

Hifi Pig Magazine

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Behind The Brands With
Peter Comeau of IAG



REVIEWS

Roksan Kandy K3 Integrated Amplifier, Arte Forma Mezzo Power Amplifier, Pro-Ject MaiA Integrated Amplifier, ATC SCM 11 Loudspeakers, Tangent Spectrum X5 BT – Powered Digital Bookshelf Speakers, Roth OLi RA1 Bookshelf Loudspeakers, ADL (Furutech) H-118 Headphones, NuForce NE750M and NE800M Inner-Earphones, Skogrand SC Beethoven Loudspeaker Cables

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ROKSAN KANDY K3 INTEGRATED



The £1250 Kandy K3 from the renowned UK manufacturer Roksan is a well priced and very well specced unit. Dan Worth gives it a whirl for Hifi Pig.

Another piece of Kandy on the shelves? Yes, if your teeth aren't already rotten from the many Kandy treats from Roksan by now then read on. Maybe the Roksan Sweet Shop have changed the flavour this time around and maybe they have put a cherry on top. Or maybe they may have just changed the wrapper slightly?

Certainly the wrapper does look different on the new £1250 K3. The overall build quality is extremely nice and attracts the eye further with a new range of stylish colour options. Anthracite, Charcoal and Opium are the new blacks and the shades are very appealing indeed and rather make a design statement.

The feature rich amplifier provides connections for both RCA Unbalanced, Moving Magnet and Bluetooth inputs as well as RCA preamp outputs to connect to a power amplifier such as Roksan's own Kandy Power Amplifier. The K3 will put out 140w into 8ohms and 220w into 4ohms.

ROKSAN KANDY K3 INTEGRATED

Remember the K2 BT? Well the BT stood for Bluetooth, Roksan haven't simply put a new wrapper on their latest offering from the Kandy range, they deem Bluetooth as a critical connection for the modern day consumer so without making a fuss about it, it's just there.

The K3 has other performance benefits such as its larger toroidal transformer alongside the power supply circuitry and a shorter signal path laid out with great spec components to, on paper at least provide substantial upgrades in resolution, bass stability and overall a better controlled sound with finer details.

THE SOUND

I know what to expect when I fire a Kandy up, over the years there have been several improvements to the range, but I've never really aligned the Kandy completely with other Roksan products. It certainly no

doubt does a remarkable job of producing party like music, but when it came to the subtleties I've always been found wanting more. Now in its 32nd guise (only kidding guys!) the Kandy K3 for me finally sounds like a 'Baby Caspian' a sound which I would have expected from the Kandy range when I first heard it years ago after owning one of the first model Caspians.

The level of insight and realism has gained dramatically over the K2 and the level of refinement and sophistication has took on a new guise.

There has been an uncanny reoccurring feeling with Roksan gear of late that I have heard and that is there just seems to be a new development in their overall sound signature. I especially would like to point toward the ability of the treble. I remarked in the Darius S1 review and have likened one or two other products



ROKSAN KANDY K3 INTEGRATED

The level of insight and realism has gained dramatically over the K2 and the level of refinement and sophistication has took on a new guise.

since by gauging them against the S1's upper frequencies, that Roksan seem to have addressed the area of bandwidth with a cleverness of attention, not attenuated but more refined, relaxed and confident in presentation.



Whilst listening to Derrin Nuendorf I was dumbfounded at how much better string rendition, clarity and raw presence the K3 had over the K2, which if you read my review would remember that I had to play extensively with cables to get the amp sounding at its best and concluded the review by stating that it was a party amp that could excite rather than give an accurate display of instrument timbre and tonality. Well, the K3, or the Baby Caspian as I now see it has come an awful long way since then, but does it still possess its power and ability to slam dynamical-

ly, fill the room with harmonic rushes of electro synthesised sound and Rock out?

First track of choice was a poppy dance number 'Stolen Dance' by Milky Chance. After the first few hi hat beats the room floods with that encapsulating sound that the studio dance track produces, along with its strong bass the K3 gives an upfront midrange with layering to the width of the soundstage which is pretty damn convincing and unexpected of an amp in this class.

If I wanted to be critical then at louder volume levels there is a bit of upper-mid hardness with higher volume levels. Further listening to some Lisa Lashes, Tiesto and Armin Van Buren, seemed as if though a switch had flicked on the K3 and it was no longer a 'Baby Caspian', it had showed me its other personality which was Kandy infused...

I'm sat here a little confused now, I had my initial listening with acoustic music as that's what was on the playlist, diverted to see if the Kandy was still in the heart of the beast and in all honesty expected dance music especially to be much different than the K2; but no, the amplifiers other personality came out and just laughed as I was sat on the sofa with a somewhat puzzled look on my face.

'Sunchyme' by Dario G (Sash remix) came on whilst I was thinking what to write next and that was it, I was off. Volume up, bouncing around the lounge with the steel drums filling my entire room and no doubt the neighbours kids dancing along. A noticeable step up in performance has got to be the bass, it's larger, tougher and punchier. This is down to the larger toroid in the power supply and the K3 knocks out beats with more command and dynamism.

I'm not going to babble on about the characteristics of the Kandy's up-beat fun party nature, except to say take a K2 give it a stiff drink and wait till it lets its hair down!

After I wore a hole in my socks cleaning the rug wishing I had a couple of 18 inchers and some horns

ROKSAN KANDY K3 INTEGRATED

it was time to calm down and take a breather (must check the ingredients on that orange juice...).

It was time after my party for me to see if I was still as convinced with K3 with instruments.

Ed Sheeran seemed to agree that 'Baby Caspian' was back in the room, but after more listening we decided there to be a clear difference between my fond memories of the Caspian and the K3 – a difference in bass presentation, the K3 was more start stop whereas the the Caspian was more fluid and extended, but the rest of the presentation could for sure pass for a slimmed down, condensed little brother.

There's definite form to be admired in the K3's abilities to reproduce acoustic and instrumental pieces over the previous models, moving it more towards the all round status. I can imagine people using the Kandy now for weekend get together so at home as well as a nice relaxing listen after a hard day... which personally I don't feel the older models came close to achieving.

Moving on from the K2 BT (Bluetooth) the K3 doesn't have the designation in its title although has the technology as standard under the hood. The Apt-X force is strong in this one.

Fighting over what they are going to play next was a group of friends who came over for a few drinks at the weekend. Fortunately they had different playlists and after restoring order and coming to some sort of consensus of what we would like to play and also creating a new playlist of tracks – at one stage by bluetoothing individual songs to one phone and using that as the streamer – we all enjoyed our evening with a range of music being played easily and surprising well versed. Sound quality is a shade off a hard wired link and our range of lossless and MP3 files did vary, but the convenience and ability to get everyone involved was fun.

CONCLUSION

To sum up my time with the Roksan Kandy K3 I can say that further progress had been made to bring the amplifier closer to an amp that can be stated as a 'good

It's flexibility to play a wider variety of genres than previous incarnations is a much welcomed benefit and Roksan have once applied a good ear to tuning the top end to reflect what I believe to be a stand out point of the new generation of Roksan products.

all rounder'. It's flexibility to play a wider variety of genres than previous incarnations is a much welcomed benefit and Roksan have once applied a good ear to tuning the top end to reflect what I believe to be a stand out point of the new generation of Roksan products.

The K3 doesn't quite have the sophistication of the Caspian and doesn't deliver the refinement in the midrange that the Caspian can achieve but it does a great job for its respective price and I stand by my 'Baby Caspian' label, but would definitely prefix it with the word 'spicy' as the fun that can be had with the sound is something that could well stand it apart from the rest in its peer group. I did go backwards and forwards a little bit I know but that's how the progression of this review panned out and that's what conclusions are for after all.

It is a little edgy sometimes yes, it is a little forward and lively yes, but let's face it, if it wasn't it wouldn't be a Kandy!

Build Quality – 8.5/10

Sound Quality – 8.3/10

Value For Money – 8.4/10

Overall – 8.4

Dan Worth

ARTE FORMA MEZZO POWER AMP

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



ARTE FORMA MEZZO POWER AMP

Arte Forma's stable of electronics are made in Taiwan with the company coming together in the beginning from a group of DIY hobbyists with a passion for music reproduction. It's a diverse group of 26 members with backgrounds ranging from computer engineer, electrical engineers and communication industry specialists. In the UK the distribution is handled by JoSound.

Arte Forma produce a handful of tube amplifiers, a tube preamplifier, plus a solid state preamp and the Mezzo solid state power amplifier we have here.

Coming in at 20KG this is a heavy beast of an amplifier which round the back sports a single XLR input (for when used in mono mode), a pair of RCA inputs, the power inlet and a good set of heavy duty speaker terminals. Round the front there's a single toggle switch for on and off and a discrete red LED to let you know it's powered up.

As I said this is a heavy amp and it looks very well put together. The front fascia is a thick piece of brushed

aluminium and the whole aesthetic is one of purposeful simplicity. I like the looks of it a great deal.

TECH SPEC

Quoted output for the Mezzo is a healthy 180 W into 8 Ohms and 500 into 8 Ohms when used in mono mode. It operates in Class A/B and has a frequency response of 5Hz to 65KHz. Looking through the top of the amp (the ventilation holes are quite large) there is a massive (and I mean huge) torroidal transformer and I guess this is where a good deal of the weight is coming from. I like this.

SOUND

All listening was done using files fed from a dedicated computer running JRiver through the VAD DAC10, The Coffman Labs G-1A valve pre using a mix of cables from Tellurium Q, Chord, Computer Audio Design and Vermouth Audio. Speakers are the usual hORN Mummy.

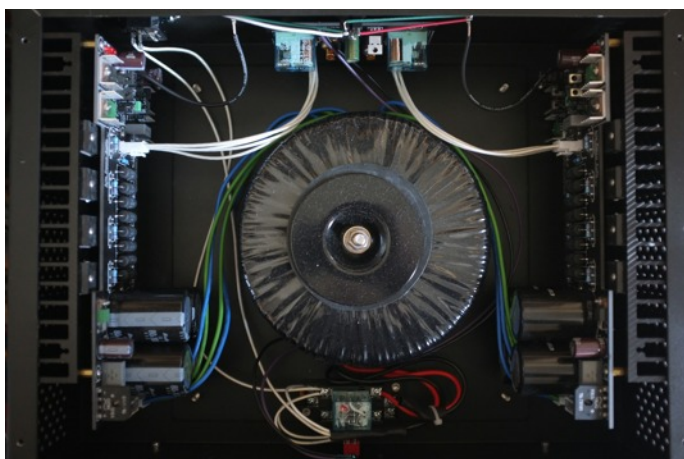


ARTE FORMA MEZZO POWER AMP

I was told the amplifier had been fully run in and it certainly seemed a solid performer with no bettering of performance during the review period.

On with Neil Young's *After The Goldrush* and it is immediate that the amp has the ability to connect you emotionally with the music. Ok I know this is a bit woolly but it is often that connection that I want to feel above all else. The midband clarity is good here and I think there is a good cohesion between the Mezzo and our reference pre. There is a terrific openness to the sound I'm hearing here in the vocal range and it's all underpinned with a nice and tight bass quality.

Popping on Madonna's *American Life* there is a feeling of great slam and speed to the bass. The cat went and hid. This is not the same speed I'm used to with the Iridium reference which is Class A but there is more weight in this respect with the Mezzo. In a lot of ways this amp is preaching to the choir in the way it bangs out electronic music over and above the reference. Imaging on this type of music is rock solid with an excellent representation of the studio mix. Indeed, coming from a studio/DJ environment this is ticking a lot of boxes for me. It doesn't have the overall finesse of the reference amp (£6 000) and overall I prefer the recently reviewed Merrill Audio Veritas amps (\$12 000) but this is an amplifier costing just £1 800.



Hypnosis' *Italo monster Droid* with its Moroderesque bassline sounds great and it strikes me that what we have here is an amplifier with the power and pump of a very good professional amplifier with added upper and mid refinement.

There is a terrific openness to the sound I'm hearing here in the vocal range and it's all underpinned with a nice and tight bass quality.

OK, I admit that this amp is really addictive playing my preferred techno, disco and house but that wouldn't really be telling the full story and very few people play just this one kind of music and so I must tear myself away and (reluctantly) explore other genres to see where this amplifier stands in the grand scheme of things.

Smoke On The Water from Deep Purple's *Made in Japan* album had that live and immediate feel to it and that bass line that I use as a reference had all the necessary power and grunt. The cat hid and growled. The amp seems to be in good control again in the bass and on Pink Floyd's *Meddle* album the bass....oh no I'm doing it again Truthfully I'm not all about the bass, no treble (*Meghan Trainor reference there kids*) and neither is this amp.

On with Pascal Mailloux' excellent *Rain* album and the feeling I get is once again of weight and authority with the double bass underpinning the piano, ensuring a solid foundation for the music to build on. This is not to say, as mentioned, that this amp is a one trick pony with a booty bass and nothing else, there is a good deal of openness and detail here too and again a good sense of the recording feeling live. Soundstaging is good if not outstanding and there is a decent, if not

ARTE FORMA MEZZO POWER AMP

holographic, sense of three dimensionality. What there is again is that emotional connection to the music that is difficult to pinpoint or describe accurately.

I was interviewing Nigel and Alan from The Chord Company recently at the Bristol Sound and Vision Show and one of the things that got mentioned a lot was the “magic” that

music can bring – it’s indefinable but you know when you hear it. It may not be produced by the most resolving system or the best recording, but when you hear it causes the hairs on the back of your neck to stand up. And so it was with Vladyslav Sendicki’s Solo Piano at Schloss Elmau...a connection. There isn’t the same level of insight into the recording as the reference amplifier, but there’s a lovely tone and feel to the music that lets you forget the system and get on with enjoying the tune.

On bigger orchestral pieces (regular readers will know this isn’t really my ‘bag’) such as The Russian National Orchestra and Mikhail Gembaczka playing Tchaikovsky, the Mezzo demonstrates it can do scale and subtlety as well as slam. The orchestra is laid out in front of me and the instruments hold their position in the stage. What strikes me most is that however loud I crank the volume knob there’s never a feeling of strain.

CONCLUSION

For the asking price of £1800 this is a very capable amplifier that is able to connect the listener with the music in a real and palpable way. It is enormously dynamic and allows the preamp to demonstrate its own set of skills without getting in the way too much.



On studio produced, beat driven music it excels and both Linette and I said that it would be great to be able to switch this amplifier into the system when listening to this kind of stuff. If you are a lover of this genre you really should check the Mezzo out.

The Mezzo isn’t the last word in poise or refinement (*though it is far from unrefined*), but what it slightly lacks in these areas it more than makes up for in sheer enjoyment factor.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time with this amplifier but it’s getting picked up tomorrow for the next leg of its journey!

