had of the UB (Ultra Black) was how strong and focused the central focus was, how projected the vocals were and how clean the midrange was as a whole.

Bass notes are very full, a tad dry and with a great amount of weight. Bass extension rolls out separately to the punch, a beat can be heard and before you think “is that it” all of a sudden a rolling wave of extension spreads out across the room.

Top end is a little more relaxed than a lot of cables I've heard, it's all there but the mids dominate a little more and there isn't a complete evenness or balance from the treble through to the upper mids. The cables render vocals strongly and there isn't that upper-mid treble harshness or glare that a lot of cables suffer from. It's a very different presentation and my ears took a little while to get used to the sound as it's so different to the Oriton Orange Symphonies that I use on a day to day basis (which have a far more relaxed midrange) but the UB really showed off some amazing details in the centre stage and completely placed the performance in front of the listener without an artificial spread or unnatural interpretation of the performance.

It's easy to imagine a singer at the forefront of the stage and the band and/or speaker system being placed around the edges of the stage and further to the rear of the main focus of the vocalist.

Bass extension rolls out separately to the punch, a beat can be heard and before you think “is that it” all of a sudden a rolling wave of extension spreads out across the room.



Tellurium Q Ultra Black Interconnects

I always have issues with cables that suck out the midrange and try to give an enhanced depth to the soundstage allowing for smaller finer details to sit closer to the listener to give an artificial “wow factor”. Personally I'd rather have the main artist at the forefront and be exposed as the star of the performance. Don't get me wrong, there's bags of detail being conveyed by the cables here but not to the expense of over shadowing the vocals.

Also during first listening I kind of thought to myself “is this sounding a little disjointed”, but after exploring many different genres and vocals from both male and female artist I grew to appreciate what I was hearing.

There is a certain quality to the separation of the music with the Ultra Black interconnects - rather than having an overall wall of notes that blend into one another (with time smearing or added/extra decay) there were clear definitions and a quality of air and space around the individual sounds.

Vocals are strongly projected from centre stage, accompanying instruments have volume levels relative to their depth on the stage and lower bass notes have that slight delay before their respective sound waves roll out to the listener. I perceived some notes as being completely independent of the performance in various places in the room and they seemed to have little initial connection to the music but once adjusted I gained a respect for this completely spatial and defined effect - if the notes were supposed to be over there then that's where they were heard.

It seems as if the Ultra Black has such precision with regards to timing that it gives a presentation which is very different to virtually every cable I've ever heard, no bloom, added decay, colouration or drag.

It's simply on point, to the point and all there for you to hear.

I'm not going to add a conclusion to this review, I will just add that the UB is a cable of very different characteristics to any I've ever heard and it took me a little adjusting to this sound, but I have a great respect for what they do and they certainly stand out from the crowd with their unique character.

Now if this sounds like something that would suit you then do what Tellurium Q suggest and try it for yourself.

Build Quality - 8.5/10
Sound Quality 8 /10

Vocals are strongly projected from centre stage, accompanying instruments have volume levels relative to their depth on the stage and lower bass notes have that slight delay before their respective sound waves roll out to the listener.

Value for Money 8.5/10
Overall - 8.3/10

Recommended for their bold and unique approach to reproducing music accurately and with great timing.

Price at time of review - £380 - 1m Pair

Dan Worth

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



The MS-E01 distribution block has six upwards pointing rhodium plated sockets arranged around its elongated triangular shaped all aluminium body. The end plate has a standard iec input rather than the 16amp horizontal pinned design of others similar in style. It costs £450.

Next to the iec connector is a push button circuit breaker rated at 20amps which is a far more transparent feature than fusing the unit.

The block is beautifully designed and constructed and its crowning glory is the highly polished gold branding plate, etched with the company's logo.

The unit comes in at slightly over 5kg and feels very substantial. On the underside there are 3 rounded brass spiked cones which are removable if chosen allowing the unit to be seated on its rubber feet. This is a useful feature and interchangeable dependent on either the surface you're standing the unit on or personal preference.

Also supplied for review was the MS high current MS-30PUK, a thick, well constructed, silver plated copper, shielded mains cable with a rhodium plug.

THE SETUP

Placing the E01 block on my wooden rack with its brass cones in place I connected it in using the Ori-ton AC-5 mains cable which usually feeds my Isol-8 Axis Powerline DC Blocking distribution unit. I have used many different units from the likes of PS Au-

MS HD Power MS-E01 Power Distribution Mains Filter and MS-40PUK High Current Mains Cable

dio, Isotek, Dezorel, Vertex AQ, Power Inspired, Russ Andrews/Kimber, Black Rhodium and Ayre amongst others and my greatest success has been with the Isol-8 which I do tend to recommend frequently coming in at around the £500 mark. It's terrific value for money and has been a better performer for me against far more expensive units of varying technologies ie regenerators, filters and conditioners.

For initial set up I left the Emille Ki40-L integrated plugged directly into the wall as usual and used Orton AC-3 cables from the MS Filter to power the modded squeezebox and the Totaldac d1 tube.

THE SOUND

The first piece of music I played was 'All Of Me' by John Legend and immediately I stood back and thought 'wow, this is more holographic'. Legend's vocal was rendered with a quality which I could only describe as organic, the end phrasing of each word had a breath of such natural throatiness that I have not heard using my Isol-8 Axis. Piano notes hung in the air for perceivable longer period of time and sounded more accurate and true to the instrument.

Dynamics, details and harmonics were just dashing around in all directions and what was so special was that this never became exhausting in the slightest.

The initial feeling was that adding the conditioner wasn't like opening a window to the music it was more like opening up a window to the artist.

I played the duet 'Say Something' from Christina Aguilera and A Great Big World deciding to stay with recent popular music I'd been listening to during the course of the day. I found myself completely engrossed in the music - more so than I have done with my current system previously. The vocals were



so expressive and meaningful, piano, violin and bass were totally magical and the airy nature to the soundstage conveyed that the music was set in an intimate scene. There was a definite finesse to the softer side of Christina's voice which is a rarity on many albums from her.

The E01 seemed to make sense of the music adding a greater sense of appreciation for my system, conveying notes and harmonics which I have simply not heard produced in such a manner before in this listening space and making more efficient use of the room.

Playing a range of Dance and Electronica pushed the rooms boundaries so far that the room didn't seem to exist anymore, all that was left was a front to back, left to right encapsulation of absolutely holographic, detailed rhythmic beats and rhythms, a glorious mass of intricate detail, dynamic rushes sweeping the void my system had carved into the atmosphere with such complexity I can only describe it by referring it to visiting the French Science Museum and experiencing 4D technology.

Dynamics, details and harmonics were just dashing around in all directions and what was so special was that this never became exhausting in the slightest.

I had a friend come over as I had to involve someone else in the excitement that I felt towards the improvement the unit has given the system. After he had stopped looking around for hidden surround speakers he just sat there and said "it sounds ridiculously incredible. What have you done to the setup?" When I showed him the MS E01 he just stood there with a blank look on his face and I said 'honestly, that's all I've changed'. He still continued examine the rest of the components on the rack and cables, looked at me and just sat back down staring into the centre of the soundstage whilst I went and made a drink with a grin.

The beautiful saxophone solo by Candy Dulfer on 'Nikki's Dream' Live in Amsterdam again conveyed excellent emotion, a trueness to the soundstage and concert hall acoustics with reverbs manifesting as I felt they should have being seated a few rows back of centre stage. Similarly the electric guitar solo was smooth and echoed through the room decaying tremendously as each note cut through the last and the odd tighter pluck held a very different space slightly bouncing towards the left rear of the room.

**The MS-E01
filtered
distribution unit is
a product which
is extremely well
constructed from
high-end parts
with great
attention to
detail.**

When both musicians joined forces and began playing together I could feel the rush of excitement in the crowd as if I was sat there.

A common trait of many filtering conditioning appliances is a brightness, a leanness, a lack of dynamics or a sucked out midrange whereas the MS E01 only adds spatial awareness, more natural tonality, timbre and an overall lifelike appeal coupled with an absolutely silent background which allows decays, smaller harmonics and that magical breath of a vocalist which people spend thousands in other areas of the system to obtain.

'Swinging on the Tree of Life' Eric Komar and 'Mi Shebeirach' Debbie Friedman (two tracks produced by Craig Taubman) expresses the timbres and tonality of instruments against the dark background allowing strings, piano and woodwind to really tell the story of the song so elegantly without being pretentious.

The E01 from MS HD Power almost seems like it has the intelligence to adapt itself to the musical gen-

MS HD Power MS-E01 Power Distribution Mains Filter and MS-40PUK High Current Mains Cable

re and give sonic benefits which make it more interesting and enjoyable. Vocals have breath and tone, instruments are true to the engineered construction, intimate passages have refinement and hard beats have drive and rhythm.

Listening to Chris Jones' 'Angel From Montgomery' clearly showed the enhanced soundstage attributes I have talked about, with air and space between instruments (and around the vocal) being greatly improved and the soundstage appearing more realistic and taller in comparison to the Isol-8.

ADDING THE MS CABLE

Supplied with the distribution filter was a MS-40PUK mains cable as recommended by MS HD Power for its high current capabilities. The cable is an added cost of £450 and is constructed from 6N Silver plated Copper in an all shielded design. It's extremely thick and solidly made with MS Rhodium UK plug and IEC.

Switching out the higher current Oriton cable, which also use MS plugs, I began to troll through the music previously mentioned and a range of other tracks I had been previously listening too.

The overall sense of the music was still there, although in comparison to the Oriton cables (£795) the MS 40 had a slightly warmer and bloomier midrange whereas the Oriton is more focused and more refined and natural to the vocal presentation and has a more holographic sensation to the soundstage.

Drive of lower notes was similar yet slightly more rounded in bass presentation, although layering and control was marvellously informative.

Higher end notes were still airy and the soundstage involvement was still terrific, the cable is just slightly smoother throughout.

Comparing to the \$700 DH Labs Red Wave mains cable showed the MS to give a wonderfully central focus just a handful of rows from the performers. In comparison the DH Labs was very much more upfront and its overall presentation was heavily detail driven. The DH Labs is an impressive cable, but I felt the richer smoother tones of the MS 40 made for a more musical and intimate listening experience with a delicate approach to recreating smaller details with generosity and finesse.

The MS 40P is quite similar in presentation to the Harmonic Technology Fantasy AC10 with proportions of front soundstage performance depth and de-

tail leading to an unforced and easy to appreciate cable with no nasties.

I am still a firm believer of running the amplifier direct from the wall and although I have terrific results using isolated or balanced power supplies I still continue to use this method.

CONCLUSIONS

The MS-E01 filtered distribution unit is a product which is extremely well constructed from high-end parts with great attention to detail.

With a simple swap out of the Isol-8 the performance of my system reached new heights, particularly in the rendition of detail in a superbly organic and natural way, a real sense of feeling from an artist and a presence to instruments which gave them a true "in the room" feeling that allowed for even the body construction of wood based instruments to be conveyed.

Using my everyday Oriton mains cables for me was a bigger improvement in performance all around than the supplied MS-40PUK cable but then they are twice the price. However, the MS cable in its own right is still a fantastically musical cable. It is non-offensive, non-fatiguing and actually performed better than some other higher priced cables. It conveyed a smooth sound with no forwardness, had good soundstaging abilities and great detail retrieval all presented in a musical manor.

I've put an order in for the E01.

MS-E01

Build Quality - 8.5/10

Sound Quality - 8.5/10

Value for money - 8.5/10

Overall - 8.5/10

Highly recommended for its build quality and holographic natural sound.

Price when tested £1699

MS-40PUK

Build Quality - 8.0/10

Sound Quality - 7.5/10

Value for money - 7.5/10

Overall - 7.6/10

Recommended for it's musically detailed and smooth presentation

Price when tested MS-40PUK - £450

Dan Worth

Audio4Soul OCC IT! Xtreme Speaker Cables

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Audio4Soul OCC IT! Xtreme Speaker Cables costing £300 for a 2.5m pair use OCC copper in their construction but how do they perform?

