

Hifi Pig Magazine

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Behind The
Brands With Lee
Taylor of Leema
Acoustics



REVIEWS

Chord Electronics Hugo Dac/headphone amp, Triangle Titus EZ loudspeakers, FiiO X5 portable audio player, Flare Audio R1 Headphones, Final Audio Heaven VI – CC, Hifiman RE-600 and Sennheiser IE 800 in ear monitors, LessLoss DFPC Original power cable, Audioplan Powerstar SII and Finefilter power filter plus X-Air doodad

PLUS Album and Gig Reviews, The Classics - (Live At Leeds by The Who)

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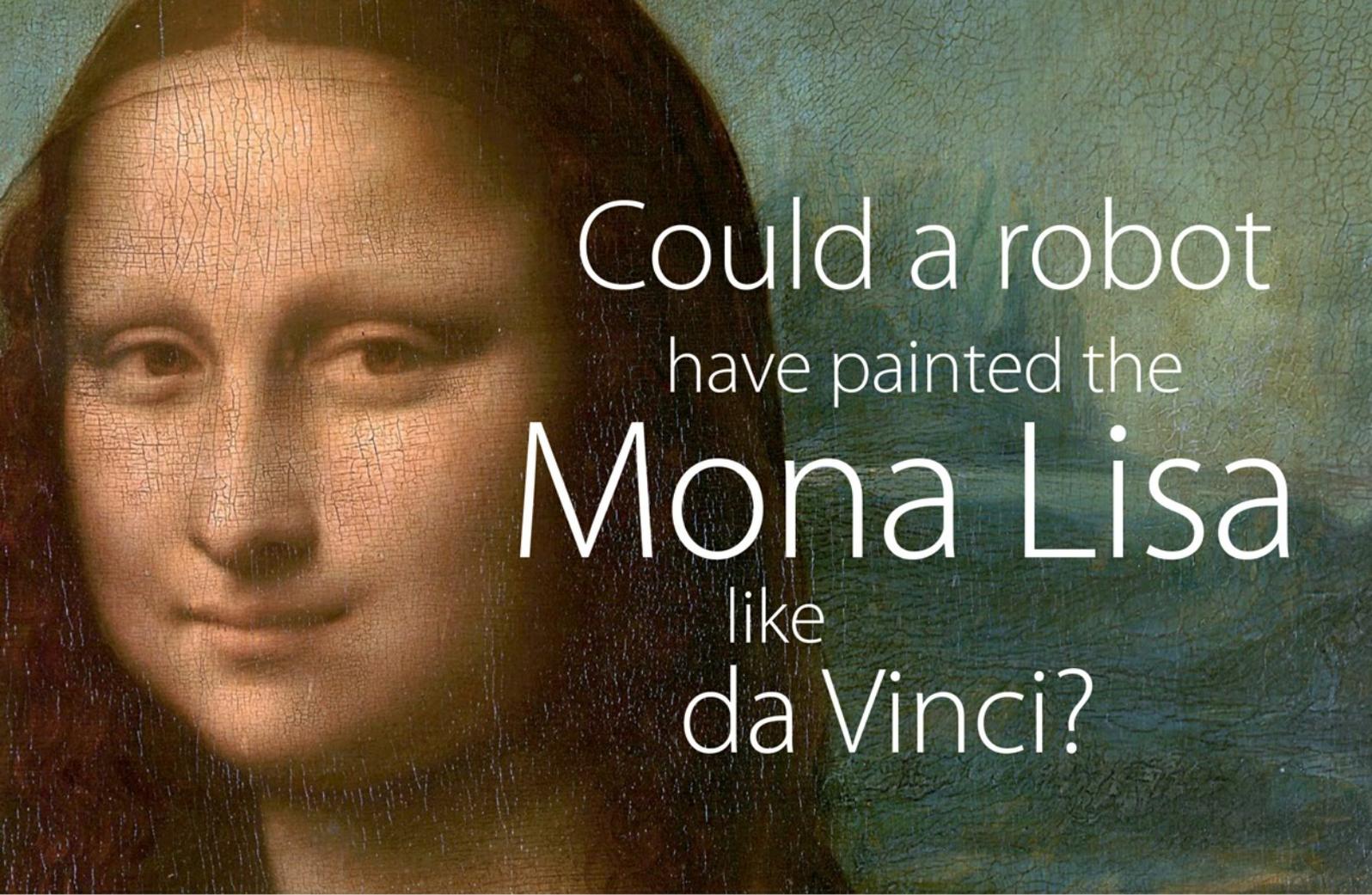
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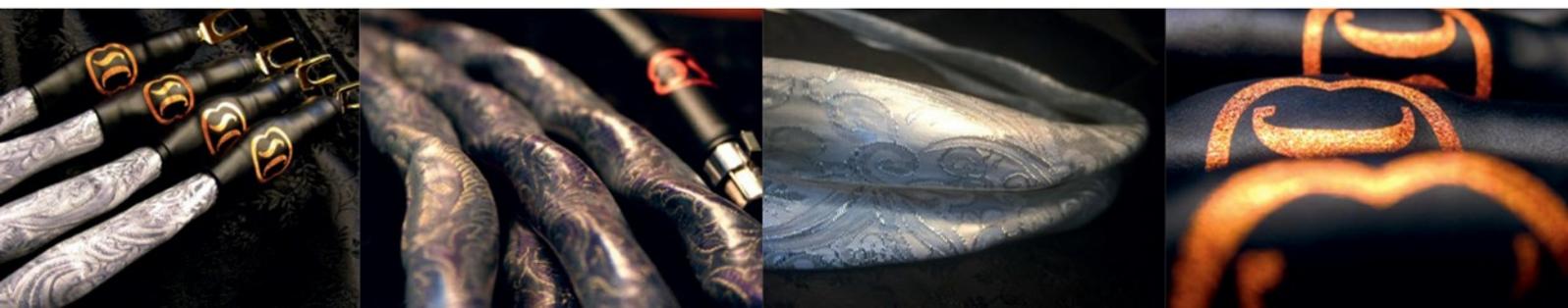
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Dan and Dominic put the Hugo DAC and headphone amp from Chord Electronics through its paces.

CHORD ELECTRONICS HUGO - DAC/HEADPHONE AMP

At the recent Bristol Show I found myself very impressed with the new CPM2800 Amplifier from Chord Electronics driving a pair of Kef Reference One Loudspeakers. I asked the representative at the door Tom what was making the amplifier sound so different to the previous version. Tom said 'we have made some power supply and signal path changes, but the main difference that I am hearing is the implementation of Hugo technology'.

Hugo is the DAC section of the CPM2800 and what better way to single Hugo out then to get an actual Hugo from Chord. The standard Hugo is more than a DAC, it also has a high quality Headphone Amplifier integrated in its bijou bodywork.

Hugo may be a small eloquent unit but my goodness it's features are of gargantuan proportions. No less than 5 digital interfaces including A2DP aptX Bluetooth, Coaxial, Optical and Hugo also benefits from two advanced USB inputs: one driverless input for legacy USB devices and one asynchronous high-definition USB port for operation up to 384kHz.

In addition to 384kHz PCM files, the Hugo can also process DSD 128 data using the latest DSD-over-PCM standard (DoP). Whether using Mac OS or Windows OS, Chord Electronics' own proprietary

driver software is provided, removing the restrictions of current standard operating system audio playback. Hugo has a built-in battery-charging circuit, with a full charge reached in approximately two hours. Hugo takes no power over its USB input (as this is severely limited with many partnering products) and only takes signal data, therefore, it is fully compatible with all iPhone, iPad and Android devices. Further features include an advanced reference-grade digital volume control which remains bit perfect according to Chord.

When attempting to connect my digital coaxial cable which has spring loaded Neutrik Profi RCA connectors I found that the chassis of the Hugo prevented me from doing so, there didn't seem to be enough clearance around the RCA socket, the same was true when trying to connect my optical cable, so USB was the default interface I had to use with sadly no other choice.

Construction of the Hugo like all Chord Electronics products is absolutely solid. The casework is precision machined from aircraft grade aluminium and comes in black or silver anodised finishes. There is a magnified circular window which gives a glimpse of the circuit board and a row of LEDs which corre-



CHORD ELECTRONICS HUGO - DAC/HEADPHONE AMP

spond to certain functional modes. All in all a stunning little piece of equipment.

THE SOUND

My first connection to the DAC was one of simplicity. I wanted to replicate a situation whereby I wasn't being too anal about connections and cables used. I plugged the supplied USB A to USB mini A cable from the side of the Apple wired keyboard into the DAC and fed the active Focal desktop speakers I use with a pair of RCA's that I had to hand.

This little setup normally uses a modified Metrum DAC that has a very bespoke power supply and series regulators. The Hugo however with its internal battery and no power over USB was an interesting comparison for me to make.

Most noticeably on first impressions was the amount of air and space around the lead vocalist and instruments. The background of the Hugo was completely black, so dark that I intently listened to many types of music as sometimes when the background is so dead it can darken and sterilise the music somewhat. This definitely was not the case, what I was hearing was an effortless sound that had stronger grounds from where the notes emanated from, instruments exuded texture and organics right through to their very core, which naturally allowed for an opening up of the soundstage, allowing it to convey many dimensions of layering.

I listened to Loreena McKennit's 'Mask and the Mirror' album and her vocal was absolutely glorious. The intense power and grace which Loreena sings with in this Celtic inspired album sends shivers down the spine when heard at volume, on the desktop it was great so naturally I wanted to hear the difference when implemented into my main system.

I was prepared for a huge improvement in definition and clarity and I was wonderfully satisfied. The sound I had from the main system was clean, clear, solid and just so stable. I don't know what and how Chord Electronics do what they do in this little box of tricks and quite frankly I don't really care, there's too many hang ups about technology specifications right down to resistor and capacitor implementation it often becomes a somewhat pompous affair by consumers and reviewers alike to comment on a product before they have heard it... me I trust my ears and base any decisions on the exploration of music with any new product.

Hugo develops midrange tones with absolute ease,

Dynamically the Hugo conveys big transients with flair and accuracy, there is a sense of ease from this little unit...

they are crystal clear and fully fleshed out, transparent right through to the core of its detail and as articulate as a 20 year old lady of the manor fresh out of Finishing School - her posture straight and upright. I was very much taken back by how true Hugo recreated such a stable soundstage and especially the height of it during many of my favourite vocalists work, each performance showed a reflection of the singers height and presence in centre stage, all band members and room acoustics produced the boundaries to the strong features of this glorious picture.

Chord have always been able to reproduce electronic sounds faithfully and excitingly and it's this that first drew me to their room at Bristol this year. As you know I too listen to a lot of this genre of music as well as the acoustic stuff and both are far enough removed from each other to be a great test for any piece of equipment. Tick tick tick, bass - solid, treble - resolution rich, crystal clear and playful, three dimensionality - stunning!

Dynamically the Hugo conveys big transients with flair and accuracy, there is a sense of ease from this little unit combating dynamics of other DACs in its price range so strongly and it's battery power in relation to large toroids never seems to be a factor. Bass isn't huge but it's definitely explosive, tight and extended revealing great amounts of information in the

CHORD ELECTRONICS HUGO - DAC/HEADPHONE AMP

upper bass regions such as the punch of a kick drum on electronic music.

Playing some trance, dance and hard house music my room was absolutely alive, the spacial boundaries seemed to disappear and the artefacts of the music just danced through, around and past the room's edges. The intensity of the sound is stimulating and if you can sit still whilst listening to this type of music then you must be wearing velcro pants. The sheer excitement and drama the Hugo does for the listener is absolutely awesome, it makes me wonder who at Chord Electronics decided to add Hugo to the CPM2800, they surely need a pat on the back, Hugo deserves more recognition than simply associating it purely with, or as a headphone amplifier.

So, what is it like as a headphone amplifier?

Errrrrrm, a mini CPM2800 in your head. It's extremely articulate and spacious, choral pieces and big bands sound separated, brass, woodwind sets have their own groupings in the performance and individual intricacies of specific musicians can be heard above and amongst the others during busy passages. Transient slams and smaller more subtle intricacies

of violin peaks were so easy to ascertain, music never seemed to be over cluttered or tempered by the enormity of the performance.,

Acoustic sound is just so clean and underpinned with fantastically natural tones allowing for decay of notes to be so true to life that the brain wanders away with it following the extension and flow of the note when it's shocked back into the performance by the next pluck of a string or beat of a drum. I got pretty much lost in some ambient type music late one night and nodded off in my computer chair with my feet on the desk only waking up when I jolted and nearly fell off it.

The amplifier in the Hugo is very powerful driving my AKG 702's and Sennheiser HD600's with ease, I much preferred the Senns with the Hugo as the AKG's are more so for monitoring duties and the Senns are for playback, they are cleaner sounding than the old reference 650's and always much preferred by myself to them and some who may love their HD650's may well not consider the Chord Electronics Hugo as their type of sound as they enjoy a smoother more romantic type sound - to them I'd say



CHORD ELECTRONICS HUGO - DAC/HEADPHONE AMP

try it, the cohesive balance articulation and resolution of the Hugo is just so well balanced and engaging. The volume control on Hugo is not to my liking at all. It's a sideways on rubbery plastic rotating wheel, yes it looks cool with the changing LED lights representing intensity of levels but I find that I have to put so much pressure on it to obtain friction to move it my thumb turns white, a friend said to me when looking at it and me showing him the volume 'wow, your pushing that hard aren't you?'. I really appreciate the fact the volume remains bit perfect of course and it's a niggle that one would learn to live with. I have dubbed the volume control with the name 'Miriam', Miriam is Hugos wife and she is that nagging type of wife that can sometimes be a pain in the backside. Next time Hugo comes out for a drink, maybe he can leave his wife at home?!

CONCLUSION

What can I say about Hugo? It's a revolutionary piece of kit which I am just so happy is now deemed absolutely fundamental to Chord as a core product which now graces their latest amplifier as well as this well constructed, solid sounding headphone amplifier.

With enough connections to carry all your mobile devices and a laptop with you connected at all times and a battery that takes only 2 hours to charge on paper it seems well implemented and straight forward to connect to any digital device.

Somewhat more importantly though is the sound. Wondrous things happen when connecting Hugo to a speaker system, amplifier or set of headphones all of a sudden you are transported into the heart of the music and whether at loud levels or lower volumes late at night, every beat and note is projected to the listener leaving no detail veiled or subdued in any way. The sound is articulate, controlled, expressive and intense. Many genres of music are covered exceptionally well and the unit produces a soundstage which is vast and stable. All in all it's a truly pleasing piece of kit, apart from the volume control that is.

Price at time of review: £1400

Build quality: 8.5/10*

Sound Quality: 9/10

Value For Money: 8.8/10

Overall: 8.76/10



*Reduced scoring for connections

Recommended for absolute flexibility and portability which combines a sound that belies its tiny footprint making a package that simply needs to be heard and tested.