Construction: 8/10

Sound quality: 8.5/10

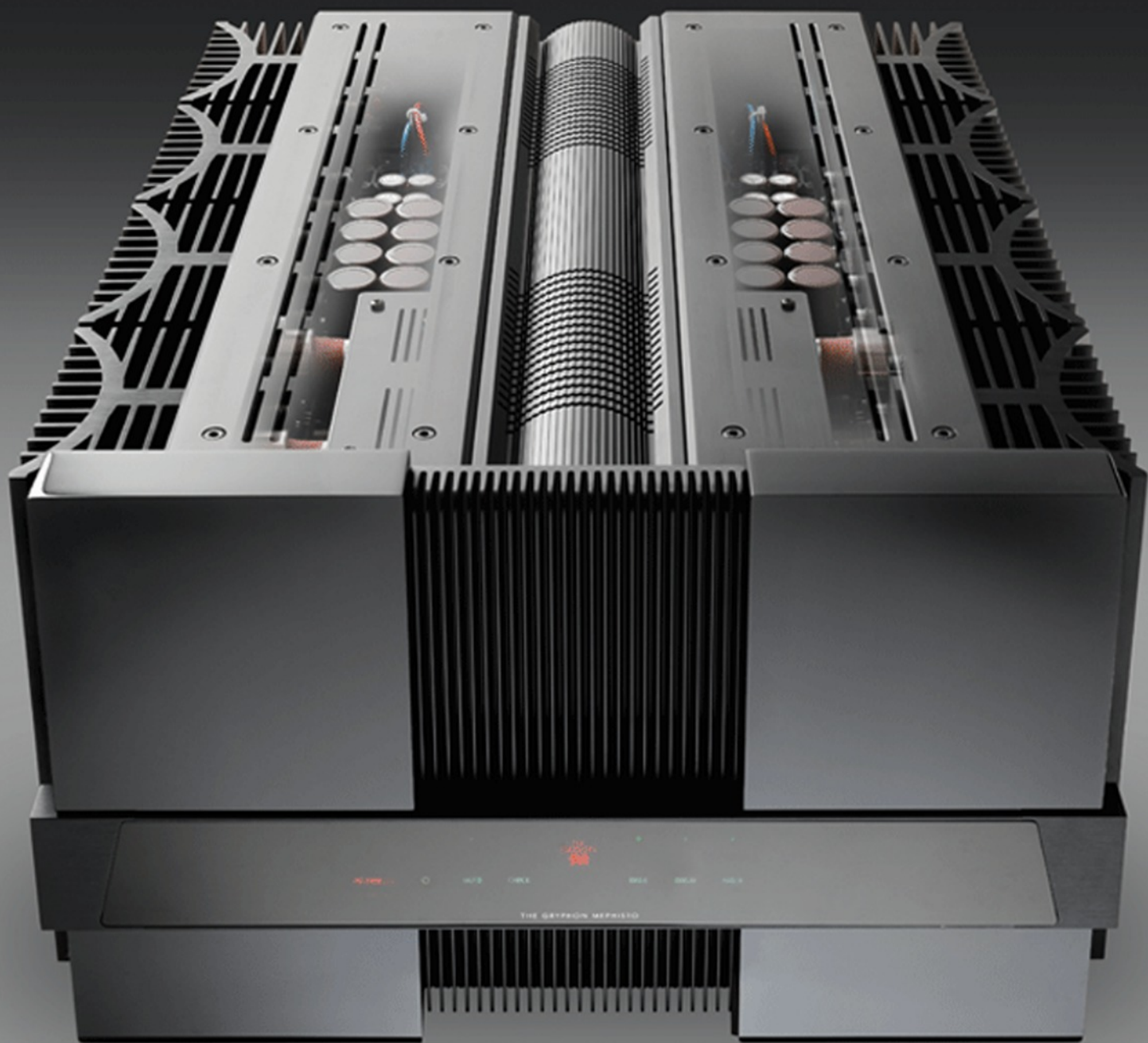
Value for money: 8.9/10

Overall: 8.47/10

Recommended for listeners looking for a good value power amplifier that is hugely dynamic and brings a real sense of that indefinable magic to the listening experience.

Stuart Smith

THE GRYPHON



GRYPHON MEPHISTO

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They say that size isn't everything, or big things come in small packages, so let's see if those statements hold true with the amplifier under review here – the Pro-Ject MaiA.

CONSTRUCTION

This really is a diminutive amplifier by anyone's standards and I can easily see it fitting unobtrusively into countless domestic situations. Measuring some 206mm(W) x 36mm(H) x 200mm (220mm including speaker sockets) deep and weighing not far off a kilogram, excluding the power supply. The separate power supply seems to be a generic design which provides 20 volts of DC at 3 amps and is fitted with a dual pole plug that connects it with the power inlet socket on the rear of the amplifier, with the power input to the supply via a standard UK 3 pin mains plug. Other plugs and voltage matching power sup-

plies are available for non-UK consumers. The casework is of steel construction with the choice of either a black or silver finish faceplate. Fit and finish of the casework is exemplary.

When it comes to source inputs, there is an absolute plethora available, with an impressive NINE separate digital and analogue inputs to choose from. Rarely seen these days although we are seeing a huge revival of vinyl playback, is an RCA phono input that caters for moving magnet or high output moving coil cartridges only, followed by 3 line level analogue inputs labeled 1, 2 and 3 accordingly, then on to the digital inputs which comprises 2x TOSLINK sockets, an RCA co-axial digital input, a USB input and a Bluetooth connection to APT-X standard, with a supplied external aerial which screws on to a dedicated socket on the rear panel.

There is only provision for a single pair of speakers to be connected. The group of four 4mm connectors are

PRO-JECT Maia INTEGRATED AMP

grouped tightly together at the far right of the rear panel and not insulated from each other either, plus the holes to insert bare wired cables are aligned vertically so extreme care is needed so the wire isn't pushed right through the connector body to touch the adjacent terminal above or beneath. A good tip would be to measure exactly how much bare wire is exposed on the cable to be inserted that is less than the connector's diameter, so none of the bare wire is exposed external to the connector to negate the risk of shorting. I would not advocate or even contemplate using spade connectors for the speaker connections because of the close proximity of the naked terminals.

On the front panel reading from left to right, we have a power button with a tiny blue LED above. A real surprise was to see the amplifier perform a soft start operation with the LED blinking while it is being carried out, so no switch on or power down thumps through the speakers from this amplifier, which is rather refreshing to see. Next we have the remote

control window which is a small unobtrusive plastic dome, followed by a 6.3mm headphone socket, which mutes the speaker output when a headphone jack plug is inserted. We then have a rotary volume control knob to adjust the volume by hand, although the control itself is also motorized for adjustment via the remote control handset. The control itself is quite stiff to turn by hand, although in all probability this stiffness will ease over time with usage. The remote control handset provides the basic functions of source selection, volume adjustment and power on/off. Next on the front panel of the amp we find a source selector button which changes the source in upwards increments, with a bank of blue LEDs to indicate which source has been selected and screen printed in white lettering beneath those LEDs is the source names themselves, then finally another source selector button to change the source in downwards increments. Incidentally, the front panel LEDs are very small yet still bright, but don't actually provide much glare as



PRO-JECT MaiA INTEGRATED AMP

blue LEDs are prone to do. You can tell the power is applied and which source has been selected without constantly drawing your attention to them – a nice touch.

I have a policy whereby I don't get the tools out to investigate the internals of any component submitted for review, but sometimes I still get curious about the goings-on inside things as an integrated amplifier with motorized volume control, a phono stage and a DAC crammed into such a small enclosure I would imagine would be pretty well packed. I gave in to temptation this time and found that there wasn't a lot of fresh air to be found inside the chassis, as you can see.

Power output is provided by Flying Mole modules and said to be 2x 25w into an 8 ohm load and 2x 37w into 4 ohms (both channels driven) although not confirmed by objective measurements myself. The integrated DAC uses a Cirrus Logic CS4344 24bit/192kHz multi-bit Delta Sigma type.

Price at date of test circa £399.00

SOUND QUALITY

Unlike a standard run-of-the-mill integrated amplifier review, I had my work cut out with this one as it wasn't just a case of bunging a CD player into it and any old pair of speakers and cables for the output either. If the inputs were there, they all had to be tested which proved to be quite a lengthy and protracted process, made more complicated by my lack of real enthusiasm for computer based source material. Not only that, I had to fit the amplifier into various systems ranging from high end to budget, including ancillaries so hopefully you the reader can get a handle on it's performance envelope.

Firstly, I paired the MaiA with my HTC mobile phone using the Bluetooth facility and this was straightforward and easy to do when following the instructions given in the user manual. Select the "BT" source on the front panel, and then set the phone to detect any nearby devices and when the BT LED on the MaiA flashes, momentarily press the power button on the MaiA and job done with no need for passwords. I only

Delicious treble performance which was clean and vibrant, the sound of struck cymbals were as realistic as anyone could wish for, with a defined metallic "ting" and the following decay all clearly rendered.

have a small selection of MP3 tracks on my phone, but the sound quality was perfectly acceptable nonetheless given the limitations of the MP3 format. I have Spotify on my tablet PC and the sound was again perfectly acceptable from that source.

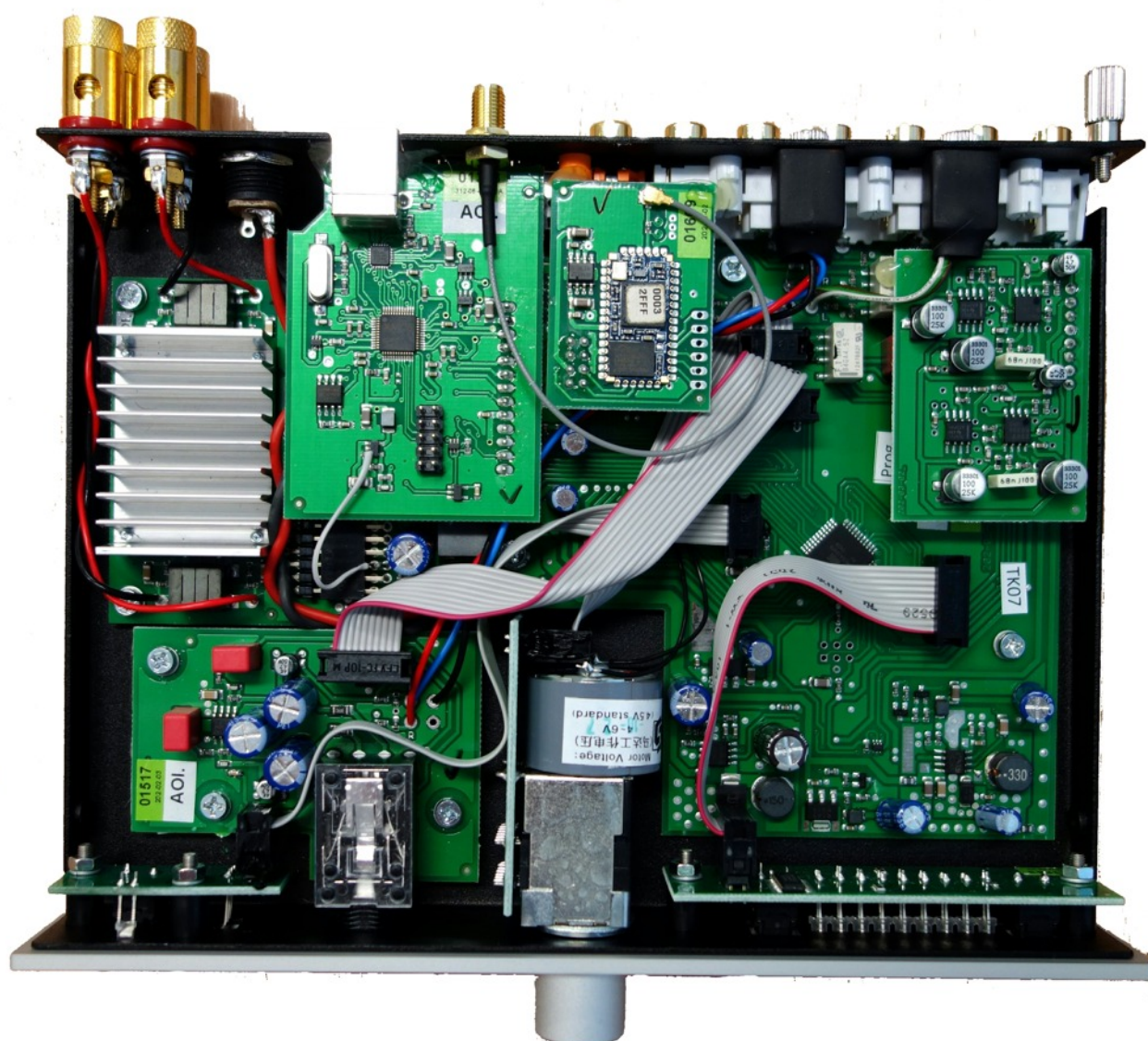
Next, I connected the MaiA into a TEAC AH300 series midi sized component music system using the TEAC CD drive and a pair of Eltax bookshelf speakers. There was a huge increase in sound quality over the TEAC amplifier and really did get hold of the Eltax speakers, producing a crisper more powerful and lucid sound. The overall sound quality was somewhat let down by the woolly sound from the TEAC CD player, but still a worthwhile exercise nonetheless because it told me just how far class D chip technology has advanced in recent years compared to the

PRO-JECT MaiA INTEGRATED AMP

TEAC which I believe (correct me if I am wrong) has Tripath based amplification.

By good fortune, I had a pair of Acoustic Energy 101 bookshelf speakers to hand which had also been submitted for review here at Hifi Pig and they seem like the genre of speakers that would very likely be paired with the MaiA, being of modest dimensions and pricing, so they were coupled up to the MaiA with my resident CD player performing front end duties. With a more accurate and realistic signal being fed into the amplifier, I was stunned at just how good this little amplifier sounded. Delicious treble performance which was clean and vibrant, the sound of struck cymbals were as realistic as anyone could wish for, with a 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 small booming effect, so I preferred them out a bit into free space, around 3 inches was optimum for me personally. They were equally at home on a desk surrounded by computer paraphernalia, so placement isn’t critical, aided of course by being front ported for the bass reflex. The performance of the Acoustic Energy 101s has already been detailed in a separate Hifi Pig review. Incidental-



PRO-JECT MaiA INTEGRATED AMP

ly, I heard this same pairing fed with a Pro-Ject turntable at the recent Bristol Hi-Fi Show and they sounded extremely good, even with a room full of people chattering among themselves.

Back to the sound then of the MaiA/AE 101 pairing, I found it a very entertaining listen and happy to say that I was never affronted by what I was hearing, or never once thinking to myself “Wish there was more bass, better mids, clearer treble, etc” because it simply wasn’t the case. Fink’s “Sort of Revolution” CD sounded palpable and full of detail, the propulsive bass line being recreated very well indeed and the treble especially so, that “ting” from the Ride cymbals in all the tracks never being overwhelmed by the rest of the music so it stood as an individual clear entity. This album is threaded throughout with close mic’d acoustic guitar recorded so the body of the instrument needs to be captured and the squealing of the finger work on the frets is integral to the performance, adding not detracting from the charm of the album.

Time now to really put the MaiA through its paces with my resident system CD player, speakers and cabling. The speakers are medium efficiency infinite baffle designs on rigid spiked stands, situated in a smallish listening room so the amplifier won’t be expected to fill a huge room with sound and the purpose was to try and find the upper limits of the MaiA’s capabilities. Cabling was by Audiomica in the form of the ERYs Excellence interconnect and the CELES Excellence speaker cable (Reviewed elsewhere in Hifi Pig). Now I found that the MaiA wasn’t seriously outclassed at all with every component costing many times more than it did. The sound moved on into yet another dimension that was snapping at the heels of my resident amplifier which cost some 10 times more than the MaiA. Yes it didn’t have the raw grunt and outright power at higher volumes, but even so it says more about the MaiA’s capabilities and what can be achieved with good design that enabled that. On that note, I can easily imagine that someone will design a more powerful low noise power supply unit to replace the supplied stock one and perhaps give the amp a bit of a turbo boost to aid performance.

Imaging and soundstage were certainly well up to standard with good height and depth, the sound extending well out beyond the speaker boundaries.

Back into the CD drawer went Fink’s “Sort of Revolution” and here we are talking about differences between the two amplifiers in the finite range, they were that small. Bass was 85% of what my resident amplifier gave me, treble was even closer and it was much easier now to pick up the ambience cues in the recording, but it was the mid band was where I heard the greatest difference and the MaiA provided a slightly “leaner” sound, but even that I could probably have lived with on a daily basis without real criticism in the long term, because that is a better compromise than a flabby or chesty sounding midrange.

Imaging and soundstage were certainly well up to standard with good height and depth, the sound extending well out beyond the speaker boundaries.

