

Hifi Pig

EXTRA

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OCTOBER 2015

Issue #3

CABLE WARS DECODED

Cable wars must surely be the biggest single cause of conflict and injury between audiophiles ...better just to keep quiet, watch from a distant hilltop and let the troops on the virtual front line battle it out ad-infinitum...

REVIEWS

Entotem Plato

Zontec Art-Deco Phonostage

Rothwell Signature One

Phonostage

Icon Audio MB 30 SE Power

Amplifiers

NuForce DAC80 DAC

NuForce HA200 Headphone

Amplifier

Magnific Audio M521

Loudspeakers

Oak Audio Hurricane

Loudspeakers

Wyred4Sound Remedy Digital

Reclocker

MCRU Excelsior DC Blocker

10 Great Free Android Apps

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Columnists,
Readers
Lives,
Classic
Audio and
more....**

PLUS 22 pages of Album and Gig Reviews, The Classics - (Yes - The Yes Album, Behind The Brands interview...

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Black Diamond RCA

Black Diamond XLR



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HiFi World, Awards Edition Jan 2015

HI-FI WORLD
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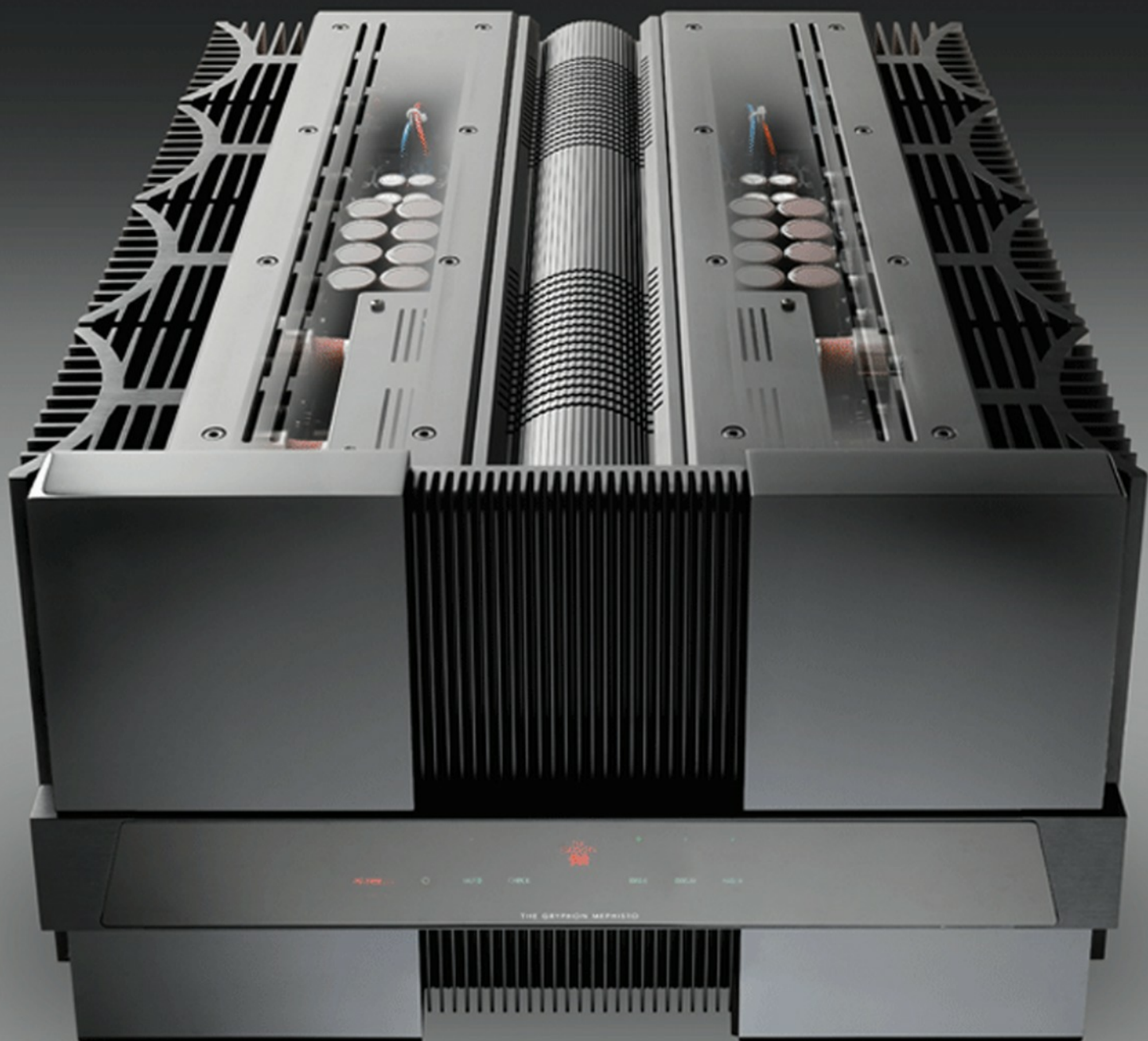
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THE GRYPHON



GRYPHON MEPHISTO

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ENTOTEM PLATO

Philosophically Speaking

The Entotem Plato is an all in one audio video player that will rip and tag not only your CDs but also your vinyl collection. Ian Ringstead takes a listen.

