

# Hifi Pig Magazine

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Issue #16

Free Bristol Show Supplement



## REVIEWS

German Physiks HRS-130, Music First Audio MM Phono Stage, Tellurium Q – Black Diamond Speaker Cable, IsoTek Aquarius Evo 3 Mains Conditioner, Acoustic Energy 101 Loudspeakers, Arcam Mini Blink Bluetooth DAC

**PLUS** Album and Gig Reviews, The Classics - (Caravan's In The Land Of The Grey and Pink), Boozers Corner

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HiFi World, Awards Edition Jan 2015

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# EDITORS SAY

It's been another really great month for Hifi Pig with readership soaring and feedback from industry and readers alike being overwhelmingly positive. The highlight of the month for me was the Bristol Show where we got to meet not only the fabulous people that review for Hifi Pig, but also had the chance to meet up with many of the people and companies we deal with day to day. You can read our special supplement for the show in this magazine - it's sponsored by the Clarity Alliance.

Bristol really was a great show and we had a blast. The new Hifi Pig bags went down a storm and we got to hear some fab kit to boot, however the ferry was a little rough to say the least...but we made it there in one piece. Time was really short for us and so we didn't really get the chances that we would have liked to chat with everyone in the rooms but I wanted to point out a handful of rooms that I enjoyed...and the owners managed to collar me and bend my ear. Scott in the CAD room was full of enthusiasm (*this was the first room I ventured into*) and keen to tell me all about the new Computer Audio Transport he was launching. He launched his DAC at this show three years ago and so it seemed fitting for him to be demonstrating his latest creation at Bristol. Basically this new transport (CAT) is aimed at those folk who are not particularly computer types but who want to get into the whole streaming malarkey. It runs on Windows, and is basically plug and play - insert your CD and the machine does the ripping, finding artwork and what not. It will play files from pretty much anything attached to your home network and costs £5300 plus the price of whatever storage you want at cost.

One of the things that was a bit of an irritation at the show was the number of people who insisted on standing in the doorways of rooms making it impossible to get in...get in there guys! Another irritation was the extremely rude chap who insisted on pushing past us on several occasions without so much as an excuse me...manners maketh the man I was always told.

The Quadral room was nice with a pair of £3 K active speakers on the end of a very expensive TAD DAC. The Doors were playing in this room when I went in which was a bit of a bonus.



Anthem AV invited us to have a listen to their Paradigm speakers and very nice they were too. They're made in Canada and cost from £1500 to £5250 and it certainly appears that you get a lot of speaker for your money.

We were also invited into a press demo in the Chord Company's room and this was a bit of an eye opener. The streaming cables on dem' certainly seemed to have a positive effect as you went up the price range, but the real gob smacking moment was a sneaky peek at their very latest cable. Linette and I just looked at each other in disbelief...though it's not going to be cheap and I think a figure of £1800 was mentioned for a 1m length. Hope you enjoy your Hifi Pig bag, Nigel.

There were lots more rooms that were great too...see the pictures and Linette and Dominic's thoughts in the free supplement.

Friday evening's awards by the Clarity Alliance was really great and it was good to see the great and the good of the press turn out for this...and we were slightly humbled to be asked along too. There were some well deserving winners and it was really good to see Paul Messenger getting a lifetime award for his services to the industry.

Friday nights meal with the guys from Sound Foundations and GamuT was a rather splendid occasion and I think we may well have found some kindred spirits there!

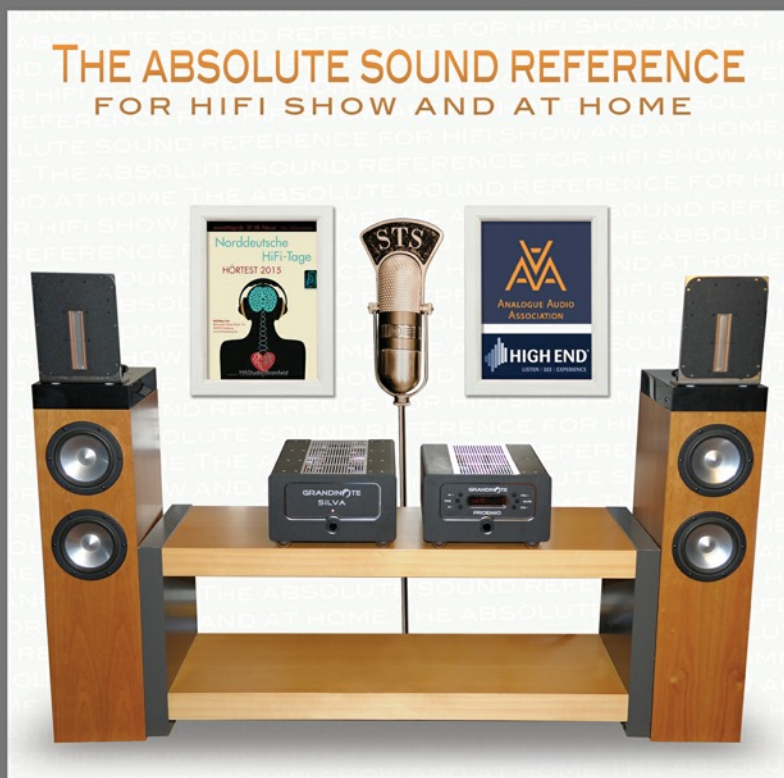
the next show for us is Munich in a couple of months and then Cranage Hall, but we'll certainly be making our way to Bristol for the show next year.

If you see us there, do make sure you say hello !

**Stuart**

# SPECIAL OFFER FOR HIFI PIG READERS

## The Absolute Sound Reference CD



STS Digital is one of Europe's most prestigious (and maybe the smallest) recording, producing and manufacturing labels of 'audiophile' quality CD's and LP's. Based in the Netherlands, STS is owned and run by Fritz de With, music balance Engineer and Director. The Company history is the history of Fritz's passion for quality music reproduction over commercial and competitive ambition. Fritz has been recording live music since he was 15 and aged just 17, had his own recording studio. Indeed, he was so successful that in 1978 he sold his catalogue of over 460 LP length recordings to Philips (under the Studio Tape Sound brand). For the next 10 years, he worked in both the Hi-Fi world and Television production, honing his audio engineering skills and appreciation of quality audio reproduction. Philips/Marantz then approached Fritz to produce there now sought after (out of print) audiophile quality music samplers that for the next 15 years could be heard at Hi-Fi Shows and in Hi-Fi shops around the world. After 15 years and 15 Marantz sampler CD's, Fritz started making his own CD's and LP's under the STS Digital label and continues to focus on production for high end audiophile music lovers. Fritz has fans all over the world, Ken Kesler is a big fan, commenting ... "If Fritz continues making CD's sound like good LP's the life expectancy of the CD could be much longer then a lot of people think". All the STS Digital CD's are produced at minus 2 db. max. headroom to reduce processing distortion in your CD player. STS Digital have also developed the 'MW Coding Process' a process where CD's indeed do sound more like good LP's or real analogue sound, sound engineered from the original master tapes. The STS Digital special offer CD is a selection of tracks both recorded and engineered by STS Digital. It offers you a real taste of high end CD reproduction at one quarter the full retail price of other STS Digital CD's sold in many Hi-Fi Shops.

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# German Physiks HRS-130

Janine Elliot checks out this interesting omnidirectional loudspeaker.

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**RECOMMENDED**



# GERMAN PHYSIKS HRS-130

Let me tell you a story. In the early 70s I remember an American company called Ohm which utilised the sides of the up-turned drivers like funnels to flex and ripple and ‘bend’ waves out to the listener in all directions. A radical omnidirectional speaker designed by Lincoln Walsh, and the Ohm Walsh Model F loudspeaker was probably the best speaker they made. Quite novel, though I personally didn’t find the sound to my liking, sounding a bit too ‘flabby’ and slow, despite the rhetoric telling me when I listened through Ohm loudspeakers “you actually hear the source”. In 1978 the German engineer and mathematician Peter Dicks, who was fascinated with certain characteristics of audio transducer behaviour, started working on improving Walsh’s design. Dubbed DDD (Dick’s Dipole Driver) this funnel shaped transducer was perfected over the next few years, though it took until a certain Mr Holger Mueller, owner of Mainhattan Acustik (and incidentally an owner of a pair of the original Ohm F loudspeakers), contacted Mr Dicks seeing its potential and employed it in the Borderland mk1 in 1993. Thus German Physiks was set up, and the DDD being utilised in all its products ever since. Whilst Dicks now worked in fine-tuning the maths and physical realisation, Mueller worked on the aesthetics and industrial design.

The idea of omnidirectional speakers has rocked the world for many years with many manufacturers trying different methods to create a sound that filled the room without that single sweet spot. Westphalia and Enckel in 1934, Harmon Kardon Citation X in 1960, Bose 901 in 1968, Shalinian from 1977, Duevel since 1997, and more recently B&O Beolab 5 and of course all those quadraphonics, Dolby Surround or soundbars, are just a few that spring to mind. I tried many options to get that room-filling-feeling and failed to get anything realistic enough to like. After all, it is realism that I wanted, and not just some short-term hi-fi buzz. When I was offered to review the German Physiks HRS-130 my immediate thoughts harked back to the Ohm Acoustics, and especially to the present day sci-fi looking MBL 101 E Radialstrahler, incidentally from another German manufacturer. Having been brought up on sweet spots, though, I entered into this review with a certain amount of trepidation. But I am always prepared to walk away with proverbial tail between my legs, so I set upon giving this monumental pedestal a fair and long listening.

**The idea of omnidirectional speakers has rocked the world for many years with many manufacturers trying different methods to create a sound that filled the room without that single sweet spot.**

You may remember the four-sided [Unlimited MkII Loudspeakers were reviewed in HiFi Pig in July 2013](#), and contained admirable explanations on the technical process. HRS-130 is a brand new 8-sided offering, still at the lower price end, but £3,000 more. At the top is the same DDD driver; a carbon fibre cone suspended vertically under the top lid with 8 rods to hold it all in place rather than guard the driver from prying hands. Robert Kelly, International sales manager, showed me you could press it in and it still went back to its original shape. Just as well, though I didn’t want to try it just in case. The Titanium version before wasn’t quite so double jointed, which is why Carbon is used. The driver has a very special quality for the discerning hi-fi journalist. As it operates flat from 220Hz upwards, it essentially means all the important audio information comes from a single place. Where the titanium driver works well

# GERMAN PHYSIKS HRS-130

only up to 21.5kHz, the carbon fibre version is more rigid and can work brilliantly up to 24kHz, and consequently it is this design that is standard in all the models. Whilst the top frequencies could go up to 30kHz, they would start to sound a little ragged, so a roll off filter is applied at 24kHz so that only the most accurately produced frequencies are allowed to be radiated. The whole is held above a shallow cavity to absorb low frequency radiation. With a downward firing driver all frequencies can radiate uniformly on the surface in all directions. It is, if you like, an elongated upturned full range woofer with a spider/motor on the top end and terminating in a synthetic damping suspension at the other to stop waves rebounding back up again, and we are listening to the outside of the cone, rather than the inside. This clever mechanical device has several modes of operation; firstly at the lower frequencies it works like a piston driver, exactly like the drivers in conventional speakers, and progressively changes into the production of bending waves when it is no longer rigid enough to transfer this force down the diaphragm pistonically. In this instance it is not the forward and back thrust of the driver that is creating the sounds, but the frequencies rippling down the flat carbon fibre funnel. The cone's narrow physique allows for enough ripples and is angled well for my height sitting in an average settee. The comparisons with a skipping rope and how when one person flicks their end of the rope a wave travels along the rope to the other end is a good explanation of how the sound travels. Eventually a standing wave is set up on the diaphragm surface. At this frequency the driver goes into modal radiation, where vibrating regions that look like the pattern you see when you drop a stone into a pool are formed on the dia-

phragm's surface. These get smaller and more numerous as the input frequency is further increased, which allows quite an extended upper frequency limit. For frequencies below 220Hz there is a downward firing sealed bass unit at the near base of this monocoque, suspended three inches above a series of

square apertures ala Helmholtz resonator which takes the music down to a very impressive 29Hz. I managed to get below 25Hz. The whole gave a flat response to above 20kHz with only a very slight dip in the mid bass around 80Hz.

With prices of up to £250,000 for the top-of-the-line Gaudi MkII, which comes complete with four DDDs and three German engineers (alas, only provided to set up this gigantic monolith), I had to make do with just Robert Kelly to deliver and set up the HRS-130. This is the company's latest outing with prices from £11,900 to £15,450 for different finishes and which replaces the 8-sided HRS-120. Where the former came in two versions with 8 inch or 10 inch woofer and Titanium or Carbon DDD driver respectively, the 130 is just 10 inches and Carbon, with all parts in high-polish black or white polyester, unless of course you want another finish. Where the former would operate in an area up to 55m<sup>2</sup>, the new model works well up to 75m<sup>2</sup>, which effectively means a 25ft square room! Luckily my 24 foot by 12 foot living room proved no challenge and allowed me to position the speakers and myself in such a way that I could get a good inkling of its character and musicality. At its base it is 325 mm x

325 mm, with a footprint only 5 mm larger than the HRS-120. The weight is a healthy 34.5kg, largely due to the special damping material called Hawaphon attached to the inside of each of the 8 panels. Hawaphon is a polymer sheet which contains a matrix of sections filled with very fine steel shot. Ap-



## GERMAN PHYSIKS HRS-130

parently this material was originally designed for use in military and government buildings as a sound deadening fixture so that spies couldn't listen in. An 8-sided structure was chosen more for creating a stiffer 'box' than for its looks, though I prefer this shape to the 'square' models. This box certainly is very rigid and substantial and at 4.8kg more than the HRS-120 sits very stably on the floor. It comes supplied with a selection of gubbins to fix to the floor, including reversible spikes giving you a choice between pointed or ball ends, metal washers for the ball ends to sit inside, and self-adhesive felt pads to stick under the metal washers to prevent them from scratching polished wood floors. All of which are provided in a well-stocked plastic pouch including a few CDs and a duster to remove those oh-so-annoying finger marks. Where the HRS-120 only had a single pair of binding posts, the HRS-130 allows bi-wiring/bi-amping, all supplied with WBT nextgen™ terminals. There are also jumpers on the rear to alter output level of the DDD above 8kHz in 2dB steps, from -2dB to +4dB. This allowed me to compensate for the absorption of high frequencies by furnishing in the room. For me 0dB was fine for my room - in the 0dB setting no extra elements are introduced into the crossover meaning a purer sound.

**It reminded me of those posthumous 3D moving holographs of Elvis Presley or Michael Jackson appearing on an empty stage that turned audience heads in awe.**



# GERMAN PHYSIKS HRS-130

Whilst technology is a major part of this company I didn't want science to take over the enjoyment of music, so I sat, and I stood, and I walked and I listened. This wasn't going to be a quick review. As soon as Robert Kelly had set the speakers up, I pressed play on the test CD that I knew so well, to get that initial emotion. Whilst initial thoughts shouldn't always be set in stone, I do tend only to buy things like clothes if they appeal to me immediately. If I hang around unsure for a while and then buy them I tend to regret it later. So I didn't write anything. I just listened for several days and then put pen to digital paper.

As a studio manager of old, used to painting a picture on a large canvas in front of me, the idea of creating a 3D print is anathema to my training. I even have problems with setting up my 5.1 system. It really just is not real. And so many times omnidirectional offerings just miss out on that x/y factor, that I just concentrate on setting up my two-speaker hi-fi so that it sounds as life-like as my brain will allow it. And then I listened to this. It reminded me of those posthumous 3D moving holographs of Elvis Presley or Michael Jackson appearing on an empty stage that turned audience heads in awe. All the music was all 'just there' in front of me and I could almost 'touch it'. I began to believe the musicians were actually there in the room with me. It didn't matter that there was no sweet spot. Indeed, I felt relieved that I could move my head and not lose anything. For that reason the music now became all the more real and therefore approachable. The TelluriumQ Ultra Silvers with their phase coherence worked well in keeping the music controlled and real. Instruments were placed at the correct desk in the orchestra. 'Nights in the Gardens of Spain', Manuel de Falla (Chandos ABRD1169) had both depth of energy and of soundstage, so that I really was there with the musicians, and probably in Spain, too. Interestingly, while the German Physiks Unlimited MKII Loudspeakers reviewed last year in Hi-Fi Pig didn't work so well with the Krell KAV250a, I found the same combination – this time with the control and bite of the MFA Baby Reference and Ecosse MS4.45 cables – gave a very controlled and realistic 3D image, particularly when the Krell was allowed to show its muscle and with the speakers well away from the walls, and with much further still. Where my B&W 804s could perform the magic act of separating the music into low, mid and high constituent sweet spots, the mixture of Helmholtz resonator bass end and omnipolar dipole



at the other in this tall gloss black pedestal now worked in harmony with each other, just as Hydrogen and oxygen. Even God, or whoever, couldn't have created a more coherent chemistry than the designers of this pedestal. The DDD funnel working all the way down through 220Hz assisted in this greatly, and lower frequencies grunted with all the energy that Helmholtz pressure peaks and troughs would allow. What astounded me was its fluidity of sound. Whilst the two drivers couldn't be further from each other physically, their similarity in delivery gave a uniformity of sound that I found quite exhilarating. This was not a bass – top duo that never talked to each other, like so many speakers, nor did I have to vice my head in a single point for fear that movement away would lose me much of the detail. Because the main DDD driver covered everything from 24kHz down to 220Hz, I could concentrate on just listening to the music, wherever I sat or stood.