When the amp was paired with the AE speakers that last octave of bass was certainly curtailed, with my resident speakers however bass extension went much lower and with taut power which suggests a high damping factor for the MaiA. The MaiA didn’t quite have the same “punch in the guts” bass power and

PRO-JECT MaiA INTEGRATED AMP

dynamics that my resident amplifier has and frankly didn't expect it to be, but I don't see that as a weakness on behalf of the MaiA. Turning the volume control right round until 2 o'clock and it all held together really well with no muddling or instruments crashing into one another as the volume level went up. Bass grip was extraordinary for what is deemed as a low power amplifier rated at 25 watts into 8 ohms. By about 3 o'clock on the volume however the sound started hardening up and although I could detect no clipping or any other distress at all I didn't risk taking it any further, because by then the listening room was full of sound anyway and so my test objectives were met in full. Incidentally, the casework didn't even get the slightest bit warm during these high power runs. A highly commendable performance.

I had to borrow a turntable as I am 'in between' turntables at the moment. A friend loaned me a Thorens TD160B with a Grado Prestige Black cartridge to evaluate the MaiA's phono stage. I found no hisses or hums through the phono input and it had sufficient gain to match the analogue line inputs. Sound was clean and rather lively I thought, although I couldn't tell for sure if it was the Grado cartridge or the MaiA amplifier responsible. I am out of my comfort zone whenever I use components for evaluation I am not wholly familiar with, so will leave it that I found no immediate causes for concern.

Last, but by no means least, I turned to the digital input capabilities of the MaiA. Both co-axial and optical inputs routed from my CD player in to the MaiA's DAC were more than satisfactory with no noise or mush detected. It was nigh on impossible to tell if the resulting sound via the DAC was any better or different to the DAC within my resident CD player because they sounded so similar. Signal lock was instantaneous although there is no indicator to show that it was. USB connection from my laptop PC was of a similar performance so no quibbles there either. As my television and satellite receiver are in another room unfortunately, so I was unable to test how the MaiA interfaced with that equipment although I foresee no issues there either.

It will happily integrate into budget systems, middle ranking systems and not entirely out of place or embarrassed when rubbing shoulders with the esoteric either...

CONCLUSION

My opening statement to this review asked whether size isn't everything and if big things come in small packages, so do these statements apply to the Pro-Ject MaiA amplifier? The answer has to be a resounding "yes" by anyone's standards and even now I am still astonished at how much performance can be crammed into such a small box, which also happens to suit modern lifestyles with it's abilities to become inconspicuous. A good solid 25 watts per channel of clean sound, three line level analogue inputs, a moving magnet level phono input, a headphone output too, no less than three digital inputs and a Bluetooth connection as well, adds up to a versatile and highly flexible heart to any hifi music reproduction, computer, or two channel A/V system, provided of course that reasonably efficient speakers are being used and in a room not

PRO-JECT MaiA INTEGRATED AMP

exceeding 25 square metres unless near field listening in a larger room is envisaged.

It will happily integrate into budget systems, middle ranking systems and not entirely out of place or embarrassed when rubbing shoulders with the esoteric either, although there are some inherent limitations like power output which is not entirely unexpected at the sort of level we are discussing here. What available power is there, is clean and enjoyably listenable, free of fatigue and distortion.

The icing on the cake has to be that sub-£400 price tag and that to me ranks it as a complete steal in terms of sound quality over value for money. I am confident it will win many admirers.

Construction: 9.3/10

Sound quality: 9.4/10

Value for money: 9.6/10

Overall: 9.4/10

Recommended for: Any music system where high power demands are not a primary requirement. Will interface with just about anything that churns out music – in whatever format, analogue or digital.

Dominic Marsh

With a score exceeding 8.5 overall for the MaiA amplifier from Dominic's review above, we now hand the same amplifier over to Dan who conducts the follow-up below:

From the very first chord that strummed from the Pro-Ject Maia, I was hooked! The small intricate delicacies that the little multi analogue and digital input amplifier presented was incredible, I was warned by Dominic that this amp is 'a little sweetie' and my oh my was he right.

Class D amplification, coax, optical and USB inputs as well as a handful of analogue inputs including a MM Phonostage, 3.5mm input for a portable player or phone and a 3.5mm output to pass a signal to active

Don't be afraid to add something a little more expensive on the end of MaiA as it will only benefit the overall experience this little amp is a bit of a show off.

desktop/computer speakers and a bluetooth aerial for streaming from a PC, phone or tablet!

How do Pro-Ject do it? No really...how do they do it? A price tag of £399 would have suited me just fine if this was a simple analogue based input class D amplifier that p doused such engaging tones as the Maia.

Getting on to its class D amplification, the Maia doesn't sound cool, cold, limp or lacklustre. The musicality that simply effortlessly flows from this magicians box of tricks was driving my big Ayons sweetly, let alone a few little speakers I have to hand. The power output is rated at 25W into 8 Ohms and 37W into 4 Ohms. My Ayons are 6 Ohm so we can assume a good 30W was available for them. The Maia is claimed to have a drive capability of 2 Ohm loads. I've had some strong contending A/B amplifiers here

PRO-JECT MaiA INTEGRATED AMP

just recently that don't come anywhere near the Maia's ability to convey such micro details at lower levels with a background blackness that is just so dead each small nuance sounds simply eerie. All of this from a nasty switch mode power supply. A good linear with plenty of headroom would no doubt give more drive and attack and may well support the intentions put forward that the Maia is capable of dipping to 2 Ohms comfortably.

The MaiA was connected to my own personal Pro-Ject Stream Box DS Net via its coaxial RCA output for most of my listening. I have ordered a custom made 9v PSU for this from Paul Hynes as Pro-Ject's own multi rail linear PSU is for their 20v based equipment which the Maia is (I have also been informed that a complementary Maia linear power supply is due soon) so I think for my own piece of mind when my 9v arrives from Paul I will get a Pro-Ject Linear PSU from Henleys the UK Distributer and try the Maia once more and attach a small update to this review as the intrigue in me is very high due to the current unexpected performance I'm getting currently.

Another point really worth mentioning which can be somewhat of a big deal is the remote controls ability to control the amplifier from all sorts of different angles and even working around objects even though it's signal is infrared and not radio frequency. I've been in torment just recently with a couple amps that, although I don't mind getting up and twisting the knob manually, if your going to provide a remote for the love of God make sure it can be used at more than one degree of axis! So thank you Pro-Ject for restoring my faith in simple engineering!

I don't use a turntable but I have various sources which have analogue outputs and also some active desktop speakers which the Maia dealt with admirably once again, conveying a sound which was detailed and truly musical.

The bluetooth feature worked well, sound quality may take a little hit here but keeping to streaming good quality files allows one to quickly forget about any

All in all the Pro-Ject MaiA is the first true budget All in One amplifier that truly demands an audition.

slight dip in performance and simply enjoy the flexibility of the technology and ease of use.

CONCLUSION

All in all the Pro-Ject MaiA is the first true budget All in One amplifier that truly demands an audition. It's so compact and feature rich it can adorn any room of the home and the Stream Box Ds Net I use is the same width, they just sit on top of each other as would the other Pro-Ject components, so whether you want to play a CD from the matching form factor CD Box S or the taller CD Box DS, listen to Internet radio or stream there is a compact solution that will drive loud volumes of any speaker 90db or above and below that threshold to most reasonable levels.

Treat the Maia with respect regarding its power output and the results are truly great, push it too hard and it will bite back.,

Don't be afraid to add something a little more expensive on the end of Maia as it will only benefit the overall experience this little amp is a bit of a show off.

Build Quality – 9/10

Sound Quality – 9/10

Value For Money – 9.6/10

Overall – 9.2/10

Recommended for 'True value for money' a one stop shop with a sound quality that just makes you sit back and smile.

Dan Worth

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ATC SCM 11 LOUDSPEAKERS



The SCM (Studio Control Monitor) range of loudspeakers and undergone a redesign and revamp of late, most noticeable is the new curved cabinets functionally superior and visually more appealing than the classic box type design.

The cabinets are constructed from multiple laminated layers of medium density fibreboard and all planes are

of the same thickness and strengthened with horizontal bracing increasing rigidity and damping. Finish in a real wood cherry veneer or black the SCM11's looked fantastic on inspection after arrival (review samples were in cherry).

The next significant upgrade to the speakers was a new tweeter. The SH25-76 tweeter is the brainchild of

ATC SCM 11 LOUDSPEAKERS

ATC and is constructed in house, comprising of 8 parts including a doped polyester diaphragm and suspension system and a neodymium motor assembly keeping the tweeter small and of low mass for close positioning with the mid bass driver for critical integration of frequencies, although ATC do produce drivers for other companies (I recall the midrange driver on a set of Ruark Crusader III's which my brother owned) the new tweeter is strictly off limits and only features in ATC's range of loudspeakers.

All ATC drivers use their own specially formulated doping compound. Being of a low mass it allows the driver to remain fast and accurate as well as having high damping properties removing excess energy and controlling unwanted resonances. The mid bass driver is made from acrylic and soaked in the formula leaving a slightly sticky to the touch feel. I voiced concerns at the time that after a period of time surely they would gather dust but was soon reassured by ATC's PR guy Keith Haddock that he has multiple pairs in what he calls his 'shack' his man cave out in the garden and although he does admit to dragging in dirt and dust frequently he firmly stated that the drivers haven't collected any particles and look as new still. Inside the packaging is two drawstring cotton bags, personally I'd be inclined to place them over the speakers when not in use for protection.

With the new tweeters in place this was of course a natural event that the crossovers would be reworked. The components used are high power rated wire wound resistors, audio grade metalised polypropylene film capacitors and air cored inductors.

THE SOUND

Interested to hear what the new tweeter was going to offer the overall performance of the SCM11, I hooked them up to my Jeff Rowland integrated. The speakers although not high current demanding require an amplifier with some good power as they are not very sensitive at 84db, so ATC recommend an amplifier of at least 75wpc, the Rowland can output twice that into class A/B.

During playback of some very minimalist Acoustic work it was really very obvious that the SCM11's have a quick transient response. When listening out for the striking of piano notes, drum beats or plucked strings the ATC's quick nature snaps into action with a controlled edge peaks with the first portion of a note and lays out the follow through with fantastic timing. Most definitely attributed to the new tweeter the SCM11's remain accurate without ever over stepping the mark into an analytical type sound.

I recall when I had many sets of studio/active monitors and although not really for the home listener I generally enjoyed the revealing nature of many of the types I had, although some were dreadful and not suitable for playback just monitoring. It's fine to have a monitoring speaker for mixing and hearing deep into the track but for playback really not so tasteful and a lot of the time bluntly aggressive. The SCM11 are for me what I would have dreamed to have in a compact style speaker back then for playback of the completed music. They are magically insightful and transparent, lack colour and attenuation and are just so damn musical. I would never say that they are designed for the 'best of both worlds' but my god don't they excel in each environment.

Listening to some Porcupine Tree and Fink allowed me to assess some busier more demanding music, with large basslines, intricacies of multiple instruments playing at once and dynamic transients that only the most stable transducers can deal with I found the stability of the image to remain constant and focused. Confident and articulately astute the ATC SCM11 have one of the least confusing un-muddled sounds I've ever heard from a speaker in this price range – full stop.

The phrase 'the whole enchilada' applies well to the SCM11's – meaning 'to give their all'. The sound from these infinite baffled standmounts is non constrictive and effortless. The drivers feel as if they are giving their all at all times regardless of volume levels there's an incredible openness and freedom to the sound produced. Late night listening at lower volume levels reveals every aspect of the music and all com-

ATC SCM 11 LOUDSPEAKERS

plexity of detail is apparent still, just as if they were being worked with higher watts.

The older ATC's were of a presentation that at times took no prisoners when they were fed with less than high quality recordings. The latest incarnation are no bed and breakfast nor are they Guantanamo Bay! The new SCM11's and they're stellar new tweeter expose every detail in the music in the most convincingly enjoyable manner and reflect any choice of genre with an even-handed experienced touch, the feeling when listening to the SCM11's is one of mischievous maturity – I may be older now but I still feel like a teenager!

During playback of Derrin Nuen-dorf's live album, at the beginning of Ghost Town I sat up in my seat and thought 'what on earth is that cat up to now?' I have a very curious black cat who loves getting into amplifier boxes, bags and cartons if she can and fall quite comfortably to sleep. I make a point of not leaving any boxes lying around open because of this. I looked left, looked right and then had a double take, I couldn't see her in the room at all. I went into the bedroom and she was fast asleep and mischief free on the bed? So I went back to the listening room and started the track again...

'What is that noise?!' it sounded like something rustling somewhere. So I'm now searching for a possible rodent that may well have accompanied the cat on return from her last outing! Nothing! Once again I started the track and then my brain clicked, aha! It was

only Derrin sat on his stool, shuffling about a little bit trying to get himself comfortable. His trousers were rustling and the sound was being picked up by the microphone.

This was the point where I really thought wow, this new ATC design tweeter is remarkable as I've never heard this before from my Accuton tweeter. The



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sound was so realistic I believed the noise was emanating from the physical room itself.

Bass notes from London Grammar's 'Hey Now' are usually large, full, bold and deeply extended with the Ayons, using a standmount of course represents limitations of lower frequency responses. A friend commented that 'Standmounts do tend to have that increased peak in the upper bass to give the impression of more bass and I think these seem typical of that' I begged to differ and questioned what he was hearing.

To me the mid to bass integration of the SCM11 is fairly flat and utterly seamless and although I agree many standmounts will have an exaggerated upper bass I didn't see it being predominant or even slightly recognised in a way with the ATC's. I would say that they response is very linear and the bass characteristic reflects a punchiness and dynamic tendency of the driver. If this driver was in a larger cabinet its punch would be perceived with more weight and the cabinet would express an extension of the drivers natural agility but in the 11 litre cabinet of the SCM11 I was confident that what I was hearing wasn't a crossover but an attribute of how controlled, punchy and dynamic the ATC mid bass driver can hold a honestly portrayed beat.

This left London Grammar's track and bassline to reflect the positive impact and heft of the bass yet didn't reflect its full presence as the note does is double drop into lower frequency ranges. The track is a great demo tune to test the bass note as on any good system/speaker combination the skin of the drum can clearly be heard when hit with the rubber ball, then the drop into lower bass will show any sharp roll off and steep angle of descent present by a poorly implemented cabinet or crossover.

The very bottom edge of the ATC's frequency response is really rather nice, there seems to be a gentle roll off that allows for decay of the bass note yet is strict enough to allow the speaker to remain fast and immediate on cue for the next powerful note. It's response in the lower end allows for a plentiful and

The very bottom edge of the ATC's frequency response is really rather nice, there seems to be a gentle roll off that allows for decay of the bass note yet is strict enough to allow the speaker to remain fast and immediate on cue for the next powerful note.

most satisfying ability to conveying a completeness to the sound.

ATC's midrange is famous for being coherently impressive and just like the previous version of the SCM11's controls a female's high octave and a male's lower tone absolutely brilliantly. Jennifer Warnes, Eiana Krall and Loreena McKennit produced a mixture of hypnotising tones that just make the listener crave for more, lucid and powerful upper mid response is so controlled remaining utterly powerful yet never peaky. With male vocalists such as Damien Rice, Chris Jones and Micheal Buble a full range of tone is put so true and focused into the centre stage with the reverberance of extreme lower mids adding the feel to the vocal just like a super tweeter adds the openness and air to a top end, the extension of the midrange was so correct and organic.

The SCM11's do come with metal grilles which have fairly open frames and wide spacing. ATC do state

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that the speakers are designed to be optimally used without them on but I listened to them on and off and to be honest left them on a great deal of the time, never feeling that they were hampering the sound. The grills are attached with buried magnets in the speaker's cabinet but are not that strong.

To hear how emphatically exciting the SCM could be I played a lot of dance music one weekend evening when friends came over for a few drinks. There was no denying that the speakers are dynamically incredible with electronica and the already complex sound-stage just explodes throughout the room, bass lines came thick and fast and kick drums really seemed to move substantial amounts of air...as well as the grills! After a period of loud volumes and stiff beats the grills would be slid down the speaker 7-8mm. Although most people wouldn't use them I would and also pop the bags over them when not in use to preserve what is one of my favourite Standmounts I've had the pleasure of hearing.