Dan Worth

Dan in his review above has given the Chord Electronics Hugo DAC/Headphone Amplifier an overall scoring of 8.93 out of 10, which means it will now be handed over to another reviewer for further evaluation, which in this instance is Dominic.

“Tiny footprint” says Dan and he is not kidding. I got the tape measure out and it’s vital statistics are 103mm wide x 25mm high x 95mm deep, so it’s comfortably pocket sized and easily transportable. Dan has more than adequately described the technical and construction aspects of the Hugo, so will press ahead with my perceptions for you of the Chord Electronics Hugo.

SOUND QUALITY

I was primarily interested in the Hugo’s performance as a digital to analogue converter more than as a headphone amp, so was rather keen to hook it up to my resident CD spinner with a good quality glass TOSLINK connector. Oh dear. The TOSLINK input to the DAC is deeply recessed into the chassis and the outer shell of the TOSLINK plug was butting up against the Hugo’s casework so the connector was prevented from being inserted, therefore only the tip was making the merest physical contact and although the signal was getting through, it was not a firm solid reliable connection – in fact the slightest movement of the DAC or lead caused it to drop out. Somewhat miffed by this, I dug out of the spares drawer an old plastic TOSLINK lead and that managed to tenuously hang on no better than the expensive glass optical lead – and I mean precisely no better, because movement of either lead or DAC still caused it to fall out. In the end I rested a book on the cable to keep it in place.

Dan in his review couldn’t quite get to grips (excuse the pun) with the volume control, but have to be honest here I didn’t have any real issues with it, save the one time when the phone rang and needed to reduce the volume rather quickly, which was a series of rapid short stabbing fumbles on the control due to the restricted travel of “thumb actions” available for each stroke. At every other instance the control was

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smooth and positive, fairly easy-ish to shift the volume up or down, very precisely indeed for all that.

Surprised too that Chord have not labelled on the casework any of the controls and switches with their designated functions. It's not exactly taxing to remember 2 push buttons, a switch and the relevance of 2 USB sockets, but it's a finishing touch that I and presumably others too, might find welcome. The coloured LED sequences were not entirely helpful either and I just stabbed at the leftmost source select button until I heard sound through my speakers. Job done and whatever colour of LED was lit at the time bothered me not, especially so when I am colour blind.

By heck Dominic, you have given the Chord Hugo a pretty good pasting there, so have you something positive to say about it? Well, yes I have and it's a very BIG positive. Forget all the niggles I have mentioned, this DAC just blows you away when you hear it and whether it's housed in some fancy casework or a wooden cigar box becomes totally immaterial as a result. It is so natural sounding, yet detailed and communicative and thoroughly musical at the same time, quite unlike any other DAC I have heard previously with it's presentation. Not easy either to pinpoint or isolate WHY it sounds so different, because it is the whole of it and not just one or more elements that makes it what it is in entirety. You still with me?

If I say "detailed" I mean exactly that, not in a spot lit manner, nor in an artificially uplifted way, not in a glaring stark way either, but the Hugo manages to uncover a wealth of detail in all genres of music, even within the busy frenetic multi-layered heavy rock or dance music that seems to confuse and befuddle other DACs, so it separates out all the musical strands into their component elements and keeps them firmly there. If I described the bass as "powerful" then I mean that as strength, tenacity and oddly enough, delicacy at the same time, because a pluck of a bass guitar string didn't just result in a full single bass note, it resulted in hearing all the vibrations of the string and the body of the instrument itself as well, with the decay of both being heard simultaneously yet still separated. Excuse my brevity here, but if it were any more detailed than it already is, you might be able hear the guitarist's fingerprints rustling against the strings as they played – assuming it is in the recording of course and aided immensely by the total eerie silence in the background. Midrange and vocals are truly fluid and flowing, female vocals in particular had a beguiling realism that made your

If I say "detailed" I mean exactly that, not in a spot lit manner, nor in an artificially uplifted way, not in a glaring stark way either, but the Hugo manages to uncover a wealth of detail in all genres of music...

hair stand on end. Every element of the music is relayed in full, but all of it entirely in proportion and most importantly, in relevance and context and that's what I liked the most with it's unique set of sound qualities that made compelling listening for hour after hour without any fatigue because it is so engaging and enervating in it's musical abilities.

I am not a classical music fan by any means, but I was tempted into playing one or two excerpts (Entire symphonies are beyond me) from a compilation CD I keep solely for bashing errant spiders, to put the Hugo through it's paces and was pleasantly surprised that the Hugo actually made it a pleasant and enjoyable listen. Brass and strings sections had a rich sonorous quality which I had not heard before and when the Timpani was struck, goodness me I felt it. One recording has a Triangle playing throughout the excerpt and I could easily follow every single strike, whereas it has tended to be drowned out and overwhelmed by the other instruments. I like this DAC, if it has made me enjoy classical music which I usually avoid, so this CD has been elevated from spider walloping duties in future, but that of course may be viewed rather differently without the Hugo in place.

The volume control operates in the digital domain and also varies the RCA analogue output level, so I found a good use for it. I have a Sheffield Labs CD of James Newton Howard and Friends which is totally uncompressed and the dynamics can overload an

CHORD ELECTRONICS HUGO - DAC/HEADPHONE AMP

amplifier's inputs, so adjusting the volume control downwards slightly gave the amplifier more headroom for coping with the highly dynamic transients found in this particular recording. The percussion on this CD is stunning and drums come across as you being just inches away from the drum set receiving the full impact, while piano had endless decay of harmonics and the body of the instrument sounded so real you could almost be standing next to it.

Now on to the headphone amplifier evaluation. I don't have an expensive pair of headphones because I find them to be claustrophobic within a very short period of time and the "in the head" sound gives me the shudders, but I do have a budget set of headphones and the test here is can the Hugo headphone amp make this pair sound good? Yes indeed, the Hugo certainly did inject a massive dose of energy and vitality into this modest pair of headphones. The treble came across as clean and insightful, rather than the "Tish, tish, tish" sort of sound listening on headphones elicits and commonly plagued with. Bass was powerful and deep too, which has never happened before with other amps of this ilk and all the details I heard through the main system were reproduced into the cans as well. A couple of prods on the "Crossfeed Filter" button managed to eradicate the "in the head" stereo effect and I wish more headphone amps could incorporate a similar feature. All in all, I would say the Hugo gives a level of sophistication that no other headphone amp I have heard to date can muster or emulate.

Chord make great play of the Hugo's long battery life and it would be remiss of me not to see if their claims stand up to scrutiny. I unplugged the charger and hooked up to my PC through the unpowered USB input playing non-stop Spotify tracks, searching for some new music purchases. This was interspersed with listening on my mobile phone, again through the unpowered USB connection. I racked up nine hours of music on the one charge and still no signs of the Hugo yelling out for more juice for it's battery, signified by a sequence given out by one of the internal LEDs.

CONCLUSION

In true Chord signature fashion, it walks a path well away from the herd in it's unique design concept, but there needs to be a rethink regarding the connection socket issues, especially so the TOSLINK connec-

tion. As I understand it, Chord have already moved the analogue output RCA sockets from an earlier variant because they were too close together and they should follow suit with addressing the connection problems both myself and Dan experienced with the current Hugo while under review.

Setting that aside though, we have a product in the Hugo that is far more than the sum of it's parts, so I will table the positives:

It is compact and portable, has a stunning amount of battery life and for good measure the charger itself is very compact as well and that too will fit into a pocket or handbag. So, provided you can find a socket to charge up to full capacity in under 2 hours you shouldn't be left high and dry with a flat battery at any time.

It has a resolving and articulate amplifier section which should power almost any headphones you can care to name, right from ear buds up to serious power hungry audiophile quality level headphones. The digital pre-amplifier section is again a true stunner in performance with it's unique bit-perfect volume control.

The real star of the show however is the DAC section which is stunning in every way imaginable, equally at ease on the move with headphones, as it is sat in the home rack doing the job of a top flight DAC in a sophisticated hi-fi system with portability as an added bonus. Chord obviously think so too, because they have standalone DACs now released with the same Spartan 6 FPGA chipset as the Hugo and as Dan has rightly observed, it is also being incorporated into their amplifier products too.

Truly untouchable in performance terms.

Build quality: 8.4/10

Sound quality: 9.1/10

Value for money: 8.9/10

Overall: 8.8/10

The "Build quality" scoring is referenced to the TOSLINK connection problem noted in the review.

Recommended for: Those looking for a high performing digital to analogue convertor with the added bonus of portable headphone listening. An audition is strongly recommended.

Dominic Marsh





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Triangle's £600 Titus EZ Loudspeakers reviewed by Ian Ringstead



TRIANGLE TITUS EZ LOUDSPEAKERS

I've visited France many times since being a child and always admired it's wide open spaces, beautiful countryside, fine wines and food and especially the weather in the south. The north's weather is just like the UK often wet and dull so I feel it no surprise that like the British the French put their minds to innovation when wiling away the dreary winter months and have come up with some rather fine designs over the centuries.

One such company to do this is Triangle which was started in 1980 and has now risen to become a highly regarded manufacturer competing with several other notable brands renowned worldwide. Based in Soissons (Picardy) north of Paris they now have research facilities in Bordeaux, wishing to further develop their expertise in new designs. This is not unlike many UK speaker manufacturers like KEF , B&W etc. Triangle like to keep control on everything ,so even the drive units are made in house, a tradition shared by any company passionate about quality. Although some products are made in China now for cost reasons , the quality control is strictly maintained and I have seen many manufacturers products made in China finished to superb standards and quality. Made in France or UK would be nice but when manufacturing costs become prohibitive I have no truck with foreign manufacture.

The model under review is the Titus EZ ,the smallest in this range and the only stand mount. Beautifully formed it comes in either walnut as standard or at extra cost in piano white or black. All the finishes are excellent and the speaker has nice touches with a magnetic grille , so no ugly plastic pegs or holes on show making for a clean fascia. The superb in house designed and made terminal posts are on a metal back plate (one pair so no bi -wiring here). They come boxed in excellent packaging and are completed by two pairs of stick on rubber pads if you wish to isolate them on a shelf or stand.

The tweeter is a horn loaded titanium design whilst the mid bass unit is made of natural cellulose . The tweeter is striking in appearance and one of the reasons this speaker sounds so big and exciting. The bass unit is finished in white so when the grilles are left off the Titus cannot go unnoticed by such a driver pairing. Like all speakers from new the Titus require a decent run in period , so I gave them a couple of weeks to settle down before serious listening began.

Once run in they offer a very exciting out of the box sound stage which cannot be ignored for its involvement and vivacity. I don't mean bright or exaggerated , just not laid back or lush. The top end in particular was notable for its clarity and percussion instruments



TRIANGLE TITUS EZ LOUDSPEAKERS

sounded superb being so clearly defined . Mid range was open and rich , whilst the bass was well defined and tight not being over blown or giving the impression of struggling.

I tried a live recording first , being Marillion ' Made Again' live in the 90's during their European tour and I was impressed how easy it was to hear the acoustics of each stadium and what a fine job the sound engineers had done trying to get the best out of each venue, not always an easy thing even with state of the art equipment unless you know what you are doing. The vocals of Steve Hogarth were very clear and I can vouch for the life like sound as I recently heard him live in an intimate setting and the slight gruffness in his distinctive vocals was admirably captured. The instruments were all clearly renditioned and the Titus were extremely good at portraying the acoustics and separating out each element of the sound.

Next I listened to a favourite recording of mine Michael Ruff 'Speaking in Melodies' a Sheffield Labs recording from the nineties. This was recorded live onto a two track master tape and the mastering done by Doug Sax , a legend in his profession . The sound and dynamics on this recording are superb and whether you like the music or not(I love it), it is a real treat on any good system. The detail on the Titus was marvellous , especially all the little background noises one gets on a live recording with the breathing of the backing singers and instrumental touches. The dynamics are thrilling and when the band is in full swing you can't help but get captured up in the session and wish you had been there.

For classical I tried Henry Gorecki 'Symphony number 3'with Dawn Upshaw as the soprano , the London Sinfonietta and David Zinman conducting. A beautiful piece of choral music where the Titus conveyed real emotion and made for a thoroughly enjoyable listen .I have little to say other than I enjoyed the music so much that I just got lost in the pleasure of the performance , rather like being at a live concert wrapped up in the emotion of it all.

Another favourite performers of mine is James Taylor and his 'Hourglass' album was placed in the cd player next. You can't help but admire what a sublime voice and guitar style James Taylor has and when he is surrounded by top session musicians and guest artists the results are rarely less than fabulous. His recordings have always been very good even from the 70's and on this album the bass weight and drums at times catch you out by the sudden change

The dynamics are thrilling and when the band is in full swing you can't help but get captured up in the session and wish you had been there.

in volume level and depth .A great test for any system and a real joy on a good one . The Titus conveyed his lilting American drawl wonderfully and again the background details of the singers and musicians shone through to really make this a magical sound .

Jazz is always a good leveller and groups like The Crusaders , Foreplay or artists such as Bob James and Lee Ritenour are always superbly recorded and so well played you can't help but tap your foot along and be impressed by the quality of musicianship and the way the individual musicians combine so brilliantly as a cohesive group of players really enjoying their craft . Clarity is a major feature of the Titus EZ and they lap up this type of music. Some people just don't get smooth jazz and say it is elevator music. Well let me tell you it grooves sublimely .Jazz is not everyone's cup of tea and I don't like all jazz myself ,but put a great set of musicians together and you generally have a recipe for success. I didn't have time to listen to every type of music and band I like , but what I did listen to was highly entertaining.

The Titus like all good small speakers do an admirable job of disappearing into the background and imaging rather well. I placed them on 700mm high good quality wooden stands filled with sand and blutacked on the top plate. This height was just right

TRIANGLE TITUS EZ LOUDSPEAKERS

for listening placing the tweeter at ear height. They were slightly toed in about 50 cm from the back wall.

For such a small speaker rated at 60 watts (90dB efficiency) and bass limited to 55Hz I confess to no feeling of lack of bass .I used a Meridian 556 amp rated at 170 watts RMS and this drove them with aplomb. The Titus revelled in having plenty of current on reserve and I never felt they were struggling even when listening at loud levels. I would strongly recommend as good a source and amp as you can afford to get the best out of these little boxes as they will not disappoint.

CONCLUSION

As you can see I rather like the Titus EZ. Having listened to and owned many speakers over my life as an enthusiast and when I was in retail I have heard everything from stupidly expensive systems to real budget products , but I have learnt money is not always the answer .Spending a lot of money on equipment is no guarantee of quality or enjoyment. Yes ,superb build and finish with excellent quality components gives pride of ownership but not necessarily enjoyment of sound. A good system whether budget or high end should convey emotion and allow the

listener to just sit back and enjoy. Ask yourself this question, "could I live with that?" If the answer is no don't buy it. I go to many shows and nine times out of ten I walk into a room and think how uninteresting the sound is . If a product is well set up and designed properly it has a chance of impressing . Many manufacturers seem to ignore this rule but I am glad to say Triangle haven't .Even their budget speaker excites and higher up the range the dearer models do as well.