In line with their philosophy of providing straightforward products at price points within reach of many music lovers, Audio4Soul offers one and only one speaker cable - the OCC IT! Xtreme speaker cables, with a very reasonable price, by audiophile standards, of 300 Euro for a 2.5m pair, worldwide shipping costs included. Custom lengths are available. Stuart (Mr Hifi Pig himself) has already reviewed Audio4Soul's Xtreme16 amplifier/DAC and gave it a Recommended Award.

As you might be able to deduce from the name, the cable's conductors are high purity copper made with the Ohno Continuously Casting (OCC) methodology. With most copper casting methods the metal forms into a multitude of grains, each having a distinct boundary which the signal has to traverse. The OCC method results in cable lengths of up to 125m made of a single copper 'grain', so avoiding the grain boundary signal distortions - sonic benefits, of course, suppose that such distortions exist and are audible! Carefully sidestepping the rather controversial issue just raised, a very high purity of copper is used in these cables - somewhere around 99.9999% (so called "six nines").

The cables appear robust and well made, the banana plugs are lightweight and fit fairly snugly into equipment sockets although a tighter fit might be beneficial. They aren't the easiest of cables to handle and lay, as they have a pronounced "sproingy" characteristic. By which I mean that they are quite stiff and are impossible to lay in curves of radius less than about 8 inches (20cm) without actually nailing them down!

Audio4Soul OCC IT! Xtreme Speaker Cables

I guess the labelling / identification scheme will be a matter of taste, with the "Audio4Soul" identification being made with a large doublesided Velcro-backed rectangle of stiff material that wraps around the cable and sticks out rather like clumsy wings. I must admit I was rather taken aback by this - consider me to not be an admirer of this scheme. On the other hand, these labels are easy to take off!

Sonics

My initial impressions of the cable were very positive as the first notes of music issued forth with a distinctly lucid and open quality to them. I was impressed!

Resolution is very good, with rapid lute finger runs, for example, being distinct and well separated. Many a cable will tend to slur the individual notes together. Vocals are tangible with excellent presence and immediacy, where appropriate.

Tonal neutrality is very good, although a slight lightening in the lower bass does tend to produce a sound that is just a little bit forward on full range music.

Bass is taut with very good texture and definition. Some folks might prefer a bit more 'bloom' or fullness, but that's a matter of taste. Slam is good, and transient edges are well captured throughout the frequency range, but the overall feel of the deep bass is that it is a bit lightweight compared to my more expensive reference cables.

Complex music is deftly handled and remains nicely coherent and lucid as the going gets going, it doesn't get smeared or confused. But the sheer scale of really 'big' music isn't fully conveyed, lacking a bit in dynamic scale and heft in absolute terms. In my experience, sadly, the sheer scale of music is only to be had with more expensive cables ... perhaps a double run of the cable would achieve this? That would be an interesting thing to try.

Imaging is nicely focused and tangible, and the overall impression is one of being close to and involved with the music. The feeling of the overall acoustic space of the recording is a little diminished compared to some cables, the musical focus is more on the musicians themselves than the environment they are in.

Comparisons

Tellurium TQ Black is a highly regarded speaker cable at around the same price point as the Audio4Soul and provides a similar overall standard of musical reproduction, although the two cables do offer a rather different presentation.

With the TQ Black the sound is a little more laid back, a bit smoothed off at the high frequency end, rather more relaxed and easy-going. Image focus is vaguer and less well-defined, the resolution of detail subtly but noticeably reduced. But soundstaging is more open and spacious. Overall you are placed a bit further away from the music with the TQ Black than you are with the Audio4Soul cables. My own preference is for the latter cable's approach, others may prefer a more relaxed and immersive presentation.

If deciding between these two fine cables, I think it comes down to personal taste and system synergy - if your system seems a little too laid back and you'd like to pep it up a bit, go for the Audio4Soul cable as it does provide a more explicit sound, a more open window to the signal. If you prefer a more relaxed and less forward sound then go for the Tellurium TQ Black.

My own reference cables do show, though, that there are further sonic gains to be had if you are prepared to spend significantly more money. My XLO Pro600 and, even better, XLO Type 5 cables do offer a worthwhile improvement in transparency, resolution and sheer scale and dynamic heft. But the XLO cables are substantially more expensive.

Conclusion

I enjoyed the Audio4Soul speaker cables a lot. So they are definitely recommended at their price point for their fine resolution, focus, clarity and sheer musical involvement.

Build quality: 7/10
Sound Quality: 7.5/10
Value for money: 8.5/10
Overall: 8/10

Jerry Jacobs

DirectWave Directors Interconnect

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



British company DirectWave launched with their first product, the Directors interconnect.

The DirectWave Directors interconnects recently appeared connecting some very nice equipment at the Bristol 2014 Hifi Show.

The Directors are a parallel design twin conductor cable utilising ultra pure silver, gold plated conductors. Each conductor has thick Teflon tube covering then the cable is covered with a copper braid which is connected to ground at one end in a pseudo balanced configuration. Utilising WBT's top of the range Nextgen RCA and silver solder for maximum signal transfer and covered in a nice black

braid sleeping the Directors look very well finished, simple and elegant.

Derek Robinson, Managing Director of DirectWave who constructs the Directors completely by hand and to order sent along a set of 1m for me try in my system.

Our initial chat to point of delivery was very quick and the cables come pre-burned in as standard, which is great for the customer to be able to demo the cables instantly. Note to other cable manufacturers – send your cables for review pre-burned, it's MUCH more convenient for us guys!

The cables come in a stylish box, adding a nice touch of pride of ownership whereas too many cables these days arrive in Jiffy bags and plastic sandwich/freezer bags despite having a considerable price tag attached. Although the packaging cannot help the sound quality it's nice to have some consideration to packaging and DirectWave gets a tick here.

The Sound

There's always a first noticeable aspect or impression to any system change and the Directors gave fantastic separation without damaging the flow of the music. They retrieved details very well if not a little cleaner and leaner in the midband than the Oriron Symphony Oranges which are my day to day cable.

DirectWave Directors Interconnect

This allowed for more articulation of the timbre and lacked a little bit of its body.

Turin Brakes 'Underdog' displayed a vast soundstage of clearly depicted instruments, acoustic and light electric guitar notes were easily ascertainable and a clean vocal was presented. The undertones of the mid-range made way to a tauter and precise bass image, allowing for good layering properties and information to be conveyed.

I am used to hearing this track with a little more flavour, coloration? I wouldn't say so just a little more body, however thinning down on the body a little allowed for more upper bass information with more perceivable detail.

I felt a lack of harmonic richness again on bass guitar during John Martyn's 'Solid Air'. There was plenty of detail conveyed, but overall a little tighter at the very bottom, which becomes more noticeable at higher volumes, throwing the balance ever so slightly towards the cleaner upper frequencies. I do tend to listen louder than most people however.

Sound staging and layering once again was exceptional and Martyn's vocal was fantastically portrayed along with plucked strings.

The slightly cleaner nature and tautness of the cables worked in harmony on Moloko's 'The Time Is Now'. I can't say I have often heard as much information from this track and there was a perfectly neutral controlled vocal which shone strongly from a solid centre focus and harmoniously with other soundstage details, making for a rather enjoyable and better take on this track than I was used too.

Listening to some more upbeat and rhythmic music such as an array of recent and past pop music the Directors are incredibly controlled and just don't show any hints of grain at all. Dynamics were strong at both ends of the scale, possibly a little shy of the lowest note fullness, but an undeniable quality of punch that really bounces the music along.

Silences were golden adding a great feeling of space and realism to the overall sound, The DirectWaves also add a really addictive plus point to that out of the box sense of holography and three dimensionality.



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The slightly richer lower mids of the Oriton's took a couple listening sessions to get used to being without and the more detailed representation of these areas portrayed by the Directors really grew on me and I

DirectWave Directors Interconnect

found myself exploring a great deal of music, concentrating quite heavily on this area of the sound.

In Chris Jones' 'Angel From Montgomery' snare drums were absolutely on the money, lower bass notes were accurate and cymbals rang true. The slight cleaning up of Chris' vocal was a nice surprise to me as it didn't lose any body, yet seemed to register with fewer undertones and had a more legible feeling of accuracy. This is a favourite of mine along with 'Long After Your Gone' from the Moon-struck album which

opened up an extension of bass notes I hadn't heard from the Directors up until this point.

So my earlier reflections on hearing 'less fullness' in the very lowest notes are actually a reflection of a lesser coloration in general to some lower notes as here the notes were extremely extended and controlled, weighted and accurate.

So I concede, the DirectWaves are in fact portraying a truer representation of the music and I can categorically state this as the past two tracks are very well known to me in their entirety.

'Blanket' by Urban Species has a sultry vocal from Imogen Heap with big strong weighty bass notes fully extending through a sleazy, smokey, intimate little back street Brooklyn Jazz Club. The Directors really helped the system to create Heap's vocal in a pure manner. I'm used the bass sounding fuller at its extremes, but with these cables in there was an upper roundness, with a more detailed articulation - a little less smooth but with more organic hit.

Conclusion

With a realistic top end full of detail and air the Directors from DirectWave are a neutral to clean cable that is wonderfully controlled and arguably 'truer' to the music. They are definitely not a warm sounding, coloured cable and their neutral midrange reflects this. I am firmly the type of audiophile who runs away at speed from analytical overly detailed sounds and the Directors even with their tauter bass still do



not fall into that category. Later reflections on this area of the sound actually confirmed to me that the lower frequency response is also truer to the music.

Their controlled and fast edges are representative of silver done correctly, exceptionally well timed without the smear or lag, giving a soundstage of huge proportions.

They are a really noticeable change in a system and if you feel your setup is lacking clarity and presence, then I urge you to try these cables. They inject life into the sound without overstepping the mark and I'd imagine a beautifully smooth vinyl rig would benefit well with their characterisation.

At first glance they come across as quite clean, on further inspection they show themselves to be accurate and controlled as I for one found out during the course of this review.

Build Quality - 8/10

Sound Quality - 7.5/10

Value For money - 7.5/10

Overall - 7.6/10

Price at time of review £360 - 1m pair

Recommended - For accurately describing the music without coarse hardness and reflecting a true representation of the material played.

Dan Worth

Audio Cable Award Grand Slam

Products of the Year 2014:

Black Diamond Speaker Cable

Black Diamond USB

Blue USB

Black Power Cable

Black Diamond RCA

Black Diamond XLR



"But perhaps their reticence is understandable when the product sounds as good as this – after all, why let others in on the secret? Used in a variety of systems the Black Diamonds consistently revealed a wider perceived bandwidth, bigger soundstage and the ability to present transient details in an effortless fashion"

HiFi World, Awards Edition Jan 2015

HI-FI WORLD
VERDICT ★★★★★

Find out why Tellurium Q® cables are achieving an audio cable grand slam from the publications below. Why not contact Tellurium Q® or one of our many dealers, now.

Tellurium Q Ultra Silver Loudspeaker Cables



British company Tellurium Q are making quite a name for themselves amongst a dedicated group of audiophiles. Here we check out their latest loudspeaker cables dubbed Ultra Silver.

Ultra Silver? Since when? Since now! So what about a basic non Ultra Silver model? Yes, they will also be available.

Can we be led to believe that these cables are made from silver, or some sort of silver alloy by the silver Z Plugs on their ends?

Who knows... in typical Tellurium Q fashion they won't utter a word of information regarding their construction, so if you want to spend £500 per/m to disassemble some to scratch an itch carry on, but from my experience with the brand I couldn't care less if they were made from ground Pelican beaks as long as they held up Tellurium Q's long standing tradition of excellent performance.

Just like Tellurium Q's other cables, they also have that Tellurium Q statement ribbon or band type design to them.

Holding the Ultra Silver next to the Ultra Black they seem similar apart from the mesh braid on the Ultra Silvers, the density and compound also has different solidity and flexibility to the central band which separates the cores. The Ultra Silvers feel stiffer but in no way detrimental to the designs routing abilities. Both cables can be flexed and bent around comparably.