CONCLUSION

You could argue that the ATC's don't have the luxury and flair of aesthetics as say a Sonus Faber but then it was Italian engineering that built the leaning tower of Pisa and British engineering that built Buckingham

Palace and The Houses of Parliament.

The ATC's are a solidly built real wood veneered 'stylishly classic' speaker which embodies a solid listen. Their strongly braced infinite baffle construction allows for their representation of the music to be truly outstanding, they give insight into the most intricate of tracks or can relaxingly and effortlessly flow with less busier material.

Although the previous model was thoroughly enjoyable

they could sometimes bite back when fed with less than adequate recordings, as we say 'rubbish in, rubbish out'. However now in their prime and more mature manner the ATC new in-house designed and built tweeter has the experience to tackle events with a second nature and never be phased or rocked of its confidence giving it the hallmark of a truly outstanding achievement by the company.

For the money and putting my experience and word on the line the ATC SCM11 are at the absolute top of their class and you really would have to spend much more to even be able to stand up confidently against these awesome little speakers let alone better them. If I had the room for another pair of speakers I would have a pair in a heartbeat.

Price at time of review – £1,200

Build Quality – 8.5/10

Sound Quality – 9.2/10

Value For Money – 9.3/10

Overall – 9/10

Recommended for being the most insightful, engrossing, fast, fun and accurate speaker to have ever graced its price range.

Dan Worth

ATC SCM 11 LOUDSPEAKERS

With an overall score exceeding 8.5 for the ATC SCM 11s from Dan, Hifi Pig scoring policy means we handed the speakers over to Dominic for his follow up views on these speakers.

Due to time constraints, I had only a short amount of time to evaluate the ATC SCM 11s, but even so they have left a lasting impression on me.

Dan has done a pretty comprehensive job of describing the construction and history of these speakers, so I see little point in repeating any of it, so I will crack on with giving you my own perceptions of this loudspeaker's performance.

SOUND QUALITY

My review notes have words like “fast”, “agile”, “lithe” and many other similar descriptions to describe the SCM 11's performance but that isn't the whole story of course. It isn't a relentless parade of spotlight details and raw dynamics, oh no, it can also do subtle and refined in spades, picking out the finest nuances and telling it like it is in a mellifluous flowing way that very few other speakers have mastered.

It is the bass performance of the SCM 11's that Dan and I diverge over. I see it as an 11 litre cabinet housing a fine performing mid/bass and it is that same 11 litre cabinet size that determines it's bass output. ATC's own specifications state the frequency response to be 56Hz-22kHz and that pretty much bears out what I heard, in that the very bottom octave wasn't being transduced in full. However, the roll off wasn't a cliff edge sort of drop, it was well obfuscated with a gentle slope and it did bring some sonic benefits with it. What was lacking in the lowermost frequency was more than compensated by the sheer control and muscular bass power this speaker could produce, so it was always taut, coherent and informative like no other speaker I have heard.

London Grammar's “If You Wait” album has organ in the mix and when the bass pedals are hit it regularly

Kick drum beats really did stop and start on the proverbial sixpence, mix in some heavy bass guitar and the SCM 11's positively BATHED in it...

produces a “one note bass” reverberation that really does wrong foot most speakers, producing a booming effect in my listening room. With the SCM 11's this did not happen at all, so where I would normally wince at this effect with other speakers, it was thrilling to play those notes cleanly and powerfully without any pain. I was starting to really like this bass. The same album has copious amounts of artificial ambience added to it so the album sounds like it was recorded in a large room, but the ATC's managed to make it sound like a cathedral or aircraft hangar, it just seemed to go on and on to almost infinity, which was very pleasing.

I put some dance music into the CD player and that too was a prime example of just how controlled the bass is. Kick drum beats really did stop and start on the proverbial sixpence, mix in some heavy bass guitar and the SCM 11's positively BATHED in it, add all the other instruments and vocals, but rather than collapse inwards and wilt like most other speakers do, they seemed to lap it up and shrug off the task, seemingly wanting more in defiance, they were truly unflappable. Dominic is impressed.

ATC SCM 11 LOUDSPEAKERS

But not for long. Next I put in my favourite torture track from Porcupine Tree's "Deadwing" album and the title track was a torture track in every sense of the word. The recording is raw and full of uncouth energy and that's exactly what the SCM 11's gave me, warts and all. I am though heartened by the knowledge that the previous incarnation of the SCM 11 would have MURDERED this particular track. My resident speakers are obviously a lot more forgiving it seems. Another Porcupine Tree CD and this time it was "Metanoia" into the player. Track one of this CD has a burst of fast dynamics within the first minute of the track in the shape of a rapid quick succession drum roll which really does sneak up on you with instant explosive power, which vanishes equally as quickly. It has the sort of power that should be felt every bit as much as it's heard and make no mistake, the ATC SCM 11's did exactly that, so it felt like it penetrated right into my very core being. My wife came running into the room thinking a runaway truck had collided with the house. It was so good and satisfying, I played that short excerpt several times over. Funny lot, us reviewers.

On to some gentler music now and Fink's "Sort of Revolution" went into the CD drawer. Fink on vocals and playing the acoustic guitar, a bass guitar and drum accompaniment sets the scene throughout the album. Regularly interspersed with both hard and gentle strikes to the Ride cymbal that produces a crisp "ting" and the ATC's also reveal the resulting shimmer of the cymbal long after the strike in great detail and clarity, which has raised the bar considerably for one of my benchmark tests. Bass guitar and kick drum produce a pounding rhythmic beat that is weighty, propelling and perfectly timed, while the snare drum has that fast rise time explosive "crack" and the following drum shell sounds included too which I feel is essential for true hi-fi sound. Fink's vocals are very difficult to reproduce and most speakers give an interpretation of his voice, not an entirely accurate rendition (Mark Knopler's voice too for that matter) so the gravelly undertones are missing, although the ATC's did a fine job and once more set a high precedent that



other speakers ought to be matching, or at the very least, striving towards.

CONCLUSION

The ATC SCM 11's are not perfect by any means – no speakers are, so it's all down to compromises that we either can or can't live with. I could easily live with the lithe dynamics, the outright faithful treble resolution, the midrange tonal accuracy of these speakers and oddly enough, I could easily live with that roll off in the lower bass registers as well, because the fast, taut, communicative and powerful bass that they do produce, more than compensates in that area. The most compelling reason of all is of course that £1,200 price tag and I would really struggle to name a single speaker that can get anywhere near such a stunning level of performance in that price range. As you read this review dear readers, I am polishing up my busking skills to be able to afford a pair for myself.

Build Quality: 8.5/10

Sound Quality: 9.3/10

Value For Money: 9.5/10

Overall: 9.1/10

Price at time of review – £1,200

Recommended for: Tonal accuracy, fast and lithe dynamics and taut powerful bass. At the price there are very few if any rivals.

Dominic Marsh



Could a machine have made a
Stradivarius

like
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TANGENT SPECTRUM X5 BT DIGITAL SPEAKERS



A powered speaker with great connectivity for £373? Dan Worth puts them through their paces for Hifi Pig.

Budgeting for a system which can offer as many features in a one box solution as possible is a demand made by many consumers and hard core audiophiles alike dependent on placement and criteria for said system. Many opt for a one box cd/streamer/amp whilst others powered or active speakers with as many variables when it comes to connections as possible to integrate a music source, TV and films.

TANGENT SPECTRUM X5 BT DIGITAL SPEAKERS

The Tangent Spectrum X5 are of the latter. The Spectrum X5 BT is the powered version of the X5 which is an all passive design. Both sets of speakers are relative in size and vary only slightly regarding the connecting sockets on the rear for the digital and analogue inputs as well as the single power cable which only powers the left hand speaker. Trailing from a standard twin core speaker cable is the right hand speaker which is a passive X5 with only the two speaker binding posts mounted on the rear.

Powered by a 25 watt per channel amplifier, the X5 BT's have a good amount of volume, with treble and bass controls variable from the included remote control which also controls source selection; They are a neat little package.

To accompany their functional design, I find the X5 BT a nice stylish speaker reminiscent of smaller Amphion bookshelf speakers. Like the Amphions they also sport metal dome and cone grills, something I personally feel should be standard (or an option) with any speaker design these days as the grills look to me more stylish than a standard cloth full sized grill, aren't expensive to have made and are the number one grill protection against kids and multi coloured missiles emanating from kids!

The model I received came in white and I was very pleased with its looks and aesthetics, I use active or powered speakers in only one situation – on my desk or on the corner shelves of the alcove where the desk is fitted – and that calls for smaller sized loudspeakers.

Connections on the rear of the Tangent Spectrum X5 BT are varied and wide enough to integrate most requirements of the home user. Coaxial and Optical SPDIF digital inputs – having these two options allows digital equipment such as a CD/DVD/Bluray player, streamer, digital/Internet radio, docks for iDevices and computer orientated ancillaries to be attached as the Tangents have an in-built DAC.

Analogue inputs such as stereo RCA and 3.5mm mini jack are also available and what a lot of people looking towards this product will find most attractive is the

Connections on the rear of the Tangent Spectrum X5 BT are varied and wide enough to integrate most requirements of the home user.

inclusion a Bluetooth wireless connection. All in all a very flexible amount of inputs and I'd imagine an attractive little package for a small living room or kids bedroom, even possibly a larger kitchen diner or conservatory.

The X5 BT also have a single RCA subwoofer output if you like to rock out a bit and adjusting the bass levels of the main speakers to allow the subwoofer to do the hard work could prove to serve a decent 2 Channel setup for films and TV.

Using a portable device such as a mobile phone or a portable music player such as an iPod is surely one of the most common ways to store and play music files in this modern age. The X5 BT will allow for the wireless transmission of those files over Aptx Bluetooth yet also has a 3.5mm input to allow the headphone output of such devices to be connected directly. But what the X5 BT offers also is a separate USB charging port, so there's no more listening to music and finding that after an hour the battery is flat – simply plug in the phone or devices everyday charging cable to play music limitlessly and put aside any worries of battery life.

Practically all of these devices have official or 3rd party docks which can be bought cheaply on the

TANGENT SPECTRUM X5 BT DIGITAL SPEAKERS

Internet to allow the phone or player to be stood up neatly and tidily and allowing easy viewing of the screen. Some even come with remote controls and have a usb and a 3.5mm socket at the rear for connection to the X5 BT. Better still, newer tablet and phone docks will have a video output allowing the use of a big screen TV's to receive Youtube music videos, ordinary videos, Netflix, Catchup TV, BBC iPlayer and device based movies which are stored locally for example. Network streamed movies from a NAS drive or PC over UPNP via apps such as Airplayer (different to Airplay) downloadable from the Apple App Store gives the user a broad smart and sleek all in one music and video system which is flexible and cost effective.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Tweeter: 25mm
- Woofer: 130mm
- Power amplifier: 2x25W with DSP
- Input: Bluetooth Aptx V4+EDR, optical, coaxial, analogue (RCA, 3,5mm mini-jack)
- Output: Subwoofer, binding post for slave speaker, USB plug for charging
- Wireless connection: Bluetooth Aptx V4+EDR
- Power consumption standby: 0,5W (EUP2013)
- Dimensions (W x H x D): 166 x 205 x 345 mm
- Weight: 6.6kg
- Packaging Size (W x H x D): 435 x 425 x 285 mm
- Packaging Weight (Net / Gross): 12,5 kg / 13,5 kg

THE SOUND

In use the Tangent Spectrum X5 BT are pretty well detailed and have a bit of refinement to their top end which surprised me, at their price I did quietly expect a bit of boom and tizz, a scratchy over emphasised treble with an overly coloured bass response and that wasn't evident here.

In my alcove with its own resonances and interaction of frequencies, being able to dial in the speakers bass from the remote control was an ideal feature and I did

The Tangents are quite fun in their nature and I did find myself listening to a lot of Hip-Hop, R&B and Pop music on them. They do a nice bouncy beat.

play with the treble to get it just right for my ears; Treble was not too rolled off and just over what seemed like the middle ground point (there is no visual reference for bass, treble or volume) which produced a really nice crystal clear sparkle to the top end. The tweeter is very sweet and agreeable, it doesn't do any nasties and is a standout feature. I would have liked to see a balance control on the remote or as a dial on the rear for treble and this would just put the cherry on the cake for me.

The Tangents are quite fun in their nature and I did find myself listening to a lot of Hip-Hop, R&B and Pop music on them. They do a nice bouncy beat. In comparison price-wise I'd say my old KRK RP5's on sound quality, but they didn't have any of the flexibility or range of connections and use of the remote control and there definitely wasn't Bluetooth on offer – so you are paying a slight premium for all of these options and adding these facilities to the KRK's would increase system size and overall price greatly.

TANGENT SPECTRUM X5 BT DIGITAL SPEAKERS

Listening to some acoustic music was a very pleasant experience as the touch of refinement that the X5 BT has in the treble region. This allowed me to enjoy some really nice string work and give a pleasant bit of finesse to instruments; The treble also had the ability to loosen up a little more for those more fun tracks I mentioned.

Vocals were well balanced and weren't forward which again was another surprising finding, in fact they are quite silky. Bearing in mind that the system is on the budget end of things, the midrange conveyed a quite interesting feeling, leaving female artists to wail away without any upper mid nasties... whether this is attributed solely to the mid/bass driver, crossover, or the very nice tweeter I don't know, but I can report that I find the overall presentation very acceptable indeed.

CONCLUSION

The thing that needs to be ascertained from this review is – Do the Tangent X5 BT fulfil their obvious design brief of flexibility, functionality and produce a sound quality that isn't over-shadowed by the latter?.

I believe so and I can conclude that they offer enough connectivity to keep 99% of consumers happy and most importantly they produce a sterling sound performance, conveying crisp refined high notes, clear vocals and a bit of fun to the bass.

Of course there are limitations to the deepest of bass notes and if connecting the TV in the living room explosions will not knock the plaster off the ceiling without attaching a subwoofer, but at the same time I can confidently say if you have bought these for a well



behaved teenager you will be constantly telling them to turn them down!

There is no doubt that the Tangent Spectrum X5 BT is capable of running the most minimalist of sources or a whole range of separate items through its adornment of peripheral connections and this is the key to any system like this which boasts all in one functionality. Not limiting itself to one particular method of playback and by moving all of the connections and features from a main headunit and into the speakers themselves allows the user to decide which devices he or she wants to use and not be restricted to what the company has decided the package will do for them.

Build Quality: 8/10

Sound Quality: 8/10

Value For Money: 8/0

Overall: 8/10

Recommended for their range of connections, refined top end and good sound for your pound.

Dan Worth

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ROTH OLi RA1 LOUDSPEAKERS

Hifi Pig

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In our quest to bring readers reviews of great quality budget gear as well as high-end products, we take a listen to the sub £100 Roth OLi RA1 Loudspeakers.

Our esteemed readership has asked that Hifi Pig conduct more reviews of equipment at the budget end of the hi-fi world, so, herewith below is my own perceptions of a diminutive loudspeaker called the Roth OLi RA1 bookshelf model.

Roth AV Ltd hail from Colnbrook near London, or more precisely, under the flight path to and from Heathrow Airport. Established in the year 2007, the range since launch has undergone several revisions and updates, leading to the RA1 bookshelf speaker found here under evaluation.

CONSTRUCTION

I have seen many small speakers other than the Roth OLi RA1 for sure, but few with such simple uncluttered lines in the design that is not unattractive. The cabinet has radiused corners and the review sample is

ROTH OLi RA1 LOUDSPEAKERS

finished in what Roth say is a matt finish, but I would say more akin to a 'silk' finish in a black colour. It is also available in a white finish I believe. Cabinet dimensions are 231mm x 151mm x 153mm (Hx-WxD), with a full frontal grille having an acoustically transparent fabric covering, attached by hidden magnets in the enclosure carcass, so are easily removable. The speakers can be wall mounted if so desired and Roth Audio thoughtfully provide the brackets in the box to enable that. Surprise, surprise, they actually fit onto a standard width bookshelf. Yes indeed.