Build Quality – 9/10

Sound Quality – 9/10

Value For Money – 9/10

Overall – 9/10

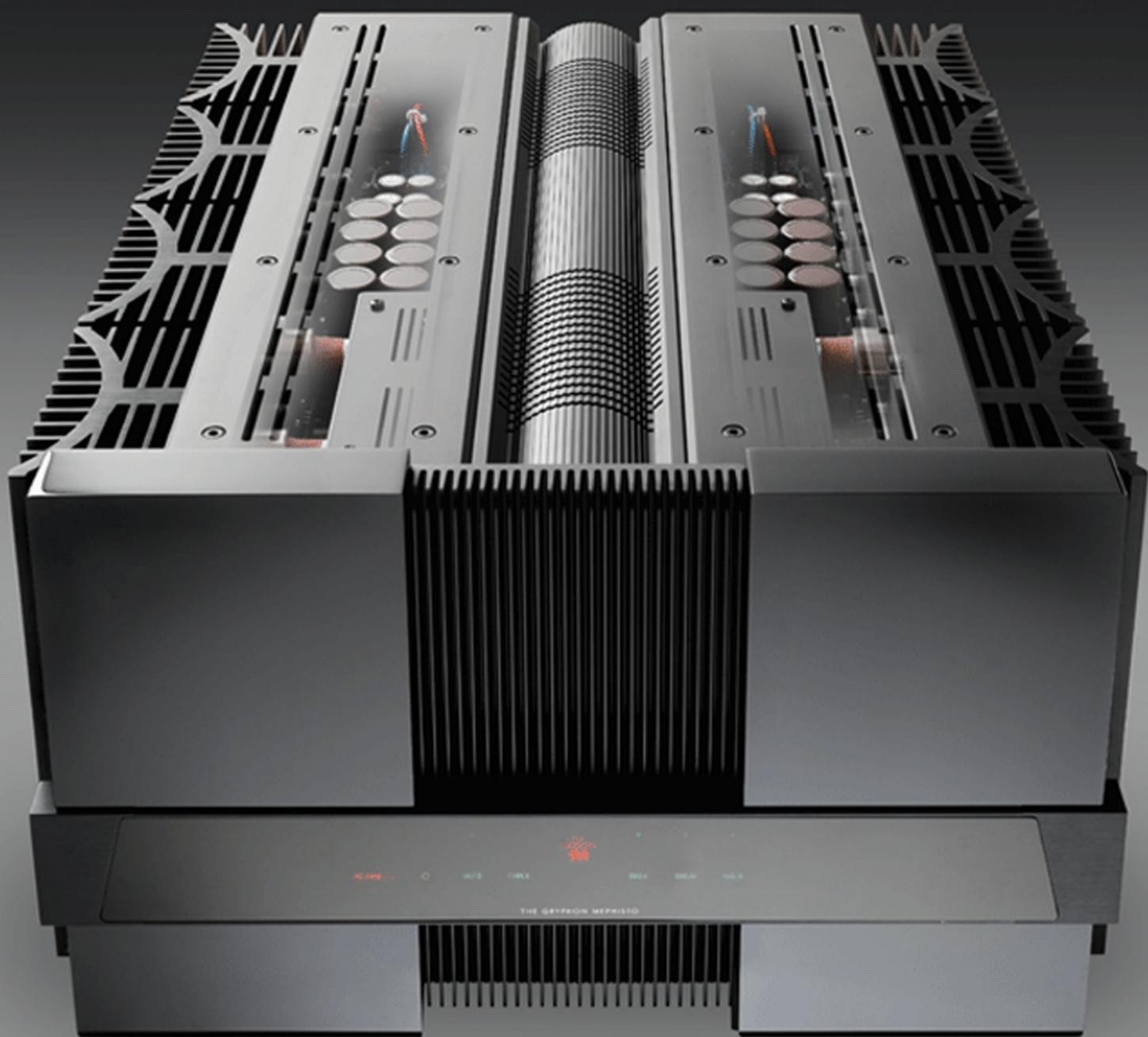
At £600 I can't recommend these speakers enough and feel they are one of the best small stand mounts under a £1000 at this current time. As they say in France "Très bien "

Ian Ringstead

Given their overall score Stuart will be taking a listen to these to see if they warrant an Outstanding Product Award.



THE GRYPHON



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www.gryphon-audio.dk

FiiO X5 HI RES MUSIC PLAYER



Personal, portable hifi reviewed on a cross channel ferry, why not?

My use for a personal music player tends to be when I'm travelling and not in a car. At home it's the big hifi that usually gets used or my desk based headphone system while I am working, I don't commute...other than staggering up stairs after retrieving a vat of coffee, so other than some preliminary testing at home, I was waiting for a long journey to really give the X5 a go.

The Brittany Ferries Amorque will take all day to cross the not so tranquil waters of La Manche to Plymouth so I have 8+ hours to work my way through a few beverages and some serious tuneage.

As we pull out of Saint Malo, France is February-fresh, bright and sunny. 'Pierre the Bear', a fantastically racially stereotypical French bear in a beret, is taking to the stage to entertain the kiddies so I retreat to the bar, don my sunnies and headphones and get lost in music.

Mr Hifi Pig, fearing rough waters and rouge bears, does the same.

I have paired the X5 with the Oppo PM1s and their standard mini jack cable. I want to see what this little beauty can do on its own before I start messing around with different cables and headphone amps.

The FiiO X5 is a serious looking player. It has a reassuring weight to it and the brushed metal and retro-old-style-ipod looks have a subdued stylishness. It is not too heavy but you could probably use it as a weapon if ever the situation arose...if Pierre the Bear gets too frisky I can always give him a swift blow with it.

It fits snugly in the Oppo PM1 travelling case with the headphones so I have a nice portable set up, even with proper sized cans.

The minimal looks are enhanced by the black soft-silicon case and I have already applied one of the supplied screen protectors so we are ready to rock...or rave.

FiiO X5 HI RES MUSIC PLAYER

The player is simple and very intuitive to use, I love the wheel and this and the buttons are easy to operate one handed as the X5 sits comfortably in my hand.

The display screen is the perfect size, big enough so you can clearly see what you are doing but not too big....with great screen resolution and colour display.

It is really simple to flick through your music, skip tracks, replay etc. I haven't yet used the playlist feature but I like the idea of it and I also like the way you can 'favourite' tracks...I have certain 'go-to' tunes that I like to use when reviewing so this makes it very quick to find what you are after.

Many people will see the FiiO line of players as competition to the more expensive

Astell&Kern players, now I have not had in depth experience of the A&Ks but I have picked them up at shows and I have to say that I found the X5 immediately much more easy to use....and in a portable player I find ease of use to be one of my priorities, I don't want to fiddling around for hours trying to find what I want to listen to when I just want to zone out from the surrounding world.

You can add up to 2 micro SD cards (max 128 GB each) and this does mean you are not constrained by the capacity of the player...if you commute a lot and have an extensive music collection you can travel with a few cards and just pop in the one that you want rather than having to take tracks on and off the player.

The X5 comes with several preset EQ settings and a custom option....though I found these unnecessary and stuck with the EQ off...but again, a nice option to have for personal tweaking.

The player supports a host of lossless file formats from FLAC to DSD, even Apple's ALAC ...so is basically going to play anything that you want it to. It can also be used on your desk as a DAC for your computer as well as a portable player, making it a sensible purchase if you are looking for both options.

Getting music onto the X5 is a simple affair from the laptop with the supplied USB cable, and it also charges at the same time...worth noting that it also has a long battery life and holds its charge when not in use, so very handy for people that travel a lot, there is nothing worse than digging your music player out of your bag to find it has gone flat.

I have put a wide variety of music on, mainly flac files but the odd mp3 has crept in, mainly because I quite often find a mix on Soundcloud that I want to listen to....and I'm not a music snob who only ever listens to hi res stuff.... if there is something new that I want to hear and I can't get it in anything other than mp3 then that will have to do, if I love it I can seek out a better quality version later down the line.

What better to kick off with than some real 'take you on a trip' music? I've got a Marcel Dettmann podcast of part of his 2014 NYE set from Berghain that I have been itching to listen to in its entirety.

This is ominous and dark but still uplifting techno that seems to perfectly suit the mood as the ferry slides out of the sunlight and under the dark clouds that herald stormy seas ahead.



FiiO X5 HI RES MUSIC PLAYER



I associate an ‘in the club’ sound with the PM1s, usually used with my desktop system, but I still get that same sense of depth, space and immersion using them with the X5.

With the driving bass I’m soon transported from a cross channel ferry to a Berlin nightclub...if zoning out from the real world is what you are looking for then the X5 delivers. In fact, after I finish listening to the hour and a half of the set that I have I have that ‘just stepped out of the cinema into the daylight’ feeling of having spent time in an alternate world.

Next on the cards is a bit of disco. The Nile Rodgers presents the Chic Organization, ‘Up all Night’ compilation is a favourite of mine and gets played when a boogie is in order...fortunately I don’t start dancing like a disco flash mob on the ferry but I’m having a hard time keeping still with the crisp hand claps of ‘Le Freak’ reverberating in my ears...by the time Sister Sledge and ‘He’s the greatest dancer’ kick in, I’m a disco on the outskirts of ‘Friscowell in my head anyway.

The urge to get up and dance continues as I move onto Curtis Mayfield, ‘Move on up’ sounds incredibly energetic with lively trumpets and, slowing things down a bit ‘Sweet Exorcist’ shows of Curtis’s hon-eyed vocals a treat.

Many, many more tunes get played and I think it is a strong testament to the FiiO X5 that I am just enjoying, rather than reviewing, it ...it really is a ‘pocket rocket’ music player.

The listening experience is immersive, the soundstage is not just left and right but fully wraparound.....the

way I want headphone listening to be, I suppose you could call it virtual reality for the ears.

Bass is not overpowering but there is plenty of it for me, piano sounds sweet and lively and vocals are glorious.

I am looking forward to trying the X5 with portable headphone amps and perhaps different cables just to see if I can get even more out of it. I will also be testing it with

some IEMs for when I don’t want to take the Oppos out.

As a standalone portable player without adding any after market extras, I do feel that it is enjoyable to listen to, user friendly and ultimately portable...a music player that you can be proud to pull out of your pocket in public but open to some ‘pimping’ if that’s the road that you want to go down.

Build Quality – 9/10

Sound Quality – 8.5/10

Value For Money – 9/10

Overall – 8.83

At just under £300 this is a well priced, beautifully made, high quality portable music player. Teamed with your favourite headphones it is a hifi in your pocket...easily recommended.

Linette Smith

Once I’d managed to prise the X5 out of Linette’s hands and given it’s overwhelmingly positive review by her it’s time for me to give my opinion and offer a second review.

I’ll not go into the whole background of this little player as Linette seems to have covered most bases. I used the X5 with a pair of Beyerdynamic T51 i headphones priced at £246 which seems a reasonable match price-wise.

LISTENING AND COMMENTS



FiiO X5 HI RES MUSIC PLAYER

The X5 has a good deep bass that is nicely controlled whilst listening to hard techno. There is a real feeling that the bass is pounding along like a foundry hammer – this is with no fiddling with the EQ. This bass isn't overpowering though and the mids and tops also get a decent outing and overall there is a nice balance to the sound the X5 produces.



Soundstage appears to be neither overly exaggerated in width but neither is it constricted to the centre of your head so you get a good feel of the stereo image. The top end is certainly not rolled off at all and you get a good sense of airiness around the upper frequencies. With the kind of music I tend to listen to whilst out and about this is pretty much perfect and leads to a precise and yet non-fatiguing listen which I thoroughly enjoyed.

On Really well recorded hi-res files the separation of instruments in the mix is exceptionally good and there is that balance to the sound that I mentioned with a slight warmth in the bass department. This again leads to an easy to listen to product which is a useful feature for a portable audio device to have.

To save on battery life I turned the screen down low and in any kind of sunlight I found it difficult to see and difficult to navigate...turn up the juice and it's fine but you will limit the time you can use the X5. This is certainly no "Retina" display but it gets the job done fine.

Another little niggle is the user interface not being immediately intuitive but you do get used to it after a bit of a play...others may want to read the manual!

The jog wheel has some stick in the past from various quarters but I really enjoyed using it and found it a breeze to use...though I do see how folk could describe it as being a bit on the vague side.

The unit feels purposeful in your hand and feels solidly constructed – there's a weight to it that I find reassuring!

You can also use the X5 as a desktop DAC via USB and it will decode files up to 192kHz/24bit and also DSD 2.8Mhz/1 bit. Download the driver, pop a suitable USB into the bottom of the X5 and a line out to your amp and you're away. It's genuinely hard to criticise this extra feature and the sound for pound ratio is very high indeed. I wouldn't

use it as my main DAC, but for listening to files on the computer it's fine and with the same characteristics sonically as when listening through cans – powerful and well balanced. I used it with a little pair of Roth OLi speakers and a Amptastic Mini 1 amp and it was great fun and allows for a desktop and portable system for less than £750 (£246 of which is in headphones)

CONCLUSION

Most of my listening is not done whilst out and about, but when I do listen to music on the train or plane I want it to be of a decent quality. In absolute terms the sound of pretty much all portable players is lacking when compared to the main rig, but the X5 manages to play your tunes in a most entertaining, non-tiring and pretty high quality way. It'll play pretty much any file you want to throw at it too! Added to this the USB DAC functionality and for the £300 asking price the X5 becomes a no brainer.

Build Quality – 8.5/10

Sound Quality – 8.25/10

Value For Money – 9/10

Overall – 8.58

Stuart Smith



FLARE AUDIO REFERENCE R1 HEADPHONES



A Novel Design and a £499 price-tag, but do these new open headphones impress. Janine Elliot finds out.

There has been a recent interest in open-loudspeakers that simply have a baffle but no cabinet as such. I remember the tests we did with loudspeakers at BBC Wood Norton in the 80s when I trained to be a Studio Manager. We found that depending on cabinet size, and whether speakers were infinite baffle, ported or with no cabinet at all, the sound changed considerably. Flare Audio, which is run by Davies Roberts originally started as a supplier of PA equipment in 2007, he formed Flare in 2010 as he was frustrated with the sound variances between

FLARE AUDIO REFERENCE R1 HEADPHONES

gigs and equipment, and who then started creating his own loudspeaker designs in 2012. Their speakers are now used by bands and establishments including Jimmy Page from Led Zeppelin, Rob da Bank, and Node. Apparently Flare Audio was selected due to its 'clarity of sound', and his designs are foremost in trying to get that purity of sound production, with nothing getting in the way. Indeed, Davies found that if you have any form of friction inside the speaker cabinet then cancellations and additions to frequency information will happen. He calls it Waveform Integrity. His SB12

has a port straight through from front to back and a system of matrixes to allow sound pressure to leave and new air to enter. I always loved the look of that. He also noted that with headphones this friction was even more complex. In closed-back headphones when the speaker diaphragm moves there is pressure both behind the driver and also in front, as it is sealed to your ear via the ear cushion. With open-back designs the pressure is only between the driver and your ear. With his Reference 1 Headphone he therefore attempts to remove that friction both in front and behind the driver.