Tellurium Q Ultra Silver Loudspeaker Cables

So where do they sit in the range?

This was one of my first questions when talking with Geoff Merrigan at Tellurium Q.

My question was also backed with:

"...you don't really give a lot of information technically about your products Geoff, which I can appreciate in one respect as there can be too much blurb sometimes which can put people off. So when it comes to the Tellurium Q cable range I simply assume that the higher the price the better the performance?"

While Geoff agreed that "of course there is a gain in performance to justify the cost, we are now establishing our cables into ranges and these ranges will have key, unmistakable qualities and characteristics to them."

The coloured range, which currently consists of the Blue and Green, will also be looking to move forward to incorporate further designs. These coloured cables are known for a slight soft edge or relaxed nature to the sound, ideal for brighter sounding systems or simply to suit one's personal taste.

The Black range of cables is known by many for their natural ability of reproducing a note or vocal and have fantastic soundstaging abilities.

Then there's the new Silver range, these are voiced differently again being extremely detail driven and cleaner, with increased top end air and extension and midrange transparency.

So that's where they sit and why they have been specifically created, now onto the sound.

My first impressions of the cables were not influ-



Tellurium Q Ultra Silver Loudspeaker Cables

enced in any way shape or form by either Geoff or Colin Wonfor of TQ. Their normal "have a listen and tell us what you think" applied as always.

My first noticeable impression was the degree of extension in the upper frequencies, how exposed but without hardness the midrange felt and, from what I was used to with my current Audioquest K2 cables, that bass was a little lean.

So I played through some acoustic music such as Damien Rice and Seth Lakeman. Top end was clearly beyond what the K2 had to offer me and I was really trying to hear something which presented itself to me which would lead me to believe that it was a bit over the top, harsh and spitty but it just didn't happen. A true increase in perceived bandwidth was shining through with strings giving small nuances of reverbs that I hadn't heard so well articulated before.

Attributes of transparency, layering and focus in the midband were wonderful, not as full and rich as the AQ's but more neutral and yet still with endearing clarity and speed.

After some very close listening to the reproduction of bass notes I feel that there is a leanness in upper bass frequencies which allows for great exposure of detail in this area and the midrange leading to arguably less muddiness to the sound.

What I didn't expect to accompany this less emphasised take on bass rendition was how low and extended the Ultra Silvers can go.

Listening to faster paced music was great in terms of speed, pace and accuracy... the Ultra Silvers do incredibly well in this department. Symphonised harmonics, dynamic shifts and detailed bandwidth shone (no sparkled) some more and if your not a bass monster this "Nordost-with-substance" type sound (that is clean and detailed without a thin or forward nature) will have you dancing before too long.

As with all TQ cables, fat or thin, big or small, Black or Blue, key attributes of timing, soundstage placement and a grip on the focus of all portions of the soundstage is bang on the money, no matter whether I listened to a busy ballad, a soft or octave rich vocal, a funky or flowing instrumental, or some strong dance, the TQ's ability to give equal portions to all of those sat at the dinner table was the mark of a true host.

Conclusions

Having the range of Tellurium Q cables banded into sections, retaining definite core characteristics, yet

Attributes of transparency, layering and focus in the midband were wonderful...

mixed with just that little bit of flavour here and there, proves to me in a real world situation that they have knowledge that; 1, people do use cables for tone controls and 2, that people do actually enjoy different sounds regardless of system integration.

Yes in an ideal world, cables wouldn't make a difference and yes in an ideal world they wouldn't need to, but they do and the Ultra Silvers can be seen as missing link in an already established line up of fantastic cabling. Some like it smooth, some like it natural and some like it very detailed and my god the Ultra Silver does detail in spades, but not once over the period of weeks that I had them constantly playing in my system did their clean nature ever pin me to the ceiling or have me recoiling and squinting, which has happened on more than one occasion in my cable dabbling experiences.

Build Quality - 8/10

Sound Quality - 8/10

Value For Money - 8/10

Highly Recommended - For their pin point precision, excellent timing, huge bandwidth, ability to remain clean and still stay true without hardness.

Price at time of review

Speaker Cables - £500 per/m terminated mono length.

Jumpers - £336 per 12" set

Dan Worth

Van Den Hul First Ultimate MK2 RCA

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



The Van Den Hul First Ultimate MK2 RCA interconnects are an all carbon affair. Each conductor is made from pure carbon and is arranged in a coaxial design. It costs £275 for a 1m pair.

The centre conductor LSC is made up of 12,000 individually insulated strands of 7 micron carbon! You thought that sounding tricky in terms of termination? Well, the outer screen of the First Ultimates are made from 6 layers of the same LSC (Linear Structured Carbon) wires, no less than 114,000 separately insulated strands?

The cable is not one the Van Den Hul will offer off the reel as terminating is a little tricky (!) and they state that it's due to internal reflection issues if not mounted to the plugs correctly. Or course the trade-marked Hulliflex outer jacket is the final out finish on these creamy/lightship yellow cable.

I have had experience with pure carbon cabling in the past, namely with speaker cables and I've had many VDH cables that also have had a mixture of carbon and silver in their construction but I've never heard an all carbon interconnect, so this one should be interesting.

The Sound

Van Den Hul First Ultimate MK2 RCA

As soon as the VDH's entered my system between DAC and amp a seductive musicality captivated a soundstage of such remarkable layering in knew I was in for a treat.

At the time of changing over the interconnects I was listening to Ed Sheeran's new album 'Ed Sheeran' and the fluidity of how the First Ultimates rendered the vocal was pretty stunning. Being fully aware of VDH's trademark smooth sound after owning many of their cables in the past I didn't expect a sharp top end at all and Sheeran's guitar confirmed that the all carbon affair was going to be a musical treat rather than a rush of bandwidth, especially in the top end.

I will convey that the background is so damn quiet that transparency in the midrange and air in the top end felt very present and convincing giving each performance on the album a naturally reflected soundstage, reproducing portions of focus very nicely indeed.

The top end no doubt sounds as if it's rolled off somewhat, but the overwhelming musicality just outweighed any perceived losses in resolution.

As well as being familiar with VDH cables, I am also familiar with the sound of conductive carbon cabling and in my experience they are very forgiving to certain digital nasties in a system, too much and the sound can get a bit under-emphasised, just the right amount and the effects can be so seductive that hunting for that next cymbal crash becomes a thing of the past and instead it's "what can I play next?".

With this more forgiving nature of the all-carbons sonic signature I moved into Spotify world and just started trawling through my own personal playlists, what was hot at the moment around the world and found that the cables did exactly what I expected of them.

The acoustic version of 'Your Winter' by Sister Hazel can get a little sharp in its extremities when played loudly from its live venue, the First Ultimates, as expected gave a slightly rounder nature to leading and trailing edges, bass notes were still crisp and the vocal was pretty awesome. The cable seems to begin to do its magic in between the notes first damping and cleaning up background hash and finishing its job just on the leading edge in order not to destroy pronunciation or detail.

Another part of the sound which I really felt was great was the proportions of bass the cables had to offer. The way I feel it's best describe is that the VDH's have bags of non-peaky bass, they give a well

fast and slower notes equally well They don't have the ultimate slap, tightness or pace of say the Oriton Symphony Oranges and TQ Black Diamonds that I use, but they have this unmistakable presence that just makes the listener feel that their power is effortless and that turning the volume up further and further just has them smiling and saying "is that all you've got for me".

Extension is deep, long and wide and the fullness never lost its tightness, although not as tight as the other cables mentioned in comparison, but there just aren't any sort of issues when hearing how well the lower mids integrate right down to the ground. In fact there's a great deal of respect for how this portion of the frequency range is handled. The amount of information produced at the lower end of the spectrum is also notably remarkable.

In Conclusion

These all carbon cables are so musically engrossing that when changing back to any other cable the sound takes a little of a readjustment and the over the top volumes that were being played ten minutes previously need to be wound down just a little to save the ear drums.

The fluid and unforgiving nature of these is unmistakable, rendering of instrument timbre is a big step up over other VDH cables I have previously heard, with a presence of soundstage layering, midrange depth and quietness of background that simply allows for vocals to shine.

If your digital rig still gives you that edge that has you running for the vinyl, give the First Ultimates a whirl, they will certainly tame all those nasties and present you with some truly seducing sounds.

Build Quality - 8/10

Sound Quality - 8/10

Value For Money - 8.5/10

Overall - 8.1/10

Recommended - For absolutely pure, grainless musicality which never had me crying out for more or felt as if though I was being short changed by it's beautifully smooth and non fatiguing sound.

Price at point of review - £275 - 1m pair

Dan Worth

LessLoss DFPC Signature Mains Cables

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



**American
company
LessLoss'
\$1800 DFPC
Signature mains
cables.**

A little while ago now I was able to have a listen to the LessLoss DFPC Signature mains cables, which made quite an impression on me and my listening experience offering fantastic refinement, liquidity, presence and an overall natural presentation, which really made for an enjoyable listen.

The Reference cables are similar in construction Utilising a similar geometry to the Signatures they employing four separate conductors - two Live - 12mm cross section, One Neutral - 12mm cross section and a single Earth - 12mm cross section.

Where the cables differ from the Signatures in the processing stages, through LessLosses' 'Skin-filtering' techniques. The Signatures reach a Level 2 whereas the Reference chords achieve a Level 4 in

LessLoss DFPC Signature Mains Cables

what is a labour intensive and timely affair carried out in house.

I'll allow Louis Motek (Managing Director) of Less-Loss give his overview;

"Each LessLoss Skin-filtering grade marks audibly significant improvements in performance. The DFPC Original uses Grade 1. With just this technology, many customers insist that their stand-alone "caps & coils" power filters are no longer needed, and often that comparing with a DFPC reveals that their previous filter imparts an undesirable flavour to the sound. Grade 1 Skin-filtering makes a substantial step beyond the performance of standard or industrial power chords; indeed, a substantial step even over power cords with much higher price tags.

The DFPC Signature's Grade 2 Skin-filtering requires a more extensive processing of the conductor's outer skin. It involves a unique utilization of pigments in a specialized in-house prepreg process. This achieves more attenuation of wide-bandwidth HF noise and results in an even cleaner sound as the true nature of the signal is better revealed above an even lower noise floor.

For three years we have been refining Skin-filtering Grades 3 and 4, found only in the new DFPC Reference. Here, we not only implement all steps involved in the production of the DFPC Signature, but, in addition, carry out several more crucial steps in the processing and assembly of each cable. This level of attention to detail and performance places this cable in an entirely different category. Each DFPC Reference undergoes half a month of controlled steps in production. Assembly alone takes 12 hours of scrupulous labor. There is much more than meets the eye in this product, with performance to match."

There is a plethora of technical information on the LessLoss website referring to each aspect of the entire conception of the cables, right down their choice of Oyaide plugs implemented on each cable.

Note: If a UK power plug is required then the Furutech 1363 is employed.

The Sound

So on to the important bit, how do they sound and are the added techniques, processing and cost worthwhile?

Sometimes when progressing through a companies range of products, upgrades can offer a marginally subtle improvement and sometimes improvements can be larger in relation to the additional costs.

...They can only be described as one of the very best power cables I have had the pleasure of listening to, plus they look sexy too.

Sometimes a subtle change is all that is needed to really have a product click or just sound so right. Other times a huge difference can be obtained which presents itself very differently and can be unexpected and destroy all expectations of a house sound.

The LessLoss DFPC cables sit somewhere in the middle (no I'm not a politician, I don't have the patience to be diplomatic).

When listening to one of my favourite albums from Chris Jones 'Moonstruck' I am presented with a core sound of liquidity, exceptional detail and a smoothness that allows for leading edges to imprint their note into a wonderfully dark soundstage that oozes musicality and presence.