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



ENTOTEM PLATO

This review has been harder to write than any of the others I have done for Hifi Pig because the product involved is essentially a high quality computer based audio visual unit. This is not a criticism of it at all; it's just that when I was in retail AV equipment took over from hifi stereo equipment in the mid to late nineties as the thing to have and traditional hifi took a back seat to some extent. It was also the time that the internet started to become popular, especially the early noughties.

Computers are now a way of life, as is the internet, and where would we be without them or our smart phones now. I use mine constantly... but as a source for hifi? Well let me introduce you to Plato, a brand new product only debuted last February at the Bristol show, but one that has been making waves since its launch. As a vinyl nut through and through I was asked to particularly look at a unique feature of Plato's capabilities – its ability to record analogue sources and archive them. I'll cover this later but let's first look at the company behind this unit.

The system connects to your existing hifi units such as your turntable, cassette deck (*remember those*) and CD player, as well as DVD, Blu ray player, VCR and TV sets.

Entotem Ltd are a high technology company founded in 2013 by four music loving entrepreneurs who had the vision and passion to develop and design a multimedia home entertainment system, which integrated both high definition video and high resolution audio amplification. The company's vision was a system that combined the ability to convert, play and record analogue music with a high resolution audio, video and internet streaming service supported by an android operating system.



ENTOTEM PLATO

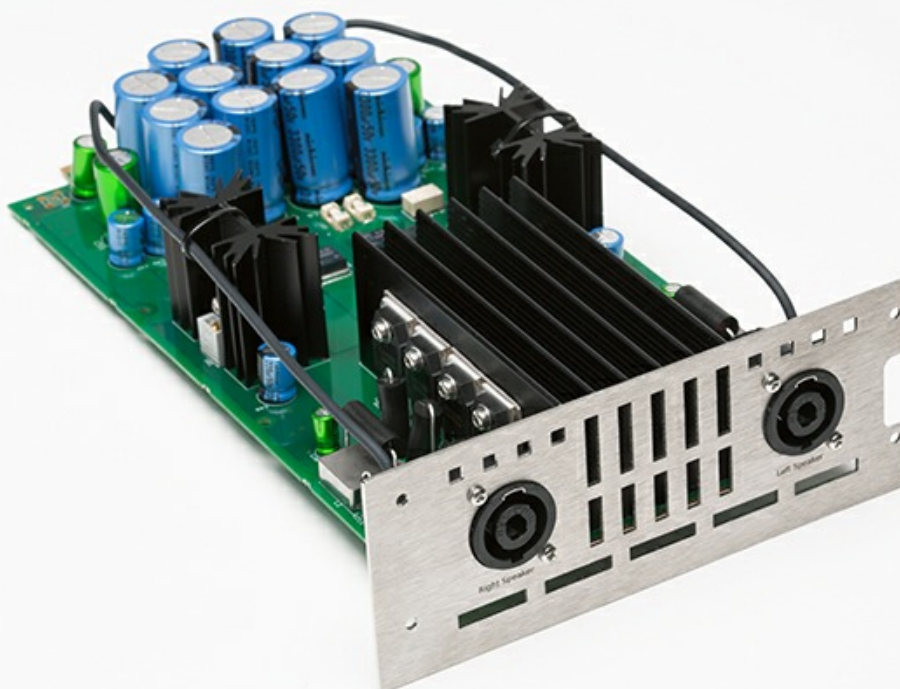
The system connects to your existing hifi units such as your turntable, cassette deck (*remember those*) and CD player, as well as DVD, Blu ray player, VCR and TV sets. Plato will automatically record from legacy analogue devices and then replays at the highest quality, allowing you to store all your vinyl, CD's, video and DVD collections in one place. Plato can store DVD/film formats (*converted on a computer first and then transferred to Plato via USB*) which can then be played either through a TV using direct HDMI connection between the TV and Plato,

Designed very much like a desk top computer, Plato has a series of modules that can be slotted into the back of the unit onto the chassis for easy servicing and upgrades.

or streamed to a tablet or smart TV using your home wi-fi network.