“Open back designs distort sound information on the compression stroke of the driver and add asymmetry to the waveform. Closed designs distort sound information on both sides of the waveform.”

Bear with me for a while; At University doing my Master of Music degree in the last century I worked on the interrelation between frequencies in sounds. This included a series of electroacoustic works under the banner of SINOLIMI (SInes NOn LInearly MIned), whereby two pure sine-wave sounds being mixed together can cause both sum and difference frequencies, which cause a complete remodelling of the original sounds. Many years before that, when I first got into Hi-Fi at the naive age of 8, I thought it was magic that a single loudspeaker could possibly play many different frequencies at the same time; after all, a single musical instrument like a wood block or flute couldn't. Davies claims that different frequencies on that single loudspeaker interact with each other, causing distortion hence new sounds and therefore lots of these at the same time can modify the sound you hear. He says all drivers create sound by placing higher frequencies inside the movement of lower frequencies, i.e. 21Hz is created within the movement of 20Hz, 22Hz within 21Hz and so on. He calls this the “Time Domain”. Additionally, if your headphones are closed back, then not only will there



FLARE AUDIO REFERENCE R1 HEADPHONES

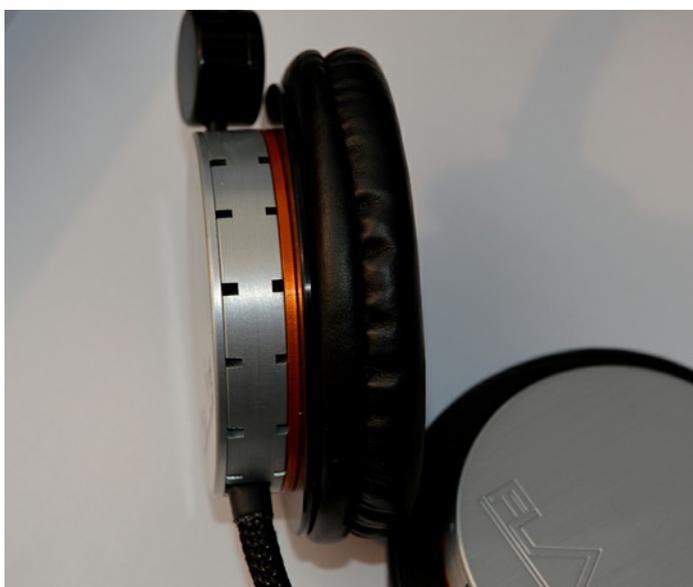
be reflections of frequencies but the reflection of waves in the cans will interfere with the driver vibrations, slowing down the primary soundwaves as they bump into it. Next time you play your open-back Stax SR-407 earspeakers, cup your hands behind the boxes and move in and out, and you will hear different frequencies interfering with the principal sound.

All in all then, there are lots of things interfering with the fundamental sound you play when you listen on cans. And, unfortunately, we have got so used to hearing all these distortions our ears think it is all right (just like our eyes see things upside down but our brain turns them back up the other way!) When I put on the Flare Audio R1 cans after playing my Audio Technica W1000s, I thought something had gone wrong with the music as it sounded all mid-band and “phased”, but then when I first put on the R1 and then listened to the Audio Technica’s I wondered where all the bass had gone and was desperate to find a way to turn down the treble! Our brains via our ears have their own tone control, an automatic volume control, and even an imagination control and ‘we’ can play havoc with the music we play without realising it. Scary!

So, after all this science, welcome the Reference R1 headphones, mimicking the metallic rugged ‘army look’ of their PA speakers, and using both of Flare’s patent-pending technologies used in their speaker designs called Space™ and Vortex™. These tech-

They are trying to remove the sound pressure that can result in open and particularly closed-back headphones.

nologies are applied to both sides of the driver to create what he says is “the first ‘fully open’ true infinite baffle headphone that produces distortion free sound”. Quite some claim. The Vortex™ discs themselves are matrix systems that remove residual air pressure that interferes with the movement of the 40cm Mylar ear speaker and silences the sound pressure as it escapes into the air. The depth of the vortex is different either side of the driver because there is more pressure between the rear of the driver and the cabinet as it is a smaller area, so the vortex hole at the sides of the unit are bigger. The other side, which travels from the driver to your ear canal, is a greater area so less pressure and consequently a smaller vortex. Both sides of this mathematical equation therefore match. The vortex can be seen by the holes running along the edges of the metal ear-cup. Flare Audio commissioned Salford University to test the attenuation of external sound entering via this vortex. Those tests were on a basic vortex shape and as a result of this work were able to modify the design using fins to gain far higher attenuation. Tests have shown external attenuation up to 20dB . Space™ is about reducing the enclosure wall vibration and so



FLARE AUDIO REFERENCE R1 HEADPHONES

uses 4 bolts that pull the rear plate and ear pad plates together with a constant compressive force on the Vortex™ discs that reside both sides of the driver. Loving abbreviations he calls this one ‘DSV’ (dual sided vortex) disc.

To recap then, Flare Audio is trying to do several things at the same time with their Reference R1 headphones;

They are trying to remove the sound pressure that can result in open and particularly closed-back headphones. By balancing the pressures between the front and rear sections enables linear driver movement (LDM).

Remove sound distortions which are caused by the friction as a result of enclosed residual pressure interference (ERPI). Basically, using wadding inside the enclosure adds friction. Particles slowing down then hit the frequencies you actually wish to hear.

Create significant noise insulation through the use of Vortex™ silencing technology,

Create a means whereby different frequencies do not interfere with each other, and therefore to create the most honest sound production system available. If a driver’s movement is restricted by the pressure mentioned in ii) above, then the time domain of frequency information is also distorted; the “Time Domain Distortion” (TDD).

Now, as this is all rather complicated and full of enough acronyms and abbreviations to make me L.M.A.O, how did it all sound once I started to listen? Firstly, putting on these cans was harder than I thought. The whole is rather heavy and with a steel headband gave my ears the feeling of tightness, though with an excellent insulation from the outside world. It was not excessive, and in the pro audio industry would be quite acceptable, but because the leatherette ear-cup is quite thin, wearing glasses wasn’t easy as they could hurt after a while by getting the frame caught between my head and the powder coated sprung steel headband.

Listening to music gave me a chance to feel the music rather than the pressure of the drivers, though the

The sound does take a long time to get adjusted to, but once adjusted clearly defines weaknesses in many recordings; things like distortion or sudden changes in soundstage caused by bad editing, making it an ideal tool for engineers to perfect their art.

closeness of the drivers to my ears made it rather claustrophobic. I remember the truly open-back and front design of the AKG 1000 headphones. The reason these famous old cans worked so well was the fact that actually nothing touched your ears. All is held in place above your ears, though it tends to feel like a vice, if my memory serves me correctly. The ear ‘speakers’ could then be aimed parallel to your ears, making the sound more akin to conventional headphones, or at an angle like the successful Stax Lambda style SR-207, 307, 407 and 507, which sounds more natural. The Flare Reference headphone is none of these. The speakers are held parallel to your ears. The sound, as explained earlier, does take a long time to get adjusted to, but once adjusted clearly defines weaknesses in many recordings; things like distortion or sudden changes in soundstage caused by bad editing, making it an ideal tool for engineers to perfect their art. Linn Record’s excellent new Sibelius Symphony No 2, (Thomas Sondergard, BBC National Orchestra of Wales) doesn’t rush through like some headphones can make the recording, showing the

FLARE AUDIO REFERENCE R1 HEADPHONES

detail of the live recording played in the clear acoustics of the Hoddinott Hall, Cardiff. The violins and violas are very clear, illustrating the good mid band of these ear speakers, but it was too forward and confused for my liking. In track 18 “Louder than Words” from The Endless River, Pink Floyd (my favourite track of this album) David Gilmour’s voice was too forward and unclear in this the only vocal track. Conversely, in Pat Metheny Group ‘The Way Up’, which is one of my favourite jazz records of all time, the top frequencies of ride and crash cymbals were still very clear, something I felt lost in some of the listening tests I did. Indeed this recording has an excellent range of frequencies and detail, with masses of horizontal writing of different tunes with different instruments playing at the same time, something that these headphones can decipher admirably. However, throughout my listening I did sense that there were missed opportunities to make these headphones become something really special; the technology is all there, just that 40cm Mylar driver letting the whole thing down. The mid bass is OK, but those used to thumping bottoms and bursts of acoustic pressure will be disappointed. These things are not audiophile or professional virtues, though. I want to hear the sound as it really should be and I got that in the mid-bass and in the midrange, though it took a bit of getting used to. No, the biggest problem was in the frequencies extremes, something which is vital, particularly today’s HD fixation. The speed and detail was also not quite good enough for me. However, this is the first version of this new technology, and Davies Roberts believes in customer satisfaction and retrofitting as new versions and updates become available; perhaps a better driver. He is already talking about a canvas padding headband to aid comfort and new designs including inner-earphones. What I really loved was seeing a 3.5mm plug at the end of the lead. If you really do need ¼ inch plugs, then you are usually sitting next to a standalone unit and in which case adding an adaptor is no problem. But those of us wanting to walk around plugged into a portable device like an iPod, Fiio or iBasso, there is nothing more annoying than having to

This is a lovely package and the craftsmanship and design are well worth the £499 asking price.

add an adaptor sticking out of the unit! Just wish the heat-shrink wasn’t quite so long.

There is considerable sense and science in the R1 but there are still several areas where further thoughts will improve the design. But, just as the original Model T Ford with its ridiculous non-standard system of foot pedals led to putting the world on wheels eventually with a clutch, break and accelerator, so too could the R1 be the beginning of something great. Just hope it doesn’t take too long.

CONCLUSION

This is a lovely package and the craftsmanship and design are well worth the £499 asking price. The sound was completely different and did ‘improve’ as I listened for longer, but you know, sometimes you just want to put cans on straight away and get that immediate ‘high’. This product is like Marmite; you will either love it or hate it. The only reason the Reference R1 makes it in my mind is because of what is possible. A number of sound engineers, such as Mick Hughes (Metallica) and Gary Langan (Metropolis Studios) have approved of it, so as a tool for the sound engineer it ticks a lot of boxes (I prefer it to the Beyer DT100 or Sennheiser HD480) but if you are wanting and expecting to get that immediate ‘buzz’ when you put them on, you will unfortunately look elsewhere.

Sound Quality – 7.8/10 (there is still work to do)

Value for Money – 8.6/10 (the good looks and the R&D)

Build Quality – 8.3/10 (will be better with canvas padding headband)

Overall – 8.23/10

Janine Elliot





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A TRIO OF IN EAR MONITORS

Linette Smith takes a listen to a trio of IEMS in the form of Final Audio Heaven VI – CC, Hifiman RE-600 and Sennheiser IE 800.

So, what do you give a girl that has ears which Legolas the Elf would be jealous of, is really finicky about Head Fi comfort and really doesn't feel much love for in ear monitors? Three pairs of High End IEMS of course!

As the resident IEM expert and Hifi Pig Teen reporter is currently out of the country, and because these are hardly Teen Pocket Money friendly, it falls to me to review them.

On my desk I have three boxes containing over £1300 worth of in ear monitors....yes, over £1300....for 3 pairs.

Now, I am used to expensive headphones, we have Audeze and Oppo high end pairs in the house....I get the Head Fi thing and I totally understand spending as

much on a pair of cans as some people spend on a whole system.

The personal audio market has exploded recently, many people, for reasons of modern living and not being a 'neighbour from hell' are shying away from a traditional Hifi system and spending their money on portable or desk systems instead. For some people it is just becoming second nature to have a head fi system that is a good as your main, high end system, and some people just like to have the best that money can buy. Full Stop.

But IEMs to me have either been plain uncomfortable (the first wave on the market were unfeasible painful to me and somewhat put me off for good) and/or just cheap and nasty and chucked in my bag to tangle up with whatever other detritus was festering in there.

I'm struggling to get my head round paying more than a few quid for a pair, however, there are definitely times when in ears can be a much better option than a pair of more obviously expensive headphones.

If you are travelling around and don't really want to draw the attention of strangers to the fact that your headphones are very, very expensive, a more discrete pair of IEMs is probably a good way to go!

So, let's see if these offerings from Sennheiser, Hifiman and Final Audio can change my mind.

All are reviewed using my FiiO X5 which I usually use with over-ear headphones.

Final Audio Heaven VI – CC

Harry reviewed some of the less expensive in this range, the Heaven II and Heaven IV and rated them very highly. The VI – CC (Chromed Copper) version come in at £400 a pair.

As with all the Final Audio products that I have come across, these are beautifully packaged. The faux croc skin box contains a silver metal case that looks like a compact or vintage cigarette case.

The copper coloured housing of the IEMs is set off by a chocolate brown flat, tangle free cable which terminates in a right angled mini-jack.

A TRIO OF IN EAR MONITORS

Also in the box are 3 sizes of ear tips in 2 different textures, although I can't really tell a difference between them other than the size. The fitted ear tips feel too big for my ears so I try the others and go for the smallest pair and change them with little fuss.

Resisting the urge to push them into my ears, they don't actually have to be rammed in to feel secure....even some vigorous head shaking doesn't dislodge them.

They feel light and pretty comfortable.....things are looking up!



However I soon realise the error of my ways when I put the music on.

Listening to Primal Scream's 'Screamadelica' album (in flac) I find I'm just not getting the funky bassline on tracks like 'Skip inside this house'

There is a definite lack of bass...this is NOT a good thing. While I don't like bass to be too dominating, if there is meant to be bass then it better be there.

I fiddle with the EQ on the FiiO (I normally don't ever need to do this), no improvement....hmmmm.

Then it hits me, these IEMs are really, really meant to be IN the ear canal....this does worry me a little but I

persevere and push them deeper, and am rewarded with finding bass instead of earwax.

Result!

They now pass the Hardfloor test, 'Once again back' and 'Aperience' sound good with tight fast bass matched by punchy top and mids, the sound is overall pretty balanced with the top end maybe just a shade prominent for me, but it's a world away from the thin sound I was getting before my 'eureka' moment.

They are also incredibly isolating from the outside world.