Whilst the HRS-130 isn't particularly efficient (at 87dB 1W/1m) it didn't feel lacking by today's standards. Where most speakers focus their sound into that

## GERMAN PHYSIKS HRS-130

one sweet spot, these were speaking just as loudly in front of me as they were everywhere else in the room, making for in reality an efficiency of probably 4-6dB more than they own up to. Indeed, room placement was less of an issue than nearly every other speaker I have ever tried. As long as it was more than a metre from walls its position was not that critical. Running bi-wired and with spikes on my carpet-covered concrete floors I could position my attention to the music, not the mechanics. I guess these speakers would work great if I were to have a party, as well as of course to be a good conversation starter. A good test for speakers is what they sound like outside the room. A real test for this is the grand piano. Not happy with one, I settled with two Steinways played by John Ogdon and Brenda Lucas in my prized Shostakovich two piano Concertino op 94 recorded in 1975, via the Music First Audio Reference Phono amplifier. This was not uprights on steroids; rather it provided me with a forceful and very realistic rendition of the half ton beasts (the pianos, in case you wondered). Deciding to come back into the room and squeezing in between the two pianos, this was just as equally real. The speaker did not feel inefficient, showing it could handle extremes in dynamics and soundstage, whether I fed it 250W Krell or 25W Slee. My room was now the concert hall or the studio, and it felt so different to my usual boxes.

Using my Slee Class Ab 25W mono-blocks, Mozart Wind Serenade No 10 in Bb (Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Naim) was tight and musical. The left-speaker in the recording didn't become annoying, as the music was there in front rather than pinned against the wall, though I still wondered why they ever invented the bassoon. Turning to the other extreme, Led Zeppelin II, the left-right bouncing effects in "Whole Lot of Love" didn't sound confused as I thought it might, and the quiet echo of Robert Plant's voice in the middle was surprisingly clear with a spaciousness that made it both enjoyable and palatable. Indeed the amount of information coming to me from all directions was clear and musical. Track 2 'What is and What Never Should Be' just showed me what there actually should be with its stunning openness and unfettered energy, the lucidity and detail in the ride cymbal showed these speakers were not wanting at high frequencies, nor slow. Robert was alive and well in my living room, but he was wearing a dapper three piece suit with bow tie, rather than jeans. Whilst the bass end could be very punchy if needed, the rest was just a little too polite. I felt



# GERMAN PHYSIKS HRS-130

these speakers worked best with live or open music, and particularly classical and jazz. Kitaro "Live in America" is an extremely dramatic and spacious work, with violins, synthesisers, recorders and numerous wooden percussion instruments, all contributing in horizontal writing of competing intertwining strands of music. It also has deep thunderclaps and an audience that occasionally claps in the very, very distant background. This work is inspired by the classic Buddhist pilgrimage to the 88 sacred temples on Japan's southerly Shikoku Island, and the German Physiks give the music the reverence and space that it deserves. Each instrument has its own place in this meditational live recording, and these speakers give the depth of field that few others I have heard can do with this complicated album. I began to realise that whilst these speakers could handle almost anything I fed it, they were more at home with music that had a good depth of sound and space. This speaker was superbly articulate, and better at mimicking live music than multitrack studio music. It was better with classical music, conducting each instrument onto their correct seat in the orchestra, but it gave me the freedom to sit anywhere in the auditorium to enjoy it. I felt it used the acoustics of my room to create a larger space than the walls suggest. Interestingly, the most excitement I got was when I used these speakers as the sound whilst watching a film, indeed finding them more engaging than my 5.1 set up. The depth of soundstage was mesmerizingly absorbing. For me this is where they excelled. Where cluttered layers of sounds and music in film can be so confusing, these speakers unravelled them and put them in their rightful position, just as the AD on the film set directs the Extras to their starting points. These could turn any transistor amp into valve, with oodles of soundstage, imaging and layering and noticeably endless decays. All they lacked was that pin-sharp focus, which was not what they were intended for. I did add the Townshend Super-tweeter to see if that improved things for me, but whilst it did gave the speaker that little bit more control and removing some of the vagueness at the top (for example, cymbals in Walking on the Moon, The Yuri Honing Trio, being that much 'tighter'), I lost much of the depth of sound that is the whole point of these speakers. I quickly confiscated them.

## Conclusion

Omnidirectional speakers are like Marmite; you will either love 'em or hate 'em. Luckily for me I like

**They are different, not for the sake of it, but because the technology mimics life more than a traditional box ever can, such that they exude the emotion of the performance rather than it being a mechanical performance.**

marmite and cheese on digestive biscuits, so feasted in the week I had these speakers in my house. If you want absolutes, you will prefer two box speakers, but if you have imagination and want exploration you will love these. They are different, not for the sake of it, but because the technology mimics life more than a traditional box ever can, such that they exude the emotion of the performance rather than it being a mechanical performance. They are not cheap, though certainly inexpensive compared with the MBIs. They were a definite conversation starter whilst in my house, though references to a cigarette bin or Daleks were quickly ignored by me. Of the wood finishes available, my favourite was Mappa Burl at £13,500, which would make this speaker look like a work of art any living room. It made a change for me not to have my head in a vice listening to music all week, and I really enjoyed listening to an immersive, uncoloured and open presentation, particularly with live music. My living room never felt so big.

**Sound Quality – 8.4/10**

**Value for Money – 8.3/10**

**Build Quality – 8.4/10**

**Overall – 8.37/10**

**Janine Elliot**

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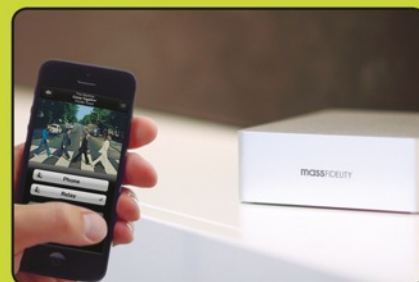
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# Music First Audio MM Phono Stage

**At £9840 this phono stage is a serious investment, but will it deliver on sound quality? Janine Elliot finds out.**

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



# MUSIC FIRST AUDIO MM PHONO

I love playing with phono stages. I guess it all goes back to my childhood spending hours of love and devotion getting the right weight and bias on my Trio KD1033's S-shaped arm, and then getting excited when I added the ADC magnesium headshell. No one had heard of carbon then. And the idea of having a separate phono-stage was unheard of until NAD brought out their PP1. Of course no one would dream of using an OEM phono-stage inside their amplifier now. Since my very first PP1 and PP2 I have tried everything, from NAD, Cambridge Audio, Creek, Musical Fidelity, Graham Slee, Manley and now testing this Music First Audio offering. If you get where this is all going, you can see my taste has been getting more audiophile, and expensive.

Whilst my original KD1033 has since gone and met its maker in the tip (well, actually I think I sold it in 1983) my turntables have similarly rotated like my phono stages. Whilst my personal museum has about 20 including five wind ups and BSR, 4 Garrards, 2 Philips, Thorens, Pioneer, Technics, Leak, and Transcription, it is my Townshend Rock with Merlin that does the hard grafting these days, feeding to a Manley Steelhead. The ability to adjust impedance, load capacitance and output level, and have 4 inputs and 3 outputs is something that really drew me to the Manley, and it has taken me many months and a few choices of valves to get that lifelike sound image I so desired. And now for this review I needed to disconnect it so I could try out the minimalist MFA that only has an on/off button and a 13 pin umbilical cord between the two boxes.

Let me tell you a story about two middle-aged bearded men and a dog. Firstly there was Jonathan Billington from Stevens and Billington who had created the RIAA600, a RIAA circuitry based on the use of Inductors (L), Capacitors (C) and resistors (R) making up an LCR circuitry. He later created the Moving Coil Step up and now the Moving Coil V2 Step-Up, and of course is primarily known for his TVC (Transformer Volume Control) passive preamplifiers including the Baby Reference which I reviewed recently. The other gentleman was a certain Nick Gorham, computer software designer and dog lover who was used to building his own audio equipment as a hobby. His designs then grew into a company he called Longdog Audio, and included the well-respected VDt1 high-end DAC and the £1995 MCj2 MC Phono Amplifier. In various capacities he had

**Indeed the whole caboodle is housed in a non-ferrous aluminium casework, and all of it built in the UK.**

been working on phono-stages for over 15 years. He spent many hours walking his dogs thinking about how he was going to get that perfect phono stage. He even got asked by a friend to make the "the best phono-stage you can build", but had to turn down the invitation fearing that there might be complications if the customer- who after all is paying for it - did not agree with his choice of components or the sound. But what it did do is stir up Nick's passion for making the very best. Over the next many years and many, many, experiments and dog walks he arrived at a number of areas of vital importance in creating that ultimate phono stage.

Firstly, the equipment needed to be of very Low noise. This meant everywhere, not just the input stage, but especially the power supply. Next it required an accurate RIAA equalisation that needed to be matched between channels. In a way this last point was more important than the accuracy, as it can be more audibly noticeable if there is a change of tone on one leg. Therefore, the RIAA equalisation is vital in getting an accurate sound. Records have been

# MUSIC FIRST AUDIO MM PHONO

EQ'd in this record-industry-standard curve since 1954, and it is imperative that circuitry in the phono amplifier reshapes sounds back to a flat response. Next, it all needed a large overload margin; necessary in avoiding the effects of surface noise from escalating from a short pulse you don't hear into a long drawn out recovery process that you certainly do! Finally, the power supplies needed to be low noise. Whilst this "wish list" is easy to write down on a piece of paper, getting all these options in a single product a reality isn't! For example, large overload margins are best done with valves, but that can make creating a low-noise product that much harder. Nick believes low impedance RIAA equalisation sounds better than high impedance, giving it more life and "spirit" to the sound. Whilst low distortion is important, what is actually more important is that it is at a constant level across the whole frequency band. Again, using valves in the design make this harder, but the end result is better. Now whilst Nick could design everything he needed to create that perfect phono stage at any cost, the LCR network itself was far from perfect. The matching was too 'loose' and the RIAA equalisation was not accurate enough. So he asked Jonathan to help him create the perfect RIAA LCR equaliser using his life experience of winding inductors and transformers. The original RIAA600 'shielding can' from Jonathan contained two inductors and a handful of capacitors and resistors. What Nick did in the new RIAA equaliser was use two inductors in each shielding can and use external capacitors and resistors to complete the RIAA network. By having them outside the can there was more space inside, which meant he could use an air cored inductor of a larger size which reduce HF distortion, and better sounding capacitors (Mundorf and SCR teflon) that would otherwise not fit inside. Finally, it allowed him to trim the resistor values to

obtain better matches. Immediately the channel matching was fixed, as was the RIAA accuracy. Nick won't mind me saying that he is a designer rather than a business man, and so he decided to leave that side to Jonathan. Whilst the design is recognisably Longdog Audio, with its cone shaped feet and on-off button mid centre, it is very clearly labelled as Music First Audio.



To the phono-stage in question, it is a two box affair, with a power supply in one case and the phono-stage itself in the other, both linked by 12-pin loom. Both look absolutely gorgeous with the front aluminium panel flush with all four sides of the box-proper. To be able to do that well is a work of art in itself. Where the

phono-box is very colourfully labelled with the clever MFA logo, the power supply unit has a very reserved italic font labelling. If they sit on top of each other that might not be a problem, but for me sitting the units on separate shelves I would like them to match. I am a woman after all.

As Nick told me; "The requirements were for low noise, high gain, long life, and high 'trans-conductance' (it notices the very small signals from the cartridge, giving what the late Allen Wright described as 'downward dynamic range'). None of the traditional valves used in phono-stages met that requirement. The solution was a valve that came from the last days of valve design, and was made for the telecommunication industry where the aim was 'performance' over 'price'. One obvious candidate I had used many times before, the Siemens d3a pentode, a wonderful valve, fitted all the requirements. So I used that for the first stage".

Whilst that gave low noise and high gain, it could not do this at the same time as driving the LCR network. So after several more dog walks (he tends to do most

# MUSIC FIRST AUDIO MM PHONO

of his thinking while walking the many dogs he has!) he decided on a design consisting of the d3a pentode at the front, driving a cathode follower to drive the LCR, then a triode gain stage, then a cathode follower to drive the output. Power came from four low noise shunt voltage regulators and inductors for the RIAA network were provided by Jonathan. On the original machine the valves were only just able to drive the LCR, so headroom was limited as was channel matching. So, after a few more dog walks he came up with using a 5687 dual triode to drive the LCR and output stage and a 6072a dual triode triode as the second voltage amplifier stage. As a dual-mono design all this is then repeated on the other leg. The power supply box contains first stage regulators, so that what gets fed into the second box is a super smooth and quiet DC. Having an outboard power supply keeps the sensitive low-level audio electronics away from things like power transformers, which can radiate magnetic fields adding unwanted hum and mains borne noise to the audio. Indeed the whole caboodle is housed in a non-ferrous aluminium case-work, and all of it built in the UK. The main second box has two sets of green LEDs set on the PCB that glow nicely out through the vents on the top, putting to shame the light from the valves themselves, and something which I really did enjoy seeing. These LEDs do, however, have a purpose being a reference point to show that the unit is being fed a constant current source.

As MC cartridges generate a smaller voltage than the MM phono-stage being reviewed, a single ratio step up transformer was provided to get the output from my Ortofon Kontrapunkt b high enough. Jonathan kindly provided me with their single ratio step-up transformer at £1,440 especially wound for my cartridge at 1:10 winding ratio. That means that the 47k $\Omega$  cartridge would see the transformer's load divided by the transformer's ratio squared giving a load to the cartridge of 470ohms. There was a 6 position switch on the front to select between different load values, effectively selecting between resistors on the secondary of 20K $\Omega$ , 30K $\Omega$ , 40k $\Omega$ , 60k $\Omega$ , 80k $\Omega$  and open circuit. Ortofon recommend the Kontrapunkt b has load impedance set between 50-200 ohms, and in my listening test I preferred setting the step up at 30K $\Omega$  meaning I had a load impedance of 183 ohms. On the rear are input and output RCA sockets, an earth connection, and a three way switch. The latter allows for three alternatives to how the input earth is connected to the output. In position 1 it directly con-



nects output ground to input ground. In the middle it is lifted completely, and in third position it connected but with a 15 $\Omega$  resistor. I used position 1.

Now for the best bit. There is nothing quite as musical and easy to listen to as vinyl, and it excites me more to get the record out of the sleeve, clean it and put it on, than it is to turn on some 24/192 file from my pc. With Krell/MFA/MFA-Longdog Audio, vinyl provided by Townshend Rock/Rega/Kontrapunkt b, and cabling from Ecosse, Townshend and Synergistic Research, listening could begin. Turning on the phono stage, the blue on-off switch flashed at me for some thirty seconds whilst all inside was optimised ready for playing. My Manley Steelhead was accurate and musical but it could still sound a little too butch, even after my mods. However, with the MFA-Longdog Audio phono-stage there was immediately a sense of passion, purpose and pizzazz, and nothing OTT. Interestingly, I had expected some buzz as there is no earth linkage from the Townshend Rock, but this unit was silent as my phone has to be at work. Goldfrapp "Theq" (Tales are Us) had a compellingly strong bass beat and a quick decay to almost silence between phrases. This track has a wide dynamic range for vinyl and the loudest sounds can be quite hard to track. This combination did it with aplomb. There was no hint of angst and it was still exciting. Schumann Symphony No 3 Op 97 opening movement (Zubin Mehta, Vienna Philharmonic, Decca SXDL 7555), is a forceful and serious symphony that I have played in orchestras many a time, which can be a little daunting to listen at high level.

# MUSIC FIRST AUDIO MM PHONO

The MFA allowed the horns to play their hearts out for England, I mean Vienna, as loud as they possibly could. No amount of energy from the brass could fox the phono-stage. Dynamic range and stereo spread from this album was better than ever, with no signs of noise floor from either the turntable or this phono-stage. Nothing was rushed, but every instrument played in their correct place and time.

The opening bass groans in David Gilmour's 'Castellorizon' from "On an Island" set the stage for quite some amazing music of guitar solos and synth-string backing tracks. Only once or twice did the music show any signs of tormenting this kit. The thunder at the end of track was all there but not pushed. Stereo spread was very fluid and the ride cymbal was only slightly drowned out within the melee of layers.

Through the Manley it was less polite with a more forward soundstage, and scratches were very prominent on this well used vinyl, far more noticeable than on the MFA, even though there was no loss of top-end frequencies, all indicating the large overload margin on the machine under review; this phono-stage was far less bothered with the excessive differences in sound level that the 'scratches' induce in the system. It all reminded me of the Garrard machine we used to use at the BBC in the 1980's to hide the snap, crackle and pop, though if I remember that one also played about with the dynamic range of the music and dull the tops. Through the MFA the soundstage was very wide and very musical, and not in my face. Those who know me and my theories on Pink Floyd will know my insistence that nearly everything is in E, and the constant bass boom on David's album, particularly the first inversion of E minor (with a bass 'G') in this opening was more pronounced in the Manley. 'Take a Breath' also in E, with its horrible hi-Q EQ setting of the vocal, which makes him sound like he's talking through a squawk box, is more pronounced in the MFA than the Manley, which did worry me a little, as the Manley dishevelled the component sounds into their constituent sounds making it actually easier to digest. Overall, though, I found the wider soundstage in the MFA preferable to my Manley, though the clearer top end in the latter was something that produced a more exciting sound. The saxophone in 'Red Sky at Night' moved about the soundstage with passion as the strings accompanied it at the extremes of the soundstage. This was heaven. In the Manley I was always slightly on edge.