These speakers weigh around 2.4Kg each which is considerably lighter than most other speakers of this size.

The RA1 is equipped with a 4 inch bass driver unit of hybrid fibreglass weave construction and a 1 inch silk dome tweeter which makes up the driver array. Sensitivity is said to be 82dB, with an impedance of 6 ohms and a power handling of up to 50 watts, with the frequency response also quoted by Roth to be 80Hz to

20KHz. None of these parameters have been verified by Hifi Pig. The bass is loaded by a rear facing Reflex port. Connections are via a single pair of binding posts which will accept 4mm banana plugs, spade connectors, or bare wire terminations.

It is said by Roth that Richard Allen of EB Acoustics was involved in the design process of the OLi series speakers.

SOUND QUALITY

So, the next query to face was whether to stand mount, wall, or shelf mount the speakers, so I chose to mount them on tall stands around 2 inches or so from the rear wall.

I don't really know what I expected from these small speakers to be truthful when I took them out of the box. Their light weight didn't inspire me that much at first and a rap on the cabinet with the knuckles didn't sound all that inert to me either, but on the other hand I still got the perception that a lot of thought and care



ROTH OLi RA1 LOUDSPEAKERS

went into their design, so it would be wrong to dismiss them out of hand solely from their physical parameters. Listening to them however proved that assumption to be correct.

I played Fink's "Sort of Revolution" CD and was pleasantly surprised just how good they sounded. Not perfect by any means but still a convincing performance and that is what I like the most when reviewing "budget" components, because in amongst that huge range available there are one or two little gems waiting to be discovered. Treble performance of the RA1's was clear and lucid, with Ride cymbal strikes sounding realistically metallic and faithful, albeit with a trace of fizz at the extreme top end but not enough to detract from a very pleasing listen. Bass as you would expect didn't plumb down into the lower registers, far from it in fact, although timing was spot on and again, rather convincing so you were never really bothered by the absence of the lowest octaves, unless the recording focused on bass alone which emphasized the shortfall. Midrange was again only slightly coloured and had a propensity to 'quack' occasionally with the wrong music played through them, but vocals came across as natural with a good range of tonal timbres, especially female vocals. That to me is the hallmark of good design where the designer has voiced the speakers to obfuscate their innate limitations and produce a speaker where it does nothing to offend or annoy the listener – no mean feat in itself.

Back then to the Fink CD, the title track has a deep propelling bass line and kick drum pairing through most of the track which is very good at highlighting any timing errors and for experiencing any 'bleed' between the two instruments playing simultaneously. Some speakers are prone to booming and losing control during these bass excursions, but the RA1's held it together very well. I could clearly hear that the kick drum had a soft face to the beater, which given the small size of the 4 inch speaker cone was again rather remarkable and even better than that, the bass guitar actually had a deep sounding growl to it. Fink's guitar playing never get lost in the mix and his squealing finger work on the frets sets your teeth on edge at

Imaging and soundstage was spot on, with terrific depth and width, instrument placement being very easy to pinpoint and there was no drifting either.

times, but that is exactly what I expect from this album, so part of it's charm. That 82dB sensitivity figure also meant the volume control had to be turned up a notch or two on the amplifier to compensate and also care had to be taken not to go too far round as the RA1's would sound very loud quite early on the volume range, although I stopped well short of actually bottoming out the drivers. Talking of which, I didn't see a lot of physical movement from the bass driver either, as you might expect from a physically small cone.

Imaging and soundstage was spot on, with terrific depth and width, instrument placement being very easy to pinpoint and there was no drifting either.

Time now to give the RA1's a bit more of a work out and so into the CD drawer went Porcupine Tree's "Deadwing" album, my favourite torture CD. Bit harsh you may think, but as a reviewer you have to highlight for the benefit of the readership what the speaker's performance envelope is and if the RA1's survive this then Dominic can only be impressed on

ROTH OLi RA1 LOUDSPEAKERS

your behalf. At the start of the title track there is the noise of an underground train pulling into a station, with squealing of the train brakes that either comes across as realistic or some vague disjointed squeaking type noises, followed by hearing the passengers alighting. The RA1's provided a clear rendition of the train pulling into the station and the passengers alighting. Then the music starts getting raucous and hectic in a raw recording, which is where blending and muddling can set in, but no, the little RA1's stuck to the plot, albeit with a lack of heft and power from the bottom end, but of course that wasn't at all unexpected. At 6 minutes 40 seconds into the track there is a long low set of bass guitar plucks that has to be very deep and "roll" out of the speakers not just emerge and much to my surprise the RA1's made a pretty good job rendering that sound, but again without the low end power that other (read larger or more expensive here) speakers can muster. The remainder of the album is just a series of tough sonic obstacles to jump over and in truth the Roth OLi RA1's gave a good account of themselves despite their size.

However, all of this evaluation was carried out in my smallish listening room with plasterboard walls and a suspended floor which has an inherent "warmness" to the sound, which of course means if you have a listening room of say 12m² or more with solid walls and floor, then you probably will arrive at a different set of conclusions regarding the sound. I took the Roth speakers round to Dan's place because he has a much larger listening room than mine with solid walls and floor but they sounded completely different again. They were overwhelmed by the size of his room unfortunately and didn't give of their best there.

CONCLUSION

In the right environment, these speakers truly shine and give a bigger and better performance than you would expect from such a diminutive loudspeaker. Treble and midrange performance was a joy and even



with only a 4 inch woofer, bass was both musical and articulate, with only the lowest registers lacking outright weight and power. No matter, the designer has still managed to cram a hell of a lot of music resolving abilities into this small package and so now I am bursting to tell you about the best part of the entire review, the price. A mere NINETY NINE POUNDS so they really are affordable.

Kindly note the value for money score is the highest I have ever awarded to any product, so with that goes an automatic recommendation from me and if Hifi Pig had a "Best Buy" category then these loudspeakers would certainly feature as such.

Construction: 7.5/10

Sound quality: 8.5/10

Value for money: 9.9/10

Overall: 8.6/10

Recommended for: Small listening rooms like a study, a den, or a bedroom where they don't need to fill a large volume with their sound. Within their performance envelope they are truly a fine speaker.

Having scored over 8.5 overall these loudspeakers will now go on for second review and possible Outstanding Product award.

Dominic Marsh

ADL (Furutech) H-118 HEADPHONES

The audio industry is at the moment coming out of the most confused period of history. A few years ago I assumed that the next generation of human life would never ever know what hi-fidelity either meant or sounded like, as we all did away with our vinyl and CD and played highly compressed MP3s from our iPods and iPhones. Luckily, vinyl has made an unimagined revival, and the likes of Fiio, Astell and Kern, Sony, Cowon and iBasso amongst others, have put money into developing hi-def personal stereo Walkmans. At the same time, the thought of playing good quality audio on throwaway earphones has similarly died a death. Where just a few years ago I could count the number of good quality headphones on one hand, over the last few years has seen a plethora of new brands, new looks, and a new quality of sound. Where the Sennheiser HD650 was seen as the queen of quality, that massive £399 price tag is seen today as a starting point and when inflation has only been moving at a snail's pace. Today, we like to see wooden edged cans, something popularised many years ago by Grado or Audio Technica, or silver edged open-back beauties perhaps inspired by the Stax 007 with great extension in high frequencies but often lacking in the bass. Many others now fit anywhere around these boundaries, and all with a multitude of looks and designs whilst pertaining to be the market leader.

So, to be given a £225 headphone from a Japanese manufacturer famous for their beautiful looking plugs, conditioners and connectors, such as the Schuko, and who's ADL line first moved into the digital portable domain in 2011 with the GT40 USB DAC/phono stage and with some beautifully looking devices thereafter, the H118 was somewhat low-end in the looks department looks with its all-black leatherette design and tear-drop shape. However, the company's ADL (Alpha Design Labs) hi-end marque



suggests that this is indeed a product worthy of praise if not quite as good looking as it's daddy the H128, with its brown and silver. However, I decided to give it a go. If the shape has been something of an afterthought (there are better looking Koss headphones from 40 years ago), the foldaway design, nonmagnetic rhodium-plated mini XLR connection allowing upgrade to better cables, and the classy zipped carry case to put it all in, show that actually this is a product that has been carefully thought through. I must stress, therefore, that if you want something bling or OTT, then this is not the product for you. This is about sound quality, not about looks.

ADL (Furutech) H-118 HEADPHONES

At first fitting I was actually impressed by just how comfortable the headphones are, bearing in mind they are closed back and on-ear, and having a fairly tight-fitting feel to them (4.5 N approximately) significantly cancelling background-noise. The product is exceptionally well made; it does not feel cheap and is fairly weighty at 245g without cable or 310g with. Being designed either with people with very small ears, or for those related to the late Dr Spock with his Vulcan shaped ears, these 3/4 size headphones lasted on my ears longer than I thought they would. The punchy bass in the 24/96kHz Brunette Models “Autarky” from my Fiio X5 gave of itself with passion, showing that the 40mm diameter high-flux “alpha cryo treated” magnet could work with ease, showing no sign of wanting. Even by today's norm of 50mm-plus diaphragms this was highly impressive not only in going down to 20Hz easily, but also in the speed of sound. These speakers are not slow, and the lightweight mechanics with coils made with copper-coated special aluminium alloy wire help to keep everything working at speed. The bass only showed a sign of being frustrated and distorting at very high level of listening, though with their excellent damping of outside noises high listening levels is unnecessary as well as obviously dangerous. The ring between the voice-coil and diaphragm is designed to keep ultra-high frequencies in phase, and indeed the sound is very much in control and musical between my ears, but I found those top frequencies to be rather anaemic for my liking. However, comparing this with my £500+ selection of cans was somewhat unfair, and whilst many cans can either sound too bright or the mid frequencies rather excessive, these cans gave a very fair and speedy rendition across all frequencies. J.S.Bach Largo from the Concerto in A-minor for four harpsichords and orchestra BWV 1065 (24bit/192kHz Saarländischer Rundfunk Kammerorchester, Karl Ristenpart) did not sound lacking in top frequencies, it was all there but just not ‘sticking out’. I remember reading a review many years ago about the Quad ESL63 electrostatic loudspeaker where the reviewer said that the fact the top end sounded lacking was not that it wasn't there, but

The H118 present very impressive bass for the price/size, and the mid-range was also stunning, particularly in vocals such as Patricia Barber “What a Shame”.

because we are used to listening to a soundstage where tops and bass are excessive rather than flat. I mean, did you ever play your mp3 files on your iPod in “flat”, or did you (like me) prefer listening in “electronic” or “rock ‘n’ roll”. Now that I listen only to wav or hi res PCM/DSD files, I really did want to be aware of the top frequencies.

CONCLUSION

The H118 present very impressive bass for the price/size, and the mid-range was also stunning, particularly in vocals such as Patricia Barber “What a Shame”. What a shame, though that the top end cymbal ripples on that same track weren't however just that tad more pronounced. Then I could have said these were the best headphones I had heard even up to £400. Certainly, if you are on the train or somewhere where it is noisy, then these are cans to go for. The IHP-35X upgraded cable at £75, with silver plated OCC copper does present a better top end sound and helps to give a wider soundstage, and are a worthy upgrade.

Sound Quality – 8.3/10 (brilliant bass and mid-range)

Value for Money – 8.4/10 (lots of accessories)

Build Quality – 8.55/10 (including case et al)

Overall – 8.4/10

Janine Elliot

NuForce NE750M and NE800M IEMs

Priced at £129.99 and £79.99 respectively, the NE800M and NE750M In Ear Monitors sit at the mid to top end of the market. Janine Elliot checks them out for Hifi Pig.

I must admit that usually inner-earphones don't do much for me. Either they are too bright or the bass is so pronounced that my head feels like it's exploding from the inside. Yet, like most humans travelling in the Class 319 EMU out of Farringdon, I needed that musical security to wile away the boring trip home after work. Luckily I don't travel on trains anymore, but if I choose to listen to inner ear cans then I still find the sound still far from being realistic. Indeed my chosen pair are modified, aged Sony MDR A34s, which sit at an angle to my ears meaning sound enters more naturally and have a headband to hold it all in place. Whilst they originally took a bit of getting used to, these earphones were far more natural than the OTT bass and unrealistic soundstage often found in those inner ear vices.

Then, having visited the Bristol Show this year, 2015, I got a chance to listen to the brand new NuForce NE800M and really liked what I heard, so I asked the company to review this model, and their cheaper NE750M. Priced



at £129.99 and £79.99 respectively, they both sit at the mid-top end of the market, though they have a 4-motor Primo8 at a whacking £399.99 available very soon. Having been familiar with their now aged metallic orange Reference 9 Class-D monoblocks, they spread their wings into avenues new over the years, much as some other companies, including B&W, MacIntosh, Musical Fidelity, or Furutech, who I reviewed recently, to name but a few. The headphone and earphone market is now the audio gold of the industry and whilst sound quality has improved not only with better armatures and wiring, there are also now many more less-desirables out there than there were before. These new NuForce models follow on from the NE700M, all under the umbrella of the video projector manufacturer Optoma, itself established in 2002 and who took over the company in November 2014.

The two earphones under review here are both 16Ω, beautifully packaged including a cute zipped pouch to put them in. The NE800M 'pouch' is indicated to be leather though I found no difference between the two. Whatever animal or chemical made it, it looks good. The earphones both have a built in microphone and controls to move through the source playlist. There are three sets of single flange ear tips,

NuForce NE750M and NE800M IEMs

and the NE800M includes an additional two pairs of comply™ soft silicone earbuds, which allow for a better fit inside your lugholes. I preferred these to the normal ear tips which for my ears felt a little too solid. I like really thin ear tips, like those provided by Sony and Apple. These earphones felt uncomfortable at first, though I soon got used to them. Much of my discomfort was the extra weight of the units in my lugholes rather than the material itself. Both the NuForce inner-ear speakers have a lovely looking rubberised cable which, whilst preventing it from getting caught up like so many earphones do to me, it does tend to cause friction with my clothes rather than hanging loose against them. Most won't find that a problem as the fact they don't get caught up far outweighs this little niggle. What they do offer is a clip band to allow you fix the cable to your front lapel, though this might cause a problem if you turn your head to one side! I listened to them both with similar and identical music through both my Fiio X5 and Apple iPod Classic players. Both earphones have been reviewed together in this piece, and whilst I have identified differences between them, this is not intended as a comparison.

The NE750M is the companies new starter model, though is certainly built with considerable precision and care. Made from aircraft grade aluminium they feel like quality and are still lightweight. The more expensive NE800M is engineered from carbon fibre, which has one of the highest strength-to-weight ratios and with its strength is of the most acoustically inert materials, as witnessed by its wide use by companies such as Wilson Benesch. The nozzle is machined from solid brass to, as the company stress, prevent micro-dynamic vibrations and to achieve the ultimate musical reproduction. Interestingly, brass also offers potent anti-microbial properties, in case you like to share your earphones with your friends. (Yuk – ed) The whole is 4g heavier than the NE750M, coming in at 18g. According to their brochure, the new Primo8 model will be a massive 0.193kg, or 193g once it arrives. Actually your ears will be relieved to hear it is only 19.3g. Phew. Bear



in mind most cheap earphones tend to be around 5-10g so these pairs on test are both on the heavier side. Both models reviewed here use a single 8.6mm driver titanium-coated Brilliance™ diaphragm incorporating two acoustic chambers, each with aperiodic bass loading which claims to reduce ear pressure for extended wearing comfort, as it tries to simulate an open-back headphone design. Its design attempts to give an 'open' soundstage whilst still trying to maintain excellent isolation from the outside. In my listening tests, I found external noise was still being well isolated, and whilst bass was noticeably improved in speed and depth in the NE800M than its cheaper sister, I did not find my ears were blowing up like they do with JVC XX Xtreme Xplosive bass blasters, for example. I was highly relieved, as were my eardrums, and there was no listening fatigue at long listening times. 8.6mm drivers are not large by today's standards, but being this size does allow them to deliver more grunt than many. The sound from both was far more musical than many others I have heard at their respective price points, and the care attended to in their design was apparent in the end results. These are good.