Listening to a few more different artists I realise that vocal music actually suits the Heaven VI best. I put on Macy Gray's album 'On how Life is'. Her vocal is sublime and I get the full benefit of the female backing vocals.

'I try' and 'Still' stand out as the distinctive huskiness of Macy's voice really comes across.

The slender design means that they are not terribly uncomfortable, but, for me they are not the most comfortable thing I have ever put in my ear.

I'm just not 'at one' with what feels like an almost medical level of ear intrusion need-

ed to get the best sound.

Unfortunately, the listening position of the Heaven VI rules them out for me, no matter how good they sound, they don't suit my ears.

I would say they work best and sound incredibly natural with vocal music, particularly female vocal music so would be a good choice for you if this is your bag and if the listening position suits you.

Sound – 8/10

Comfort – 5/10

Fit and finish – 8/10

Value – 7/10

Overall – 7/10

A TRIO OF IN EAR MONITORS

Hifiman RE-600

Hifiman are another company who know the added value of quality packaging.

The RE- 600s come in a (faux?) leather case that flips open top and bottom to reveal the IEMs and their array of foam tips.

These are the cheapest of the bunch at only (!) around £320.

[The RE400 were recommended by Harry last year.](#)

The RE-600s are shiny and black and feel very light, the cable is black and braided and comes with mini jack and a right angled mini jack adapter.

They sit very comfortably in my ears; I can hardly tell they are there....however they seem to want to work their way out while I am listening...time to try some of the other tips.

I change for a smaller pair and find that they do sit a lot less intrusively in my ears than the previous pair of Finals.

You do have to fiddle around a little to get the best position and get the most out of them...but I like the fact that they don't go too deep into the ear.

The sound is very balanced and, probably because I'm finding them comfortable and I like how they sound, I get drawn into listening ...I have Gil Scott-Heron's 'Ghetto Style' on, which is one of my go to reviewing albums.

They are not as isolating to outside noise as the Finals and the sound is not quite as complex but I really like them.

I go back through the same tunes as I listened to with the Finals.

The Hardfloor test reveals great definition and the rumbling bass comes through without being over dominating.



Vocals are engaging to listen to...not quite as 'rich' as the Finals but very good.

These strike me as a very comfortable pair of IEMs that are good all rounders, perfect if you like a variety of music on your portable system...I would be happy to use these as an alternative to full size headphones when out and about.

Sound – 8/10

Comfort – 8.9/10

Fit and finish – 9/10

Value – 8/10

Overall – 8.48/10



A TRIO OF IN EAR MONITORS



Sennheiser IE 800

Somewhat ironically, the most expensive pair (£600) of IEMs in the trio comes in the plainest packaging. Sennheiser is a name I associate with no fuss functionality and in the box, the IEMs are neatly packaged in a handy and smart leather wallet that looks pocket or handbag friendly;

Also included are a selection of ear tips and a handy little tool for cleaning gunk out of the ear tips...not a nice thought but useful to have!

They certainly look the business with a smart black and green cable terminating in a right angled mini jack and with their shiny ceramic housing.

The design is interesting with two little ports on the back of each monitor.

Changing to the smallest ear tips they sit comfortably in my ears and feel really light but stable in the ear.

They also promise 'Extremely deep, distortion free bass' which sounds like a challenge to me.

A TRIO OF IN EAR MONITORS

The first thing that strikes me is that the soundstage is much wider than with the previous IEMs I have tried...the listening experience is akin to using full size, high end over ear cans.

Best of all I am finding them very comfortable and non fatiguing, both sound wise and physically., plus I've done that thing I do when I really rate a piece of kit...forget I'm meant to be reviewing and just get into the music, always a good sign!

I dive straight back in to Macy Gray's 'On how life is' and the music totally comes alive.

Bass does seem incredibly deep and tuneful and I am particularly aware of the piano and organ sound.

I get the feeling that I am hearing everything the recording has to offer, not missing anything at all.

Macy's vocal is as engaging and huskily velvet as it is on the main hifi.....which is quite crazy, seeing as the combined price on the Sennheisers and my X5 is under a grand as opposed to 10s of thousands downstairs in the big system.....yeah, I know, I'm trying to rationalise £600 in ears as 'good value'.

Hardfloor time again! Ok Sennheiser, you weren't making it up about the bass were you?

This is pretty insane, I am getting so much detail in the music on every level, perfectly balanced, from the tight, fast bass to the skippy tops.

Best of all I am finding them very comfortable and non fatiguing, both sound wise and physically., plus I've done that thing I do when I really rate a piece of kit...forget I'm meant to be reviewing and just get into the music, always a good sign!

Before I know it I have listened to the full albums that I had previously picked tracks out from...Gil Scott-Heron sounds amazing...so do Primal Scream. I don't have any classical music on my FiiO but if I did, I bet that would sound great too.;and I am not a classical fan!

A thoroughly enjoyable listening experience.....possibly the first in ears I have heard that are serious competition for full size headphones, as in you could just buy these rather than having a pair of headphones and a pair of IEMs.

Furiously expensive they may be, but it's a justifiable expensive.

The best thing I ever put in my ears!

Sound – 9.5/10

Comfort – 9/10

Fit and finish – 9/10

Value – 9/10

Overall – 9.13/10

Given their overall score Stuart will be taking a listen to the IE800s to see if they warrant an Outstanding Product Award.

Obviously IEMs are a very personal area of Hifi and one size will never fit all. The issue of comfort is perhaps as, if not more, important as the sound.

Have I found an in ear I can live with? Surprisingly yes and, even more surprisingly, possibly competition for my beloved over ear headphones!

Linette Smith

brianandtrevors

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LESSLOSS DFPC ORIGINAL POWER CABLES



**Dan Worth and
Dominic Marsh
take a listen
to this \$595
mains cable
from US
company
LessLoss.**

Along with the DFPC Signature and DFPC Reference power cables that I had in for review last year I also had the DFPC Originals. Costing a fair bit less than the other models coming in at \$595 for any length up to 2 metres and only costing a small amount more for longer lengths. The cables can be terminated with standard or high current IEC's from Oyaide and are available with any variation of power plugs from Oyaide or a Furutech 1363 (G) for the UK and Japan.

Geometrically, the DFPC Original has a 3 core plaited construction and like other LessLoss power cables is extremely well made and solid in construction. Flexibility of the cable is very good due to its geometry and is more easily routed than first perceptions would leave one to believe as its size is slightly toward the larger size.

The DFPC Original is constructed from 6mm² copper conductors with a level 1 'Skin Filtering' technique applied to them. DFPC Signature has level 2 and DFPC Reference a level 4 Skin Filtering, more on LessLoss' Skin Filtering is available from their website pages but needless to say the processes are time consuming processes which has an effect how long it takes to produce the power cables, taking

LESSLOSS DFPC ORIGINAL POWER CABLES

many days in some cases claims LessLoss.

THE SOUND

I have been incredibly impressed with the DFPC Signature and DFPC Reference cables, each being a defined step up in performance from the previous. The DFPC Original though is a truly fantastic cable at a very reasonable price which has a firm relation in performance to the other two ranges.

The DFPC Originals promote delicacies in the performance very well and Ed Sheeran's guitar strings really came to life during his 'Tenerife Sea' performance conveying intricacy and naturalness. The black background I was used to in my system didn't seem to have changes at all proving that the Originals didn't allow for any airborne nasties to be introduced into the system and Sheeran's vocal was on the money for me with a great range of tone.

Whilst not exploring the vast open and extreme airiness of say the Reference cable in upper frequencies I felt that the Original traded off the absolute refinement for a little bit more of an edgier aura of excitement and pizzazz with rock and dance recording where absolute refinement takes away the fun in these types of genres, in fact they were pretty much on the money.

Not taking away from how good the Original is with 'proper' music violins and cymbals were very palpable and the cables didn't seem to restrict spacious decay bringing a sense of realism that was clearly noticeable during playback.

Listening to Urban Species 'Blanket', bass notes were full and allowed for the tracks large lower end to be truly conveyed with all of its masculine weight and extension which never over-shadowed the sultry vocal conveying all the appeal of the dark smokey back street bar the track was set in.

The Originals seem to strike this wonderful balance where gritty meets sultry, rough meets smooth and tight meets loose, the overall presentation has a balance which I could refer to as very universal and the cables could be an extremely easy integration into most systems especially where a range of genres are listened to often.

I replaced the power cable I was using from the wall with a DFPC Signature as LessLoss' Louis Motek suggests that if making a single cable upgrade to use that cable from the wall to the distribution block.

My bottom line is the DFPC Originals are the baby of the line but what they may lack in ultimate refinement and detail retrieval they more than make up in musicality, balance and flexibility of synergy with equipment and music alike.

Effects were well received, the cables have and had a clear synergy and refinement increased allowing for upper end micro details and micro dynamics to become more apparent and bass notes had more upper bass information. Where 'Blanket' sounded full and a little loose with great extension, now the upper bass registers had more definition and detail.

Overall soundstage width with the Originals in place was as vast as I'm used to although some of the borders intricacies had been masked and their 'firefly like' bouncy nature had become slightly intoxicated. DFPC Signature sobered them up a little and they began to sound a little more playful in comparison.

CONCLUSION

Using DFPC Originals throughout a system is a sure fire way of fitting excellent cables which I believe to be great value for money, (the plugs alone are really quite expensive) that will wow the listener and not have them drawn to any particular aspects of the music in a critical manner, they just enthuse the music and across a vast range of genres have a good tonal balance.

Introducing a DFPC Signature will enhance smaller details and refinement but in turn draw the listener to other aspects over a period of time in a more critical manner, this is a constant threat with equipment and cables alike in high end audio and is definitely not a factor specific to LessLoss, so don't get this statement confused.

LESSLOSS DFPC ORIGINAL POWER CABLES

My bottom line is the DFPC Originals are the baby of the line but what they may lack in ultimate refinement and detail retrieval they more than make up in musicality, balance and flexibility of synergy with equipment and music alike.

Build Quality - 8.7/10

Sound Quality - 8.4/10

Value For Money - 8.6/10

Overall - 8.56/10

Recommended for their price/performance level and flexibility of synergy with musical genres and equipment.

Dan Worth

As the cable under review here has achieved a score greater than 8.5 out of a possible 10 marks, our policy at Hifi Pig is then to forward it to another reviewer, in this case Dominic, who casts his views about the product.

Lessloss hail from US and produce a number of power cables, interconnects, speaker cables, digital interconnects, a firewall mains conditioning unit and digital source components (A streamer and DAC).

Here under review is their "Original" power cord which lies at the bottom of their 3 tiered power cord range. The Signature cord was reviewed by Hifi Pig in January 2014 by Dan Worth and the Reference was also reviewed by him in June 2014, both of which won his approval.

CONSTRUCTION

Outwardly, the Lessloss Original appears to be a plaited 3 wire weave of equal sized conductors and clothed in a black expandable mesh covering. It looks very simple, but getting the plait weave to this level of accuracy and consistency is not easy by any means. The review sample was fitted with a Schuko mains plug from Oyaide at the 'input' end while at the 'output' end there is a large bodied Oyaide IEC connector, which by the way are genuine Oyaide connectors. Other terminations are available to order.

No other details about construction was supplied directly to Hifi Pig by Lessloss, so I spent some considerable amount of time ploughing through the copious amount of information on the Lessloss website, yet at the end of that I am still none the wiser



From that first note onwards everything sounded solid and complete, wanting for nothing obvious in the sounds I heard.

regarding conductor metallurgy or insulation materials. A vast amount of explanation about "skin filtering" but even then not explaining how that is implemented within the cable itself, not that Lessloss are obliged to inform any of us of course, so that makes what is written there rather irrelevant with regards to this review, especially so when I disagree with some of the statements being made there. No matter, whether the cable is made from spaghetti or any other material, what concerns us here is the actual sound produced by the Lessloss Original power cord, so herewith is my perception of its performance.

SOUND QUALITY

My first impression of the sound then can be encompassed within only one word – SOLIDITY. From that first note onwards everything sounded solid and complete, wanting for nothing obvious in the sounds I heard. The sound seemed almost constructed of granite, so that the shape of notes was defined within an envelope that had textures and layers within too, with the power and weight that should be there, was there, yet never once excessive or overblown, with not a trace of overhang or muddling. It was that same absence of overhang that gave the impression that the music had slowed down, because once the bass note ceased, I was greeted by a swift silence between the notes so the end of one note and the commencement of the next seemed longer because of that brief pause. That silence was indeed 'silent', as background noise just wasn't there, a dark quiet that

LESSLOSS DFPC ORIGINAL POWER CABLES

shows the cable itself isn't introducing hiss or hum into the system.

Talking of silence, I then played no music at all and cranked the volume right up to full for my noise test. This is to see if there is any hiss, hum or other unwanted artifacts being introduced by the cable itself and none was heard at all in my system, which is sensitive and will show these faults immediately.

When it comes to fast transients however, this cable wasn't quite as nimble and agile as others I have heard. Snare drum hits slightly lacked the crisp razor sharp "crack" from the leading edge of wooden stick striking skin and couldn't quite convincingly convey the sounds coming from the shell of the drum itself heard immediately behind the strike either. It still sounded like a snare drum being hit with a wooden stick though nonetheless. Kick drum was recreated accurately and I could clearly tell if a soft or hard face was being used on the beater, with the weight and power of the strike easily discernable so the full power was there to be heard.

I found the treble to be very natural and organic which is my own personal preference, rather than being spotlit and etched sounding, as over illuminated treble really does make me wince. Cymbal strikes had a crisp metallic "ting" to them with the decay shimmer of the instrument heard clearly and the high hat was very easy to follow with any genre of music, particularly so with high energy or frenetic rock music which often drowns out this instrument.

The mid band too was also a pleasant organic natural sound, so female vocals were clear and uncluttered, soft and beguiling with soft undertones easily heard. Male vocals had the throaty bass growl where needs be and in particular Mark Knopfler's voice had it's gravelly texture as it should be too, so this cable met all my standard sonic benchmarks.

Moving on to some music, I played Porcupine Tree's "Deadwing" album which for me sorts out who's who when it comes to cables. The beginning of the title track has various screeches and squealing noises for the casual listener which is in fact the sounds of an Underground train arriving at a station and passengers alighting. Cables not quite up to the mark gives only the screeching and squealing noises, omitting or muffling the other sounds and leaving the listener rather baffled as to what the sounds actually are, so the Lessloss cable left me in no doubt that all the sounds were present and correct. The track then

picks up pace and can sound rather raucous and frenetic, instruments crashing into one another too, unless it's under perfect control so all the subtle layering is unfolded. At 6 minutes 40 seconds into the title track there is a long low bass note which must 'roll' outwards from the speakers and that is the best way I can describe the sound, because there should actually be a wave shape of sound. With the Lessloss Original all sounds were conveyed as anticipated so another plus mark from me here.