Dave Brubeck's direct cut disc 'A Cut Above', "Unisphere" gave a clear top end on the cymbals shimmering away like silk with the piano and synth conversation forming the melodic lines, only getting carried away into an argument at the end. The phono-stage made it all sound quite nonchalant, with no hint of urgency or unease. On the Manley, while the cymbals were more forward the conversation was more argumentative. The loudest phrases sounded slightly compressed as if it wasn't able to cope. "Three to Get ready" decay of sounds gave a clear rendition through the MFA with no hint of struggle. The £7,000 Manley is no slouch though, and I still prefer this to most of the competition out there, but what drew me to the Music First phono-stage was the tranquillity and transparency in all it produced. This machine had six gears and no overdrive, and it was just as happy with classical as it was jazz or heavy rock.

## Conclusion

So, at £9840 plus the single ratio step-up transformer at £1,440 for moving coil this is a serious well-designed piece of kit. Not for the wallet-shy audiophile, it is designed with a "cost is no problem" philosophy, clearly shown not only in its component choice and the sound, but also in the way it has all been packaged. This is a product of love, patience and wisdom and it deserves to be listened to, respected and loved. I loved it, I really did! The bass is extended compared with all others I have heard at any price, and sound is very big, bold and very vibrant, though nothing is too bright, or compressed, or unnatural. Everything has been masterfully been put just in its rightful place. If I have to find any grumble it is in the top end, which was just a tad too tidy, though nothing was lacking. So in a way this big baby is a bit like a child that never cries or wets itself. Some might find that boring, but being a parent myself a perfect little baby like this one would make me very proud. Nick and Jonathan should be very proud.

**Sound Quality – 8.9/10**

**Value for Money – 8.6/10**

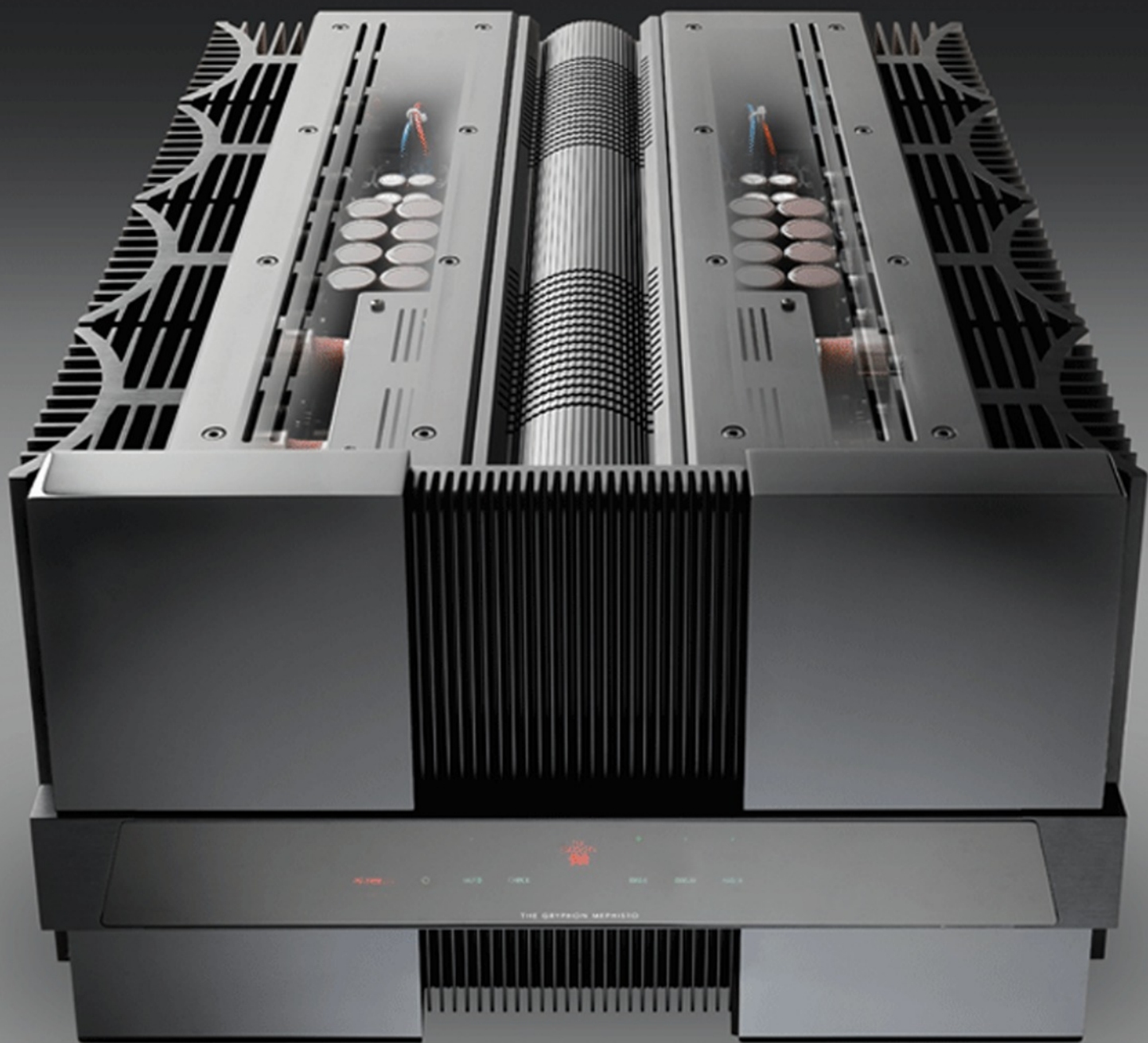
**Build Quality – 8.9/10**

**Overall – 8.8/10**

**Janine Elliot**

**The Music First Audio MM Phono Stage is currently undergoing a second review to see if it will gain the Hifi Pig Outstanding Award.**

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# Tellurium Q Black Diamond Loudspeaker Cable

**Dan Worth and Dominic Marsh get to grips with the latest loudspeaker cable from British manufacturer Tellurium Q.**



## TELLURIUM Q BLACK DIAMOND SPEAKER CABLE

The Black Diamond speaker cable from Tellurium Q is their top of the range speaker cable coming in at £630 per metre including terminations which many would confuse for WBT but they are in fact TQ's own design.

Yes they have an ergonomic styling similar to the WBT's which is a testament to the design and usability of them.

TQ's version of the 4mm banana is constructed from tellurium copper and is gold plated, the barrels are a metal alloy which are nickel plated to give a nice shiny finish and feature some nice surface grips for easy tightening of the locking design.

The cable itself as always is a mystery, all I can determine from looking at and handling the cable is that it is fractionally wider than the Ultras and where the Ultras have the conductor in a rounded cavity to each side of the cable the Black Diamond has a different shape to its borders feeling as if it has separate chambers of cables running through its length. The cable is finished in a mesh and comes in a very nice satin black box.

Routing the cables into the system is trickier than the thickest of the previous TQ cables. The band of the Black Diamond is thicker and slightly stiffer. It just takes a little care and time if there are a fair few components and angles to navigate and the job is far from impossible.

**The depth of the performance was very true and details were exquisite from trumpet to hi-hats.**



# TELLURIUM Q BLACK DIAMOND SPEAKER CABLE



## The Sound

Sting's 'Seven Days' from the Live at the Royal Albert Hall 2000 album conveyed a deepness of soundstage which reflected being sat about 6 rows back. I could clearly discern all band members and their stage arrangement. The depth of the performance was very true and details were exquisite from trumpet to hi-hats.

The cable had taken a full 24 hours to settle in the system after its burn in process on the Blue Horizon Proburn. The Black Diamond likes to be plugged into the system and just given time to relax and settle moving it's slightly initial forwardness in the midrange back a touch, increasing natural tone, timbre and breath.

Once settled the results are simply stunning, the delicacy and refinement in the top end especially is sublime, I could clearly hear all micro details in Fleetwood Mac's 'Everywhere' and 'Seven Wonders' leaving nothing masked and conveying everything with a textured flow, a complete harmonious rendition of frequencies floating gracefully around the soundstage like fireflies over a moonlit pond. Micro dynamics were absolutely effortless and more to the point, natural. There was no over-emphasis on power just a keen respect for precision and timed just so well.

Derrin Nuendorf's 'I Won't Hold You Back' has a soft cymbal work in the background, ticking away like a clock timing each section of guitar string work which has acrySTALLine and prestigious edge to each note, entering the fullness of the note and decaying with timbral vibrancy and scale which gives an

impression of size to the guitar. The same is true for Derrin's vocal which clearly comes from a foot or so above the guitar giving the impression that he is sat and somewhat hunkered over the instrument.

Soundstage width and complexity has a way of expressing its abilities even with the most stripped down music allowing for small venue interactions, reflections and acoustics to convey their ambience and scale in a most holographic manner. Whilst busier quartets, orchestras and studio recording generated larger complements with attack with slam, large scale and drama bring the performance to life with an inner energy and grip of realism.

When listening to some various recording by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, double bass fluidity and the dynamic slam of percussion was incredibly intense, I would refer to the sensation as a sound wave or pressure field which is closer to a live performance rather than a synthesized punch and drone.

I wouldn't say that I felt the Black Diamond's bass in my system was devastating, huge or bold but I can confidently state that it has an entire shape and skill that can be fast, slow and expressive, delicate or rhythmic.

Touching on my last word of explanation of the the Black Diamond's flexible bass characteristics 'rhythmic' and moving through some varying genres of pop, dance, folk and R&B the lower end took on a new found enthusiasm for me that just the natural alignment it possessed with acoustic and classical music.

# TELLURIUM Q BLACK DIAMOND SPEAKER CABLE

To hold a good flow to the music a system needs to have a good bass-line, a strong undertone and a bottom end to support and carry the music along and the Black Diamond's were very even handed in respects of being able to deliver particularly great mid and upper tones with a strong chassis to stiffen everything up giving strength and stability.

I would say that my own reference cable the Audioquest K2 has a hugely detailed, refined and somewhat relaxed top end. The Black Diamond has an exquisite top end, it's highly polished, crisp, controlled and transparent and integrates down into the midrange flawlessly which is very liquid.

Any male vocalist I played from Ben Howard, Ben Harper, Jo Savoretti, Sean Lakeman and many many more had a reflection of their individual tonalities that sounded extremely true and effortless, the K2 in the midrange is just a marvel and to give any other speaker cable high praise in the same sentence calling it organic and expressive of all midrange characteristics and potential flaws is a testament to its designer.

Equally poised were female artists, the projection of the upper mids could be so intense with the Black Diamond and still remain controlled and not suffer with peaks of eye shattering wincing was remarkable, many high end cables use networking boxes to attenuate this frequency but the Black Diamond simply takes it in its stride and adds no unwanted nasties or even begins to try and hype up the signal its receiving, it's more like a gentlemen standing to one side to allow the lady to comfortably pass by.

## Conclusion

My time with the Black Diamond speaker cable has been extremely enjoyable, I have praised its attributes very much. You could argue that the price is a draw back but I don't hear cables that performed as well as the Black Diamond costing any less and I listen to a great deal of cables frequently.

In fact my own Audioquest K2 although differently balanced does not walk all over the Black Diamond and some may well argue that system to system their preference would swing one way or the other. The Audioquest is staggeringly more expensive also. With exquisite treble, beautifully fluid midband, expressively detailed bass and a dynamic range and soundstage which explores every performance in a most natural and involving way the Black Diamond from Tellurium Q is a masterpiece of cable design.

**My time with the Black Diamond speaker cable has been extremely enjoyable, I have praised its attributes very much.**

**Build Quality - 9/10**

**Sound Quality - 9.2/10**

**Value For Money - 8.5/10**

**Overall - 8.9/10**

**Recommended for being a truly high end performer, a tribute to a system rather than just a means to conduct music. Sound quality is simply stunning.**

**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, Hifi Pig asked Dominic Marsh to conduct a follow up review for this cable.**

**T**his cable is awesome. What? You want MORE? Oh well, if you must.

## Construction

This is some serious heavyweight cable, larger in fact than the other "wide banded" TQ cables like the Blue Diamond, Ultra Black and Graphite. Unlike the other cables however, this model has special locking 4mm banana plugs very similar in principle to WBT's

## TELLURIUM Q BLACK DIAMOND SPEAKER CABLE

0644 classic straight connectors, but manufactured to TQ's own design brief with Tellurium Copper bodies plated in gold. They do grip very well to binding posts which helps considerably, given the weight of these cables.

I recall my comments about the Blue Diamond speaker cables (Reviewed recently in Hifi Pig) which noted that they were not very easy to make inconspicuous due to their size and propensity not to lay flat readily and the Black Diamond is no exception to that observation either. Not that anyone in reality is really bothered by that, are we? Priced at £630.00 per linear metre they are not exactly cheap, nor are they the dearest on the market either. Value is a sliding scale however and given that we all strive for the “perfect” sound from the pounds we invest in it, then we expect a fair return for that outlay.

### Sound

As you can probably imagine, us reviewers do get a goodly number of cables passing through our hands as part of our function to appraise hifi components and not forgetting either we play with our own personal cables as well for good measure, so it takes an exceptional cable to really get itself noticed. From that first few bars of music I heard through these cables I knew they were something rather special. It was a kick drum in fact and it hit me square in the pit of my stomach it was so clean and powerful, it fair took me aback. The CD I was playing was only a warm up track I play to get the system warmed up ready for some serious listening and wasn't paying too much attention to be honest because of that.

Anyway, after hearing those first few moments I quickly changed the CD to Pink Floyd's “The Wall” and the next hour and a half or so was a complete revelation. No, make that three hours – I listened to it again just for the sheer pleasure of it. When I say the word “helicopter” you Pink Floyd fans will know exactly what I am talking about now and I have never heard that sound better in 20+ years than I have with the TQ Black Diamonds in my system. If I shut my eyes I wouldn't know any better than having this machine hovering less than 50 feet above me with the vortexes spinning of the tips of the twin rotor blades, making the classic whistling sound. When the children are singing during the title track it can hurt your ears a bit with the volume turned right up, but not at all this time. No muddle, no hash, no

**They are not at all forward sounding or brash, nor are they recessive or muted in sound either.**

moments to make you wince, smooth as silk and bursting with refinement. I even got the sonic impression of how many children were singing in the chorus, it was just so palpable. The list was endless of all the extra details I was hearing and I must have heard this album many, many hundreds of times over the years since it's first release and hearing it this way has set a new benchmark for me what sound lies buried in there, never heard before, but now has been heard for sure.

Next into the drawer was Yello's “Flag” album and that also got two hearings, with every single track on the album a total pleasure, again another album I believed I knew intimately what it sounded like until I heard it through the Black Diamonds. Those that have heard this album will know that it has a powerful propelling bass line right throughout the CD and the sense of power, precision and timing with the Black Diamonds was never in any doubt. “Otto Di Catania” from this album is one of my favourites and the imaging and sound staging are exemplary, with depth, height and width well out beyond the speaker boundaries.

Next into the CD drawer is my preferred “murder track” from Porcupine Tree's “Deadwing” album, which really does sort out who's who when it comes to components – especially cables. The title track has all sorts of squeaks and screeches in the initial

# TELLURIUM Q BLACK DIAMOND SPEAKER CABLE

minute of the track and I was always puzzled what the sounds were, but not now. The TQ Black Diamonds have let me clearly hear the sounds are from an Underground (“Subway” to our transatlantic cousins) train pulling into a station, with people disembarking. This is both good and bad news, because there is now a danger that other cables that pass through my hands are going to be thought less of after hearing what the Black Diamonds could do with Deadwing. Fear not readers, I will be as unbiased and dispassionate as ever towards all that follow.

I think Dan has done a pretty good job of describing all the finer points of the Black Diamond's performance, so there isn't that much I can add to it in truth without repetiton, so perhaps if I summarise what the cables don't do just to add another dimension to this report to give you a clearer picture of this cable's capabilities. They don't boom or overhang at all anywhere in the bass. There is no cloudiness, haze or congestion in the midband. Treble is not harsh or fizzy, no sting, no unpleasant artifacts. They do not have a flat two-dimensional perspective to the imaging and sounstage, nor are they curtailed in width or height. Dynamics and transients are not slow or slurred. They are not at all forward sounding or brash, nor are they recessive or muted in sound either. My evaluations always concentrate on these attributes in great detail and if there were any issues found then be assured they would certainly be included in this review.