I was immediately impressed with the sensitivity (largely as a result of the lower impedance) and the maximum SPL. It enabled me to play music with

NuForce NE750M and NE800M IEMs

force without the need to worry about sound breakup. At the other end, and much better for my ears, low level listening was both full range and musical. I did, however, find the NE750M had both an enlarged bass and a tad mid-band emphasis, especially when pushed, meaning vocals were slightly forward. The NE800M was much more controlled in both musicality and in the frequency response, allowing my ears to be able to listen for longer than I would usually permit them to. Nothing shouted out to me, meaning that the music was controlled and the soundstage was as real as it can be inside my skull. 24bit/192kHz Souvenir de Florence Op 70.1 Allegro con spirit (Tchaikovsky, Trondheimsolistene) certainly had spirit. The violins were as clear as the 'bits' would allow and the music shone through with spirit and musicality. All frequencies were as they should be. Only in the NE750M did the violins seem a little too loud and the bass slightly too animated.

My favourite Linn track 'Almost Like Being In Love' (Joe Stilgoe, 24 Bits of Christmas, Linn Records) played with passion in all frequencies from lowest bass, and probably all the way to 40,000Hz on the NE800M's. There was speed and detail from the lowest bass to the highs of the ride cymbals. This was admirable on these inner-cans, and really showed the difference between the two products. The NE800M's had the much flatter soundstage, with an exceptionally wide frequency band. The brochure states 10Hz to 40kHz, I will take their word for it, though the top end was far crisper and quicker than on their cheaper sibling. The cheaper model quotes 20-20,000Hz. Both quote sensitivity of 113dB±3dB. Chopin's Op28 24 Preludes (in Db, no15, 'Rain-drop'; Linn) were brilliantly played by Ingrid Fliter on the NE800M's, with the 2740mm Steinway grand sounding as big as the 8.5mm driver would allow. I really did like what I heard, even the breath from the pianist as she played with passion. Even recordings I have produced with me playing my grand piano sounded as realistic as my own living room itself. Mozart Requiem in D played by the Gunedin Consort under John Butt's played with as much finesse

and authenticity as could be from any earphone. This final work from Mozart was largely to be assumed to be completed by the composer Franz Xaver Süssmayr. These cans worked well with whatever I threw at it, whether orchestral, instrumental, jazz or pop. Pat Metheny Group "The Way Up" was as near to realism as earphones could get. The speed and detail of sound was superb as was picking out each individual instrument in the array of sounds. In all that I played vocals were vociferous, bursts from bass drums bellowed without any hint of struggle, and cymbals were sizzlingly good; not OTT, just everything there in the right proportion, like that perfect restaurant food. The NE750M's weren't far behind, but this food was stodgier and made me feel that there was just too much of some of the ingredients.

CONCLUSION

The NE800M's are a stonkingly good pair of earphones if you can put up with being on the heavy side. The dynamic range and frequency response is excellent courtesy of the powerful "N50" neodymium motor structure that allows the deepest and most authoritative bass, and I have to say that I really did enjoy listening to these. The NE750M's were very good, but I felt that at the price point penny short of £80 I should get a flatter sound quality.

NE800M

Sound Quality – 8.7/10

Value for Money – 8.2/10

Build Quality – 8.55/10

Overall – 8.48/10

NE750M

Sound Quality – 8.1/10

Value for Money – 8.1/10

Build Quality – 8.45/10

Overall – 8.22/10

Janine Elliot

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SKOGRAND SC BEETHOVEN LOUDSPEAKER CABLES



Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

When asked to review these cables, I pointed out to Stu that I have always been a bit of a sceptic about audio cables and have always been disinclined to shell out very much on them, to the extent that I often make my own out of nothing more exotic than recording studio wiring and a bit of rudimentary soldering. So being asked to review a £20,000 pair of speaker cables could be interesting. Review them anyway, Stu said.

(I specifically asked Peter to do this review knowing his healthy scepticism of cables making huge differences – Stu)

At the outset, let me say that I am happy enough to accept that purer conductors and better engineering can lead to better signals than rough kit and sloppy practice will. And, obviously, different materials may have different sonic characters. I can also buy arguments about better euphony from certain materials but I struggle much beyond that to get excited by the whole subjectivist/objectivist cable debate. I simply do not believe that which can't be measured does not by definition exist. So, I approached the task with an open mind but we are not going down the double blind

testing route etc – this is, as usual in HiFi Pig, a simple subjective review.

Shortly after my exchange with Stu, I duly received from Norway a pair of Skogrand SC Beethoven cables in a rather snazzy protective case. I guess it emphasises the care taken in ensuring that these handmade cables arrive exactly as they are supposed to. On inspection, the design of the outer jacket of the cable appeared to be a snake or alligator skin (it's not) with beautifully finished heatshrink and gold spade terminations at either end. They certainly look the part in a slightly Rod Stewart sort of way. But there is no doubting the craftsmanship put into these.

The cables were very thick and felt solid and rather stiff, but they were also reasonably pliable and I had no problem to speak of in hooking them up to my spare amplifier and speakers for burn-in (although the spade lugs were not quite widely separated enough for my Sonus Faber binding posts but I found a work-around).

Knut Skogrand recommends about one hundred and twenty hours of settling-in before they are ready for

SKOGRAND SC BEETHOVEN LOUDSPEAKER CABLES

full fat listening, though stresses a burn-in machine should never be used. These cables were brand new and had not been “burnt in” by someone else, so I was in for the long haul. They sounded OK from the off but after about a week of continuous musical input, they seemed to have loosened up somewhat and were sounding rather as I imagined they should. A week later, they were sounding even better. A week after that, and I think they were suitably settled.

Once these cables had been burnt in in my system, the sound they delivered appeared to me, rather than adding anything, simply to be revealing better the true nature of the material, the source and the amplifier. There seemed to be less hash and fewer artefacts in the background.

I hooked them up to the McIntosh MA5200 I was reviewing at that point and to several pairs of speakers in turn. I also gave them a run on a couple of modern Naim amps and on my old Audiovalve Assistant. Each of these amplifiers I know well, including their limitations. In summary, I doubt that Skogrand SC Beethoven can improve what comes out of a bad amplifier or speakers. Indeed it is more likely to show them up. It is also likely to show up poor recordings. Rather tiresomely, the improved clarity goes as far as reproducing a bit of sound bleed across grooves on a couple of LPs which I had never heard before.

The baby McIntosh has many virtues but the Skogrand highlighted more than other cables the tendency to extreme treble and bass roll off that this amp shows, although it is highly unlikely that one would pair a £20,000 pair of cables with a £5000 amplifier, and if one did all other £5000 amps would likely come off just as badly.

The Audiovalve amp seemed to benefit most from the cables, where all the valve goodness shone through especially in the midrange. The cable also seemed to allow more bass through than I had heard before with this amp. Another give-away with the Skogrand was that I could go louder than usual on my Naim amps without them setting my teeth on edge.



What I got from these cables was a sense that more of the source material was getting through in better order – there was removal of congestion. Swapping between my Electrofluidics or NACA5 cables and the Skogrands, I could hear a more open and clear sound, with transients rather better defined, too. I was also getting more detail, more harmonic texture and tonal colour. There was also less grain. But, of course, neither other pair cost even a tenth of the Skogrands (although those who argue the cables make no difference can’t really argue that that matters...).

My hunch seemed supported by the use of the Spendor BC 1s – these BBC-designed monitors from the seventies have a fabulous mid-range but the bass is a bit loose for modern tastes. Listening to a variety of music through the Skogrands, including cymbals and brushes courtesy of Dave Brubeck, confirmed that the speakers’ reputation for an absence of sibilance, good imaging and a realistic soundstage is well deserved. They were well matched, too, with the McIntosh. The Skogrands let it all through and highlighted the slightly woolly bass. The same material through the Bastanis had the bass fully present. Equally, any programme put through the Sonus Faber added no

SKOGRAND SC BEETHOVEN LOUDSPEAKER CABLES

colouration that I could discern beyond that already inherent in the voicing of these speakers.

CONCLUSION

In my opinion, the Skogrand SC Beethoven cables excel at allowing a good system to reproduce music in what appears to be an authentic sonic manner – it comes as close as I’ve heard to the old Shredded Wheat slogan – nothing added and nothing taken away.

Whether they are worth spending £20,000 on is another matter. I don’t have that kind of money so the question is entirely academic for me. But I would certainly be tempted keep these cables if Skogrand forgot to ask for them back! If you have the money you should give them a listen.

Build quality: 9.0/10

Sound Quality: 9.0/10 – I don’t think I’ve ever heard better.

Value for money – 7.4 (with the caveat that the cost of the cable should be proportionate to the cost of the system it is deployed in. There is no point spending this much on sub-optimal products...but we are in real “should I buy these or my seventh Harley instead?” territory here.)

Overall: 8.47

Peter Stanton-Ife



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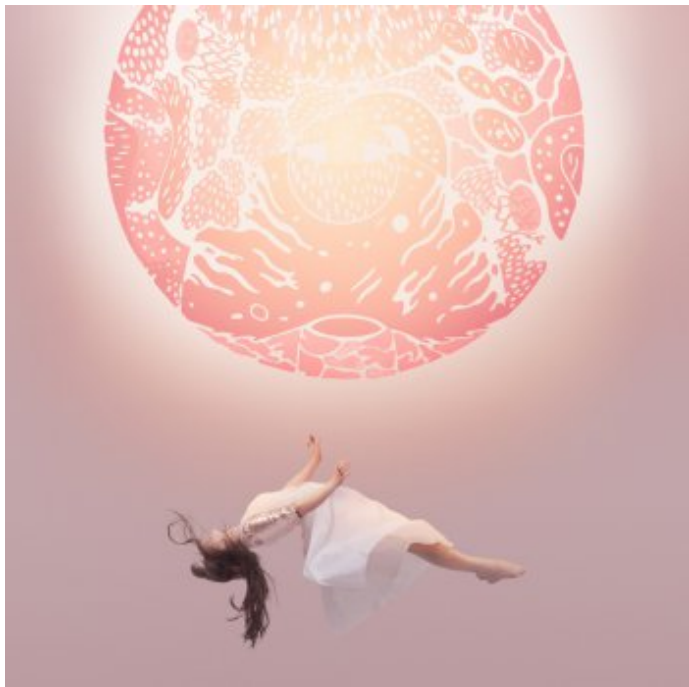
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MUSIC

Purity Ring – ‘Another Eternity’ (4AD Records)



Whilst it's been getting progressively more difficult to describe a 'typical' 4AD artist in recent years, as a label it has delivered some genuinely superb albums during this time – notably including Daughter's 'If You Leave', Serena-Maneesh's '#2: Abyss In B Minor' and of course Purity Ring's 2012 debut 'Shrines'.

Where Purity Ring really do stand out from the competition is in those melody lines.

I guess the first – and most obvious – thing to say about 'Another Eternity', Purity Ring's sophomore album, is that it's 'business as usual' – with one or two caveats. If you enjoyed their debut, then it's a pretty safe bet that you're going to enjoy this one too. Let's break it down...

Firstly, I really like the vocals – they're what I would describe as 'girly', mainly high-pitched with no rough edges. The two people who make up Purity

Ring deliver clean melodies over heavily processed electronics. I might get shot down by some for saying this but all too often in place of a great melody I hear a lot of grunting from female singers, as if to over-emphasise certain lyrics or parts of the song. It's a real turn off for which I blame Whitney Houston and Annie Lennox. Fortunately, there's none of that on display here, just great layers of melodies on top of all sorts of electronics. So 'Another Eternity' pretty much carries on from where 'Shrines' left off. 'Heartsigh' kicks things off, driven by a gorgeous vocal melody and supported by a nice keyboard hook and sampled drums.

Unsurprisingly there is lots of studio trickery at work here to fill out the sound. Not a bad thing – the overall sound carries considerably more weight than you would expect from just two musicians at work. The production is polished and the performance sounds assured. However, maybe that's the first of my caveats – there are literally no moments during this album where you think Purity Ring have dropped their guard or where there's a brief moment of insecurity. That's possibly a good thing but it also keeps the barrier just about open, as if allowing us to peek inside without stepping across the line, but it doesn't let us see their vulnerability.

Where Purity Ring really do stand out from the competition is in those melody lines. While some tracks, notably 'Repetition' could, in the wrong hands, veer towards, ahem, repetition, it's the vocal which rescues the song from mediocrity. There's also some serious bass and musicality in many of these tracks – check out 'Stranger Than Earth' for starters. Now imagine a dark room with a sugary scent. Like sweetness and darkness. That's exactly what 'Stranger Than Earth' delivers. It's a BIG track which propels us neatly into the single 'Begin Again'. 'Sea Castle' which arrives near to the end is actually one of my favourite tracks on the album. It has one of those choruses which lingers in your mind and it doesn't attempt to try too hard.

'Another Eternity' is another quality release from Purity Ring. Whether it's up there with 'Shrines' is possibly one for debate. Fans of electronic music will certainly enjoy it – as will 4AD purists too.

Paul Lockett

MUSIC

The Big Sound Authority - An Inward Revolution (Cherry Red)



It's thirty years since the first release of An Inward Revolution on MCA, an album that scored The Big Sound Authority three single releases.

The band came together after a competition in Smash Hits (a British pop magazine) had vocalist Julie Hodwen singing backing vocals with The Jam. The Jam's Paul Weller put Hodwen together with songwriter Tony Burke and so The Big Sound Authority were born...I vaguely remember them. Here, this two CD collection, out on Cherry Red has the bands original album and the 7" releases on one CD and their 12" releases and B sides on the second. There's also some excellent sleeve notes.

It should sound dated , and there is a clear eighties power pop feel to the tunes herein, but good tunes are good tunes whenever they were made. The Weller influence is really evident, particularly on the Soul Man tune and given my obsession with The Jam in my teens it's no surprise that this record strikes a chord.

There are production contributions from Pete Wilson, Greg Walsh, Robin Millar and Tony Visconti and the song-writing is really fabulous -

It should sound dated , and there is a clear eighties power pop feel to the tunes herein, but good tunes are good tunes whenever they were made.

The Big Sound Authority deserved bigger success in my book.

The highlights for me is the ballad When Things Fall Apart and the Style Council-esque Soul Man, but the whole record is well worth having in your collection. Sure, it's going to appeal to people of a certain age but I reckon it will have wider appeal than just the folk looking for a bit of nostalgia.

Stuart Smith

MUSIC

Björk - Vulnicura (One Little Indian)



You know, whatever your thoughts of Björk, what you really can't knock is the quality of her recordings. As the first track on 'Vulnicura', Björk's ninth solo album draws to its close, I really can't help feeling that it sounds – well – fantastic. The string arrangements are just sublime. In fact, there are several moments when I momentarily forget that I'm listening to a Björk album at all.

'Vulnicura' is probably not an album which you'd want to play if you've recently lost a family member or close friend.

For this outing, Björk's been working with British musician & producer The Haxan Cloak (whose brilliant 'Excavation' album redefines the words 'dark music'). It's a working relationship which looks to have paid off. However, while the experimental side of Björk's music remains firmly intact, there's an inherent sadness across many of the tracks. Maybe that's because the album is reputed to be a reaction to the breakup of her personal relationship.