Time for some gentler music perhaps with acoustic sounds, so in to the CD drawer went Derrin Nauendorf's "Live at the Boardwalk" CD which is recorded live, close mic'd with only a simple drum kit accompaniment. Derrin's voice on this album leaves a lot to be desired in places (no offence Derrin fans – which I am one), but it's his superb guitar playing that compels me to listen to him performing again and again, so I do favour the instrumental parts of the album rather than the vocals I must admit. Derrin's guitar plucks, strums and finger work on the frets was recreated with startling reality and I could clearly distinguish between steel and nylon strings on his guitar, with the rich tones of the instrument's body also shining through. There was never a clash either between drums and guitar, so the whole performance remained cohesive and very easy to listen to.

CONCLUSION

All in all then, a fine performance from a mains cable that does what it says on the tin – allows the system to breathe and perform at it's best. It really is a product that you set to it's task and it will quietly and efficiently give a solid uncluttered sound without drawing attention to itself, so it is truly a "fit and forget" component – which I nearly did until I realised it had to be returned to Lessloss following the review!

Construction: 8.6/10

Sound quality: 8.6/10

Value for money: 8.3/10

Overall: 8.5/10

Recommended for: Providing a no-nonsense, powerful, and solid sound.

Price at date of test: \$595.00 including shipping

Dominic Marsh



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AUDIOPLAN POWERSTAR SII MAINS BLOCK AND FINEFILTER POWER FILTER

**Dominic Marsh
takes a listen to a
couple of mains
products from
German
manufacturer
Audioplan.**

Audioplan is a long established hi-fi manufacturer from Germany founded in 1981, with a history of producing excellent sounding speakers and now ancillaries are also added to their portfolio, including cables and supports, plus the PowerStar power distribution block and the Finefilter conditioner/filter unit reviewed here. I am more than surprised that Audioplan don't have a greater presence here in the UK, although I have seen the Kontrast loudspeaker advertised on several occasions throughout the years and tempted more than once to buy a pair. Perhaps we are being a touch too parochial with home grown products when there is a plethora of products waiting across the Channel that has real

AUDIOPLAN POWERSTAR SII MAINS BLOCK AND FINEFILTER POWER FILTER

merits for adding to an audition shortlist. Arguably, we have the likes of Atoll, Advance Acoustic, Focal, Cabasse and Triangle from France that was instantly recalled from memory without any effort, but I truly struggled to recall any from Germany apart from Audio Physic. Shame on me and I bet I am not alone in this.

I regard a mains conditioner as an essential rather than a luxury or a frivolity, so my system has one permanently installed and wouldn't be without it. I pay particular attention with any of these devices under review, as to whether or not the conditioner or filter squashes or curtails dynamics, so that benchmark test is high on the agenda when I evaluate any filtering/conditioning device.

Anyway, back to the matter at hand and let's find out what the Audioplan PowerStar and Finefilter are about.

**CONSTRUCTION**

The PowerStar mains distribution block is a huge change away from the often found "strip" type of power block arranged in a gang of four or more outlet sockets mounted in a straight line. Nothing actually wrong with that arrangement per se when implemented correctly, but it is not uncommon for the internal bus bars to be made from brass, which means there can be a slight voltage drop and/or loss of power between the socket nearest to the inlet and the furthest one away.

The PowerStar "S" device is a flat drum shape measuring 12 x 8,5 x 22 cm (WxHxD) made from 5mm cast aluminium which looks like black machined Delrin material. There are seven power outlets arranged in a radial pattern of six around the perimeter with the seventh outlet located in the centre. The review sample was fitted with seven 3 pin 13 amp UK sockets, but Schuko and other sockets are available to order I believe. Power inlet is by way of a C19 20 amp high power IEC socket. Power rating is 16 amps continuous with overvoltage protection. The unit is supported on 3 round feet which can be unscrewed if

AUDIOPLAN POWERSTAR SII MAINS BLOCK AND FINEFILTER POWER FILTER

so desired and Audioplan have bored a keyhole type of aperture for wall mounting. It is wired internally in a “star” arrangement, the theory being that all sockets are equidistant from the inlet and hence no voltage or power losses between sockets can occur. The “S” suffix denotes this is the deluxe version with silver internal wiring.

The FineFilter “S” submitted for review is a plain looking black painted box with a hard wired mains inlet cable attached. The inlet cable named “PowerCord S” has a UK 3 pin 13 amp plug fitted to the review sample and of course other terminations are available, plus the lead length can also be specified when ordering. The conductor wire is 4 x 2.6 mm² and made from pure copper with silver plating. External appearance of this cable is rather attractive with a multi-coloured mesh sheath, finally encased in a clear outer shroud. There are two toggle switches fitted to the filter box which cater for a “Ground filter” setting for one of the switches, plus another 3 position toggle switch denoted as “Presence+”, “Neutral” and “Bass+”.

Linking the FineFilter to the PowerStar is a supplied flying lead with a UK 3 pin 13 amp plug at one end and a C19 20 amp IEC connector at the other end.

The FineFilter S retails for £485.00, the PowerStar S retails for £435.00 which also includes the PowerCord S. The PowerCord S is available separately at £175.00 for a standard 1.5 metre length and other lengths with commensurate prices are available.

SOUND QUALITY

Or rather, what it doesn’t sound like, because it doesn’t have a sonic signature of it’s own.

However, the first obstacle I had to overcome was where to place these two items. Being a large cylindrical construction and having a separate filter box to contend with meant I had to make some choices about location when installing this combo. They wouldn’t fit under the rack and not behind either, having them to one or the other side of the rack wasn’t an option,

Treble definition seemed to be noticeably clearer, with ambience especially giving a more detailed and resolved sonic picture.

unless I wanted my good lady wife to offer me a large dose of ear bashing for my sins and also running the risk of damage from vigorous vacuuming from said spouse , so I sat the pair on the top shelf of my rack out of harm’s way. Now, if I was the owner of these items I would be very tempted to remove the 3 feet from under the PowerStar unit and wall mount it out of sight, then pop the smaller Finefilter unit somewhere else. Having a total of seven power outlets though was very much appreciated, because every component in my system was ably catered for.

Right then, on to some listening to gauge how effective this pair is.

There was no “WOW!” moment from the outset, instead everything sounded just so solid and tangible but in an understated way. Treble definition seemed to be noticeably clearer, with ambience especially giving a more detailed and resolved sonic picture. The entire audible sound palette was just THERE in full detail, unfussed and uncluttered with no shortfalls I could even begin to mention. It wasn’t that I was unenthusiastic, it was more that I was secure in the

Live albums especially had vibrancy and “aliveness” that really made you feel as though you were sat in the venue maybe four or five rows back from the stage, hearing all of the music clearly and being right in amongst your fellow audience members.

knowledge that the improvements were right across the board from the upper treble right down into the lower registers, but never once in an in your face floodlit style – very subtle in fact. Separation between instruments was noteworthy, without showing any clashing or crashing into each other during hectic music passages and sound staging too was crisp and concise. I couldn't hear any squashing or suppressing of dynamics with the combination under review.

Live albums especially had vibrancy and “aliveness” that really made you feel as though you were sat in the venue maybe four or five rows back from the stage, hearing all of the music clearly and being right in amongst your fellow audience members. My recent purchase of Fink's “Wheels Under My Feet” live album recorded in different venues around the world exemplifies that feeling of just being there each time when the tracks were actually recorded.

I took the opportunity during those tracks to experiment with the toggle switch positions on the FineFilter unit. Try as I might, I couldn't find any perceptible

differences with either one of the switches on or off in whatever position and I count myself fortunate in having good hearing acuity. That was as much attention as I paid to that pair of switches and thereafter left them in the OFF position for the Ground Filter and in the NEUTRAL position for the “Presence+” and the “Bass+” toggle switch for the remainder of the review period. You may find otherwise of course.

Most components that don't provide that initial WOW factor from the start and are laced with subtleties throughout generally only make their true presence felt when they depart and the Audioplan pair did exactly that when I took them out of my system. The palpable weight and strength in the bass departed with them, so did the top end detail resolution, as did the midrange power, in fact the system sounded a tad thin and anaemic afterwards and that was with my resident mains conditioner installed once more.

CONCLUSION

I would say that the final paragraph in this review above sums up my time with the Audioplan FineFilter and PowerStar pairing perfectly and it would be totally superfluous to add any more here. It takes living with them full time to appreciate their true worth and if there is any doubt, then I suggest disconnecting them for an hour or so to prove that point unequivocally. For that reason I give a full and deserved recommendation.

Build quality:	8.4/10
Sound quality:	8.4/10
Value for money:	8.4/10
Overall:	8.4/10

Recommended for: An understated performance, delivered in an unassuming manner. Price is good value too, so should undoubtedly be on your audition wish list.

Dominic Marsh



THEY DON'T FEEL
WHAT YOU FEEL
THEY DON'T SEE
WHAT YOU SEE

THEY DON'T HEAR
WHAT YOU HEAR

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X-AIR

As a reviewer you get a lot of things other than electronics and speakers sent and whilst some are inexpensive and serve a useful purpose, there are those that are much pricier and fail to impress...others do. The doodad we have here falls into the former category...well sort of.

WHAT IS IT?

..or rather, what are they? Designed to fit underneath components the X-Air system allows air to circulate underneath your valuable electronics and keep it cooler. The idea is that by keeping your kit cooler it will last longer. Effectively they are adding an extra 14mm of space underneath each component.

In the pack you get a couple of pieces of hollow aluminium 255mm long, 25mm wide and 14mm in height. You also get four stick pads to fit underneath to stop them slipping about. They cost a penny short of ten pounds.

DO THEY WORK?

When the distributor asked if they could send these I was pretty emphatic that they would be of little or no use. Most of my kit sits on purpose made anti-vibration feet from various makers that inherently add an extra layer of space for air to circulate underneath and so an extra little gap would be neither here nor there.

In honesty I struggled to find a use for these in the main set up until it dawned on me that they would be perfect for adding a ventilation space under the laptop.

In recent months I've embraced streaming technology and files are (usually) my main source. The laptop I use is not the newest of models, but it has been optimised for audio playback and it is dedicated for this purpose. It is quiet enough but it does get warm. Popping the X-Airs underneath does seem to have reduced the frequency of the fan coming on. Obviously I'm not going to comment on whether this will prolong the lifespan of the computer!

CONCLUSION



Of course you could introduce an air gap in other ways using blocks of wood or whatever, but for the sake of a tenner these do the job very nicely and unobtrusively.

In high-end audio I can't see these being used as the majority of kit has plenty of space underneath and if not users utilise more esoteric products that will incorporate vibration control...well I do. However, I did find a good use for them under the laptop and they do work to a greater or lesser extent.

Of course you could introduce an air gap in other ways using blocks of wood or whatever, but for the sake of a tenner these do the job very nicely and unobtrusively.

No Scores but effective if you feel you can find a use for them like I did.

Stuart Smith

MUSIC

Gavin Harrison – Cheating The Polygraph (Kscope)



Drummers have a hard time of it. You've all heard the jokes: How do you know when a drummer is at the door? The knocking speeds up. Or alternatively: How do you know when a drummer is at the door? He doesn't know when to come in.

It's fair to say that, generally speaking, solo albums by drummers are only of interest to other drummers. That certainly isn't the case with Cheating The Polygraph. Gavin Harrison drums with The Porcupine Tree and is currently one of three drummers in the latest incarnation of King Crimson. For Cheating The Polygraph, Harrison has taken eight Porcupine Tree tracks and reimagined them in a jazz big band style.

This is not big band jazz in the style of Glenn Miller however; think more like Frank Zappa's Make A Jazz Noise Here album. In fact, the closest comparison I can make is with Andy Sheppard's 1990 album Soft On The Inside. Harrison's father was a professional trumpet player and so he was surrounded by the sound of brass from an early age. Working over a five year period with Porcupine Tree bassist Laurence Cottle, who arranged the pieces, Harrison has produced an album that succeeds entirely on its own merits. If, like me, you are entirely unfamiliar with

If, like me, you are entirely unfamiliar with the Porcupine Tree originals, you will still find this to be a deeply satisfying album.

the Porcupine Tree originals, you will still find this to be a deeply satisfying album.

Highlights include opening track what Happens Now? which builds on seemingly random short brass stabs, reminiscent of the opening pulses of Steve Reich's Music for 18 Musicians, moving to a complex polyrhythmic crescendo. Hatesong (halo) provides a network of marimba and bass guitar patterns for the brass and drums to weave their way through.

Cheating The Polygraph is an album for both fans of modern jazz and lovers of adventurous rock. Highly recommended.

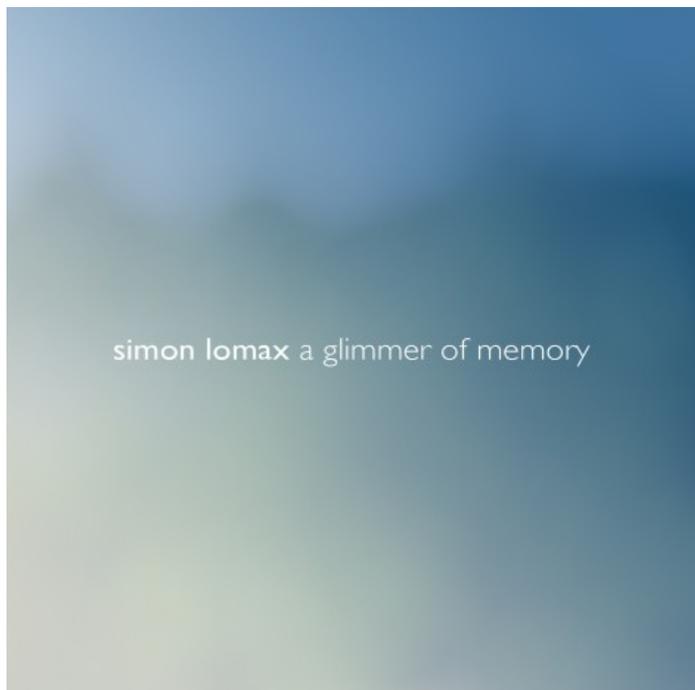
Cheating The Polygraph is available now on Kscope.

John Scott

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MUSIC

Simon Lomax - A Glimmer Of Memory



A Glimmer of Memory is best listened to with the lights dimmed whilst sat in your favourite armchair and allowing the music taking you along with its natural flow.

This is electronic music, of course, but it manages to remain organic and pure in the feeling it conveys. A tune may produce a contemplative response or a more uplifting reaction, and this is certainly music for the mind and not the body.

There is an instant calming of all senses whilst it is playing Glimmer and whilst it meanders, twists and flows you can't help but be drawn in to its soundscapes. Linette on first hearing it said it was "like tripping but without the drugs"

Beautiful and highly recommended!