LessLoss DFPC Signature Mains Cables

The References developed these leading edges with more defining realism, organic flare and responsiveness to the transient nature of strength, dependent on how intensely each note is struck or blown. Decay just dissipates magically into the blackness where notes are still emerging from, retaining overall rhythm through smaller delicacies and nuances.

Chris' vocal is so genuine sounding and focused it just draws the listener right in, gets you toe tapping and singing along to the point where I for one thought I needed to shut up and listen, I can have a good old sing song when I've finished the review!

That didn't last for long, soon enough I was off again...

Right, so getting back on point I contrasted Jones' vocal with the power and delicacy of Loreena McKennit. What a treat her vocal really is, fortunately for review purposes I can't even begin to sing along to her voice, it's something to really sit back and admire.

I started off with 'The Mask and the Mirror' album and the track 'Full Circle'. A very old world Celtic vibe flows throughout this performance; I can imagine it being played during a Macbeth play when panning across the highlands at dusk. I can only describe the flavour of Loreena's vocal as intense. The decay of each phrase simply washes through the depths of the soundstage and the ability of the Reference cables over the Signatures was one of added control in upper octaves, instead of describing this factor as restraint is more of a freedom of expression. The violin in this track emanates from the upper centre of McKennits vocal and the breath that was added with the DFPC References allowed the graceful notes to shine... so well polished with no smear or masking of itself or the vocal.

From 'the Nights at the Alhambra' album which is a live recording I love the 'Raglan Road' track. McKennit's seductive vocal is as delicate and powerful as in any other track she has ever performed, but a real stand out performance for me. The pure liquidity of her vocal which is already established with such grace and beauty in my system was enhanced so well with the Reference power cords and violin which sat to the right hand side of centre stage had a quality that one would imagine the musician to almost be in the room. The overwhelming realism really was something special within the acoustic space of the performance.

Moving into some more beat driven music from the likes of Fleetwood Mac and The Beautiful South, rhythmic qualities were very strong and natural, detail rendition and dynamics were effortlessly proportioned in a busy soundstage of more than one lead vocalist and accompanying instruments.

A cleanliness took over Stevie Nicks vocal which had a smoothness to its edges during 'Seven Wonders' that allowed me to really turn up the volume and let her wail.

If I have to balance this review with a negative then the only portion of the wondrous display which I can be critical of is the upper bass drive. As with the Signatures when I reviewed them they stay clean in this area and my own personal tastes want for a little more fullness in this area to help really drive along the dance music I enjoy so much... but that's just me. I don't come across too many audiophiles who still think they are 18 in a nightclub, well there's one I can think of who edits my reviews before they are published, so we'll see if 'Disco Stu' leaves this comment in...*(Oh ye of little faith.)*

Conclusion

To sum up the time and the experience which I have had with all the LessLoss power cables (DFPC Original review to come) it can be said that their natural presentation coupled with masses of detail retrieval, undeniable purity and smoothness just culminates in a soundstage which is enhanced with such musicality, grace and presence that they can only be described as one of the very best power cables I have had the pleasure of listening to, plus they look sexy too.

The DFPC Signatures were great, but the Reference just takes things a step further in overall refinement, precision and soundstage presence without changing the core character of LessLoss' take on the sound.

Build Quality - 8.5/10

Sound Quality - 8.75/10

Value For Money - 8/10

Overall - 8.4/10

Highly Recommend - For their clean, smooth and detailed sound, build quality and great style visually and musically.

Price at time of review - \$1824 - up to a 2m length (reviewed at 1.5m)

Dan Worth

The Digital Music Box -Linus and Kalliope USB Cables

The digital Music Box offer up the Linus USB cable at £500 and the powered USB cable Kalliope at £1000. Hif Pig takes a listen to both.



There's been a very rapid increase in availability of exotic USB cables over the past year. Many companies are offering a range of this cable type which can consist of as many progressive versions through the range as digital coaxial cables which were for many the main digital link between transports and DACs.

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

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

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

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

The Kalliope a separately powered USB cable leaving the data lines only to be connected to the source computer. "The power supply is a very high quality precision regulated linear design housed in an alu-

minium extrusion, available in anodised black or silver with black end plates. A high quality locking power connector is used to maintain a permanent connection between cable and power supply.

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

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

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

Bearing in mind how important the link between the two source components (computer and DAC) are and what many of us are willing to and have spent on digital link cables in the past, the two cables are sitting in a position in the market that already has many other digital cables fighting for dominance.

Before we get into how I found my time with the two DMB cables, let's talk about that 'pride of ownership factor' a little.

The Digital Music Box -Linus and Kalliope USB Cables

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

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

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

The Sound - Linus

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

Once I had finished creating a playlist in Amarra 3.0 on my Mac and letting Chris Jones' 'Long After Your Gone' begin to play I initially thought "wow, this sounds clean and dark", but I was a little apprehensive at how the overall balance was going to be as the lower notes started. So, whilst holding my thought process for a few more seconds this big, full and rich bass just sank down straight in front of me before it opened up and then rolled throughout my listening space.

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

Leading edges with a range of female vocals was clean and ultimately grain free. There's no masking



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

of any part of the range and the grainless, stable nature to each part is effortless.

Listening to some faster bassier tracks through Amarra and Spotify was also great and dancer beats can be said to have good impact with a pace and speed of

The Digital Music Box -Linus and Kalliope USB Cables

execution that is undeniably attractive, engrossing and rhythmic.

Small note flecks in and around soundstage borders are clear and concise, allowing the systems micro dynamics and inner depth to come through without restriction and there is an enviable openness to the sound.

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

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

The Sound - Kalliope (Powered USB)

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

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

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

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

Midrange as a whole was silkier and a little sweeter - I really like the Linus here as it has a more raspy grunt instead of this silkier appeal and fleshes out the bottom end of a male vocalist incredibly well, but the Kalliope is just so organically natural and developed

The Kalliope is also very rhythmic, holding the tone of a bouncy tune with ease...

in any vocal it has its hand in allowing the system to convey just flows through with absolute presence and grace.

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

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

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

Some Comparisons

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

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

I do have an Astintrew Concord USB cable which uses a separate 'Never Connected' power supply. Similarities between this and the Kalliope are there for sure, most notably the 'silky' and the darkness of the background. I would say the Kalliope is

Both the Linus and the Kalliope have outstanding detail right across the board...

cleaner in sound though and has a better more holographic soundstage, especially in depth perception. I preferred the cleaner nature in the upper-mid and treble articulation which lead to solidly defined edges, it's never to the point where I would ever say it gets anywhere near analytical whatsoever and arguably it exposes minimal amounts of added detail, it's just has more air, sparkle and shine right up there at the top.

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

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

Conclusion

This was never a "shootout" or a comparative review between what I've heard and the two Digital Music Box cables, but some small comparisons between other cables I currently have in my procession are necessary when detailing the sound of a company's product which will be unknown to many.

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

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

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

Yes, they are on the richer side of a lot of USB cables, but boy don't they both make an impression. If you're in the market for a new USB then try the two cables from The Digital Music Box and see where your benchmark lies thereafter.

Linus - £500 - 1m

Build Quality - 8/10

Sound Quality - 8/10

Value For Money - 8/10

Overall - 8/10

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

Kalliope - £1000 - 1m

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

Sound Quality - 9/10

Value For Money - 8/10

Overall - 8.5/10

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

Dan Worth

Computer Audio Design USB Cable

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



This USB cable from UK company Computer Audio Design (CAD) uses separate data and power cables and costs £480 for a 1.1m length.

It has been somewhat of a bone of contention whether it is necessary to run external power supplies with USB cables. A couple of manufacturers/designers I have talked with state 'it's unnecessary if done correctly' and others say 'the computers dirty power needs to be removed and the USB chip should get the cleanest supply available'.

Now I'm no designer or technical whizz kid but I have listened to many USB cables and to these ears regardless of implementation I have found that USB cables display as much difference in sound reproduction as any other digital cables. Some I have experienced with separates PSU's have not sounded as good as the all in one design and vice versa, proving that implementation of each design from one end to the other is absolutely crucial.

Even though my Mac runs a couple of Paul Hynes' linear power supplies and its USB output power will be a lot cleaner than most systems, each of the aforementioned designs still have an effect as a whole on

Computer Audio Design USB Cable

sound and I would not under any circumstances rule out the fact that an outboard PSU would now have no effect on overall performance.

Scott Barry's design of his USB cable without an external power supply is believed by him to be, after rigorous R&D, the most pleasing and best implementation of the cable that he could obtain. The cable has two wires - a data cable of thicker overall proportions and a separate power cable running externally of the main data cable.

There's no information about the internal structure of the cable and its conductors. Sometimes this is a good thing, not allowing people to have preconceived ideas about what a cable may sound like. I for one never do any research prior to getting a cable, or any other product for that matter, in for review, so I can judge its performance blind - so to speak.

The CAD Cable is well made, solid and flexible, there is plenty of strain relief to protect the annoyingly small solder tags of a USB plug (manufacturers note this point) making routing and connecting very simple compared to some other behemoths I own and have had in the past.

The Sound

Ed Sheeran's 'Runaway' from the 'X' album sounded totally authoritative, with distinctively projected and pure vocals that convey a touch of echo applied to

Its nature is clean and clear in the top end and full and extended in the lower end.

the mic and a slap to the drum that produced a crystalline bass line, with punch and rhythm.

Ben Harpers 'Whipping Boy' proved that the CAD USB can definitely do texture. Its nature is clean and clear in the top end and full and extended in the lower end. Ben's playful, raspy guitar had all the presence of its acoustic chamber, the reverbs of its close environment coupled with that textured and detailed upper mid/treble, conveying a most organic and full frequency rendition of the reproduced instrument.

Chris Jones 'Angel From Montgomery' is one of my truly favourite tracks and the CAD's ability to render the harmonics and lend its hand to maintaining the system's wide and tall soundstage was impeccable. A small negative was that I would have liked a bit more warmth in the upper bass, particularly with this track and my all ceramic drivers, which by their very nature require it. Vocals however started from a natural and true distance within the stage and projected with great clarity and control.

The CAD USB conveys such a 'satisfying' sound. The data retrieval abilities during complex passages is



Computer Audio Design USB Cable

totally engrossing and never etched, exploring every part of the music without any brightness or analytical portrayal.

Moving onto some Dub Step, Tiesto, Mikado and Seb Fontain, showed that the well balanced nature of the CAD USB was very much at home with fast paced, heavy beats and searing treble, allowing a huge and airy soundstage to fill my entire room with pulsating and explosive dynamics.

To flip the coin again I made a playlist of sultry, sexy and delicate female vocalists. The upper mids in particular were hugely impressive. They exploited all the upper tones of a broadly natured vocal, remained clean and clear and in particular fantastically controlled without rounding any edges or sounding rolled off in any way.

"this is the best USB cable I've heard and I think I'll buy".

From time to time I loan cables to a friend John, be it my own or ones that have come in for review. John has a high end headphone rig with some pretty serious modifications to the amp, DAC and power supplies, running into a pair of Audeze LCD-2 headphones with the latest driver upgrades. His system is very transparent and shows any changes in system configuration very well. After he had the some time to play with the CAD USB he gave me an update on its performance exclaiming that "vocals have that eerie sensation, the balance is tremendous and top and bottom end sounds very right".

John listens to a good varied range of genres and spends many hours lost in music and tweaking his system with power cables, interconnects and sockets which he has found makes quite substantial differences in his highly detailed rig. When John reluctant-



ly returned the cable for me to complete my review he stated "this is the best USB cable I've heard and I think I'll buy".

Conclusion

It can be a little difficult to pin point certain aspects of a cable or piece of electronics when the sound doesn't do any particular aspect very well but does the whole so impressively good. There's nothing in particular to latch onto and admire or attribute areas of the system to benefit from its characteristic. Being able to simply sit and listen, not be drawn to any particular area or feature is a testament to the product and the CAD is a fantastic all rounder that excels in not one or two particular aspects, yet impresses emphatically in all.

At its most reasonable price the CAD has to be auditioned, don't listen with intent, just put your feet up and let the music flow.