## Conclusion

£630.00 per linear metre terminated. Let's get that out of the way first, because some of you will have a frowned expression while reading that figure. Many of you will already have tried this, that and the other cables during the ownership of your hifi systems and nobody can escape the losses incurred while on that journey of buying and selling. If I said to you the TQ Black Diamonds just might be the last speaker cables you will buy, then suddenly the price isn't as vexing as the figure might at first suggest, so in a perverse way they could actually save you money by ending that endless search. What you will hopefully be auditioning is a cable that has so little wrong with it, it just sounds so RIGHT in every way imaginable and you could probably count on one hand the number of high end cables that could be claimants to that particular crown and the TQ Black Diamond costs much less than it's immediate rivals.

**If I said to you the TQ Black Diamonds just might be the last speaker cables you will buy, then suddenly the price isn't as vexing as the figure might at first suggest...**

My time with them has been a total joy and a learning experience too, in that I have heard so much more details from my CD collection that simply have not been manifested for more years than I care to remember and some of them have been listened to hundreds if not thousands of times, played on some esoteric high end systems no less. I will listen to Pink Floyd's “The Wall” album in a completely new light from now on.

The real acid question then is, would I buy them myself?

How much would a Kidney fetch these days I wonder?

**Build Quality - 9/10**

**Sound Quality - 9.3/10**

**Value For Money - 8.5/10**

**Overall – 8.93/10**

**Recommended for being probably the last cable you will need to buy. Stunning performance.**

**Dominic Marsh**



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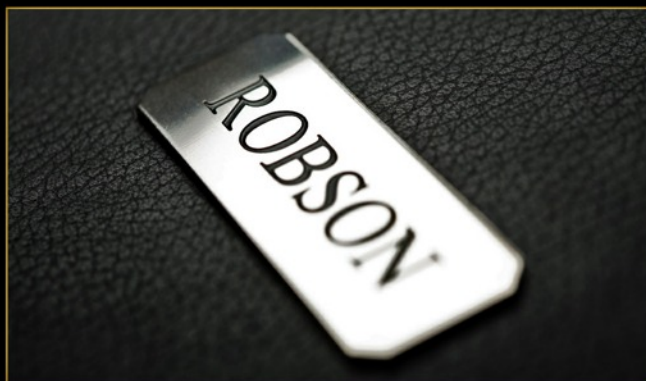


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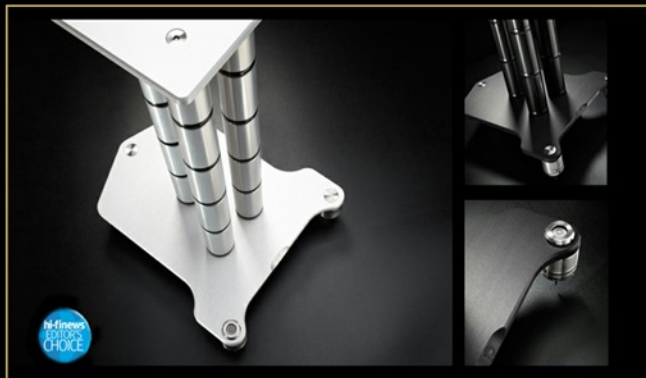


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# ISOTEK AQUARIUS EVO 3 MAINS CONDITIONER



**Dominic Marsh and Dan Worth take a listen to the IsoTek Aquarius Evo 3 mains conditioner in their systems.**

I have often wondered what they feed thoroughbred race horses with. I bet it isn't carrot tops and potato peelings, that's for sure. Nor would I imagine they fuel Formula 1 racing cars with petrol from the local supermarket either. The same goes for Hi-Fi systems; feed them on a poor mains supply and they are not going to run at their optimum performance.

What does a "mains conditioner" do then? In simple terms it gives the electricity supply a jolly good tidy and smarten up, taking out surges, spikes and fluctuations, removing noise and induced radio frequencies, neutralising them so they don't enter your Hi-Fi components. "I don't have any of that" some may say, but you would be truly shocked just how much the electricity supply varies in voltage and sometimes frequency too, plus these days the National Grid is being used for digital data transfer, not forgetting either that many home broadband systems operate via the mains in the house wiring, not confined either solely to the house itself that has it installed, because some will leak back into the supply lines. Thermostats and motors found in fridges, washing machines and central heating controls are notorious for causing unwanted clicks and whirring which can be clearly audible through a Hi-Fi system. If you live near an industrial estate or a farm you might get all sorts of nasty artefacts reflected back into the mains supply. Add to that some DC offset where direct current voltages appear within the AC waveform, imbalances where either the positive

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or negative cycles are curtailed (this happened in my previous house) and as you can see, a mains conditioner clearly has its work cut out standing sentinel over what can be transported inwards via the mains supply. Therefore I don't regard a mains conditioner as an accessory or a luxury, I regard it as essential and hence have had one in my own system for a number of years and wouldn't be without one now.

However, I have also heard some mains conditioners in the past that managed to squeeze the life out of the music and suppress dynamics to a marked degree, so I will be paying particular attention towards that trait during the evaluation.

## Construction

Built into a substantial case, this is a solid piece of engineering. Measuring 444x85x305mm and weighing in at 9kg it is the right size to slot into a standard sized rack. When powered it has just two small faint blue LEDs in the central backlit panel which are not distracting, so it's rather nice having a power indicator lamp telling you it's switched on, rather than TELLING you it's switched on with a glaring light – a nice touch. The power switch and safety cutout is underneath the chassis just off centre to the front right. It is a bit of a fumble getting your fingers in beneath the case to locate the switch, but given that the unit should be permanently powered up then it isn't such a major issue for the rare times you may need to reach underneath for it.

On the rear of the unit is six 3 pin UK mains sockets, two of which are deemed high power outlets for use with components such as amplifiers and power amplifiers that can deliver 3,680 watts continuously per socket and the remaining four are for lower current draw units like CD players, DACs and phono stages, etc., able to supply 1,150 watts continuously per socket. The sockets are of good quality and grip the plugs well. IsoTek say that each individual socket is monitored for power consumption and are isolated from each other so a heavy current demand on one socket will not detriment the others.

Power inlet is by a 3 pole 20 amp C-19 IEC connector. IsoTek thoughtfully provide a power cable suitable for the role with the Aquarius and it isn't just any old power cable of indeterminate or generic parentage plonked into the box, it is one of their own products, namely an Evo 3 Premier. As it is included as part of the Aquarius package I will give a brief description of it here and Hifi Pig's own Jerry did in

fact carry out a brief review of this cable back in December of 2013.

The Evo 3 Premier is only supplied as a 1.5 metre length, which should be more than adequate to fit the majority of installations. Conductor material is 40 strands of 99.9999% OFC silver-plated conductors with Teflon (FEP) dielectric with a 2mm<sup>2</sup> diameter. Connectors are custom made 24 carat gold plated and to IsoTek's own design, which is a refreshing change from the norm.

Retail price of the IsoTek Aquarius Evo3 as detailed here is circa £1,200.00.

## Sound Quality

Or rather, how it doesn't sound. The sound quality heard through my Hi-Fi system wasn't directly attributable to the IsoTek Aquarius itself, more the profound effect it had on the performance of the other components attached to it and allowing them to work unhindered by mains borne pollution. Because of that the "Sound Quality" rating I have given at the end of the review is only a notional figure, as it should be by rights much higher if it was a standalone sound producing component, as opposed to affecting other components in the chain as mains conditioners are wont to do. Even so, it is still given a 9.1 out of 10 rating, a more than respectable scoring nonetheless, given the context of its function.

The Aquarius was tried with 3 different amplifiers; a valve amplifier, an all digital amplifier and a conventional transistor output amplifier, plus two CD players too, so all of them benefited immensely from the cleaned up mains supply it provided, so practically any device should derive gains from using the conditioner in the system.

Background became totally silent, with not even the tiniest amount of hiss when the amplifier's volume was cranked up to maximum, whereas it was there before the Aquarius was introduced. I heard no hums or buzzes either.

Of course, part of my brief was to analyse whether or not the Aquarius was compressing any of the dynamics and I would be paying particularly close attention to that, given my previous experience with other mains conditioners. Pleased to report that I couldn't detect any compression effects at all, in fact the system was even more dynamic than hitherto without the Aquarius being installed and never once felt that it was running out of available power at any time.

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The sound just opened up and flowed with absolute ease from the speakers, fine details had acquired a polished refinement, presented in an endless stream of new found details, so it was no effort at all to hear all of the tiny nuances in the recording without having to strain to hear them. Bass too acquired a palpable firmness and solidity without any trace of boom or overhang at all. Drums and bass were immense in scale yet under perfect control at all times. Of particular note however was the sound stage and imaging which really was holographic in every sense of the word and it was effortless in placing musicians and instruments into fixed points in space with an ethereal quality to them, being surrounded and enveloped by an inky blackness. In short, I believe the IsoTek Aquarius simply unshackled my system and let it do what it does best, with the benefit of having what the Aquarius doing what it does best, forming a perfect symbiotic partnership.

## Conclusion

So, would you feed that thoroughbred race horse with carrot tops and potato peelings? Would you fill up a Formula 1 car with supermarket petrol? No you wouldn't answer 'yes' to either of those questions and the same goes too for your Hi-Fi system with the mains quality you feed it.

I will say it again so there is no doubt, I believe a mains conditioner is an essential component and provided the conditioner you choose doesn't compress or curtail the dynamics and lets the music flow out your system without any hiss, hash, mush, or extraneous noise in effortless and untroubled ease, then the outlay is worthwhile in sound quality gains. On that basis, the IsoTek Aquarius Evo3 easily meets all of those important performance criteria and I am convinced that IsoTek have also sprinkled some "Ingredient X" in there as well, because it performed for me way better than I had expected it to, comfortably beating my long term resident mains conditioner with aplomb.

Therefore I give the IsoTek Aquarius Evo3 mains conditioner an unequivocal recommendation.

<b>Build quality:</b>	<b>8.9/10</b>
<b>Sound quality:</b>	<b>9.3/10</b>
<b>Value for money:</b>	<b>9.1/10</b>
<b>Overall:</b>	<b>9.1/10</b>

**Recommended for:** Any Hi-Fi system, enabling it to perform at it's best.

**Dominic Marsh**

**As is customary with Hifi Pig, whenever a product scores 8.5 or more then a second review is called for, so after Dominic's scoring ratings, it was handed over to Dan Worth for him to conduct the follow up review.**

I've had many mains products in my time, ranging from simple basic to more complex filters and conditioners, regenerators, balanced power transformers and isolation transformers.

What I look for in a mains routing system is a unit that imposes no sonic signature on the sound and simply allows the equipment to work closer to its full potential. The Aquarius is a product that gets a tick from me.

The unit is extremely well made, has a substantial aluminium case and great looks to match. Available in various socket output types it will cater for all, regardless of plug choice or country of origin.

In the box, accompanied with the unit is an EVO3 Premier mains cable with gold plugs, an extremely welcome addition over a stock throw away cable which comes with most units regardless of price.

I ordinarily use Schuko sockets so a quick change over to some MS HD Power plugs and the Aquarius was easily swapped into my system and fired up ready to go.

My initial take on the sound was very pleasant and music seemed to be able to breathe very well indeed giving a spacious and 3D soundstage with a black background listened for an hour or so until I had other things to take care of that day and appreciating and anticipating an even better result from the unit later that evening once it had the time to settle in and warm up etc.

Later that evening I returned to the music and played some acoustic material I was very familiar with. I can't really say that I felt the sound was much better than earlier the same day. The sound was spacious and engaging, the soundstage was definitely carved out from the black background and a sense of effortless prowess was a stand out feature of the Aquarius in my system, easily giving the impression that the

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unit was allowing my equipment to work more efficiently.

Imagine a calmness over the sound that can be definite, solid, bass confident and delicate and you are on the right track to understanding how the Aquarius works in the system.

Listening to vocals, especially female vocals triggered my brain to note that the upper midrange was less forced than using a direct wall or simple mains extension to power the system and other cheaper filter type units which generally always have a sense of compression or squeezed dampening of the dynamics, contrasted very to the Aquarius' sonic appeal.

The dynamic range obtained with the equipment being fed by the Aquarius was very exciting, dramatic and enthusiastic. Orchestral movements had vigour and explosive expression, Electronica was very beat driven with slam and subtle more intricate dynamics of delicate acoustic work was sublime.

It was easy to be seduced with what the Aquarius was achieving in the system and when the review was discussed with Keith Martin GM at Isotek, we discussed sending an extra power cable that could be seen as an upgrade to the already included Premier.

Keith suggested we take a look at and listen to the EVO3 Optimum with a Furutech 1363 (G) and Isotek's own copper 24ct Gold plated Furutech style IEC connector.

Plugging the Optimum into the system wasn't a revelation but it was for sure a strong upgrade that was easily discernible over the Premier. Where the Aquarius allowed the equipment to work at a greater potential, the Optimum allowed the Aquarius to work at a better potential. Was there a different characteristic to the sound? Yes, there wasn't a different tonality or sonic signature but there was definitely a better characteristic. The most standout addition to the overall sound field for me was an increased openness in the midrange, vocals had better projection and were a little smoother and controlled, allowing male vocals to be more masculine and female vocals to command more power and delicacy.

Bass notes also gained a degree of stability and shape, mellowing the upper bass to come through with a little more detail, giving a perception of more strength to the undertones of the midband. Treble remained much the same yet had an addition of smaller micro details being a little more easily depicted especially when the music got busier. The Op-

**The Aquarius offers no sonic signature of its own, simply put it will allow the system components to work much more towards their full potential, allowing for better sound staging a quieter background and more ease, control and strength to the overall sound.**

timum isn't cheap but it's combination with the Aquarius did allow for a further improvement to the overall feel and dimension of the sound.

## Conclusion

The Aquarius is a strongly made unit which offers all the benefits of a shelf sat extension block in a sleek looking package. But that doesn't mean anything if it's performance isn't strong.

The Aquarius offers no sonic signature of its own, simply put it will allow the system components to work much more towards their full potential, allowing for better sound staging a quieter background and more ease, control and strength to the overall sound.

The included EVO3 Premier power cable is a fantastic touch and works incredibly well with the unit. Adding a better mains cable though such as the EVO3 Optimum as tested in the review will rep further benefits again.

**Build Quality - 8.7/10**

**Sound Quality - 8.9/10**

**Value For Money - 8.8/10**

**Overall - 8.8/10**

**Recommended for an ability to enhance the overall performance of a system without imposing on the equipment's sonic signature.**

**Dan Worth**

# ACOUSTIC ENERGY 101



**£275 doesn't buy you very much at all in this day and age, so how will these budget standmounters perform?**  
**Dominic Marsh finds out.**

Our esteemed editor Stuart said “Our readership wants to see more reviews of budget components”, so cast yer mince pies at the review given below, good readers. Acoustic Energy have produced a long line of highly accomplished bookshelf and floor standing loudspeakers, not least of which is the highly acclaimed original AE1 bookshelf/standmount model, which even today is still highly sought after on the second-hand market by all accounts. That legendary loudspeaker was truly diminutive in size, yet big in sound far and above what you would expect from such a small enclosure. Does this model the 101 continue that tradition? Let's find out shall we.

## Construction

The pair of AE101s submitted for review here is a compact stand mount/bookshelf model measuring some 300 x 185 x 250mm (HxWxD), weighing 6 kilogrammes each. The review sample provided has a black ash vinyl wrap finish and it is also available in a walnut coloured/textured vinyl finish. It's compact size means it can fit fairly unobtrusively into

# ACOUSTIC ENERGY 101

most domestic situations. The speakers come supplied with fabric covered grilles that are attached by hidden magnets embedded into the cabinets. The cabinet itself is manufactured from 18mm MDF with internal bracing and has a bass reflex port in the shape of a slot near the bottom of the front baffle. Driver complement is a 28mm fabric dome tweeter of AE's own manufacture, as is the 110mm bass/mid driver with a custom spun and anodized aluminium cone with a foam suspension surround, the dust cap is also spun anodized aluminium in the shape of a cone.

To the rear we have the connection panel with provision only for single wiring via 4mm binding posts.

As far as appearance goes, with the black fabric grilles on and the black ash cabinet together looks fairly unobtrusive, but when the grilles are removed we see the drivers have a bright trim surround which looks more attractive, although that does seem to invite small curious fingers to go pushing speaker cones and dust caps in.

In true AE tradition, the speakers are capable of handling up to 150 watts RMS and have a nominal 8 Ohms impedance with a minimum impedance of 6 Ohms. Sensitivity is quoted at 87db with a claimed frequency response of 48Hz - 32kHz (+/- 3dB).

Nothing really untoward in that set of specifications, so amplifier choice therefore isn't critical.

Price at time of review is circa £275.00 per pair.

## Sound Quality

I decided to pair these speakers with 3 different systems to put them through their paces and get a handle about their capabilities. Firstly, a TEAC AH300 midi system, then paired with a Pro-Ject MaiA integrated amplifier (Reviewed by Hifi Pig) and finally teamed up with a Roksan K3 integrated (Also reviewed by Hifi Pig).