Thore Pfeiffer - Im Blickfeld (Kompakt)



Thore Pfeiffer is a young German producer who first came up on my radar on Kompakt's excellent Pop Ambient album we reviewed back in October of last year. This is the second artist album to come from the Pop Ambient compilation series that is so carefully curated by label head honcho Wolfgang Voigt.

There is an instant calming of all senses whilst it is playing Glimmer and whilst it meanders, twists and flows you can't help but be drawn in to its soundscapes.

Simon Lomax is predominantly known as a producer of music for film and television, but his self released A Glimmer Of Memory sits firmly in the ambient and atmospheric category.

The six tracks on this album are sparse, with pads ebbing and flowing to produce an album that is quite beautiful in its textural quality and ability to trigger an emotional response - All That Is Gone has a mournful and eerie quality to it that is somewhat sad whilst At First Sight manages to conjure a much more positive and forward looking vibe.

MUSIC

Im Blickfeld follows the Pop Ambient aesthetic remaining avant-garde enough to remain interesting, whilst being accessible enough to not be just one for the beard strokers out there.

Im Kreislauf Der Dinge, the album's fourth tune reminds me of Pink Floyd for some reason, though I can't quite put my finger on why that should be. There is a general feeling of pastoral psychedelia throughout the album.

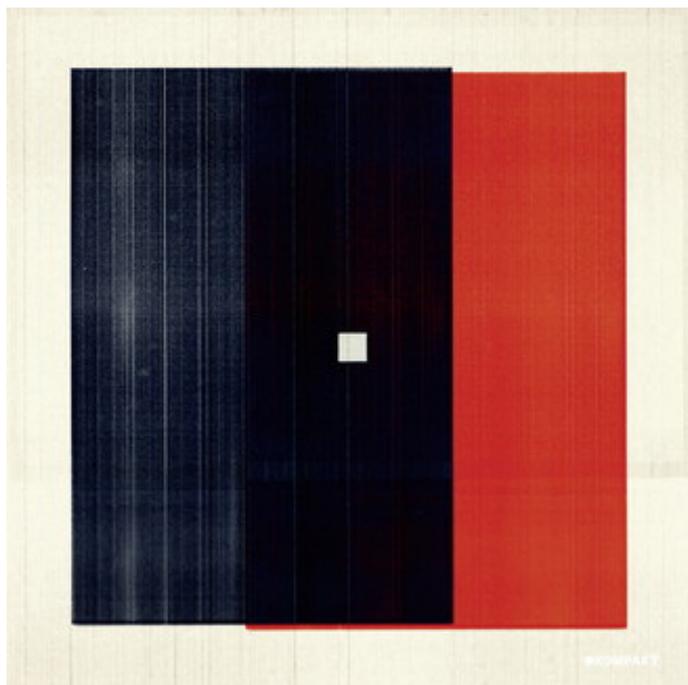
Pfeiffer's tunes are pretty stripped back affairs and rather than building layer upon layers of samples he goes for a more simplistic approach that is both hypnotic and thought provoking. There's not masses going on but what is there is carefully crafted to create pieces that evoke a feeling of introversion and calm that comes before a storm of activity.

"During production, I always had these images in mind, of a hunter sitting in his deerstand, contemplating his extended field of vision", Thore explains. "He's got a lot of time at his hands to muse about things and take in the silence before the storm".

Out on Kompakt May 25th

Recommended!

John Tejada - Signs Under Test (Kompakt)



Tejada is a 41 year old producer and Dj based in LA who joined the Kompakt imprint in 2011 with Signs Under Test following his

previous album The Predicting Machine and a load of 12 inchers.

This is very much in the bleep and beats techno category with Tejada working the machines at his disposal with assurance and self confidence to produce an album of individual tunes that work well together.

This is clever stuff that is best at home in the murky and dirty underground clubs - no main room, four to the floor bangers here - but for the dedicated follower of anti-fashion this album is equally relevant in the sitting room.

What you have is a collection of tunes that hark back to the days of producers using proper synths and manipulating them to create that gorgeous analogue sound that many will be familiar with.

Signs Under Test is dark and broody and manages to have a meditative and yet foot stomping quality to it. The beats are skippy and clever with enough variation to never feel like you are listening to a variation on a theme.

Texturally the tunes on Signs build and build taking you to a place of bliss before releasing sparse stabs that draw you in and hook you.

For me the tune Rubric is the standout and it sort of encapsulates everything about this record. A clever beat opens the track, a warbly little synth line comes in and gets in your brain before the squelchy melody comes to the fore. It builds and builds before the hands in the air, blissed out break and then gets back to the business of noodly spaced out techno with a funky edge.

Meadow is also a killer of a track too with a nagging and insistent beat that underpins the whole track keeping it firmly rooted in place whilst around it Tejada builds soundscapes and textures that let your mind drift to another place.

If you like what I used to call "proper" techno that eschews the immediate rush of formulaic dancefloor fillers in favour of carefully crafted, spaced-out, insistent and slightly sinister tunes then Signs Under Test will be right up your street.

As Tejada comments "Everything is built from the ground up using hardware synths - mostly analogue, but that's a bit annoying to say nowadays. It's not a record that fits in with any current stuff, but something that hopefully holds up as it ages. Something that hopefully reveals more on repeated listens."

MUSIC

Out now on Kompakt.

Recommended!

Collected 01 - Various Artists (Naim Records)

Collected_01



The blurb on the Naim Records website says that Collected 1 is a collection of their favourite records from the last few years and succeeds the Naim Sampler series. It's out on official release on 11th May and is available in hi-rez download or on limited and numbered vinyl.

It's a wide reaching collection in terms of the styles of music represented and I really like it for that, though there is a bit of an emphasis on the more jazz tinged.

Given the record's diversity, rather than trying to talk about each of the tunes herein in detail it's perhaps better to list the tracks so readers can look them up and judge for themselves - there's snippets available on the Naim Records website.

1. PYLO "Crying On Land"
2. NEIL COWLEY TRIO "La Porte"
3. SABINA "Toujours"
4. PHANTOM LIMB "Hollow Eyes"
5. KAIROS 4TET "Home To You feat. Marc O'Reilly"
6. HUEY AND THE NEW YORKERS "Dirty Bird"
7. GET THE BLESSING "OC DC"

8. TRICHOTOMY "Strom"
9. SONS OF KEMET "Going Home"
10. GRIGORI "Sinus"
11. STUART McCALLUM "What Is Beauty (Live)"
12. EMPIRICAL "Simple Things"
13. BARB JUNGR "Lay Lady Lay"
14. MARC FORD "Call Me Faithful"

There's an inherent danger in putting such a varied collection of music on one album, but here it works really well.

Listeners are treated in the first track to the down-beat-indie-pop stylings of Pylo (*who should clearly be massive and remind me not a small amount of Richard Ashcroft*)... and then we move straight into the cool jazz of Neil Cowley Trio... and with barely a breath onto the somewhat leftfield and art rock Toujours by Sabina... and then the country tinged Hollow Eyes by Phantom Limb - *such a shame this band are no more as they are a real gem of a group!*

You get the drift? ...eclectic! Well sort of.

In the main Collected 01 is on the cooler side of the musical tracks and it will appeal to the hip kids. As such I can see this getting played in the bars and pre club eateries of the capital's trendier areas where the urban woodsmen with their beards and coiffed hairdos lurk. It'll also get played a good deal here as the content is great and the reproduction very good indeed!

I enjoyed Collected a great deal is a bit of an understatement...it's a fabulous collection of tunes from a number of artists I've not had the pleasure of encountering previously, but some I will be exploring further in the near future. Highlights for me were Sons Of Kemet with their excellent dubby/jazzy Going Home and then the song that follows it Sinus by Grigori...which also has dubby elements to it. But then Stuart McCallum's What is Beauty (Live) is also rather splendid! ...and then there's Barb Jungr's version of Lay Lady Lay...

There's a lot on this record to really enjoy, much of it difficult to pigeonhole (*which is a good thing too*) and none of it boring or on the record to make up the numbers.

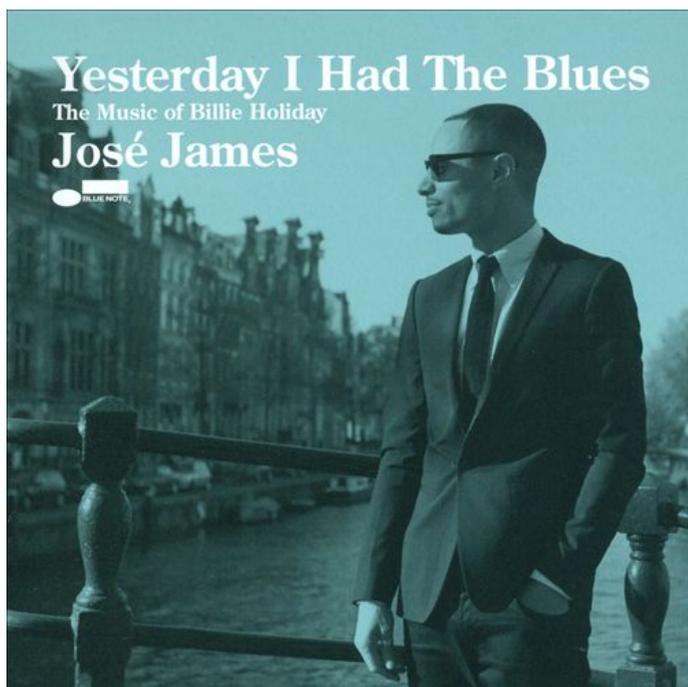
As a whole Collected never feels disjointed and as an introduction to some of the artists on Naim Label it works really well. It's a sit down with a glass of wine

MUSIC

after a hard day at the virtual coalface and letting the cares of the world ebb away type of record.

Recommended!

José James – Yesterday I had The Blues: The Music of Billie Holiday (Bluenote)



Panamanian (now resident in Minneapolis, USA) José James attended The New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music. In 2008, he debuted with his first album, *The Dreamer*, on the Brownswood label with *Blackmagic* following in 2010. 2010's *For All We Know* came out on the Impulse! label and became the winner of both the Edison Award and L'Académie du Jazz Grand Prix for best Vocal Jazz Album of 2010.

On this album he showcases his significant vocal talent to the tunes of Billie Holliday whose 100th birthday it would have been this year and who James claims as his inspiration for following his chosen career path. “As much as I loved Nirvana, De La Soul, and A Tribe Called Quest, her music spoke to me on a much deeper level. Her work was mastery - of pain, of trauma, of faith in music and the power of transformation. I had found my teacher. Billie Holiday made me want to be a jazz singer and set me on the path that I'm walking today.” he says in the notes to this album out on Bluenote and downloaded here from Highresaudio.

The arrangements are for the main part sparse allowing James' vocals to shine through and carry the emotional connection he obviously has with the music herein through to the listener ...

You get Good Morning Heartache, Body and Soul, Fine and Mellow, I Thought About You, What a Little Moonlight Can Do, Tenderly, Lover Man, God Bless the Child, Strange Fruit and all are rather splendid indeed.

Yesterday I had The Blues is produced by Blue Note president Don Was and features a band that includes pianist Jason Muan, bassist John Patitucci, and drummer Eric Harland. The arrangements are for the main part sparse allowing James' vocals to shine through and carry the emotional connection he obviously has with the music herein through to the listener - the exception to the laidback blues stylings of *Yesterday* is the much more upbeat and energetic *What A Little Moonlight Can Do*.

I'm certainly no jazz aficionado, but this is clearly an album of worth and James' vocal talents are undeniable. This, together with the excellent musicianship and Holliday's heartfelt lyrics makes for a thoroughly enjoyable album. Highlights for me are the gospel-like and stripped-back *Strange Fruit* which, if you know the song, can't fail to touch you and cause the hairs on the back of your neck to stand up.

A fitting tribute to Holliday!

Recommended

CLASSICS

Leeds United

This month John Scott revisits The Who's timeless live album: The Who Live At Leeds.

By 1970, The Who were riding the crest of a wave, although they would continue on to even bigger successes. The previous year had seen them release *Tommy*, their first magnum opus - a double-album "rock opera" about a deaf, dumb and blind boy. The album was a huge critical and commercial success, although it failed to hit the number one spot on either side of the Atlantic reaching #4 in America and #2 in the UK.

The band had toured extensively throughout 1969; before, during, and after the *Tommy* recording sessions and had built up an extensive collection of live recordings. The intention had been to follow the release of *Tommy* with a live release in 1970 consisting of material taken from the 1969 tour. When it came down to it though, Pete Townsend just couldn't bring himself to wade through all the recordings to select the best performances and ordered that the tapes should be destroyed. The band decided to play a couple of small gigs in early 1970 with the specific purpose of recording these for live album material. Shows were arranged in Leeds on 15 February and Hull the day



after. Both shows were recorded as planned but problems with the Hull show - John Entwistle's bass guitar was not recorded on some of the songs - resulted in the Leeds performance providing all of the material for the resulting album; *Live At Leeds*.

Live At Leeds was released on 16 May in the USA and 23 May in the UK. Although the band had four studio albums and 18 singles under their belt by this

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time, the album was surprisingly low on original material - the band's Substitute was accompanied by three covers of R&B standards on side one and just two original songs - extended workouts of Townsend's My Generation and Magic Bus featured on the second side.

Live At Leeds was released in the style of a bootleg LP, heavily modelled on the Rolling Stones bootleg Live'r Than You'll Ever Be. A flimsy brown cardboard sleeve featured a printed recreation of a rubber stamp in either blue or red stating: The Who Live At Leeds. The sleeve opened up with two pockets inside, one containing the album in a paper inner sleeve and the other a selection of facsimile documents from the band's career. These included typewritten lyrics for My Generation with written amendments, a rejection letter from EMI, an invoice for the purchase of various musical instruments and a Maximum R&B poster featuring Townsend in windmill guitar mode. Remarkably, when I bought a second-hand copy of the album around 1976 all of these artefacts were still present.

The album opens with a barnstorming version of Mose Allison's Young Man's Blues. Townsend, to the right of the stage switches effortlessly between chordal riffing and nimble lead runs, moving between crunchy overdrive and delicate clean tones and provides a grounding for Keith Moon's manic drumming and Entwistle's thundering bass. Townsend claimed that Entwistle was really the lead guitarist in the group rather than himself and you can clearly hear what he means. Roger Daltrey's screaming vocal culminates in the assertion that: "A young man aint got nothing; aint got sweet fuck-all" - a punk call to arms years before its time, as My Generation was, five years even earlier. Substitute, Eddie Cochrane's Summertime Blues and Johnny Kidd & The Pirates' Shakin' All Over follow a similar formula - Townsend's skilled rhythm work providing enough space to allow Entwistle and Moon to prod, pummel and propel the songs.