Build Quality - 8.5/10

Sound Quality - 9/10

Value For Money - 8.5/10

Overall - 8.66/10

Price at time of review - £480 - 1.1m length

Recommended for abundant amounts of detail, top end control and excellent balance, making it one of the very best USB cables on the market.

Dan Worth

JIB - Krypton Balanced XLR Interconnects

JIB is based in Berlin, Germany and here we check out their Krypton XLR interconnects costing £385 for a 1m pair.

The only other companies I've come across with such an extensive range of cables as JIB offers are Chord and Audioquest. JIB's inventory consists of every type of Audio and Video cable a consumer could require, along with power cables and car audio cables.

So who are JIB?

JIB is a German company run out of Berlin by founder Jurgen Isaac Bauer, his love for Classical music spurred him on design and create cables which he felt suited his system best. After a few years he began to develop on his growing knowledge of conductors and dielectrics and soon formed JIB which was to launch with not just one cable but an extensive range of cables.

I was asked by our editor Stuart if I'd like to have a look at the range JIB offer and choose a couple cables which would interest me for review - the list was long and wide! I decided to take a listen to a few cables - a glass fibre toslink, a silver USB and the topic of this review the Krypton XLR's.

Their construction is made up of:

Overall size of the cable is 18mm
99.9999% pure HG-OCC® (Ohno Continuous Cast) copper.

Cable structure of high conductivity micro-conductors, in Teflon.

PTFE coated chlorine free cotton damping

Connectors made of Fiberglass with 24K gold plating.

Packaging wise the cables arrived in a wooden case with metal clasp, externally trimmed in a two tone



leather and internally with a velvety/suede type material. Very nicely done and substantial.

The cables were burned in for a few days and then subsequently connected to my Kavent Acoustics amp for some listening. These cables are very thick and a little on the stiff side. I had to hold and bend, which wasn't natural to the cables original curve, with one hand and then locate the XLR socket with the other hand. Once in they didn't seem to pose any threat in moving or raising any of my components, it was just the contour out of the plug that was a bit tricky.

Sound

'Stolen Dance' by Milky Chance is a great track to listen to when ascertaining the harmonic flare of a piece of equipment, or in this case a cable. The JIB seemed to offer a quite a substantially more enveloping rear soundstage, spreading rear width and height on both sides further than I've previously heard on this track with any other combination of components. Centre focus remained absolutely solid and depth too was impressive. Overall three dimensionality is superior to many other cables I have heard of this type, complimenting the Kavent amp's abilities to image incredibly well.

Overall tonality of the cable is a little warm, a touch smooth and engrossingly immersive. The presentation is one of a sultry infection - late night bar rather than a nightclub.

Detail retrieval is pretty good with the most prominent details being a little rounded, well controlled and expressive. The smaller nuances, harmonics and micro details are fantastic. I found myself less focused on pin point imaging, but just emerging myself in the entire musics' acoustic.

JIB - Krypton Balanced XLR Interconnects

Sam Smith's acoustic version of 'Latch' originally performed by Disclosure gave a splendid fluidity to his vocal tone, piano notes had a strong tone and sounded really quite natural. The overall performance held strong attention from me and left me digging out some more of my favourite acoustic tracks, hunting for this insightful appeal to reverbs and cues like an archaeologists digging for ancient ceramics.

Live performances from the likes of Loreena McKennit and Candy Dulfer kept ticking box after box with regards arena and hall acoustics, picking out areas of the crowd who applauded more emphatically than others before the whole included themselves to congratulate the performance.

I wouldn't say that the Kavent is the most dynamic amplifier and the Krypton equally isn't either. I would state that the overall presentation is more geared towards musical flow rather than typical 'Hifi' type aspects, many will appreciate this and some energetically fatiguing systems I have heard would surely benefit from this approach.

During Chris Jones 'Soul Storm' I was drawn to the fact that the music remains very explanatory and cohesive during busier passages, yes there's a touch more grain when things get more complicated, but the slight colouration to the cable helps mask this in

With some sexy looking plugs and a case which you could use take your hand luggage on to a plane, its value and pride of ownership factor to price ratio is outstanding!

the midrange very well.

So, what are the individual portions of the bandwidth like if I had to nail it down?

Treble seems to have two aspects to it:

One would be that extremes are a little soft but still there and the upper end focuses the forefront of the soundstage well.

Two, lower portion of the treble is hugely open, just floats around the listening space of its own accord, expressing harmonics which late at night with the lights off can be a little eerie.



Midband is a little thick and juicy, three dimensionally it's fantastic and tonally gives real body to a vocal, great expression, presence and real musical involvement. There's a naturalness with a little bit of added flavour.

Bass is firmly big and round, not lumpy or bloomy but just nice and plump. Expressively I'd say the Krypton does a great job of allowing notes to drop down and around the room, retaining good information in its upper registers.

Conclusion

The JIB Krypton is a substantially thick, well made cable which offers a truly engrossing musical character as opposed to the cleaner 'Hifi' typical sounding cables. One could suggest that it doesn't do this or that on first listen, but after taking some time to listen on your own, in your own time it's pretty damn addictive and draws the listener into the way it allows the music through from the system components.

With some sexy looking plugs and a case which you could use take your hand luggage on to a plane, its value and pride of ownership factor to price ratio is outstanding!

Build Quality - 8/10

Sound Quality - 8/10

Value For Money - 8.2/10

Overall - 8.06

Price at time of review - £385 - 1m pair

Recommended - for being truly musical and remaining true to the whole reason behind hifi - the music!

Dan Worth



SLIC Innovations - Eclipse C RCA Interconnects cost £492 for a one metre pair and promise to deliver...do they?

Virtually every manufacturer on earth believes that their cables are the next innovation in sound reproduction - enhancing dynamics, detail retrieval and giving a soundstage which sits in the darkest of backgrounds etc....you all know where I'm coming from.

On one hand we all like to have some sort of understanding of material choice, dielectric properties, geometry and whatever other technology may have gone into the extensive (or not) R&D that

has been put into the cables which we purchase for our systems. It does add to that 'pride of ownership factor' and also allows us to make judgments on silver vs copper and other influences which we may be aware of that can influence system performance.

Some manufacturers, TQ come to mind, simply have a reputation based on market and consumer reviews - the tried and tested method rather than attempting to sell their products to you on specifications, keeping the construction of the cables close to their chest.

Well, SLIC Innovations Eclipse C is a cable which falls into this category - in the sense that any construction methods and materials used are not published, leaving the raw experience of the cable to the listener, no preconceived ideas or notions on how said conductor in such a geometry with such dielectric should perform. Risky? For a new company I'd say so!

The trick is finding an established outlet which can market the cable and get it into the public eye, this is where MCRU have stepped in. David Brook strongly believed in the performance of the cable known in short as 'SLIC' and after a friend of mine listened to

SLIC has a way of addressing every detail so that it is apparent in the mix, yet isn't as emphatically displayed, adding a more natural listen to the sound...

one and brought it over to me I also had the chance to appraise it.

An interesting aspect for me is that I was made aware that the cable is of a design built from the ground up, taking the design back to basics, attempting to eliminate crosstalk to its very minimum and patents have been since granted for the design. It's refreshing for me to be able to test a cable such as this that doesn't simply use an off the reel, standard RG cable or a cable made for industrial use, adopting its application to hifi.

The Sound

On first listening I didn't think wow this is exceptionally good, but after spending an hour or so with SLIC I asked if the cable could be left with me so I could do some serious listening on my own in my own time.

The reason being and what did draw me in (even though my friend and I were discussing HiFi a fair bit, not always ideal when ascertaining the performance of a product when in company) was the great deal of texture and the unforced relaxed nature that SLIC presented.

I talk so much about the initial 'wow factor' of products and how many of us can be drawn in and subsequently make wrong decisions when buying equipment or accessories, later to find that during long listening sessions the music falls apart.

When I had my first evening with the Eclipse C I had that initial first impression again that maybe the sound was a little relaxed, now I wouldn't say coloured or masked but a little lacking in excitement.

Once the amps had truly warmed through and I was confident that the sound was as it should be I put on the new Ed Sheeran album 'X'; the album is very acoustic in nature and there needs to be good transparency to the system to really expose Ed's vocal and all the texture of his guitar.

To say I got totally immersed in each performance is somewhat of an understatement, I really enjoy this album and have spent many a long nights with it being part of the playlist. This evening I had the pleasure of hearing it in a slightly different way.

Normally Ed's voice has an upper midrange vibrancy, tonight there was more of a depth of clarity, as if his voice had been warmed up for longer before he came on stage and just effortlessly put across his lyrics. Texture to the lower end of the vocal was also very well conveyed, equally too was instrument timbre, giving an extremely organic feel to the album.

SLIC has a way of addressing every detail so that it is apparent in the mix, yet isn't as emphatically displayed, adding a more natural listen to the sound which really doesn't get appreciated until you have sat down relaxed, cleared your mind and just listen to the music rather than the system.

Another favourite of mine is the 'Moonstruck' album by Chris Jones - if you have noticed I am talking about albums here rather than individual tracks. This is simply the way the Eclipse C has played out with me this evening, I'm not just listening to my reference songs I'm playing whole albums and enjoying every minute.

SLIC Innovations - Eclipse C RCA Interconnects

There are many passages in the album which has those little small breaks and silences - which leaves the listener semi expectant on the next note even though the album is well known and has been played many times. An older gentlemen friend of mine once commented when listening to classical one afternoon 'it's the silences which give this piece substance', I forget what we were listening to now as I'm not a big classical fan but it's very true. SLIC allows for spatial cues and pauses to really become more emotionally connective.

SLIC does background silence, darkness and depth incredibly well and is one its top features for sure. The decay of Chris Jones guitar or Nils Lofgrens on the 'Acoustic Live' album is simply wonderful, a textured note just fades into the darkness for a brief second as the next begins with body and control to its leading edge.

Leading edges on all aspects of what SLIC conveys is just solid and falls into fully fleshed out and unforced delicacies which has you sinking further and further into the sofa and that bottle of wine on the table, never realising that your actually listening about 30% louder than usual.

There is so little grain and mush to the sound. If a good cable is like a windbreaker at the beach than the Eclipse C is a brick wall. It does take a little bit of time to appreciate the difference between SLIC and what has been previously used as its rendition of top edges is very different, yet I argue with myself still now that I just can't be so bold as to say it's attenuated in any way. My Roksan Darius S1 speaker review reflects on the presentation in a similar manner, simply put - it's very clever.

During my late night listening tests and being fortunate enough that my current neighbours are very good and don't have children I was quite surprised that I had reached such volumes and was still not offended by any brightness or hardness from my ceramic drivers. So I started to play with the volume knowingly.

The Eclipse C throughout all my time with it always produced a good solid soundstage with a depth that came from its robust way of dealing with upper frequencies. Increasing the volume a good bit higher than what I had been listening to which was already louder than ordinary. The cable notably helped to retain the stability to the soundstage to a point where room interaction was clearly the discerning factor

What I found was a clever, astute and personable take on the sound that drew me in and represented itself to me as a cable that can truly produce no frills music which in the long term was more engaging.

with a build up of bass boom in an alcove to the left front. SLIC itself held the music together and never collapsed in on itself becoming less explanatory, confused or inject unwanted nasties into the dark background it portrayed even under pressure from busier music at higher volume levels.

Conclusion

I must say that at first I wasn't overly impressed with the Eclipse C from SLIC Innovations, although it's organic texture warranted me to explore it further and I'm glad I did.

What I found was a clever, astute and personable take on the sound that drew me in and represented itself to me as a cable that can truly produce no frills music which in the long term was more engaging, exciting and tempting than many cables ive heard. Reproducing the body of the music rather than the top and bottom edge of a recreated note or vocal is where the Eclipse C is fascinating. There is true substance to music with the aid of SLIC in a system and that comment probably describes it best.