First off then, my results with the TEAC midi system which normally have a resident pair of Eltax bookshelf speakers attached. This was not really a happy



marriage as the AE 101s clearly showed the shortcomings of the TEAC's amplification, which sounded lightweight and indistinct driving the 101s. Moving swiftly on, I connected the 101s to a Pro-Ject MaiA integrated amplifier. Now we were cooking; the little MaiA amp with its modest dimensions could put out 30 watts of good solid amplification and the AE 101s responded very well to the extra power and clarity. A delicious treble performance which was clean and vibrant, the sound of struck cymbals were as realistic as anyone could wish for, with a well defined metallic "ting" and the following decay all clearly rendered. Mid tones were slightly on the lean side giving a slightly cool balance to the sound. Of course, I didn't expect the bottom octave to be forthcoming from the Acoustic Energy 101s due to their size, but even so that absence wasn't missed because what bass was there I found to be very solid and articulate, full of expression and energy, well defined and textured. Placing the speakers on stands and close to the rear wall elicited an increase in bass output but that to me added a slight booming effect, so I preferred them out a bit into free space, around 3 inches was optimum for me personally. I found the imaging was precise and broad spanned, only just outside the speaker boundaries. Height and depth were both fine, aided no doubt by the contoured driver surrounds. They were equally at

# ACOUSTIC ENERGY 101

home on a desk surrounded by computer paraphernalia, so placement isn't critical, aided of course by being front ported for the bass reflex. These two components seemed to gel well together and this was confirmed by my recent visit to the Bristol Sound & Vision Show where I heard the same pairing demonstrated being fed with a Pro-Ject turntable and sounding refined, even in a room full of seated and standing attendees to the show.

Then moving on to a Roksan K3 amplifier driving the 101s with my resident CD player performing source duties. Speaker cables being used were the Audiomica CELES Excellence and ERYs Excellence interconnects (Also reviewed by Hifi Pig) which produced a very clean and dynamic signal for the 101s to really get their teeth into.

Now the Acoustic Energy 101s truly sprang into life, with improvements in all areas of the sound. I put Fink's "Kind of Revolution" CD into the player and hit the PLAY button. With the extra power of the Roksan K3 amplifier, the sound was bigger and more dynamic, full of energy and vitality. The title track to this album has a pounding driving bass line from the bass guitar and kick drum which shows up timing errors very well, but the 101s held it together really well. Interestingly enough, I wasn't aware the bass output was curtailed in frequency at all or attenuating the last octave, as it was solid and articulate with rich timbres. This album also has superb recordings of cymbals, especially so the Ride cymbal which is struck both hard and softly to the edge and centre throughout the album, so the recorded shimmer of the cymbal after the strike is stunning. Any speaker on test that ruins this subtle effect for me gets short shrift, trust me and the AE 101s passed that benchmark easily. Snare drum strikes were very fast and taut, sounding very realistic with the drum's shell sounds being heard just after the strike with the drumstick, so dynamic speed resolution is up to the mark, but moving on to the midband region, I found the 101s to have a "forward" sort of presentation, so whatever is at centre stage of the recording comes out to meet you rather boldly in front of the baffle's plane so you were inclined to move back a few inches to glean the best effect of that sound. Some people love this kind of sound and are rather glad I just typed that, so it isn't actually a criticism from me, more an observation as a reviewer listening to these speakers on your behalf. As a result though, it gives a bouncy springiness to the sound whereas other speakers are, how should I say this are, errrrrm, less

**Midband performance  
has a ballsy quality  
and lively flavour  
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"enthusiastic" in that area, but even so they didn't elicit any listening fatigue from me even after a few hours of critical listening with a wide variety of music genres.

## Conclusion

To summarize then what the Acoustic Energy 101s capabilities are, I would say they are no shrinking violets skulking in a corner to escape attention, they come out and say it like it is as, characterized in true Acoustic Energy fashion. Unlike most "budget" speakers however, feed them a clean undistorted signal with power and control and you could be well rewarded with exhilarating sounds. Pairing them with the TEAC system certainly brought out the Mr Hyde in them which I quickly discovered, while the Dr Jekyll identity of the 101s was a large measure of rather pleasant company to be with when the Roksan K3 amplifier was driving them.

While the 101s specifications say the frequency response goes down to 48Hz, the sounds you hear doesn't suggest that bass output is curtailed below that frequency, because I found them a most satisfying listen throughout my entire time with them with regards to bass. Treble is sweet and crisp, able to sound realistic in the truest sense. Midband performance has a ballsy quality and lively flavour which will please many folks I am sure, so I can recommend them as a fine performer, if indeed they match your particular taste in loudspeakers .

**Construction: 7.9/10**

**Sound quality: 8.4/10**

**Value for money: 8.4/10**

**Overall: 8.3/10**

**Recommended for: It's up front verve and treble refinement with solid communicative bass when fed by quality amplification.**

**Dominic Marsh**

# ARCAM MINI BLINK BLUETOOTH DAC

**It's a DAC, it does Bluetooth and it costs just £90.**

**Stuart Smith has a play with the Arcam Mini Blink.**



As far as I'm concerned Bluetooth has always been something that belonged firmly in the realms of teenage boys bedrooms, but it seems that this nifty technology is becoming a bit all-pervading. No sooner had I bought a tablet device I was out trying Bluetooth keyboards and we even got a pair of Bluetooth headphones to try out. So, never one to stand in the way of progress I requested that Arcam send us over a review sample of their Mini Blink.

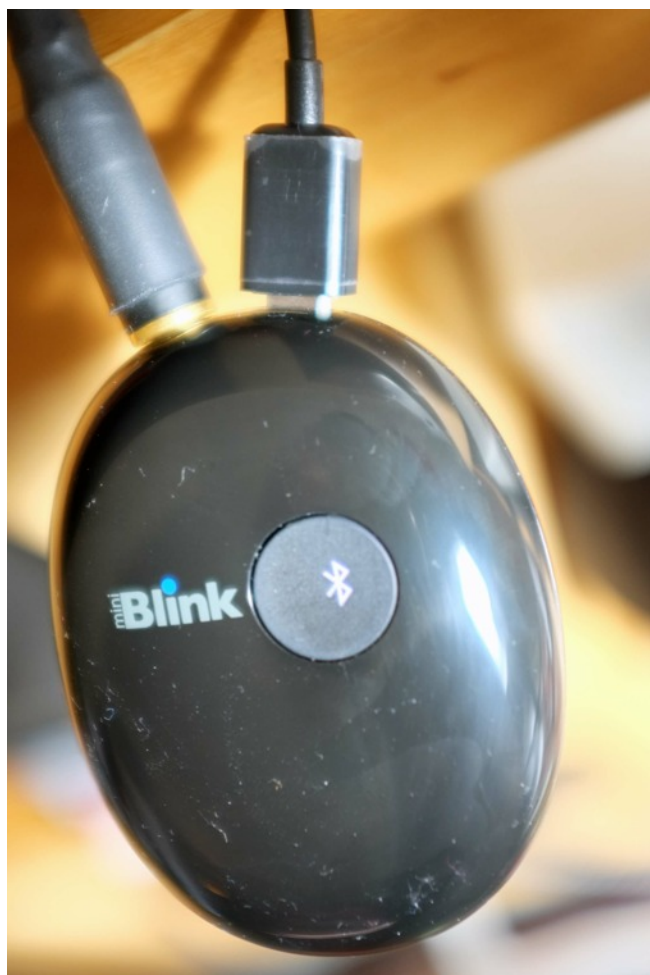
## What Is It?

It's a little ovoid box that measures 12 x 12 x 10 cm and weighs just 150g - it sort of looks like a largish water smoothed pebble - that you plug into the back of your preamplifier or integrated amplifier. It allows you to stream music from your laptop, computer, phone or any Bluetooth enabled device. It costs £90 and will work with PC, Android and Apple machines.

In the box you get the unit itself, a tiny wallwart powerpack (with a choice of plug connectors to match your country's sockets), a USB cable to connect the Blink to the wallwart and a minijack to stereo RCA cable (I used my own chunkier cables). The unit can be powered via USB from your PC or laptop too.

With the heavier cables I used I had to use a bit of Blutack under the unit to stop it slipping about but it was fine with the supplied cable. It's a bit plasticky looking but it's not a product that is really going to be on show...more of a plug it in and forget about it until you want to use it kind of thing.

The unit has a claimed range of ten metres and so in theory you should be able to stream your music from your chosen device at the touch of a virtual button.



# ARCAM MINI BLINK BLUETOOTH DAC

**If you have folks come round who want you to hear a new tune they have on their phone then this is ideal...press the button, pair the phone and away you go.**

Inside the unit is a Burr Brown DAC that will accept aptx Bluetooth and which should give a much higher quality of sound than standard Bluetooth.

## Easy To Use?

Ok, I'm not really known for my prowess around computers but this is a pretty simple device to get your head round once you've got your tunes on your player of choice...this was a Nexus 7 in my case. For me, set up was simple case of pressing the little button on the Blink (it blinks), go to settings on the Nexus 7, find the Blink (called Arcam Bluetooth) and choose it...hey presto you get music out of your speakers.

## Sound OK?

The Nexus 7 isn't exactly what you'd call an audiophile product and it refuses to recognise my FLAC files and so I was 'reduced' to using 320Kbps MP3 files to stream to the Blink, but you know what, the sound isn't too bad at all... in fact it's really rather splendid.

The only thing I can fault is the actual DAC in the Blink - it's just never going to compare to the

reference DAC we use, but then we're talking oranges and apples as the reference DAC is the best part of £7000. For £90 what you are getting is damned fine sound that is really hard to bash in anyway with the files I threw at it. If you were to spend a little more you can get the Arcam rBlink which sports a digital out.

There's a nice and relaxed feel to the sound with no nasty top end hash or digital artefacts and there's an openness too that belies we're listening to MP3s through a sub £100 DAC...that is connected by the Bluetooth fairies. With the chilled techno (Kompakt) I listened to there was decent bass clarity and depth, fine and clear mids and good top end definition... certainly nothing to complain about for all but the most critical of listening. With vocal tracks (Gil Scott-Heron) there is a warmth and none-fatiguing quality.

## Conclusion

Another no-brainer for me. If you have folks come round who want you to hear a new tune they have on their phone then this is ideal...press the button, pair the phone and away you go. Personally it's a product I'll not use all the time as I have dedicated sources, but for parties and where I don't want folk messing with my expensive kit then the miniBlink is perfect and hard to pick any fault at all with.

For folk who have a phone with all their tunes on and who want to listen through a proper hifi rather than headphones then again this little doodad is hard to fault. Personally I'd like to have the option of a digital out.

Sound quality isn't the very best in the world but then for the asking price any one that moaned would surely be being churlish in the extreme and I found it perfectly adequate, even through the best part of £20Ks worth of pre, amp and speakers.

## Sound Quality – 8.2

### Build – 8.1

### Value – 8.5

### Overall – 8.23

## Price as reviewed £90

**Highly Recommended for those looking to get good sound from their phones to their proper hifi, or for those looking for a unit to use once in a while for parties and the like.**

**Stuart Smith**

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# MUSIC

## Diana Krall - Wallflower (Verve)



On her 2012 album *Glad Rag Doll*, Diana Krall covered a selection of 1920's and 30's jazz standards, inspired by her father's collection of 78-rpm records. *Wallflower*, her latest album, takes a similar approach; this time with some of the songs that Krall discovered on vinyl while growing up in the 1960's and 70's. Krall maintains what has become her signature style, a mix of intimate jazz ensemble playing and lush orchestration, bringing in other instrumental elements and production touches to suit the individual songs. If you grew up in the 60's and 70's yourself, the bulk of the material here will be instantly familiar to you: there are songs made famous by The Eagles, The Carpenters, Gilbert O'Sullivan, Elton John, 10cc and The Beatles. This is not just a set of AOR chart hits however, Jim Croce's *Operator* is reasonably obscure and is one of the best songs here. Not being a massive fan of the Eagles, their *I Can't Tell You Why* was new to me, even if I am near word perfect with their *Desperado*, also given an effective, reflective airing here. Krall's duet with Georgie Fame on *Yeah, Yeah* isn't a patch on the original but no doubt the artist formally known as Clive Powell will be glad of the royalties. Two or three songs here do not fit the album's overall theme: Crowded House's *Don't Dream It's Over* fits the mood but is from the 80's; the title track is a 1971 Bob Dylan song that remained unreleased

**If you grew up in the 60's and 70's yourself, the bulk of the material here will be instantly familiar to you: there are songs made famous by The Eagles, The Carpenters, Gilbert O'Sullivan, Elton John, 10cc and The Beatles.**

for 20 years until it appeared as part of Dylan's *Bootleg Series* and *If I Take You Home* is a Paul McCartney song that didn't make the final track selection for his *Kisses On The Bottom* album, on which he collaborated with Krall.

There is little if anything here that won't appeal to Krall's legion of existing fans and the fact that these are pop rather than jazz songs will no doubt broaden her fan base even further. Personally, I'd prefer to see her trying something more adventurous like she did on her 2004 album *The Girl In The Other Room* featuring her own songs co-written with husband Elvis Costello.

That said, if you are looking for an undemanding but satisfying late-night listen, *Wallflower* has much to offer.

**John Scott**

# MUSIC

## Aqualung – 10 Futures



**M**att Hales, aka Aqualung, had all but given up his recording career and moved across the pond into production & songwriting. It's to our benefit that he had a change of heart along the way. '10 Futures' is Aqualung's fifth album (not counting compilations) – and also Hales' first for five years. Things are somewhat different for this outing though – something immediately obvious from the track listing and also during the first listen of the album.

What Hales has essentially done is invited a number of the people he's worked with over the past few

**For those of you who don't know Aqualung, it's fair to say that their sound sits somewhere between Coldplay, Guillemots, Keane and possibly even Radiohead.**

years to perform guest vocals on tracks which he's been baking. It's a nice idea. For those of you who don't know Aqualung, it's fair to say that their sound sits somewhere between Coldplay, Guillemots, Keane and possibly even Radiohead. If you're new to them, look up the tracks Brighter Than Sunshine or 7 Keys. Over the years, I've recommended the band to a fair few friends and pretty much all of them told me that they couldn't believe that they hadn't heard of them and also that they couldn't stop playing their albums.

I first discovered Aqualung around the time of the second album, Still Life. I recall thinking that they could have been a serious rival to Coldplay. That they never took off commercially is one of life's mysteries.

Tape 2 Tape kicks things off and I actually did a double-take as it really doesn't have any of the usual hallmarks of an Aqualung piece. The track, along with Joel Compass's vocals, could easily feature on a Jason Mraz or Justin Timberlake album. I was about to say that Eggshells is a cracking tune (excuse the pun!), as it contains all the typical hallmarks of Aqualung – great song writing, a great melody, and a clean, polished & full production – but it also benefits from some delicious, sultry vocals from Lianne La Havas. Similarly, Be Beautiful is to Aqualung what 'Viva La Vida' is to Coldplay – a great pop tune. Likewise, Hearts has a great melody which simply sucks you in.

Despite any initial reservations which Aqualung fans might have, I can't really foresee anybody being disappointed. The idea of bringing guest vocalists on board is nothing new, but it works so well here.

We're treated to standard Hales fare such as 'Seventeens', but this is nicely bookended by tracks which take the band on a completely different track, with some songs leaning more towards pop than rock. I was delighted to see Tim Elsenburg from Sweet Billy Pilgrim pop up as the guest vocalist on 'Clean'. His singing style suits the track so well.

10 Futures delivers a nice, uncluttered overall performance with lots of space for instrumentation and vocals. The production is polished but not to the extent where the soul of the music is erased away. There is a lot of variation in terms of the musical themes explored which has resulted in an early gift for 2015. From my perspective, it's a gift I'll be treasuring.

Paul Lockett

## MUSIC

## Aphex Twin - Computer Controlled Acoustic Instruments pt2 EP (Warp)



Richard D. James aka Aphex Twin returned last year after a break of 13 years with a cracking new album "Syro". Less than 6 months later he follows this up with a horse of a totally different colour. Here we find this incredibly creative artist concentrating more on texture, ambience and mood. Similar in many ways to Selected Ambient Works 85-92, here he is exploring an entirely different avenue to that of Syro. As the title suggests he has built an array of contraptions that allow him to control instrumental sounds on a computer. From the outset one is struck by the exploratory nature of the pieces as various percussive sounds clatter and stumble together. At one point I was expecting Tom Waits to commence singing and was slightly disappointed when he didn't.

As an EP some of the tracks are very short, one piano piece being only 9 seconds.

The piano features a great deal on these tracks and many different sounds are produced plucking, striking and generally vibrating the strings. Of most interest are the more beat heavy tracks but these to my mind lack the magic associated with classic Aphex Twin masterpieces. They do however have a great depth of texture and are a pleasure to listen to. In a recent interview Richard D. James has declared that Syro was an exercise in cleaning out the

**At one point I was expecting Tom Waits to commence singing and was slightly disappointed when he didn't.**

cupboards. Putting an end to his previous work and preparing the way for something new. This EP may give us some indication of where he intends to go but I can't help feeling that much of it reflects someone who just had to get this out of their system. Hopefully now, having explored, investigated and released this, he will now go on to produce something new to match the quality of Syro and Windowlicker.

**Islwyn Paul Mainwaring**

**LIVE**

# Wish You Were Here? The Australian Pink Floyd Show, Usher Hall, Edinburgh



**I**n November 1974 Pink Floyd launched their British tour at Edinburgh's Usher Hall with a performance of Shine On You Crazy Diamond which was still a work in progress at the time. Just over 40 years later, The Australian Pink Floyd Show kick off the British leg of their Welcome To The Machine European tour by playing to a capacity crowd at the same venue.