It should be noted that there is limited instrumentation across the entire album – lots of strings and the occasional electronic beat but little else. In all honesty, I ceased to really notice the lack of instrumentation as the strings in particular are so blissful that the music simply washes over you. This is particularly evident during 'Black Lake', a track more than 10 minutes long which contains more emotion than a Downton Abbey blu-ray box set. What the limited instrumentation does allow, however, is lots of space in the recording; the vocals simply become another instrument rather than the driving force for the recording. 'Atom Dance' highlights this point extremely well – there are various electronic sounds flying from left to right and back again across the stereo spectrum and occasionally odd little sounds which add – rather than detract – from the vocal. There are even foreign-sounding vocals (from Antony Hegarty of Antony And The Johnsons) suddenly injected half way through 'Atom Dance' causing it to suddenly take a massive detour.

'Vulnicura' is probably not an album which you'd want to play if you've recently lost a family member or close friend. Wounds are never likely to heal while playing 'Family', for instance. Similarly, purchasers hoping for music along the lines of 'Hyperballad' or 'Play Dead' from her earlier albums are likely to find that they've been thrown a curveball. I don't want to paint the picture that this album is overly sad – but it's an album which definitely wears its heart on its sleeve. Music is for many people a sense of escape, a recovery, a lifeline even. During 'Notget', that recovery is laid bare – "After our love ended, your arms don't carry me. Without love I feel the abyss and understand your fear of death".

Where this album succeeds is in portraying just how much can be achieved with so little. It's almost as if the mission statement "Less Is More" had been spray-painted above the studio door. What it also underlines is just how incredibly relevant Björk still is in 2015; she is a unique innovator who constantly develops her craft and reinvents her sound. It's to our benefit that she does.

Paul Lockett

MUSIC

Sanguine Hum - Now We Have Light (Esoteric)



Out now on the Esoteric Recordings label, *Now We Have Light* is the third album from Oxford's Sanguine Hum.

It's a double concept album in the finest "prog" tradition with its roots going back over a decade and the days of *Antique Seeking Nuns*, which was the first project guitarist Joff Winks and keyboardist Matt Barber collaborated on.

The core of *Now We Have Light* is based around tunes and concepts developed as far back as 2002 and, inspired by more recent Sanguine Hum material these have been revisited, developed, reworked and rewritten.

The record is recorded at Evolution Studios in Oxford and as well as Winks and Barber, the album has original bassist Brad Waissman plus Henry Fool and No-Man drummer Andrew Booker onboard for the ride. There is also an appearance by UK Jazz vibraphone player Jim Hart on several tracks and this adds a nice touch to proceedings.

It's an accomplished record that will appeal to lovers of progressive rock both old and new and there are definite elements of Genesis at their best (think *Lamb Lies Down*). All the requisite fundamentals are

OK so it is a bit overblown and pompous but isn't that what prog' is all about - showing off and being a bit pretentious.

there - clever time changes and signatures, musical histrionics... and a concept. I didn't realise bands did concept albums any more!

Now We Have Light is easy to pigeon hole as modern progressive, but it should have a broader appeal than that. There are elements of Zappa's guitar style on the slightly heavier *Theft* tune and this record could have easily become an overblown, pompous exercise in navel gazing, but in actual fact is damned entertaining.

OK so it is a bit overblown and pompous but isn't that what prog' is all about - showing off and being a bit pretentious.

The song-writing and musicianship are really top notch and as such the record comes together very nicely indeed and I'd suggest that anyone who has a passing interest in progressive music should certainly seek out this record. I'll certainly be exploring more by Sanguine Hum!

Stuart Smith

LIVE

An Evening With Steven Wilson – The Queens Hall, Edinburgh

If I required yet another reminder that The Supreme Being does not evenly distribute his gifts, I need look no further than Steven Wilson. Let's have a think about this: Does he have a back catalogue spanning more than 20 years, covering a diverse variety of genres? - He does. Can he sing and play a multitude of musical instruments to a more than acceptable standard? - He certainly can. Do rock legends such as King Crimson's Robert Fripp, Jethro Tull's Ian Anderson and Yes' Steve Howe and Chris Squire queue up to have him remix their classic albums to give them a 21st century sonic spring clean? - They do. And on top of all this, he looks at least 10 years younger than his age and seems like the kind of bloke that you would happily spend a highly entertaining evening with in the pub. Bastard.

Wilson's new album *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* deals with themes of isolation, technology and childhood. Tonight's show opens with a video: a montage of bleak, urban high rise buildings. The camera dissolves to a close up of one of these; we watch lights go on and off behind net curtains and blinds and are tacitly invited to speculate on the lives being lived behind them. This is accompanied by an extended, pre-recorded version of *First Regret*, the new album's opening track; distant children's voices over a rising electronic loop, building a palpable sense of tension until the band take to the stage.

Unsurprisingly, tonight's show focuses heavily on the new album. *Hand. Cannot. Erase* is loosely based on the true story of Joyce Carol Vincent, a young, attractive, sociable woman who died in her city flat and lay undiscovered for three years. The large video screen behind the stage plays out a loose narrative to accompany the songs but, for me at least, is something of a distraction - you can watch the

And on top of all this, he looks at least 10 years younger than his age and seems like the kind of bloke that you would happily spend a highly entertaining evening with in the pub. Bastard.

video or you can watch the band and I'd much rather watch the band.

And what a band it is. Wilson swaps between guitars, bass and keyboards and is supported by Guthrie Govan on guitars, Marco Minneman on drums, Adam Holzman (son of Elektra Records founder Jac Holzman) on keyboards and Nick Beggs on basses and Chapman Stick. All of these guys are crack musicians who could name their price as sidemen in the touring band of their choice; Holzman was Miles Davis' musical director for four years.

There may be a reviewer somewhere in the world that doesn't reference Beggs as "ex-Kajagoogoo bassist Nick Beggs" but it won't be me. Ex-Kajagoogoo bassist Nick Beggs provides practically a whole band's worth of backing on his own from his Chapman Stick, which is fascinating to watch - how do you even go about learning to play one of those? Wilson's breaks up the songs from the new album with selections both from his band The Porcupine Tree and his earlier solo albums. I particularly enjoyed *Lazerus*, shorter and poppier than we are

LIVE

used to hearing from him, and Index which the band storm through relentlessly.

Ancestral, Happy Returns and Ascendant Here On..., the last three of Hand Cannot. Erase.'s tracks, take us to the end of the main part of the performance and the band leave the stage one by one in darkness.

Almost immediately however, a gauze curtain is pulled across the front of the stage, ticking, whirring sounds emanate from the back of the hall and a video is projected onto the curtain to introduce The Watchmaker from Wilson's 2013 album The Raven That Refused To Sing (And Other Stories). The band return to the stage and play from behind the curtain but clearly visible through the gauze, treating us to an encore of The Watchmaker, Porcupine Tree song Sleep Together and The Raven That Refused To Sing.

The curtain drops to the floor and the band take their bow. "Wait till you hear the second half" Wilson jokes but two hours of stunning entertainment is as much as we can reasonably ask for. Gig of the year so far.

John Scott



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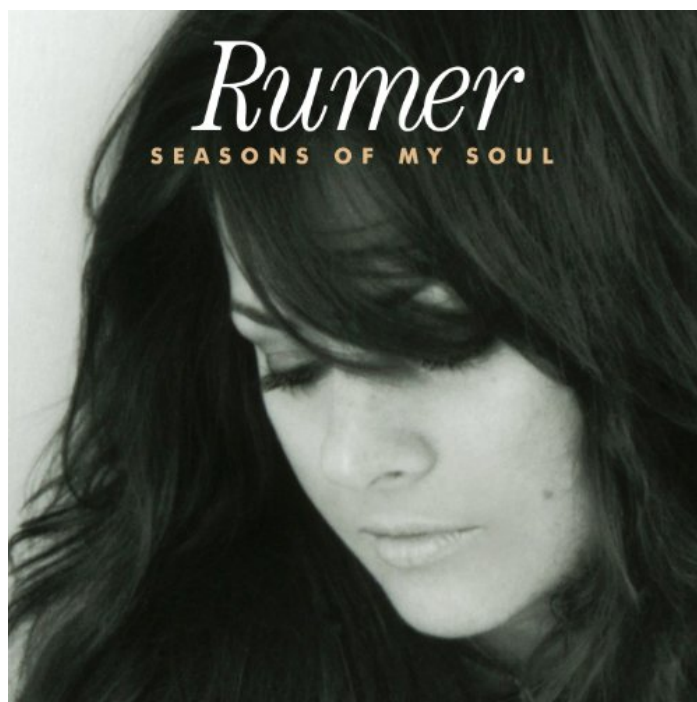
LIVE

John Scott pops off to see Rumer at The Queens Hall Edinburgh

Somewhere in the deep, dusty archives of the BBC television centre lies an unseen episode of Dr Who in which Rumer becomes the Doctor's assistant and travels back to 1975 where her new album *Into Colour* becomes the best selling album of the year.

Well okay maybe I made that up but I'm in no doubt that had *Into Colour* been released in 1975 it would have been a worldwide chart topper.

Rumer's debut album *Seasons Of My Soul* sold close to a million copies without the aid of a T.A.R.D.I.S. It brought her the opportunity to sing with Burt Bacarach and perform at the White House. It also brought pressures which saw Rumer diagnosed with bipolar syndrome and post traumatic stress disorder. She took a break from live performance, releasing a very good holding album of covers, *Boys Don't Cry*, in 2012.



Returning to the stage to promote her new album, there is no evidence of stagefright or discomfort at having to face an audience. Rumer is happy and chatty throughout the gig and evidently relishes the warm feedback from the crowd.

Opening number *Dangerous* provides a perfect Philly pastiche. On record, the repeated refrain of "Is your love too dangerous" comes dangerously close to making me think: "Is this song too tedious" but performed live, the slick disco groove dispels such uncharitable thoughts.

The songs from the new album dominate the set but there is still room for a clutch of songs from the debut and a cover of Hall & Oates' *I Can't Go For That (No Can Do)* that gives the band, featuring members of Daryl Hall's own backing band, the opportunity to stretch out. Having Burt Bacarach and Dionne Warwick's musical director in your band can't hurt either and Rob Shirakbari, who also happens to be Rumer's fiancé, brings an additional sheen of seventies' sophistication.

There is something deeply comforting about Rumer's molten chocolate vocals and after giving her a deserved ovation, tonight's audience go home satisfied, having enjoyed a little bit of time travel of their own.

John Scott

LIVE

The Unthanks, Live in Edinburgh

The Unthanks brought their UK tour in support of new album, *Mount The Air*, to a close in front of a sell out crowd at The Queen's Hall in Edinburgh. Departing from tradition, not for the first time tonight, The Unthanks eschew the time-honoured format support band followed by main act. Instead, The Young Uns – a trio of acapella close harmony singers - open each of the two halves of the show.

Beginning with a terrific version of Billy Bragg's *Between The Wars*, the Young Uns win over the audience instantly with a combination of first class vocals and humour. "How could you not love The Young Uns?" asks Becky Unthank later, and I honestly can't imagine anyone not doing so.

The Unthanks – ten of them in this current incarnation – file onto the stage and open with two tracks from the new album. Right from the outset it is clear that we are in for a very special evening. You can probably count on the fingers of two fingers the number of bands that have successfully incorporated a string quartet into their line up; The Unthanks are one of them and The Northumbrian Soul Orchestra - they're not actually called that but they really should be – add a real depth to the sound and ensure that tracks like *Feltin Lonin* and *Last Lullaby* retain all the subtlety and intricacy of the recorded versions.

Two of the tracks on the new album top the ten minute mark and the band decide to only play one of them. As keyboard player and musical director, Adrian McNally, explains: "It's not your attention span we're worried about; it's ours". *Mount The Air* begins with a yearning trumpet figure that nods to Miles Davis' *Sketches Of Spain* but swiftly moves on to explore other territories, building pace as it grows and culminating in a joyous clog dance from Rachel and Becky. Special mention, for her contributions here and throughout, has to go to trumpet and flugelhorn player, Victoria Rule, whose



passion, power and purity of tone is truly outstanding.

Niopha Keegan, an integral Unthank on violin and vocals, has spent most of this evening hidden at the back of the string quartet. She comes to the front of the stage to feature her instrumental tribute to her late father, *For Dad*. The tune opens with an audio clip of a conversation between the three year old Niopha and her dad and a surreptitious glance around the hall reveals a mass outbreak of tear wiping and throatlump swallowing.

Folk music has always looked to the past whilst enshrining contemporary songs into the tradition. The Unthanks have done more than most in recent times to place mainstream songwriters in the folk catalogue, covering songs by artists such as Elvis Costello, Antony Hegarty and Robert Wyatt. Hegarty's *Spiralling* and *Out Of The Blue* by Wyatt's partner Alfreda Benghe slip seamlessly into the set list. King Crimson's *Starless* – a prog rock monster of growling bass, squealing sax and clattering drums in its original form – is transformed into a thing of dark beauty with Victoria's trumpet shining at its core.

A reprise of *Mount The Air* and the title track of the previous studio album, *Last*, bring the performance, and the tour, to a triumphant end. Thanks, Unthanks and hurry back soon.

John Scott

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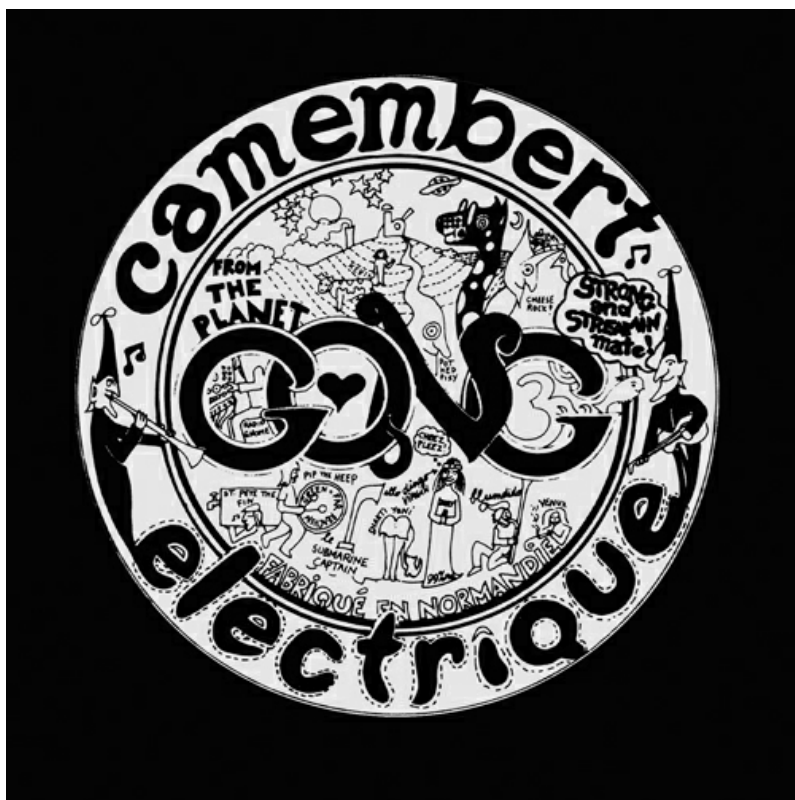


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THE CLASSICS

Following the recent passing of Daavid Allen, John Scott takes a listen to the classic Camembert Electrique by Gong



Bert Camembert, Dingo Virgin, Divided Alien – just few of the names that founder of ‘70s prog/space rockers Gong Daavid Allen liked to go by. Daavid and his other selves passed on from this existence on 13 March this year aged 77 so it seems only fitting that this month’s edition of The Classics focusses on Gong’s defining early album Camembert Electrique.

Allen was born in Australia in 1938. In 1960, inspired by the American Beat poetry movement, he set out to explore the world; moving first to Paris and then to Canterbury in England where he formed his first band, the free jazz inspired Daavid Allen Trio with bassist Hugh Hopper and drummer Robert Wyatt. The band did not last long and Allen returned briefly to Paris. Before long though, he was back in the Canterbury scene, forming The Soft Machine with Wyatt, Kevin Ayres and Mike Ratledge. The Soft Machine – they would later drop the ‘The’ – enjoyed some success, recording a couple of singles and shooting off on a European Tour including a lengthy stay in France.