Build Quality - 8.3/10

Sound Quality - 8.7/10

Value For Money - 8.1/10

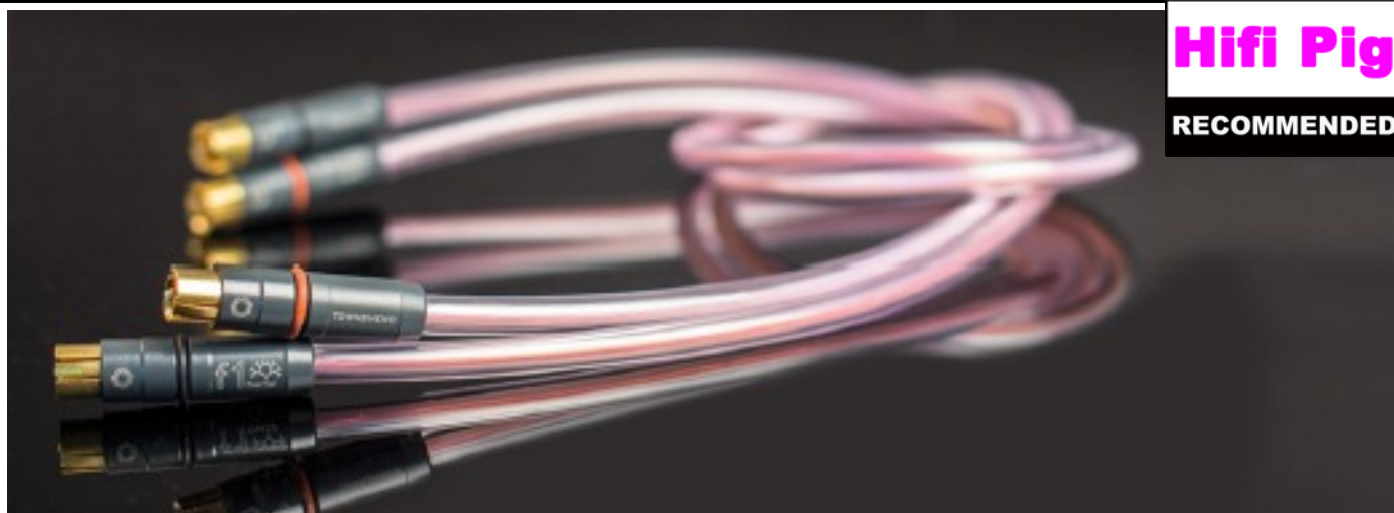
Overall - 8.36/10

Price at time of testing £492 for a 1m Pair

Recommended - for being the undercard that wins the race. A textured, grain free musical cable that does excitement without all the bells and whistles.

Dan Worth

Townshend Audio F1 Stereo RCA



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. The price is £899 for a 1 to 2 metre RCA pair.

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 thing I wanted to see, and something, to be honest I

Townshend Audio F1 Stereo RCA

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 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 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 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

Townshend Audio F1 Stereo RCA

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 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 Tangalco's energetic 'La Zucca Barucca'. The 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

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.

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.

Build quality 8.5

Sound quality 9.1

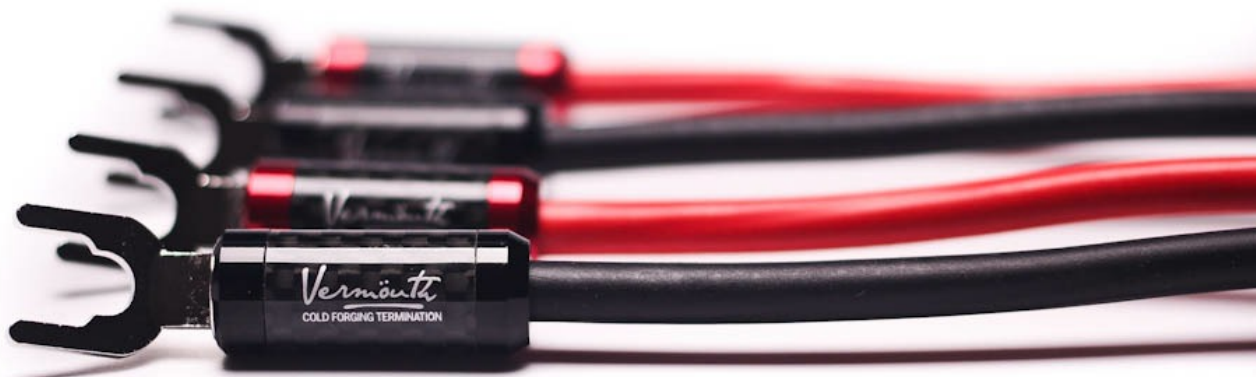
Value for money 8.7

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.

Price £899 for 1 to 2m Phono to phono and £949 for XLR

Janine Elliot



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

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.

Moving on to Derrin Nauendorf's '*Live at the Boardwalk*' which is a live acoustic recording with

Vermouth Audio Black Pearl Loudspeaker

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 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,

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 .

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?

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

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.

Dominic Marsh

Epiphany Acoustics

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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

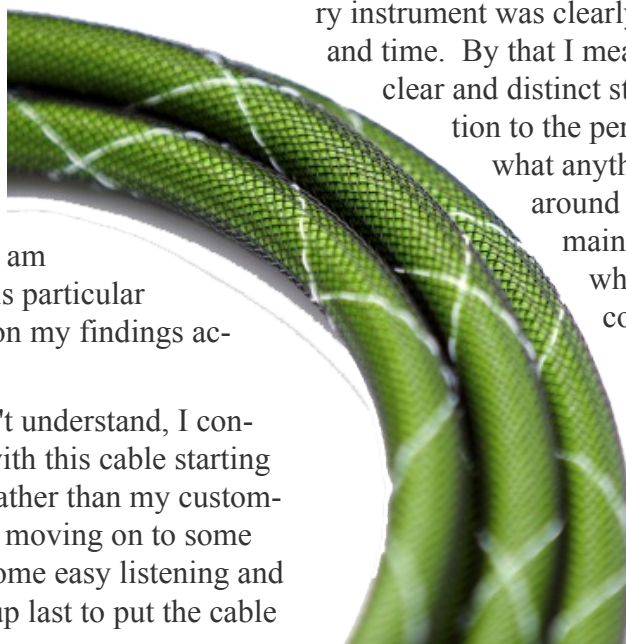
If Jerry got somewhat enthusiastic about the original Atratus interconnect he reviewed, I wonder what his opinion would be about the current Mark 3? Unfortunately I never had that pleasure of hearing the earlier variant, so I am more than content to accept this particular cable at face value and report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

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.

Dominic Marsh

Epiphany Acoustics Atratus 3 Interconnect

The Epiphany Acoustics Atratus 3 Interconnect went for second review to see if they would 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.

Build Quality - 8.2

Sound Quality - 8.6

Value For Money - 9.3

Overall - 8.7

Recommended for its performance to price ratio.

Dan Worth

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 detail retrieval really is remarkable allowing me to hear all the small cues, nuances and rubbed strings

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.

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.

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 happi-



Tellurium Q Blue Series

ly 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 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.



Tellurium Q Blue Series

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.

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 spa-

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

tial 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 exceptional 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 extreme-

Tellurium Q Blue Series

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.

ly 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.

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

Dan Worth

As is customary with Hifi Pig, whenever a product scores 8.5 or more then a second review is called for, so after Danny's scoring ratings, I have been asked to conduct the follow up reviews.

It'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 con-

Tellurium Q Blue Series

struction 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, 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

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.

cost of the Ultra Blue or the standard Blue? Read on and judge for yourself.

Ultra Blue Sound



Tellurium Q Blue Series

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 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 its 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 its 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 to do. Still, the serious audiophiles among us bother 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 its 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"

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

does tend to get over used these days but describes the effect perfectly and I searched for ages for a better 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

Tellurium Q Blue Series

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 Newton Howard 'And Friends' which isn't that enervating or involving in a strictly musical sense, but can certainly puts 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 it's vitality and I would suggest it will find many admirers of it's performance.

Conclusion - Ultra Blue

Effectively, this outshines the Blue in what the Blue does best, so it really has a strong kinship with it's 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.

The Blue speaker cable is a good example that good sound on a budget is within easy reach.

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 it's 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 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?

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

Dominic Marsh

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

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



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.

Picture 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

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.

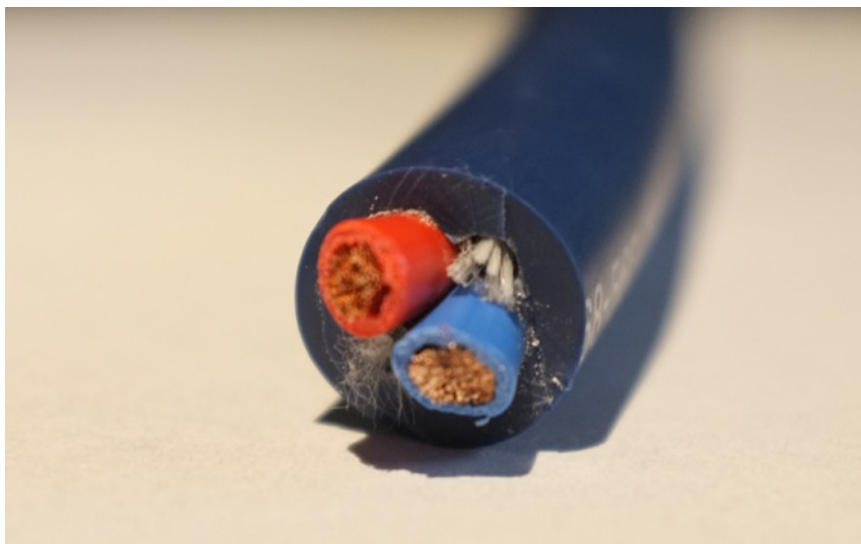
Conductor material is said to be high purity copper of 0.20mm per strand, 189 strands per conductor, so there is a lot of metal in there giving a commendably low resistance reading of 3.2 Ohms per kilometre. No inductance or capacitance measurements are provided.

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

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 the people who can hit number 10 or 11 on the dial

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.

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 reviews, you will know this is my own personal hobby

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

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.

horse I am a tad fastidious about and regard as an essential hallmark of cable performance.

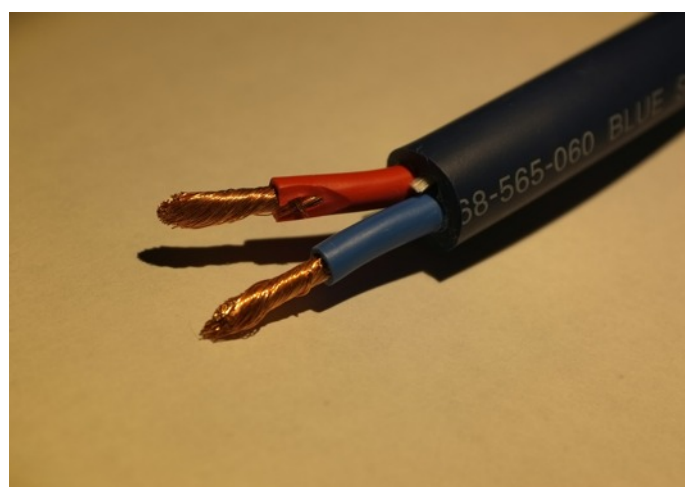
Conclusion

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!



BLUE 6mm SPEAKER CABLE

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

UP-LCOFC Hi-Fi 6mm speaker cable

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

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.

Dominic Marsh

JIB - 'Digital Glass' Toslink Cable

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Toshiba 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.

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.

Dan Worth

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-

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 suggests 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

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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 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 am-

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plifier 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.

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

Dominic Marsh

Paint It Black

"I felt I was listening to a more lifelike rendition of the music...good vocal projection combined with tight timing and a natural tonality make this cable extra special"

Tony Bolton



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Oriton R33 Support Rack



The R33 Support System looks for all intents and purposes to be a regular and straight forward hi-fi rack, but look a little closer and you begin to see that first impressions can be deceptive.