There are tribute bands and then there is The Australian Pink Floyd Show. The group – lets just call them TAPFS from here on in – redefine what it means to be a tribute band. They have sold over 3 million concert tickets in 35 countries and played at Floyd guitarist David Gilmour's 50th birthday party. They have incorporated members of Pink Floyd's touring band and road crew into their own set up and Floyd drummer Nick Mason is on record as stating: "They are probably better than us". Such is their sway with the Pink Floyd fan base that they are able to charge premium prices for VIP meet and greet tickets.

Tonight's show starts with a darkly brooding Astronomy Dominie which warms up both band and audience before the familiar keyboard wash of

**David Domminney Fowler share David Gilmour's guitar parts evenly throughout the show but it is Mac who gets the first opportunity to show what he can do with a perfect reproduction of Gilmour's clean, bluesy lines.**

Shine On You Crazy Diamond leads us into a performance of the entire Wish You Were Here album. Guitarists Steve Mac and David Domminney Fowler share David Gilmour's guitar parts evenly throughout the show but it is Mac

# LIVE

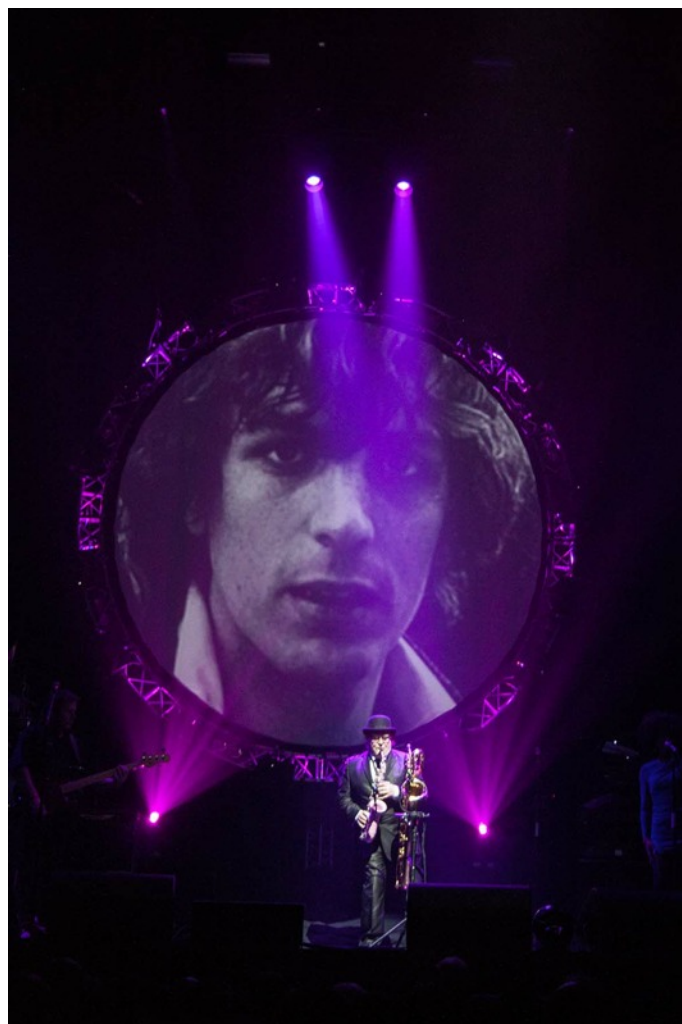


## As a fan of the earlier, more experimental Floyd, I was happy to hear One Of These Days get an airing

who gets the first opportunity to show what he can do with a perfect reproduction of Gilmour's clean, bluesy lines.

As Mike Kidson plays his sax solo a photo of Syd Barrett appears on Mr Screen, the circular projection screen that is practically a Pink Floyd trademark, and I have to confess to feeling a bit emotional. There definitely is a real sense of reverence to what TAPFS do; they clearly love and care about the music and about carrying on the Floyd legacy. That said, they are not afraid to have a bit of fun with it all as well. Floyd's rich iconography is mined at every opportunity for Australian references: the robotic handshake on the Wish You Were Here logo becomes a stylised kangaroo, the Dark Side Of The Moon prism is in the shape of a map of Australia and the radio clips at the beginning of Wish You Were Here are replaced by a montage including the Neighbours theme tune, Crocodile Dundee, Men At Work and Kylie.

Opening with a storming In The Flesh, the second half of the show includes Time, Breathe, Great Gig In The Sky and Money from Dark Side Of The Moon along with post-Waters songs Learning To Fly and High Hopes. Backing vocalists Lorelei McBroom – an actual Pink Floyd veteran, Emily Lynn and Lara Smiles come into their own during Great Gig In The Sky as you might expect, with Smiles in particular singing her guts out during the first section. As a fan of the earlier, more experimental Floyd, I was happy to hear One Of These Days get an airing as an additional



band member joined the stage. If the idea of an inflatable pink pig seems a bit silly [There is absolutely nothing silly whatsoever about an inflatable pink pig. Ed] then an inflatable pink kangaroo is even sillier. He (or she, I couldn't tell) goes down a storm with the audience though. Young Lust continues to raise the temperature before Comfortably Numb brings things to a crescendo with a solo from Fowler to which only the word "blistering" can do justice. The first encore brings the Pink Floyd story up to date with Louder Than Words from last year's Endless River album and the second, Run Like Hell, sends the rapturous audience home happy.

I'm still slightly uncertain about the whole tribute band thing but the reality is that none of us will ever get the chance to see the real Pink Floyd again. For the audience tonight, that really didn't seem to matter. Shine on.

**John Scott**

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**LIVE****The Kaiser Chiefs - Usher Hall, Edinburgh**

**We've worked  
fucking hard to  
get back into  
these big rooms"  
Kaiser Chief  
singer Ricky  
Wilson  
announces to the  
2,500-strong  
audience "and we  
are going to work  
fucking hard to  
make sure we  
stay here".**

**I**t's always a pleasant surprise at a gig to discover that the support band is one that you have actually heard of. I had enjoyed Public Service Broadcasting's album Inform-Educate-Entertain when I heard it last year but had found it difficult to dispel a feeling that it was a bit "Kraftwerk lite". Live however, the duo of J. Will goose, Esq. and Wrigglesworth (possibly not their real names) are

supplemented by other musicians, including a three-piece brass section on a couple of numbers.

PSB only really do one thing - driving, almost motorik instrumentals backing audio samples from old public service and propaganda films - but they do it well. It does tend to get a bit repetitive after three or four tracks though and they failed to really engage with tonight's crowd. If they want to fulfil their manifesto to "Teach the lessons of the past through the music of the future" they may need to make their future music a bit more adventurous.

"We've worked fucking hard to get back into these big rooms" Kaiser Chief singer Ricky Wilson announces to the 2,500-strong audience "and we are going to work fucking hard to make sure we stay here". And work hard they do, powering through 2 hours of hits and album tracks from across their 10-year career and barely pausing for breath.

These days, Wilson is possibly better known from his second career as a judge on TV talent contest The Voice where he comes over as a slightly reserved, laid back guy-next-door. Any thoughts that this has softened him up are quickly dispelled as he takes every opportunity to treat the stage as his personal playground, hopping from monitor to monitor across the front of the stage and leaping onto the bass drum, never missing a step. During The Angry Mob he disappears from the stage completely and reappears in the balcony, walking precariously across the second row seats, to the surprise of those sitting in them. Deciding that this is not quite dangerous enough, he then straddles the edge of the balcony and sits with his legs dangling over the edge for the remainder of the song.

The Usher Hall is a fairly genteel kind of a place; more suited to Mozart and choir singing than tonight's moshing and crowd surfing but, predictably, I Predict A Riot tears the roof off and Ruby along with an unexpected cover of Pinball Wizard keep cranking up the audiences energy levels. The show finishes on an extended Oh My God featuring exuberant audience participation. It doesn't look like The Kaiser Chiefs will be leaving the big rooms any time soon.

**John Scott**

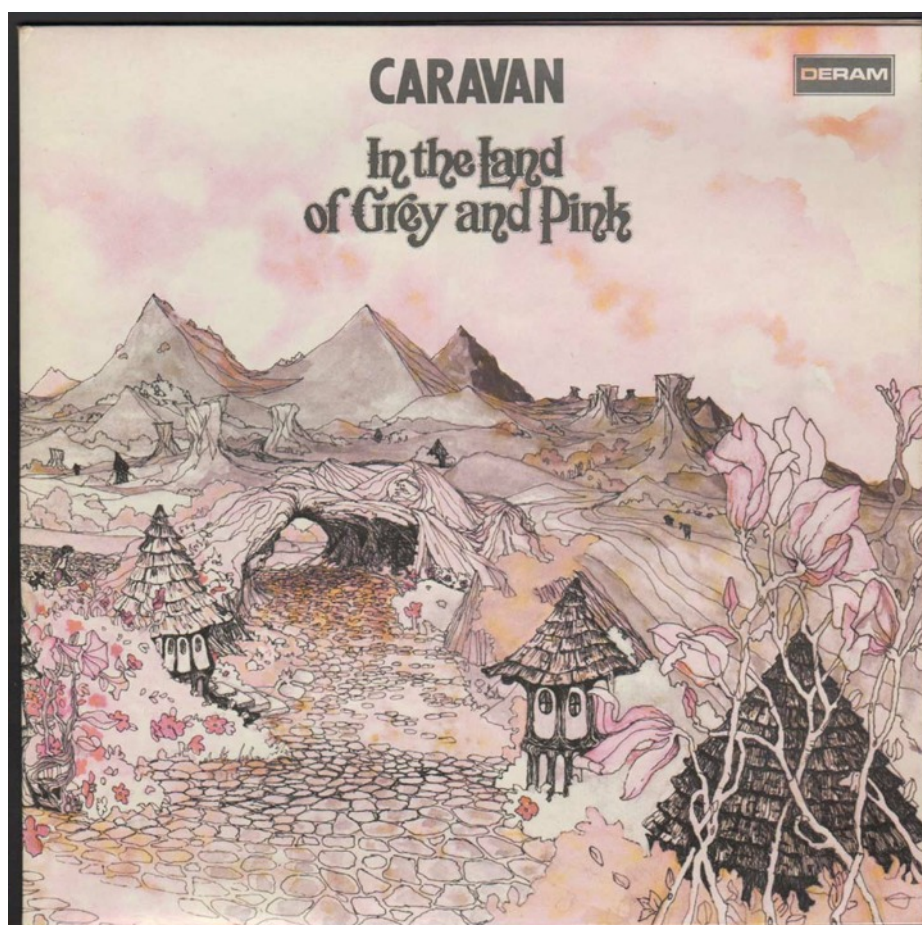
## CLASSICS

# This Month John Scott looks at the Canterbury Sound that was Caravan and their In The Land Of The Grey And Pink Album.

In the late 1960s the city of Canterbury in the south of England exploded with a new musical scene. The Canterbury sound was heavily influenced by jazz, mixing it with the new progressive rock sound. The Canterbury scene was characterised by collaboration; musicians flowing freely out of one band into another, giving birth to bands such as Soft Machine, Matching (a pun on the French for Soft Machine - Machine Molle), Gong, National Health, Hatfield & The North, Camel and Caravan.

Many of these bands owed their existence to a single band, The Wilde Flowers. Although The Wilde Flowers did not release any records during its time together it was an important proving ground for many of the musicians who would go on to create other bands, in particular Soft Machine and Caravan.

Caravan formed in 1968, consisting of cousins David and Richard Sinclair, Pye Hastings and Richard Coughton, all of whom had played in The Wilde Flowers at various times. The band signed with American label Verve and released their first self-titled album the same year but were then dropped by Verve when the label pulled out of the British music scene. Subsequently signing to Decca, Caravan released their second album *If I Could Do It All Over Again, I'd Do It All Over You* in 1970. The



following year saw the release of what would become their best known work *In The Land Of Grey And Pink*.

Progressive rock is often thought of as a particularly English music. This theory tends to ignore Italian bands such as Le Orme, Premiata Forneria Marconi and Banco del Mutuo Sorccoso or the Canadian Rush. Prog may have had its roots in England but it was not a purely English phenomenon. Caravan's brand of whimsical jazz rock however, is archetypically that of the young, middle class, white

# CLASSICS



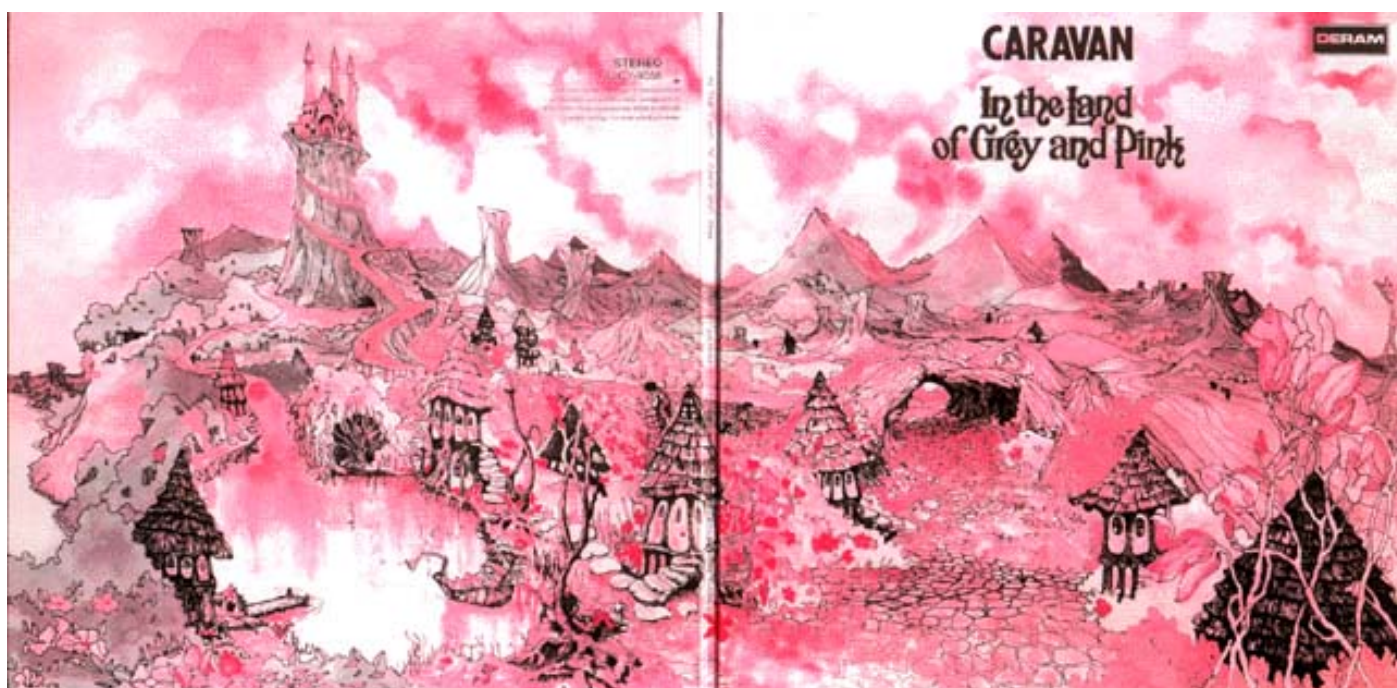
**Love To Love You contains the line "I'd love to get deep down inside your pants" which may have been okay in 1971 but seems a little gauche, to say the least, these days.**

Southern English male; it is hard to think of an equivocal from elsewhere in the world.

The first track, Golf Girl (covered by Niger Planer as his alter ego Neil Pye from The Young Ones), opens with a trombone; hardly your standard rock instrument. A frothy tale of romance on the golf course, it typifies the sound of the album - insubstantial lyrics that seem to be there just to prevent the songs from being instrumentals. Caravan were not a message band, they had nothing important to say about the world and so didn't waste time trying to. Winter Wine could almost be a Nick Drake song were it not for the substandard lyrics; it does have a lovely tune though. Love To Love You contains the

line "I'd love to get deep down inside your pants" which may have been okay in 1971 but seems a little gauche, to say the least, these days. The highlight of the album is the side - long Nine Feet Underground which showcases Dave Sinclair's keyboards amidst some tight ensemble playing from the rest of the band.

Voted 19th most cosmic album of all time by Mojo magazine, In The Land Of Grey And Pink is an album very much of its time. Perhaps more than even Pink Floyd, ELP and Genesis this is what punk sought to wipe from the face of the earth but if you need some gentle English whimsy in your life, this has it in spade fulls.



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## BOOZERS CORNER

# Campari & San Pellegrino to the tunes of Harry's Bar

On a nice day we like to welcome the early evening sat outdoors, a little Jazz drifting through the open windows and the translucent red of a Campari providing us with the excuse to say 'Cheers'.

My favourite album, for this regular summer event, is Gordon Haskell's 'Harry's Bar', for many reasons the lyrics take us back to Venice and the Campari to Italy in general.

Hard to remember where I was first introduced to Campari, was it by Franco at the Madeira House Restaurant in Tideswell, Derbyshire, or was it in Venice at the terrace bar of the Hotel Europa & Regina, while fascinated by the ever changing light on the Grand Canal?