During this time, Allen’s passport expired and when the band returned to Britain he was refused entry and found himself back in Paris again where he formed a creative and emotional partnership with Welsh poet

Gilli Smyth who was teaching at the Sorbonne and had performed some gigs with The Soft Machine. Smith and Allen became active in the 1968 student riots and fearing reprisals from the police, fled to Majorca where they became friendly with poet and I Claudius author Robert Graves and met up with saxophone and flute player Didier Malherbe who was reputedly living in a cave on Graves’ estate. The trio soon found themselves back in France where they recorded their first album Magick Brother with a loose collection of other musicians.

By the summer of 1971 Allen, Smith and Malherbe had formed the first proper Gong line up with Christian Tritsch on bass and Pip Pyle on drums, recording Camembert Electrique at Chateau d’Herouville studios – later made famous as the Honky Chateau by Elton John – between June and September. Released on the Byg record label, the album would later be released on Virgin Records, selling for 59p, the price of a single at the time.

The music of Gong is intertwined with a rich mythology featuring Pot Head Pixies, Octave Doctors, Flying Teapots and Zero The Hero. These aspects of the Gong story would be fleshed out over the course of the next three albums, The Flying

THE CLASSICS



Teapot trilogy, but their beginnings are seeded in Camembert Electrique, as is the classic Gong sound.

The album opens with a sound collage of speeded up sound effects and vocals – a message from The Planet Gong beamed out by Radio Gnome, morphing into *You Can't Kill Me*; a song which would become a Gong standard. Daevid Allen may have been an archetypal hippie but here and throughout his recorded output he would show that he was every bit as much an anarchist and punk. *You Can't Kill Me* harks back to those Parisienne student riots and police clashes. A trio of tracks, *I've Bin Stone Before / Mister Longshanks / O Mother* take us through some typically playful Allen wordplay before *I Am Your Fantasy* premieres Gilli Smyth's patented space whisper in an erotically-charged tone poem. *Dynamite/I Am Your Animal* ups the aggression once more until the sound collage of *Wet Cheese Delirium* leads us into the run out grooves of side one.

Side two of the album showcases the space rock aspect of Gong's music. Having picked up some surgical scalpel handles at a Paris flea market, Allen experimented with rubbing these against his guitar strings to produce an effect he called glissando guitar. This floating, ethereal sound would become a Gong trademark and is widely featured in songs here such as *You Tried So Hard* and *Selene*.

Gong went on to produce the aforementioned Flying Teapot Trilogy albums consisting of *Flying Teapot*, *Angel's Egg*, and *You* – the band's music evolving

as it went through a series of personnel changes . Allen and Smyth left the band after *You* as the band's increasingly slick jazz rock musical direction threatened to overshadow Allen's personal vision. The vision lived on though and Allen and Smith would both carry it through a series of solo albums and Gong reformations over the years, right up until last year's acclaimed Gong album *I See You*.

By the time *I See You* was recorded and released, Allen was fighting the tumours that would eventually get the better of him. He fought hard but on being told in January this year that he had no more than six months to live he decided to forgo further treatment and to accept the inevitable as the next part of his journey. He gave his last performance at a poetry recital just two weeks before he died, reciting lines from Kahil Gibrah'n's *On Death*, smiling, serene and at peace. Daevid Allen was a songwriter, a poet, a painter, a storyteller, an eccentric and a visionary. Our world is a poorer place without him but for as long as the histories and mysteries of The Planet Gong are with us, his spirit will live on.

Camembert Electrique has recently been re-released in a remastered version on CD and 180 gram vinyl. The lovely people at Indiscreet PR sent me copies of both for this review and I am deeply grateful to them.

John Scott

BEHIND THE BRANDS

Hif Pig Goes Behind The Brands With Peter Comeau, Director of Acoustic Design At IAG

Peter is Director of Acoustic Design at IAG (International Audio Group) – home of many famous audio brands including Quad, Wharfedale, Audiolab, Mission, Castle and Luxman. Since the late 1970s he's earned a reputation as one of Britain's foremost loudspeaker designers, responsible for many award-winning designs for the likes of Heybrook and Mission, before joining IAG in 2009 and continuing the feat with brands like Quad and Wharfedale.

Current products for which he's responsible include the already hugely successful Diamond 200 Series: the latest iteration of Wharfedale's famous Diamond line, the classic entry point to proper hi-fi sound since the early 1980s. He also designed Quad's new S Series speakers, which launch in May and feature a specially designed ribbon tweeter.

Questions

Your History

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



I was working in various retailers in London in the early '70s, both in mail order and on the shop floor in Tottenham Court Road – at that time the hi-fi 'mecca' for consumers. Then I returned to my home town, Plymouth, to manage a hi-fi shop there, plus working as a sound engineer for BBC SouthWest, before starting Heybrook Hi-Fi.

BEHIND THE BRANDS

- Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?

The products and books by G.A. Briggs inspired me to start working on loudspeaker design. He showed, clearly, how you could create good loudspeakers using thoughtful design and careful listening.

- Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?

When the Heybrook HB1 won 'Best Loudspeaker' What Hi-Fi? Awards for 3 years in a row. I still get owners telling me they 'love' their HB1s!

You and your system

- What was your very first system?

As opposed to my parent's B&O Beomaster 1000 system you mean? My own, personal, first system was a Goldring Lenco GL75 with Goldring G800SE cartridge, Cambridge Audio P40 amplifier, B&O Beocord 2000K De-luxe open-reel tape recorder and home built Wharfedale Unit 5 speakers. The P40 was Cambridge Audio's first product – innovative, sleek design with excellent performance all round.

- Tell us about your system history

How many pages do you have for this? Seriously, we're talking over 45 years of systems here! I'll cover the high points, though, from the first system. When I started reviewing for Hi-Fi mags in the mid '70s I naturally had an ever-changing series of components. But my reference system was a Linn LP12 with Hadcock GH228 Super arm and ADC10E cartridge, Quad 22/II pre/power



BEHIND THE BRANDS

amplifier and QUAD ESL(57) speakers. The Hadcock was a fascinating unipivot design and George Hadcock constantly sent me ‘upgrades’ as he developed the design. The QUAD 22/II was really there to drive the ESLs properly – not much else would! Until I discovered the EAR509 power amps – an outstanding valve design by Tim de Paravicini.

When I started Heybrook in 1978 I had to get real. No more valve amps (except for fun). An A&R A60 became the transistor reference for my speaker designs. The Linn LP12 stayed for many years, with a variety of arm/cartridge combos the most mellifluous of which was the Grace G707 and Supex 900 Super. I ended up, though, with the Ittok/Asak combination simply because it was the industry reference at the time. Eventually this all gave way to a Garrard 401

mounted on a Slatadeck plinth with SME312 fitted with a Denon DL-103.

Amplifiers progressed in fits and starts and I have lasting memories of a succession of Musical Fidelity designs with the Tri-Vista 300 being the ultimate. CD players, for me, never really progressed much beyond the Naim CD3 which, despite limitations at the frequency extremes, retained a musical midrange which most closely approached LP. That was until the revolutionary (to my ears anyway) Audioloab 8200 CDQ (which I still use).

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

Undoubtedly the QUAD ESL57 speakers. I’ve forgotten why they had to go (moving house or something like it) but I’ve always regretted parting with them.



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

First of all there is no such thing as ‘best’ – when I cast my mind back a lot of the systems (and components) I have enjoyed the most all had severe limitations and were just different flavours of the ideal. And ruling out the brands I’m currently working with is a severe limitation too (if only because it rules out the QUAD ESLs!)

But, if pushed, the most effortlessly natural and enjoyable presentation of music I’ve heard has consistently come from the MBL 101E MkII Radialstrahler loudspeaker. They always deliver a majestically spectacular and musically compelling performance every time I hear them. They’re not perfect – only 82dB sensitivity and the need for a very large room dictates a requirement for super-power amplifiers – but I still love ‘em!

- Tell us about your current system(s)

Nowadays the amplifier of choice is a QUAD QSP, driven by the aforementioned Audiolab 8200CDQ and an M-DAC hitched up to my iMac. And speakers – well, whatever I’m working on of course, currently in there are a pair of Wharfedale Diamond 230s!

The state of the industry

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

I’ve loved well-designed valve amplifiers (none of your warm, cuddly nonsense) since first hearing a Radford STA25 back in the ‘70s. It was a revelation when everyone thought that transistors were the state-of-the-art. Having done more research, recently, I

now have an inkling of the substantial differences in the way a music signal is treated by a valve compared to a transistor. You only have to look at the science behind it, let alone the transfer characteristics, to see that there is a yawning gulf between the two.

But it’s no easier to design a good valve amplifier than a good transistor amplifier. The output transformer, alone, has to be a work of art (and that’s where most valve amp designs fall at the first hurdle). But get it right and the results get you closer to a living, breathing musical performance in the way that no solid-state design I’ve heard manages.

- What are your views on the state of the industry/where is it going/what will it look like in 5 years/what will typical systems look like?/What will happen to prices?/What will happen to the high end – will it carry on regardless?

Actually the high end is becoming more popular so, yes, it will carry on regardless and prices will continue to climb. The number of customers for cheaper stereo systems is decreasing, however, as the market drifts inexorably towards smaller and smaller components.

We have to remember that we live in a space-age world. You can now cram most of your music collection onto an iPhone in Apple Lossless and it sounds remarkably good even over relatively cheap Sennheiser in-ear headphones. So there’s actually little ‘need’ for relatively expensive amplifier and two speaker systems in most people’s minds.

There are two problems that the hi-fi industry has to face. One is that consumers expect science to overcome any physical obstacles, for example producing full range music from tiny speakers. The other is that people are

BEHIND THE BRANDS

generally becoming less 'quality aware' and their budgets are being stretched to the limit by new technological gadgets.

Look, in the '60s it was easy to demonstrate the difference in musical quality between a Dansette record player and, say, a full Garrard/QUAD system. The step up from the Dansette was to a 'radiogram' and you stepped up from that to a full hi-fi separates system and, in each case, there was a major leap in subjective performance. Nowadays it's not so clear-cut. Only those enthusiasts on a quest for the ultimate musical enjoyment are supporting the hi-fi industry.

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

The whole 'digital is perfect' nonsense has been percolating into people's consciousness since Compact Disc was first marketed. So now we have so-called Class D amplifiers and lossy music formats like mp3 to contend with and people think they're all 'perfect' because they're 'digital'. Digital music storage has its place, to be sure, but replaying it comes with a whole host of problems and compromises, which are equally as difficult to resolve as in analogue replay.

And this bleeds over into a 'DSP can solve everything' paradigm. I see this in speaker design, room EQ and the like where DSP is thrown into the mix to produce the ideal 'flat frequency response', as if that is some sort of cure-all. DSP is just a tool and, like all tools, it needs to be used carefully or it brings with it all sorts of attendant problems.

On the other hand there's a sort of snobbishness about analogue being superior. I don't think it is, necessarily, it's just different. You either love it or can't see the point. It doesn't mean you have to be an adherent to the faith!

The way you work

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

The measurements are only the starting point. You can have great measurements from a product that sounds truly awful, especially with loudspeakers.

I start by listening for realism, particularly with voices, acoustic guitar and piano. All of these make it easy to identify coloration and distortion. Once those problems are relatively well solved I'm then looking for musical presentation. The music has to engage the emotions of the listener. It can only do that if all the musical elements are presented in the correct balance.

For example, at a live concert, it is easy to switch attention from one instrument to another and hear exactly how all the instruments and voices blend to present the musical message. Too many hi-fi components, I find, push the loudest instrument or voice in the mix, making it difficult to hear what the rest of the band or orchestra is playing. When everything's right it becomes easy to switch focus to any instrument and marvel at its contribution to the whole. That's when the music really grips you and gets you involved.

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

All of those! You can't leave any of them out.

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

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Full-range floorstanders, if only because a separate sub is always a distraction. Subs produce upper bass and lower midrange too, you know, it's difficult to filter that out and you can hear it. Of course if the mini-monitors and sub are designed as a whole, then it puts a whole different aspect on the design.

The other problem is baffle area. People forget that the smaller the baffle the higher in frequency is the highly audible 'baffle step' (look it up). That puts mini-monitors at a disadvantage because, really, you want the baffle step to coincide with the crossover frequency.

Large monitors/open baffles and a sub? Now you're talking!

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

- What is your favourite recording?

You're going to laugh. Sandy Denny's 'The Sea' from 'Fotheringay' (particularly A Boxful Of Treasures remaster). Yes, it's a 1970 recording and there's tape hiss and over-modulation at times, but it is a magical performance that I find very moving.

- Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings

For pure vocals I turn to John Rutter's 'There Is Sweet Music' which is a BBC transcription recording and one of the most natural recordings I know of. Again, highly emotional music too.



Combine vocal with acoustic instruments and you have The Wailin' Jennys '40 Days'. If you haven't got this, you should have.

Violin, piano and full orchestra erupt in Britten's Violin Concerto and Piano Concerto (Lubotsky, Richter, conducted by Britten – Decca 417 308-2) which is a dynamically tough recording to get 'right'.

- What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures

I still remember the exact moment I first heard 'Good Vibrations' so The Beach Boys 'Pet Sounds' and 'Smiley Smile' sit proudly in iTunes. Oh, but that's probably not embarrassing enough, so how about 'The Best of M2M'? Which just goes to show I'm a sucker for a well crafted pop song!

- Having safely ushered your loved ones out of the house as it is burning down to the ground, you ignore all standard safety advice and dash back inside to grab just one recording – what is it?

Gotta be Sandy Denny and 'Fotheringay'.

LEEDH E2

A totally revolutionary technology for a simply lifelike sound

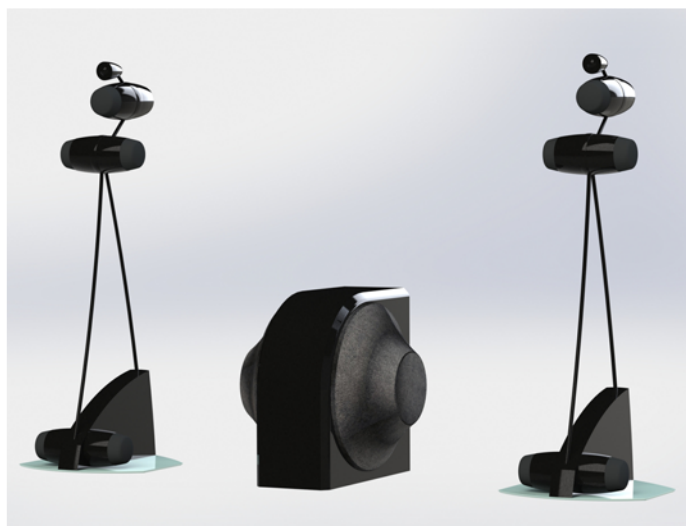
The ABD (Acoustical Beauty Driver) module was created from a blank sheet to eradicate defects of traditional loudspeakers :

- Iron free motor to transform the electrical signal into mechanical signal without distortion
- Ferrofluid suspension to transform the mechanical signal into acoustic signal without distortion and remove the speaker cabinet
- Pistonic membrane in UHM Carbon (Ultra High Modulus) to eliminate standing waves in the pistonic membrane which could otherwise cause colouration of the sound. Because of the small size of our driver and the stiffness of its material the frequencies of colorations are up to 1500Hz instead of 50Hz for a conventional driver which in effect means that there is no audible colouration.

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

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

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



THE LEEDH SYSTEM

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

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

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

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

ACOUSTICAL BEAUTY
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www.leedh-acoustic.com



LEEDH E2 TEST **Hifi Pig**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Looking for retailers
in Europe and
North America