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

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

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

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

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

You definitely get the feeling that the R33 has been designed from the ground up with no buying in of off the shelf items and, despite its very modern appearance, it really does exude a certain luxury and high-end feel to it – much in the same way that a modern super car does. It may not be all polished wood and whatnot, but the modern materials used and the way they're put together lend it a feeling of being a quality item.

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

Oriton R33 Support Rack

Bass frequencies appear to be somewhat tighter and the effect is one of there being an increase in definition of the stereo image... which has to be a good thing.

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

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

My kit is pretty well isolated from the loudspeakers as the electronics are in a different part of the room,

but it would seem that the Oriton rack doesn't just limit external vibrations from reaching your equipment and it does seem to be doing something to the overall sound of kit placed on it to a greater or lesser extent. I'm suspecting but have no way of confirming that internal vibrations within the kit is being subdued somewhat.

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

Conclusion

The price of the Oriton R33 is to be confirmed but, given the materials used, the way that it is clearly very well thought out and put together and with its overall luxury feel, I doubt it is going to be bargain basement fodder - I suspect it to be a major purchase for most given the price of units that purport to offer similar benefits. The R33 rack screams luxury in a high-tech and high-end kind of way.

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

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

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

Stuart Smith

Paul Hynes SR3 Power Supply

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



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

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

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

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

Paul Hynes SR3 Power Supply

of due to a backlog of orders) so I contacted David to make arrangements to purchase one to try.

The Actual Supply

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

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

Burning In

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

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

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

The Sound

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After about another three weeks the playlist that I really wanted to use to compare and contrast the two supplies with finally came into play. I chose a mixture of music as I would for any session of this kind, female vocals to test sheen on upper mids, good solid male vocals to hear how fleshed out the lower mids were and a mixture of instrumental and manufactured music such as dance and electronica for nuances, dynamics top end and bass response.

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

Paul Hynes SR3 Power Supply

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

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

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

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

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

Since owning the Paul Hynes SR3 I have purchased another standard Squeezebox and can confirm the attributes mentioned in this review to be apparent and feel it an extremely worthwhile upgrade, especially in bass reproduction which develops a tighter



and more informative response with greater extension and detail.

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

Conclusion

Both supplies are extremely well made by professionals which are really at the top of their game. The Teddy Pardo is a clean sounding dynamic supply with incredible attributes. However, for me and to cover a wider range of genres, the Paul Hynes is a far better fit and does excel in certain areas, some in smaller degrees and some in amounts that convinced me it was a better all rounder. The Paul Hynes supply was able to produce a beautifully natural and silky presentation in the midrange coupled with added body and tone, without ever sounding exhausting dynamically. I also found it able to replicate an image convincingly clean and clearly without adding grain and remaining true to the tonal balance of a track and also having a strong solid engaging soundstage.

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

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

Dan Worth

Audiophile Inventory AUI Converter

Audiophile Inventory's AUI Converter software used primarily for file conversion and ripping of CDs.

What is AUI?

Audiophile Inventory's AUI Converter is a Windows or Mac based tool for professionals as well as the home user. For use in Hifi its main features are - ripping discs for streaming and the conversion of file types for device specific requirements such as any high resolution home audio device, portable players and car head units etc.

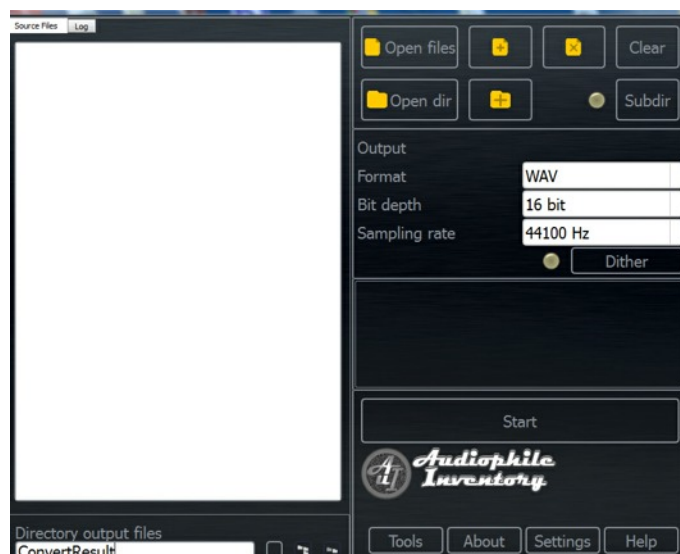
The software offers:

- High quality sound conversion
- High precision (64-bit floating point) algorithms
- sample rates and bit-depth conversion (alphaC)
- Gentle dithering algorithms (alphaD) for decreasing audio bit resolutions to 16 bit.
- Uses a solid and simple user friendly interface

The user is also able to add their own input and output audio formats (by using command line software - encoders, players, etc). The more professional features are not really something the average audiophile will be interested in and their specifics are beyond the scope of this review.

In short AUI is in my eyes a tool for ripping and converting files for the day to day home user, which offers a very high quality rip for a file based system, with features such as "Dithering" to retain the integrity and quality of a digital file allowing for (in experience) a smooth and transparent sound.

Applying Dither to conversions



When truncating an audio file (reducing its bit depth) from say 24bit to 16bit for example, maybe if the user wishes to burn a disc for a car CD player or another disc player elsewhere in the home we can run into "Truncating Errors".

Truncating Errors are the result of this compression which manifest itself as missing bits, missing 1's and 0's in the digital signal leading to a loss in details, nuances and information within the audio track.

The effect of these truncating errors is what many refer to as a nasty digital sound or recording. Artifacts, hard edges and high frequency grainy noise becomes very apparent on down samples and compressed music. So, how can the signal integrity be retained and smoothed out? This is where "Dithering" comes into play.

Ripping is very straight forward. The trick is to create a Master directory on the chosen drive you wish to save all of your rips to.

Audiophile Inventory AUI Converter

Applying dither during the process of sampling from the 24bit original to the 16bit copy eradicates these losses and retains the information by adding a low level noise to the sine wave. Dither however is not a magic wand, it does add a background hiss to the music just like a tape recording of old, yet at levels far below. This level of hiss is only apparent on 16bit and above files when at very high volumes during extreme silence cues between passages.

The audio signal with dithering remains intact, retains details and does not have a hard digital edginess or apparent noise across the frequency range which has been left by the missing 1's and 0's. The sound is more transparent and smoother sounding.

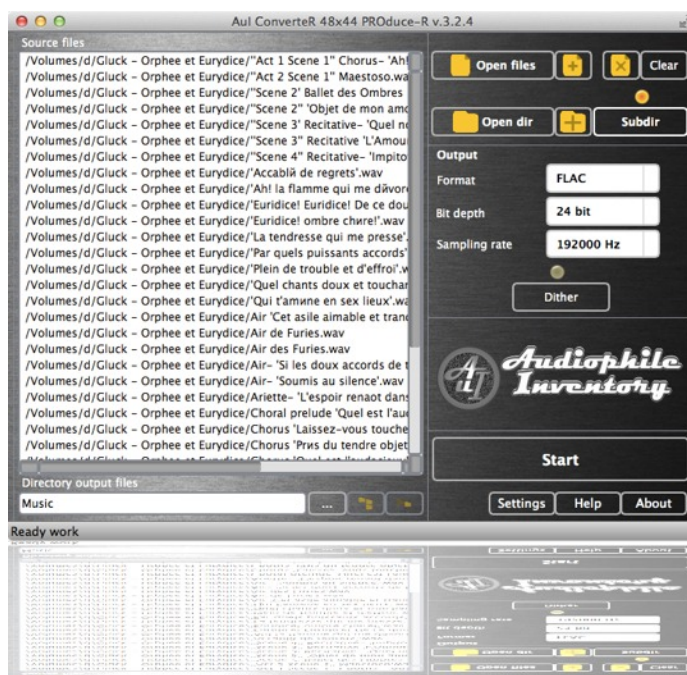
AUI has a built in dither slider in the settings tab and fine tuning the levels of dither will produce better results dependant on the recording (whether it has already been dithered or not) any down sampling which needs to be undertaken or whether the user is ripping from a disc. The standard amount of dither which AUI provides is deemed by them as the ideal rate for ripping on the fly and in my experience using the software I have found that applying dither to a rip makes for a more musical and smoother rip, retaining or adding transparency and being a safe method to reach the optimum quality of the rip.

If a rip seems to have a level of background hiss which is not on the original disc then it's advisable to re-rip that particular album again with dither turned off. I myself have not encountered this as of yet. The recording may already have some high dithering in place when originally mastered to physical copy. Remember, nearly all recording are originally mastered in the studio at either 24 or 32bit and are down sampled to 16bit for a standard CD.

A 24bit SACD would have less or no truncating of the original file (due to its original deriving from a 24bit master or 32bit) and therefore dithering is not essential. AUI has the ability to rip SACD's to DSD 64 or 128 formats allowing for the playback of High Rez files on compatible DACs and PC/Mac direct systems also.

DSD is trademarked by Sony/Phillips, the actual file extension is .dsf (data stream file). AUI refers to DSD files within the software as DSF "1bit/2.8mhz" and "1bit/5.6mhz". These numbers equate to:

$1\text{bit}/44,1\text{ kHz} \times 64 = 2,8\text{ MHz}$ (known as DSD64).
 $1\text{bit}/44,1\text{ kHz} \times 128 = 5,6\text{ MHz}$ (known as DSD128).



If a rip seems to have a level of background hiss which is not on the original disc then it's advisable to re-rip that particular album again with dither turned off.

The Software in Use

Using the AUI Interface is a breeze, the user is presented with a very simple GUI with options for sample rates, bit depths and file output type. The software covers all major file types, so if you wish to rip a disc to ALAC, FLAC, WAV, AIFF the option is there. Likewise if you wish convert pre-ripped files -

Audiophile Inventory AUI Converter

say you originally ripped all of your files to Apple Lossless and have the need for them to now be in FLAC this is also an available option, or if you simply wish to make copies in other formats such as WAV for burning a CD for the car or MP3 for a portable music player.

Like other ripping software on the market AUI can obtain metadata by first opening iTunes. When the inserted disc ready for rip is recognised by iTunes and message appears asking if you wish to import the album simply click no. Leaving iTunes open however will allow for the album and track names to appear within AUI and be located into the albums folder once ripped.

Ripping is very straight forward. The trick is to create a Master directory on the chosen drive you wish to save all of your rips to. Within this folder simply add sub folders with a preference to how you wish the library to be displayed. Personally I create a folder with the artists name and sub folders for individual albums.

Then on the AUI GUI click "Open Files" navigate to the disc and select all files and open. Then clicking the three dots at the bottom of the AUI screen allows you to navigate to the destination folder, once selected click "Start" bearing in mind the chosen output file format, bit depth and sample rate required, as well as clicking on the "dither" button which will be required 99 times out of 100. A more specialised dithering can be obtained through a trial and error process using the slider in the advanced settings, but for standard usage of the optimised settings it's just click click click and Start.

- Note: Some players/streamers will state that they will playback files of many variants, but in fact they can often convert these files to FLAC "on the fly". You may wish to investigate this and copy and rip all your albums to FLAC for piece of mind so that there is no converting necessary and to maximise hard drive capacity. Personally I rip everything to the exact file it appears in on the disc, mostly WAV and on the odd occasion AIFF, for me I feel why change anything about the original recording, especially if the playback software will play these files directly as my Amarra 3.0 does.

My impressions of the ripped media files.

Bearing in mind as earlier stated I haven't (yet) found the need to not use dither and have found that in

The distinctive difference is in all the smaller nuances, details and cues which add to and are crucial to the entire performance.

practice multiple rips using AUI have sounded incredibly good and sometimes better than the original CD itself, offering a more analogue take on the sound with great midrange transparency and perceivable air in the top end. Now I'm not saying that these differences are game changing, but the subtleties which they convey are very pleasing to a high end system.

Details seem to portray a more solid leading edge and allow for a more natural decay of instruments, also revealing reverbs which are more understandable.