It was Campari & Soda in those days, soda out of a glass syphon bottle with a chrome top. Today, because we drink sparkling water, it is the gentle effervescence of San Pellegrino that lengthens the Campari (one part Campari to two parts San Pellegrino, ice and a slice of orange). The fact that they both originate from around Milan is pure coincidence for me and I wonder how many of the bars in Milan have that union on offer.

I would describe Gordon Haskell's music as 'realistically optimist', romance with a touch of the blues, regrets pushed aside by a thirst for life. Jazz, like Campari, is cosmopolitan, you can enjoy both anywhere you may be, and put together may help remind you of the important things in life, not money and greed, but sharing and enjoying.

Comment from She Who Speaks Her Mind: "Gordon Haskell's latest song 'I'm Letting Everybody Know' is being released as Carers UK 50th Anniversary Fundraising Single. The message from Carers UK is simple: 'No One Should Have To Care Alone'. So lets all download it now or buy the CD [here](#) or [here](#)".

Campari was created in 1860, in Novara near Milan, by Gaspare Campari. It is produced by infusing herbs, aromatic plants and fruits in alcohol and water, the last two being the only ingredients known for sure, it is said that up to 80 other ingredients are used



in the secret recipe. A production plant was later opened in Sesto San Giovanni, north-east of Milan and just south of Monza and its now famous autodrome.

San Pellegrino Terme is some 70 kilometres north-east of Milan, near Bergamo, at the foot of the Dolomites mountain range. Its waters have been 'taken' for some 600 years, however, the first records of the sale of bottled water dates from 1899. The waters are naturally carbonated.

**Louis Bricka**

**Louis Brisca is the owner of the online magazine Wine Spirit Region. [Click here to take a look.](#)**

## BOOZERS CORNER

### In a series of articles John Scott explores some Scottish beers and pairs them with some classic Scottish music.

Scotland is arguably the producer of the world's finest whiskey. Wait: let's start again.

Scotland is unarguably the producer of the world's finest whisky (note lack of 'e' there). Given that whisky is basically distilled beer, it should be of no surprise that Scotland's craft beers are also emerging as world beaters.

Brewdog, based in the North East of Scotland is leading the Caledonian craft beer charge. From its origins in 2007 as a tiny two-man business, the brewery became Britain's fastest growing food and drink manufacturer. Along with a state of the art brewing facility, Brewdog now own 25 bars in cities across the globe, including several in Europe and one in Brazil.

Brewdog's mission is to show drinkers that there is more to beer than the insipid brews served up by the majority of major manufacturers. Taking their cue from the West Coast's IPAs, Brewdog's beers are loaded with hops and often contain additional flavourings such as chili, lemongrass, cranberries or jasmine blossoms.

Punk IPA is perhaps the brewery's signature offering; the most popular of its core range. The beer pours with a light amber colour and a good white head with light lacing. Hops are a beer's backbone and Brewdog beers have a stronger backbone than most. Punk's hops provide it with a nose of tropical fruits. In the mouth there is caramel from the malt, quickly giving way to a strong hit of grapefruit and a long astringent finish with a hint of pine resin. This is a beer that deserves time to savour.

To accompany my Punk IPA tasting I have chosen Framed, the 1972 album by The Sensational Alex Harvey Band. Harvey was a punk before the term had ever been coined in relation to music. Raised in The Gorbals, the roughest, toughest area of a rough,

tough Glasgow, Harvey left school at 15, reportedly drifting through 36 jobs including a stint as a lion tamer, before his tenure in a skiffle band led to him winning a talent competition. He formed the Alex Harvey Big Beat Band in 1959 and in 1960 the group played a gig supporting Johnny Gentle and his back up band. This back up band just happened to include a certain Lennon, McCartney, Harrison and Sutcliffe. The Big Beat Band became the Big Soul Band until Harvey left to try his hand at a solo career which saw him join the pit band for the London production of Hair for five years. In 1972 he formed The Sensational Alex Harvey Band - or SAHB as they were commonly known - who released their first album Framed later that year.

Framed laid down the blueprint for everything the band would become: a mix of raw blues, rock and roll, glam rock and vaudeville. The album opens with the title track - a Leiber and Stoller cover performed with a huge crunchy riff from clown-faced guitarist Zal Cleminson. "I never did nothing! I was Framed!" Harvey screams but do we believe him?

Across the course of the album Harvey leads us from barroom to bawdy house to execution chamber with the band providing a tight but loose hard rock accompaniment. On their cover of I Just Want To Make Love To You SAHB add a brass section to the mix - sheets of seismic bass trombone and dog whistle sax - and the dynamics and sense of space in the arrangement gives a hint of just what a spectacular live act they were.

and Harvey's protopunk passion are a perfect partnership. Give them a try - you are in for a treat.

**John Scott**

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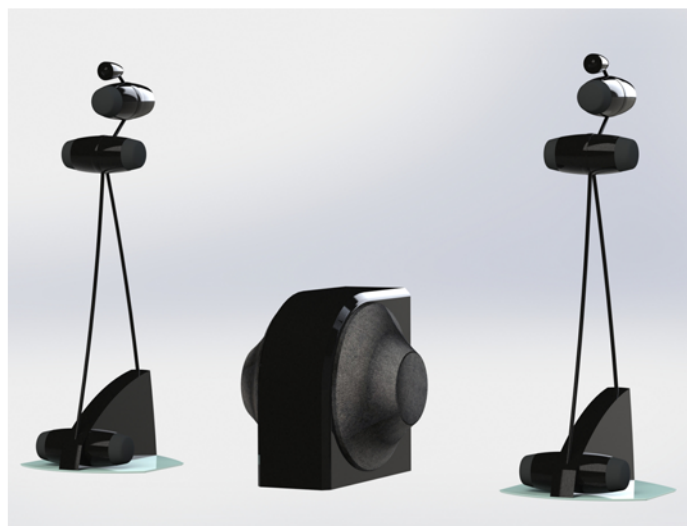
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February 27th 2015  
Special Publication

## SOUND AND VISION - THE BRISTOL SHOW REPORT

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# Hifi Pig Reviewer Dominic Marsh Gives His Personal View On The Show

I haven't attended the Bristol Sound and Vision show for some years to be truthful, due to a lack of available time and other commitments, so I really did look forward to attending the show this year with my Hifi Pig hat on, which was a refreshing change from being just an audiophile ogling the latest hi-fi toys and jewellery as it has been during previous visits. Even so, I was able to make it for the one day only (Friday 20<sup>th</sup>) and that simply wasn't enough time to put too many ticks against my wish list of all the exhibitors I wanted to visit, which wasn't that extensive to begin with, given those time limitations. Not an easy task by any means. This year there was no trade and press only day which was sorely missed by me. It wasn't very efficient or productive to be waiting in turn behind the public to talk business with the exhibitors and I achieved much less than I had even hoped for.

Again, within my Hifi Pig reviewer's role I had several objectives to meet that were far removed from being simply the curious enthusiast, I had to formulate a perception of where the industry currently is and perhaps identify new trends and directions for the future, offset against what the audiophile is actively seeking out for their pleasures for today and beyond.

To really make my day, I packed up what I thought I would need to take with me to the show and forgot the most essential item of all – the camera. Doh! Apologies then for any lack of photos from me in this report but I grabbed a couple with the phone

**The last thing I anticipated in any event was to go “WOW!” at any of the demonstrations because hotel rooms full of warm bodies and out of the ordinary seating arrangements are fighting a losing battle from the outset...**

which seems to be somewhat reluctant to part with them. My excuse is I did get up very early and as I am not a morning person with a long journey to face ahead of me, so I wasn't all that bright eyed and bushy tailed to begin with, so no surprises there. I was to be given a Hifi Pig shoulder bag at the show so my baggage when I left home consisted of a tatty old plastic carrier bag in anticipation of receiving the Pig bag on arrival so I could transfer the contents into the Hifi Pig shoulder bag on arrival. It was perversely fortuitous that I left the camera at home as the carrier bag was already creating some nasty

weals on my fingers from carrying it around and I didn't get the shoulder bag until late in the day. The tatty carrier bag gave up mid-afternoon and my thanks to the Chord Company people for allowing me to pilfer one of their carrier bags.

I have not the slightest doubt that the internet will be buzzing soon over what sounds were heard at the show so I don't intend to add any more to that mountain of opinions by doing a room-by-room analysis myself. The last thing I anticipated in any event was to go "WOW!" at any of the demonstrations because hotel rooms full of warm bodies and out of the ordinary seating arrangements are fighting a losing battle from the outset, unless of course you will have upwards of 20 people sat in your own listening room on metal chairs yapping away during your own music listening sessions. To me the show wasn't about what sounds were being produced, it was at a much deeper level than that.

As I recall, my last visit all those years ago wasn't all that pleasurable or enervating, as I have recollections of music blaring out of bedroom doorways at deafening levels into corridors, endless rivers of people bumping into each other trying to navigate their way along the aforesaid corridors and staircases, each carrying a carrier bag laden with reams of catalogues and literature they had accumulated from exhibitors, which also did a supreme job of bashing your shins constantly with plenty of "Sorry!" comments all round. Now this is very interesting indeed, as one of my very first impressions on entering the show was the LACK of heavy carrier bags bursting with literature being lugged around by the attendees. Hmmmmmm. Either the catalogues weren't being doled out by the ton from the exhibitors, or the attendees were not tempted by what was on offer, or was there maybe another reason? I was soon to find out.

Another poignant memory from the last visit was the attitudes of those manning the demonstrations. You could enter a demonstration room to find no attendee's bottoms on seats, some indifferent plinky plonk muzak being played on whatever system of

variable quality and the staff huddled in a corner chatting amongst themselves paying no attention to you at all. You could have caught fire and they wouldn't have piddled on you to extinguish the flames. Dare you ask a simple question and there was a good chance you would get a "Dunno mate, the bloke who knows aint here" kind of reply. Contrast that scenario with the attitudes I found at this visit. Gone was that awful indifference and the exhibitors were more than keen to engage you in polite and more importantly, knowledgeable conversation if you approached them. Aha, you might say, wearing a press badge might have made some sort of difference, but no, I tucked the badge into my shirt breast pocket a few times so the exhibitors were totally unaware of who I was and why I was there. Top marks to all you guys and gals, you did the industry proud.

This might also account for the absence of bulging carrier bags too, because I found no shortage at all of catalogues and literature available in all the demonstration rooms.

The one thing I did remember to pack was some CDs which I was hoping to be played, so I was at least hearing a familiar recording during the demonstrations. Given that most systems were being fed with streamed digital music, that was yet another item I could have comfortably left out of that blasted carrier bag I was lugging around all day and hurting my fingers. I did manage to get one of the CDs played which somehow lured plenty of new visitors in to a room that was otherwise empty immediately beforehand. Which leads me on to my next comment about the show – the demo music choices.

On the one hand it was great not to be assaulted by Joan Armourplating's "Me myself I" emanating from every room doorway at 90db+ levels as I used to find in hi-fi show days of yore, it irked me somewhat that I didn't hear any memorable music at this year's show either. Not quite plinky plonk or lift muzak, but not a zillion miles away from it either, although I did hear a brief but not unexpected excerpt of Hugh Masakela's Hope at one point. I did get really

engaged by a drum solo in the Paradigm room which I could easily have used in my review evaluations because it had some superbly recorded transients, so I discreetly got the mobile phone out to see if Shazam could identify it for me. No chance, might as well have held up and waved around a wet lettuce leaf for all the good Shazam was to me. The guys were too busy with queries from other attendees to ask, so still none the wiser what that track or album was called. I even returned later in the day to ask but the room was as full as before and they were playing Stairway to Heaven by Led Zeppelin this time around.

What perceptions have I brought away from this year's Bristol Show?

Firstly, judging by the amount of streaming devices on show, this is without doubt what will dominate the hi-fi industry for the foreseeable future. Is it "Hi Fi" though? Yes it has instant accessibility to a massive range of music and for convenience, no other medium comes close. It also allows for ultimate mobility too as nobody is being stuck in the lounge parked in front of speakers or lassoed by headphones at the end of a cable. Factor in what the cost would be to purchase that same amount of music on CD or vinyl and it really is a no brainer to see why it dominates. But for me, it isn't "Hi Fi" in the true sense of the word, because that to me is only available by being stuck in the lounge parked in front of good speakers fed by the complete picture through full range media like CD and vinyl. Call me old fashioned if you like. Dominic, you are old fashioned.

Secondly and not entirely unconnected with digital streaming, we have miniaturization moving forward at an alarming pace. Witness the Pro-Ject MaiA integrated amplifier that I have reviewed recently for Hifi Pig that has within a tiny box, a high quality 30 watts per channel amplifier, a headphone output, a motorized volume control, a DAC, USB and Bluetooth connections and 3 digital inputs in the shape of 2x TOSLINK and 1x RCA SPDIF input, making nine inputs in total. It won't just be confined

## **Finally, what has pleased me the most is the huge change in attitude from the exhibitors.**

to living next door to a desktop computer either because it's size will fit in with a lot of modern lifestyle locations. The seventeen inch wide stack system of components in individual boxes are heading for extinction it seems, although history says one day we may revisit that genre again. You have doubts? We have brand new turntables and valves available right now, so never say never.

Thirdly, casework design has come a long way in the intervening years too, so now we have some gorgeous laser cut faceplates and tasteful bright trims to behold instead of plain rectangular boxes. Having said that, it fair took me aback to see that Technics have launched a large power amp with big and bold VU meters dominating almost the entire front panel. All digital circuitry inside mind.

Finally, what has pleased me the most is the huge change in attitude from the exhibitors. Perhaps the recession has enabled the dealers and distributors to realize that the money in our pockets is only accessible through better interaction with their audience on a personal level. My advice to you guys is to forget the word "business" and embrace the notion that it is one to one personal transactions that defines whether someone buys an item from you or not. The four key words here are "How would I feel?" if I walked into a demo room and was ignored, how would I feel if someone spoke to me like that, or how would I feel if someone said they would call me back but didn't? The answers are all there because EVERYONE is a consumer, so their experiences are easily applied into a vendor situation if you think about it. Sermon over.

Dominic Marsh

# Bristol Sound and Vision 2015 – Birds Eye View

**Linette Smith**

To say the show was rammed would be an understatement....when we got there before it opened on Friday morning, there were people queuing round the block to get in.

There was a real buzz of excitement over the two days that we were there with people keen to see and hear as much as possible. All the demos were packed and I must admit to doing a bit of queue jumping with my press pass in order to get to everything I wanted!

The venue is a good one, yes some of the rooms are a bit small but it is a hotel. Facilities at the Marriott are excellent with plenty of staff to cater for hungry and thirsty audiophiles.....and believe me, it was thirsty work!

Bristol seems to me to be a show for real people, it's not just crazy high end (Naim Statement anybody?), there's something for the more modest budget too ....the Q Acoustics room was the perfect example of this, where they were demoing their new little speakers that retail at less than £200, making great sounding music accessible to everyone.

KEF always have one of my favourite rooms at shows, and they did not disappoint this time. I must admit to my most blatant bit of queue jumping here..... very sorry to the two guys I had to skip in front of, hope you got in in the end! I got to hear the new R series AV system in a Dolby Atmos dem that was very impressive...Im not usually blown away by AV systems but KEF have something special here ...that's probably the reason that Dolby themselves are using the new KEF speakers at their HQ.



The 'Baby' blades (Blade 2) were also on show and were demoed by the ever bouncy Johann, again an excellent sound, I'm beginning to think I could happily live with some big KEF speakers! Another thing I noticed was that KEF had their speakers in many of the other rooms...which is always a good sign for a brand, including Yamaha who won the best AV room award at the show.

The Astel & Kern and Audeze stand was absolutely mobbed for the whole show (or when ever I passed anyway) and I was itching to get my ears around the new EL 8 headphones. I managed a sneaky listen before opening on Saturday and liked what I heard....a lighter (in weight and price) addition to the Audeze family yet they still have that quality feel and amazing sound.....I just want a pair to play with properly now.

Dynaudio had one of the nicest and most refreshing rooms .....a light and airy oasis that had a

tremendous sound with their new Focus XD loudspeakers...I went in a few times for a listen.

Another brand that seemed to have their products in a lot of rooms was the Chord Company ....it seemed like everyone was using their cables.

If you are (and I was for a long time) a cable sceptic, you should go to one of their demos.

We were given a demo of streaming cables ....a subject that is bound to start a fight on any audiophile forum, power cables and interconnects. I wasn't expecting to be able to detect much of a difference with the streaming cables but there was a definite improvement as we moved up the range.

The most eye (or ear) opening demo was of the interconnects and we were treated to a listen of The Chord Company's new product line 'Music'. If just shy of £4000 for a pair of interconnects that contain a secret new insulation sounds bonkers to you (and lets face it, it does to most people) then you definitely need to take a listen....there were more than a few raised eyebrows and murmurs of amazement when we were in the room.

A room we found ourselves very happy to be in was the Music First and Longdog Audio room. Probably up there for one of the best sounding rooms in my opinion, they were playing Kraftwerk and I wished I could have stayed there longer.