Side two allows the band, and Townsend in particular, to stretch out. Extending a classic three minute single to five times its length could be considered somewhat self-indulgent but The Who avoided merely extending the song with bloated soloing and instead incorporated a thrilling medley including See Me, Feel Me/Listening To You, Underture, Naked Eye and The Seeker. Magic Bus

gets a seven and a half minute workout during which the song's Bo Diddley beat is stretched in a dozen different directions. For much of the song Townsend drops out, leaving Entwistle's bass to carry the song along with minimal accompaniment from Moon until the guitar and drums power in again bringing the album to a tumultuous climax.

And that was the Live At Leeds that I knew and loved through the second half of the 1970's right up until 2001 when the deluxe version of the album was released, containing the whole of the Leeds set list, including a complete performance of Tommy. This could only be a good thing, right? Well, yes and no. The additional performances are just as exciting as those on the original album, the between-song banter is entertaining and the version of Tommy has become my go-to version, preferable to the studio or film soundtrack version. And yet, I do a little double take every time I play the album and it starts with Heaven And Hell and not Young Man's Blues; that's just not right and never will be. In a perfect world, a disc with the original album would also have been included in the package.

So now we have the whole set - even if still not quite in the correct running order; Summertime Blues, Shakin' All Over, My Generation and Magic Bus actually followed the performance of Tommy rather than proceeding it as they do on the album, but having the Tommy performance on a separate CD makes more sense from a sequencing point of view, I suppose. Substitute now forms part of a medley of hits - "The easy ones", Townsend jokes - along with Happy Jack and I'm A Boy. The "mini opera" A Quick One While He's Away" is played for laughs although the subject matter, the seduction of a Girl Guide by an old engine driver, like Tommy's Uncle Ernie, hasn't stood the test of time.

A further release in 2010 finally allowed us to hear the Hull recording, the missing bass parts having been replaced by digitally "stitching in" the equivalent parts from the Leeds recording. It is another coruscating performance, in places even more so than Live At Leeds and there are those who prefer it to the Leeds recording. Live At Leeds however is the album that has gone down in rock history as one of the greatest live albums of all time, if not *the* greatest.

John Scott

BEHIND THE BRANDS

This Month Hifi Pig Goes Behind The Brands With Lee Taylor of Leema Acoustics

Your History

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

If you mean the Audio industry, I ran the sound department in the school theatre, a chap came out to service the school system. He recommended I talk to the company he worked for...I did...and they gave me a job... That was in 1976!

I attended a really crap progressive comprehensive school, careers advice was "Ford Dagenham" or "The Gas Board". That was it...I was going to be a rock star (of course) so getting in to "Audio" seemed like a terrific opportunity...I should have chosen The Gas Board, I would be living in Spain now

Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?

My Father

Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?

My Children/Leema Libra DAC...delete as appropriate.

You and your system

What was your very first system?

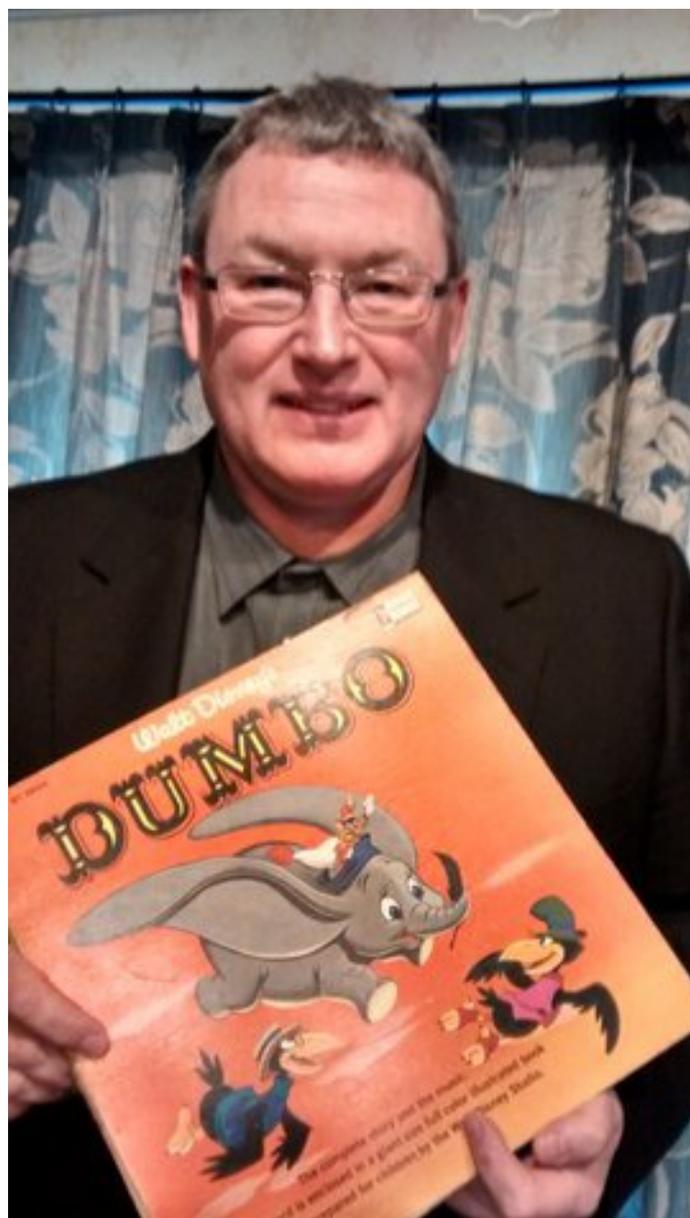
A BSR turntable in cream plastic and a crystal cartridge running in to an ex-American Naval PA amplifier made by Crown, which had a dirty great 240 to 110 transformer stuck on the side.....all valve of course, It had about 100 watts output and was indestructible.

I used to use it for school discos so I painted it with lilac emulsion.....Cool.

I built a speaker with an EMI bass driver, a Goodman's midrange of some sort and an Elac tweeter...Oh the happy days of mono!

Tell us about your system history

What...you want a book now?....Here's a heavily edited list of highlights.



Second system was a Garrard SP25 Mk3 turntable feeding a kit amp...Texas I think....and a pair of KEF Concerto's...Quickly changed the deck to a Sugden Connoisseur.

Slowly Upgraded to a Goldring Lenco GL75, a Linsley Hood amp kit and a pair of Leak sandwich 600 speakers.

Added an Akai 4000DS reel to reel tape deck sometime.

It was around this time I bought some Sennheiser HD 414 headphones...terrific.

BEHIND THE BRANDS

Upgraded again to a Transcriptors turntable and built a pair of huge transmission line speakers following an article in HiFi Answers...Solid Teak...unthinkable now.
They had a Coles super tweeter...woo hoo.
Sold it all and built a system with my dad.....Went back to the Lenco turntable,
Upgraded the Linsley Hood amp....bigger transformer...2N3055 output devices,
bought four second hand Quad electrostatics...EL57's...built our own double height end cheeks and stacked them.
We were disappointed with the bass, so we ripped up the floor and built an enormous spiral bass horn with 4 KEF B139 drivers (racetrack) in to the floor void.
Pretty radical in a terraced 3 bedroom ex-council house!
When we had finished you would never have known it was there, we built a complicated arrangement of vents in to the skirting board as the opening of the Horn in to the room.
My Dad made a little active crossover so the Quads were relieved of bass duty.
The lilac Crown amp was used to drive the bass beast.

My Dad had bought the soundtrack for 2001 a space odyssey and the opening "Also thus spake Zarathustra" was breath-taking. There seemed to be no limit in either dynamics or frequency.

I left home on my 17th birthday and couldn't really have a big system in my tiny little flat...Instead I bought an old VW van with a 2 litre engine and a broken accelerator pedal...he return spring had broken which was a sod to replace, so I had to drive with a piece of rope tied round the pedal and pulled up when changing gear or stopping..Oh happy days!
Anyway, I bought some old kit from my employer at the time (Theatre Projects)...a whopping pair of Tannoy Lockwoods, an Amcron DC150 amplifier and a Revox A77 reel to reel tape machine.
I then got an industrial inverter which converted the 12v in the van to 240v AC.
I had the ultimate in-car stereo Way ahead of my time.
Changing tapes left handed while driving proved to be a particular challenge!
Tape, Rope or Steering..... choose any two!.....why am I still alive!



BEHIND THE BRANDS

I could only play 1 tape then had to keep the engine running for a bit to recharge the battery
I suppose I could have used a cassette machine but at the time I had access to unlimited Ampex quarter inch tape for free so it was much cheaper. I never did warm to cassette.

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

When I was at the BBC, all the Garrard 301 and 401 turntables were upgraded to Technics direct drive.....I remember walking in to BBC Lime Grove and seeing piles of them being loaded in to vans for disposal. I heard that the majority were skipped because there were too many for BBC redundant stores dept to deal with.....somewhere out there must be a landfill site full of Garrard turntables.....it makes you want to cry.
Anyway, one of the 401 units with SME 3009 arm fell in to my car.....how lucky was that!

Sadly it was stolen from my flat in Earls Court in the mid 80's. I miss that turntable a lot.

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

The quad system I built with my Dad, no question.

Tell us about your current system(s)

5 Leema Xen micro monitors fed by Leema Elements power amps and a custom built 500 watt subwoofer discreetly built in to the seat in the living room bay window (My living has solid floors dammit). I am however designing a two by 18 inch Isobaric sixth order sub which I can fit in the basement on the other side of the house and duct the ports to the sitting room, hidden behind vents in the skirting. History repeats itself
Calculations predict over 120dB at 15Hz!
Currently the source is an Oppo 103EU as the source. I digitised my record collection to a NAS drive and am still contemplating how I will deal with streaming longer term.



BEHIND THE BRANDS

I also have a Thorens TD160 with Rega RB250 arm for my vinyl, but this has been liberated by my youngest daughter who “doesn’t like” CD, so she collects music she wants to keep on vinyl and uses downloads for transient music only. She is not unique in this, it’s a growing trend.

The state of the industry

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

A substantial element must be fashion...they look cool, but there is a deeper message...I think it is a backlash against many of the ultra-fast high bandwidth solid state amps produced in the 80’s and 90’s. Technical superiority was king and musicality was somehow lost. Many amplifiers from that period, particularly those from a number of high end audio companies, had a harsh sheen to the sound which was exacerbated by the fashion for poorly designed metal dome tweeters with hideous out of band resonance characteristics.

I auditioned loads of amps in that period and couldn’t find anything I liked. I ended up with an old Rogers amp in a lovely wooden cabinet. The front was half silver and half red....sounded better than anything else I tried by miles.

Of course, valves should always be used in guitar amps.....I always like to torture mine so badly they emit a kind of bluey violet plasma and probably tachyons!

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?

How many questions?

The older I get the more cyclic things seem to be.....Bicycles sold in huge numbers up until the mid 50’s then took a steep tumble with many well-known brands biting the dust in the early 80’s. Now, in 2015 we buy more bikes than ever.

People still buy huge quantities of music, it’s up to us to sell the benefits of our products.

The larger market wants smaller and cheaper, there are now many other pursuits and technologies to challenge HiFi, but a point of convergence will occur soon at the sharp end of formats/bit rates/playback

I left home on my 17th birthday and couldn’t really have a big system in my tiny little flat...Instead I bought an old VW van with a 2 litre engine and a broken accelerator pedal...

devices. Amplifiers and speakers will still be needed whatever the source.

The high end will remain largely untouched.....to reproduce Rammstein at stadium rock levels or classical music at concert level cleanly and without distortion takes a lot of power, big speakers and a lot of money. Those that want it will buy it regardless.

What are the industry’s biggest con(s)?

Despite the efforts of trade bodies, the industry is fragmented in its efforts to promote itself. To use the Swiss watch industry as an analogy, in the 70’s digital watches were the next big thing. Many small Swiss watch companies disappeared. The big companies got together and rebranded.....they made their products desirable, sexy, classy, exclusive, and most importantly EXPENSIVE. There is a lesson to be learned.....traditional quality HiFi brands should stop trying to compete with the far east on price and concentrate on quality and exclusivity.

What we want is for affluent successful people to make the transition from “why do we want a HiFi?” to “I really desire a sexy music system”

We need to change the message and our image.

BEHIND THE BRANDS

The way you work

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

I have spent the majority of my working life in recording studios. The last thing I am looking for is that HiFi sound... simply want what I am hearing to sound the same as the original.....not augmented.

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

All of the above.

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

Neither

There are many preconceptions in HiFi...small monitors image better/big speakers make more natural bass/small speakers integrate in to the room better/big speakers have better dynamics etc etc.

I have heard many speakers which would prove/disprove any such assertions either way. If I had a big room I would plumb for big speakers AND subwoofers, carefully placed to improve the consistency of bass.

The idea of sub/sat systems is to produce the illusion of full range speakers in the room. However, my experience of such systems is that the subwoofer is almost always poorly placed and badly integrated such that the illusion somehow never comes off. Specifically, the subwoofer is usually too loud. I have seen people constantly get up and down to change the volume on the subwoofer from one album to the next...this should really tell you something. In my experience the best way to fix poor in-room integration is...to use two subwoofers.

If it was a small room I would opt for mini monitors and two subwoofers, carefully integrated. There is a very useful article available online which was written by my business partner Mallory Nicholls for Sound on Sound magazine a few years ago. It is a mine of information regarding subwoofer types and installation/integration tips.

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

What is your favourite recording?

Technical...Really don't have one.

Music...The Sensational Alex Harvey band live...I was there!

Changes week by week

Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings

Kind of Blue by Miles Davis.a classic and nicely recorded, though I think the opening crash cymbal on "so what" caught the engineers out...Makes me smile every time.

Romantic Warrior by Return to Forever...staggering musicianship and writing from every member of the band...Unequaled I believe.

Music for 18 musicians by Steve Reich.....I attended a concert in Bristol where he performed parts of this and another piece called "clapping" which was the opening piece, performed as the musicians were walking to the central stage from the corners of the hall. The effect was mesmerising and one that sadly, no system is going to be able to recreate.

What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures

All Brand X...I love JazzFunk and JazzRock even now. I played in a number of bands from the mid 70's to the early 90's. Bass in the JazzFunk bands (slappety slap slap slap) and really nasty guitar in the JazzRock bands. My guitar style has been described as loud confident and wrong! We won't discuss my bass style I loved it all.

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?

Disneys Dumbo, original mid 60's edition with picture book....First record I bought when my parents took me to the west end to see the film for my birthday (I think I was about 7 years old). They sold the records in the foyer during the intermission (for readers under 50...you won't believe this but there used to be a 15 minute break in the middle of a feature film so you could load up with KaiOra and ButterKist...you will just have to Google it children)... I still have the whole thing, I bought it with my birthday money...

It cost five shillings and six pence in proper Imperial money...That's 27 and a half pence in modern Metric money. This was a major purchase because my pocket money was only 3d (that's one and a quarter new pence) per week back then... Unbelievable!