The difference is in these smaller notifications and cues which add more atmosphere to the performance.

Before AUI and being Mac based I would use X-ACT which is free software. X-ACT is extremely good software and gives an audio reproduction which is leaps and bounds ahead of iTunes, causing me to re-rip my entire library again after discovering it.

Now with AUI I find myself working back through my albums as and when I have the time. The distinctive difference is in all the smaller nuances, details and cues which add to and are crucial to the entire performance.

With many audio playback softwares available to the end user such as JRiver, Audirvana, Puremusic and Amarra, it makes absolute sense that a good solid ripper is essential too. Once you have experienced the differences with specifically and professionally designed playback softwares, it makes sense to put your trust into a ripper of the same calibre and Audiophile Inventory's AUI Converter 48x44 is one to consider. A Free Trial as with any good vendor is available from the Audiophile Inventory website.

Price - Varies from \$33 - \$249 dependent on edition.

Dan Worth



This £695 box of tricks is designed to take the hassle out of cable burn in.

The theory goes that the material touching the conductor, the dielectric, has an effect on the performance of a cable and this has been been noted from very soon after the introduction of radio and the widespread use of conducting cables. In the past there was much speculation as to why this should be the case, but the work of Nickola Tesla in the latter part of the 19th century provided the answer when he passed very high voltages and frequencies (around 2000Hz) through a human with no ill effects. This phenomena is known as the 'skin' effect and is essentially the signal passing over the skin and not through the person.

It is said that cable can act in a similar fashion and that high frequencies will be passed along the surface of the wire and will avoid the inner parts of the wire. This means that in a cable used in your hifi system, it is not only the purity of the conductor that has an effect but also the wrapping/dielctric that is used. The Blue Horizon website states "However, the manufacturing process creates tension, stress and static charges between the conductor and dielectric,

and the resulting deleterious effects remain permanent unless properly dealt with". It is widely accepted (and I've certainly experienced the effect) that sound, be it the music you listen to on a daily basis or carefully generated frequencies played through your rig (such as from a burn in CD), will improve a cable's performance over time. Blue Horizon claim that this method of burn-in is fundamentally flawed given the lack of high-frequency content being fed through the cable .

In my experience it can take months of use before a cable reaches its optimum potential and the reason put forward by Blue Horizon is that the music we listen to has very little high-frequency energy and as such its ability to improve a cable's performance is limited. Blue Horizon also claim that the limited bandwidth of the achieved recording when played on CD is only about 20kHz at best and, by extrapolation of their theory, normal music, or dedicated burn in CDs, will never allow a cable to achieve its full potential.

Time is of course a major issue for a person such as myself who may have any number of cables in for review at one time and so I'd been on the look-out for a product or doodad that could:

1. Speed up the time it takes for a cable to "burn in"
2. Improve on the results achieved by playing music/burn in CDs alone

Blue Horizon Proburn Cable Burn-In and Conditioning Machine

Both these are claims made by Blue Horizon for the £695 Proburn.

The Proburn in use.

What did I think of the performance after use?

Since having the Proburn here I have used it to burn in many cables that have come in for review, shaving weeks or even months off what a cable can potentially take to fully settle in and sound at its peak performance. How do I know this?

After using Proburn on XLR, RCA and Speaker Cables the most obvious experiment for me to undertake was to place each set of conditioned cables into my system again and then to leave them in with music playing as much as possible for a further week to see if their character improved further.

Placing the cables in fresh from burn in showed usual improvements which one would expect to hear after a good amount of time of usage. Bass was more fleshed out and had better extension, mids became fuller and vocals gained presence. Top end clarity was less grainy, more airy and controlled.

Now I hear you say - How can you be so distinctive about a cable which you have only know for a very short period?

As mentioned before, I left each of the pairs of cables in my system for a week after burning and I honestly didn't notice any further improvements, I actually just moved on to completing the reviews for the said cables after a few days as the sound seemed so consistent.

I'm just an Audiophile, so what can Proburn do for me?

Moving on to what I believe is the stronger point of usage for the general consumer and enthusiast - System Enhancing.

My everyday interconnects are the Oriton Orange Symphony and the TQ Black Diamond. The Orange Symphony have been in my system for around a year and the TQ's a couple months. The Oritons have just been used in my system from new and the TQ's had a week on their own cable burning in machine before I received them.

So, I popped the Oriton interconnects onto the Proburn for a period of 24 hours. Plugging them back into the system I wasn't that optimistic to be honest and thought that if there was a couple percent improvement in performance then I would be

extremely happy - a couple of percent in this game can cost a considerable amount!

The differences really weren't subtle, the performance of the cables were significantly improved. The weight of bass notes was the first aspect which struck me. Bottom end notes were much of more expressively extended and fleshed out the midrange in a way that didn't ever tip towards overbearing in any way, just lend their hand to a new found confidence to the overall sound.

Midrange clarity stood firm and pronounced against this new found body and also seemed as if it had a step forward in performance. Treble articulation and sparkle raised an eyebrow or two also. Top end extension seemed to grow and dictated a command to the sound from the peak of the mountain right down to its depths of the valley floor.

All these aspects in culmination increased dynamic shifts, exposure to micro details and smaller nuances as well as conveying a hint more of emotional palpability during some of my very favourite performances.

The TQ black Diamonds were up next. I gave them the same 24 hour burn in time as I did the Oritons. Plugged them back into the system and, er... they sounded the same as before. Geoff Merrigan had left them on his own cable burning machine just 7-8 weeks earlier for a week.

Would I have liked to get an improvement from the process? Of course, we always want better for our systems but I guess the experiment confirms that burning in cables on a dedicated machine makes bigger improvements in performance than general can.

Dan Worth

I'm not going to score the Proburn but I am going to highly recommend it. In my experience, any cable that the Blue Horizon Proburn can accommodate will no doubt benefit from its extensively wide bandwidths of signal frequencies to bring them up to their full potential.

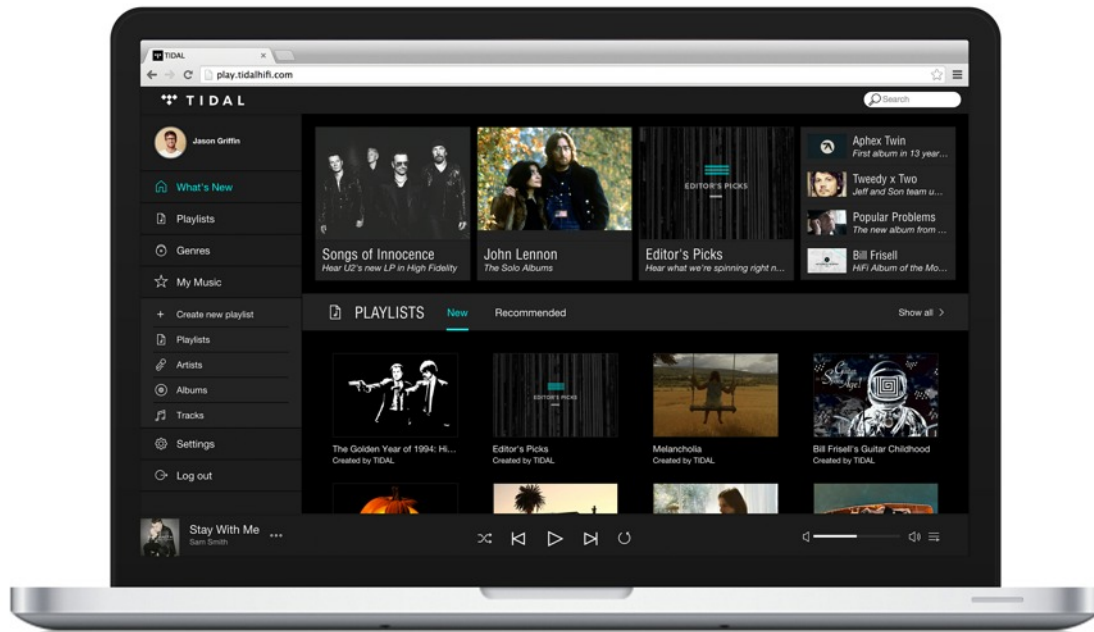
Note:

It's been recommended by Blue Horizon to repeat a 24 hour conditioning period every 6 months or so along with cleaning cable plugs and sockets for positive effects.

Tidal Music Streaming Service

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Three independent reviews of the new Tidal music streaming service from users with different listening habits/styles.

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

Tidal Music Streaming Service

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

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.

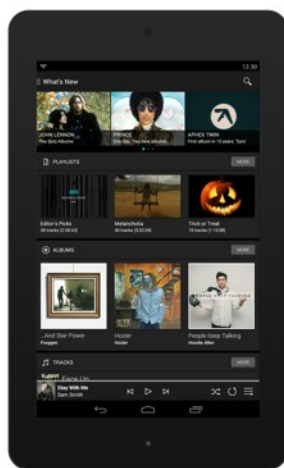
Tidal aim to have new albums available on the day of release. As I write this, I'm listening to Pink Floyd's *Endless River*, released today. The What's New section of the app has a wide selection of releases featured across all genres with albums from

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



Tidal Music Streaming Service

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.

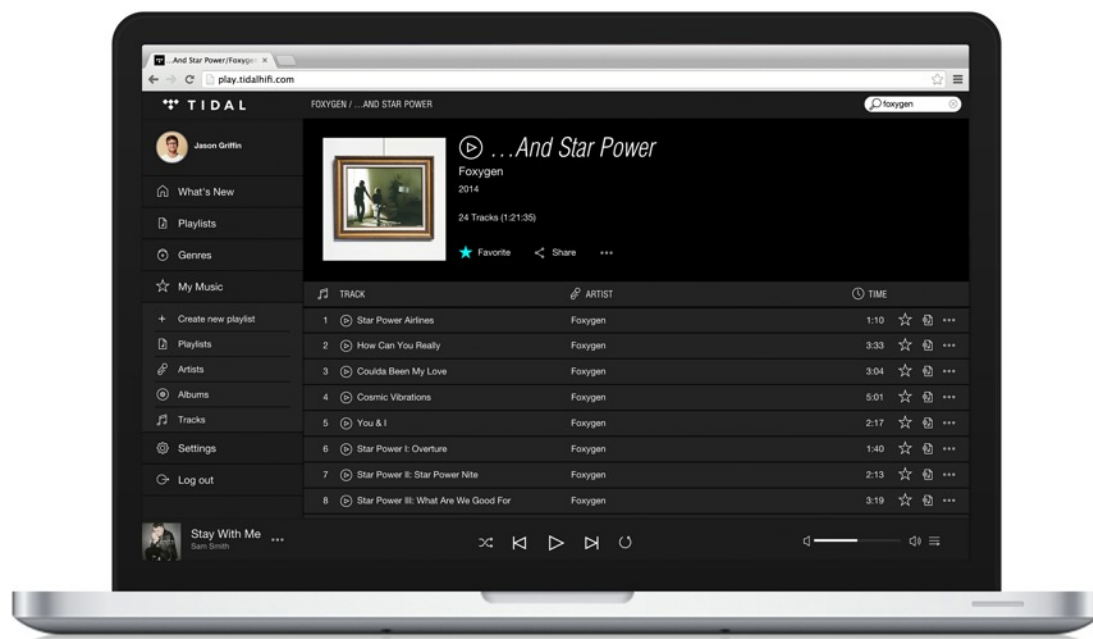
Playlists

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-

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



Tidal Music Streaming Service

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 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.

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.

John Scott

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 broad-

Tidal Music Streaming Service

band but I am not holding my breath!) I do also get 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.

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

Linette 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 Internet 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

Tidal Music Streaming Service

“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

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

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.

Stuart Smith

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The competition is open to all readers with a European address and aged over 18 except for Hifi Pig contributors and their household. Due to the nature of the electronics we will not send outside the EU! By entering the competition you are giving permission for Hifi Pig to publish your name and information when the winner is announced. Closing date 31/01/2015
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