Another vinyl room that I liked a lot was Clearaudio and Gamut, stunning sounding and beautiful looking turntables and the Gamut amps and speakers were pretty breathtaking too.

Mr Hifi Pig did point out the irony of me rating vinyl rooms but I've never said I don't think vinyl can sound amazing....just that in the home situation it can be a pain to use. Perhaps seeing as the Clearaudio TTs are so high end they might send a turntable minion with them when you buy one, to make your life easier?

Spendor had three rooms all featuring their Speakers and Devialet kit. Very stylishly done rooms that sounded great....I was particularly impressed with the Spendor Classic speakers and their 70s styling ...Mr Hifi Pig came out of the room saying that he wanted a pair.

Henley Designs were another distributor with three rooms. The new Roksan K3 system was kicking

**I wasn't expecting to be able to detect much of a difference with the streaming cables but there was a definite improvement as we moved up the range.**

some serious ass in one of them...nice to hear this kit at a show after seeing them being made back when we visited Roksan HQ.

After hearing the Tsakirdis valve amps from Greece at last years Cranage show, we were pleased to find them at Bristol. The Flamingo room that they were in had a lovely sound and I think anyone would be surprised to hear that the amp they were using when we were in there was sub £2000....affordable valves indeed.

More valves from Ming Da UK who were drawing people into their room and keeping them there.....a feast for both eyes and ears. Definitely a room for lovers of big valve amps.

The last room on our tour was Wilson Benesch who were pumping out rock music nice and loud on their new stunningly 'Alien' looking loudspeakers....we could have spent a lot longer in here.

There were plenty of other rooms that I really liked such as Brodmann, Focal, Eclipse, Chord Electronics, Exposure, Heed Audio ...too many to list but there are plenty of brands that I will be seeking out to listen to some more at the next show.

I really, really enjoyed this show. My only regret was that we didn't have a bit more time to just go back into some rooms and sit and listen for longer. As a Hifi show it also is a very social event and it was great fun to catch up with so many people that we knew and make some new acquaintances.

Next stop for us Munich, then Cranage Hall.....see you there!

# Clarity at Sound & Vision, The Bristol Show

**We caught up with Phil Hansen, operations director for The Clarity Alliance at the Bristol Show and asked him about the Alliance's involvement with the show.**



**HFP** How did your involvement with the Bristol Show come about?

**PH** Around three years ago we approached the show organisers and proposed that Clarity, as the hi-fi industry's trade association, could organise an awards event to recognise the hard work that the exhibitors put into their rooms at the show.

**HFP** And what was the reaction from Audio-T to this suggestion?

**PH** The idea was welcomed as it would give some independent recognition to the huge amount of effort

that is taken by the hi-fi industry to make Bristol one of the best shows in the country. The organisers quite rightly felt they couldn't run any sort of awards as it wouldn't be independent, but by agreeing to Clarity organising it there would be a totally apolitical approach to the awards.

**HFP** So how many years have you been running the awards and what has the reaction been from the exhibitors?

**PH** 2015 marks the third year we have run the awards and each year it gets better and gains more

recognition. The first year it was a bit of a surprise for people but it has gained a following each time we have run it. Having said that, the winners in 2013 were delighted to receive their accolades, as were the winners in 2014 and now this year. It's great to see the winners' certificates proudly displayed in their rooms and on their stands on the Saturday morning. The comments from each of the 15 winners we have had to date have been nothing short of fantastic.

**HFP** Tell us how the judging process works and what makes it independent?

**PH** We start by splitting the show into five or six areas, based largely around a floor of the hotel or a couple of floors or a split area in the case of the busy ground floor and lower ground floor. Each of our five or six judges is then given an area to visit and they are asked to mark the room or stand from their area that they think deserves to be the winner in each of the awards categories. This all happens on the Friday morning and then in the afternoon the judges get together and hand in their nomination forms. From these a shortlist in each of the five awards categories is created and one judge visits each of the five rooms to choose the overall winner. At all times we are conscious of any conflicts of interest and make sure the judges are not asked to visit rooms that they may have an interest in (e.g. work for or sell the products in question).

**HFP** OK, so the judges are not allowed to vote on rooms they are interested in, that does make it truly independent, but who are the judges?

**PH** We keep the judges anonymous so as to remove any possibility of arm twisting or favouritism. This year, for instance, we had a number of journalists, a couple of manufacturers and two retailers. And to further mix it up and keep it fair, the mix of people judging the first round was different from those who visited the shortlisted rooms to make the final decisions.

**HFP** That sounds like a lot of effort for a hi-fi show awards event?

**PH** It may be a lot of effort, but as the trade association for the industry we have to be totally impartial and so it is worth the time it takes to

**The idea was to bring together anyone and everyone operating in the hi-fi industry to work towards a common goal of promoting better quality home entertainment to consumers.**

organise in order that we can be confident in the results.

**HFP** What exactly is The Clarity Alliance?

**PH** Clarity, for short, was formed in 2012 by a group of likeminded manufacturers, distributors, retailers, the media and independent PR consultants. The idea was to bring together anyone and everyone operating in the hi-fi industry to work towards a common goal of promoting better quality home entertainment to consumers.

**HFP** That's quite an ambitious objective. How did you achieve it?

**PH** For the past 25 years or so the industry has had two trade associations: BADA, the British Audio

Dealers Association, and the BFA, British Federation of Audio – a manufacturers association. During 2011 the BFA began winding up its operations and at around the same time BADA's board of directors had begun thinking about a repositioning of the association as more of an industry body rather than being purely retail focused. An 18-month consultation process with the whole of the UK's hi-fi industry resulted in the formation of The Clarity Alliance.

**HFP** What does Clarity offer for the hi-fi buying public?

**PH** Clarity is a trade association, which means its focus is on its members and the help it can give them in the running of their businesses. Like most trade associations that includes the provision of standard but essential services such as insurance deals, credit card rates and legal helplines. For consumers, Clarity has two purposes, both of which are hugely important:

Firstly our primary objective is to promote hi-fi to the public. Particularly the public who don't normally buy 'proper' hi-fi. We want people to

become aware of better quality home entertainment and to know they need to visit a specialist shop to get the best advice and products.

Secondly, we run a suite of training courses specially designed for people working in hi-fi shops. So end users can rest assured that when they shop at a specialist independent store they are being served by people who are knowledgeable, experienced in and passionate about the products they are selling. For the very best in service and to get a solution that is right for each person's requirements, shopping at a Clarity member's shop is the best option.

**HFP** How can people find their nearest Clarity member shop?

**PH** Our website, [www.clarityalliance.co.uk](http://www.clarityalliance.co.uk), lists all the manufacturer and retailer members of the Alliance, so finding your nearest shop is just a few clicks away. We are also active on facebook and are always posting articles of interest to people who are into hi-fi and better quality home entertainment. Please 'like' us at [facebook.com/Clarity Alliance](https://facebook.com/ClarityAlliance)



**Phil Hansen (left) and Laurence Armstrong (Clarity's Chairman) announce the Clarity Award winners.**

# The Clarity Awards



**I**t was a crowded room on the Friday evening for the Clarity Award ceremony at this year's Sound & Vision, The Bristol Show and given the effort most exhibitors had put into their rooms and stands, I can imagine the judging was an agonizing process. The clear joy expressed by exhibitors at just being shortlisted for the awards shows these are obviously very relevant and significant honours to the companies involved.

There was an impassioned introduction by Robert Follis which set the tone nicely for the ceremony itself.

The overall winners were clearly delighted to be presented with their awards by Laurence Armstrong, the Chairman of Clarity and proudly exhibited their trophies throughout the remainder of the show. The highlight of the ceremony for me was the awarding of a Lifetime award for one of the music journalists I've followed since my teens, Paul Messenger.

## The Categories and Shortlisted Companies

### **Best Hi-fi Room**

Henley Designs  
Neat  
Arcam  
Brodmann  
Dynaudio  
Spendor/Devialet

### **Best Cinema Room**

Canton  
Yamaha  
REL  
Pioneer

### **Most Innovative Room**

Entotem  
Elac  
Air

Technics  
KEF  
Wilson Benesch

### **Best Presented Room**

Fostex  
Wilson Benesch  
AudioQuest  
Dynaudio  
Quad/IAG  
Sony

### **Best Stand in an Open Area**

Naim  
Hi-Fi Racks

### **Overall Winners**

#### **Best Hi-Fi Room**

Henley Designs

#### **Best Cinema Room**

Yamaha

### **Most Innovative Room**

Entotem

### **Best Presented Room**

Dynaudio

### **Best Stand in an Open Area**

Hi-Fi Racks





**Just part of one of Henley Designs' rooms showing Pro-Ject and Unison Research kit**



**Spendor and Devialet make the shortlist**



**Neat Acoustics and Arcam both shortlisted**



**The Dynaudio Lounge appealed to at least one of the judges in the Best Hi-Fi Room Category**

**I always enjoy the Brodmanns whenever I hear them as they seem just so unforced and non-hifi and so I'm not surprised to them shortlisted. However, they are a swine to photograph given their finish and so here's the rest of the room with the speakers inset.**

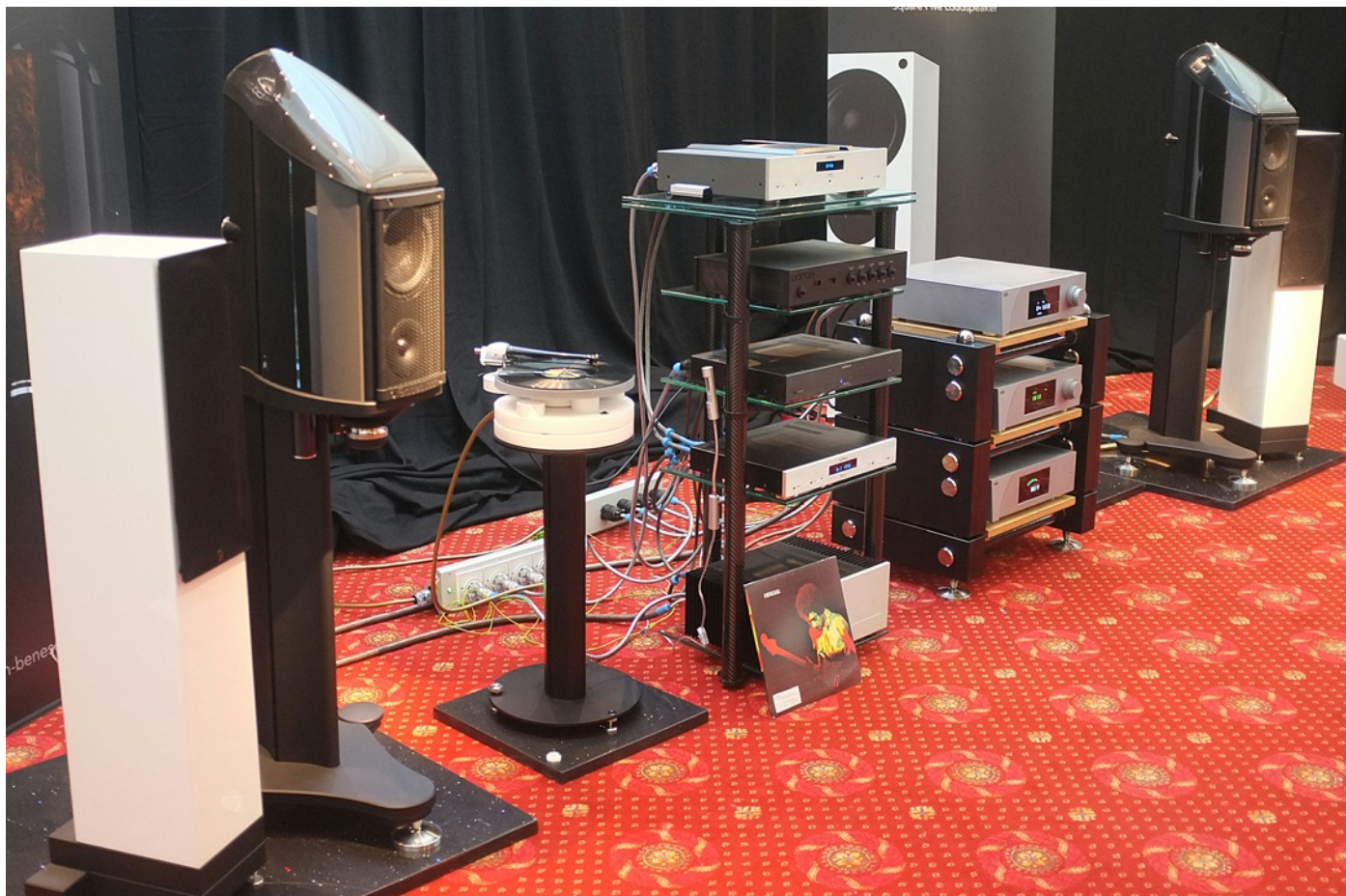


**Entotem won the award for the most innovative room amongst some stiff competition with their Plato system and app**





**Elac and Wilson Benesch were both nominated in the most innovative category**



**Air Audio were shortlisted in the innovation category and here you can see their room with Trichord kit and one of their MB Power blocks**



**Another shortlisted company in the innovation category ,this time from a bit of a blast from the past Technics**



**KEF are a well known brand that seem to have been around for ever and so it's nice to see them recognised for innovation. Always a very entertaining room at any show, with really enthusiastic presenters**





**Top, Yamaha's winning Cinema Room. Left, Canton. Bottom Left, Rel. Below, Pioneer**





**Audioquest, Wilson Benesch and Quad/AIG were all shortlisted in the best presented room category.**



**Also shortlisted were Sony and previously pictured Dynaudio who won the category and SCV Distribution on the next page**

In association with

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a sound vision for the UK's AV industry



**SCV Distribution with  
Benchmark, Fostex, CEntrance,  
Briscati and Isoacoustics were  
shortlisted in the best presented  
room category**

**Hi-Fi Racks were winners in the Best Stand in an Open Area category and quite rightly so. The effort the team had put into their display was clear. Also nice to see all the family being involved!**



**The Naim stand also got a good deal of interest from the judges and public alike.**



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THE BRISTOL SHOW

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Awards at Sound & Vision, The Bristol Show

### Dynaudio

(best presented room)

### Entotem

(most innovative room)

### Henley Designs

(best hi-fi room)

### Hi-Fi Racks

(best stand in an open area)

### Yamaha

(best home cinema room)

as voted for by **The Clarity Alliance**  
the UK hi-fi and home cinema industry's trade association

[www.clarityalliance.co.uk](http://www.clarityalliance.co.uk)



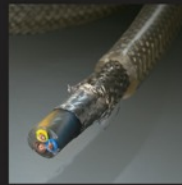
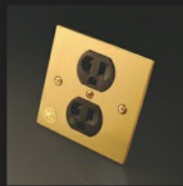
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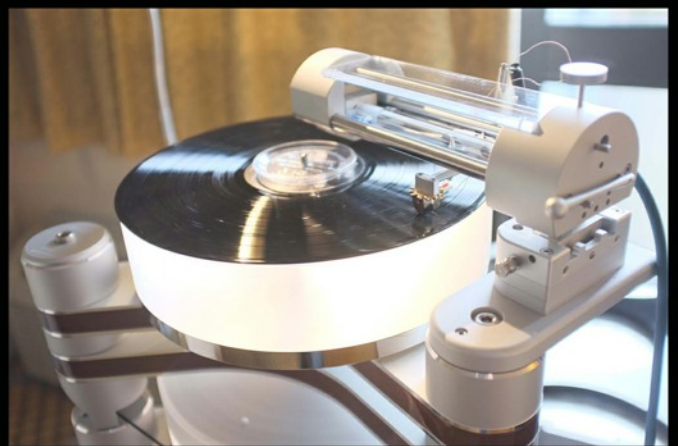
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HiFi World, Awards Edition Jan 2015

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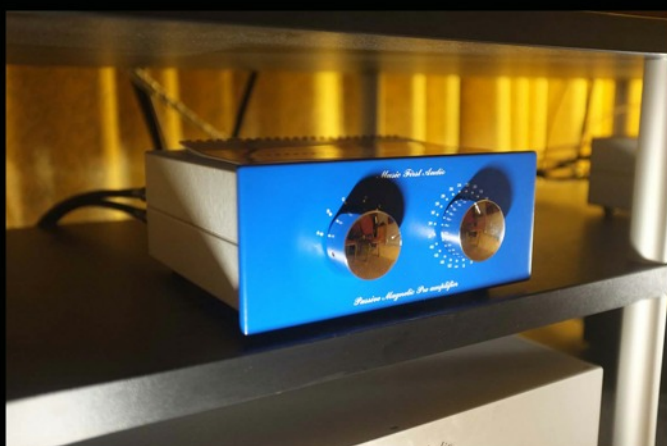
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Amplifiers

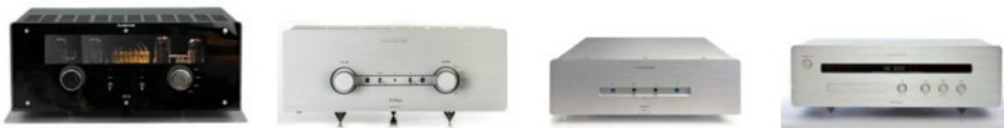
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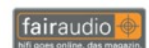
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