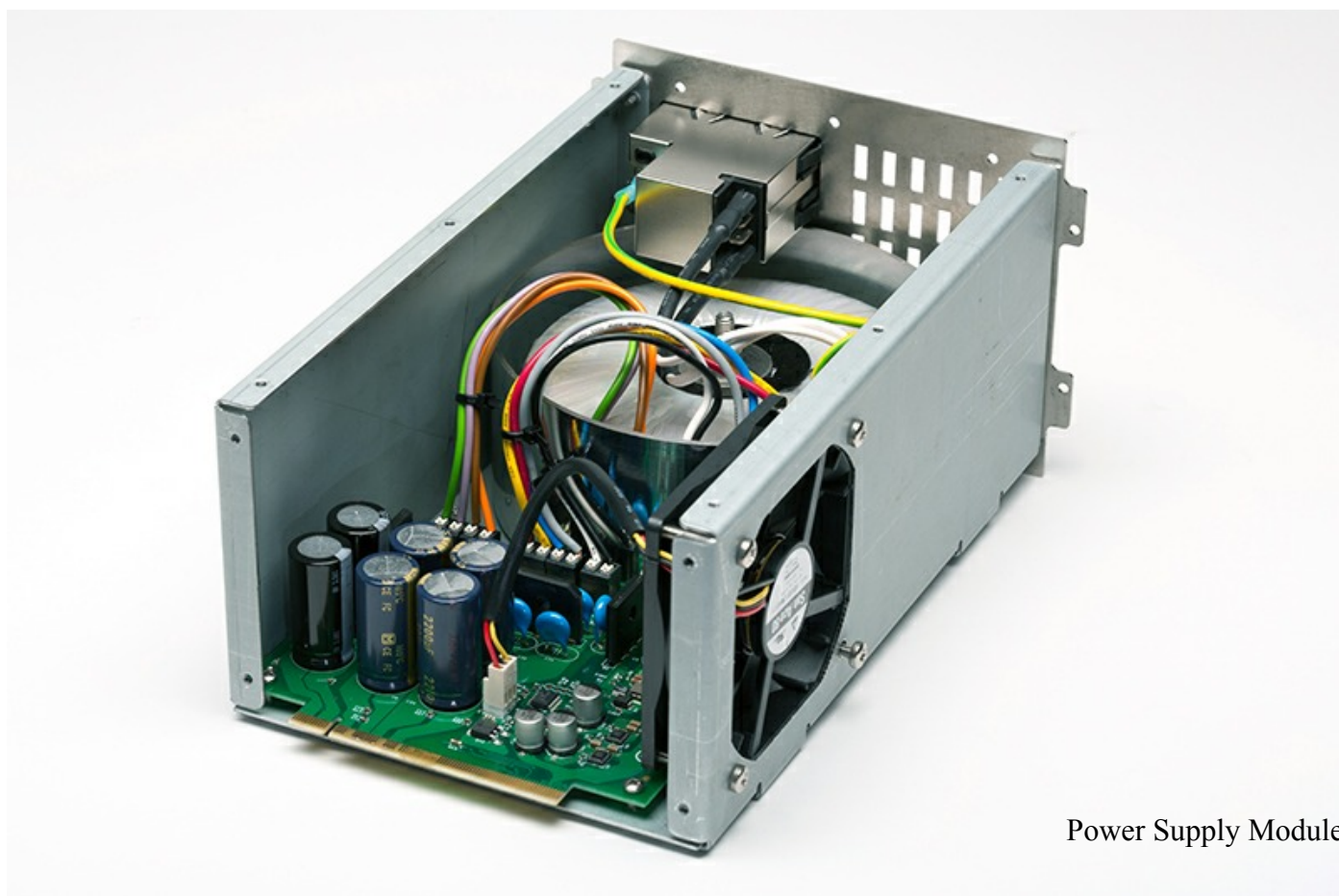
The built in Android platform allows new developments and upgrades to be pushed to the user so their investment is safeguarded and essentially future proofed. The Android system is soon to be followed by an Apple iOS version by the end of the year meaning there is no need for a separate remote with a companion Android app through touch-

screen allowing for control by the user as to what is being played and in which room.



Power amplifier Module

ENTOTEM PLATO



Power Supply Module

The Entotem Plato can be easily integrated with other DLNA (*Digital Living Network Alliance*) systems and this is something I did to good advantage. It means you don't have to have cables trailing all over, using your houses mains wiring to transfer the signals quickly and reliably without any drop outs. You can play different music in different rooms through a system like Sonos. Streaming over the internet is possible listening to the thousands of radio stations out there on the www. Spotify and other music sources can be accessed as well as YouTube music videos and they can

I recorded several albums and when finished allowed the software to seamlessly write these to the hard drive and add to the media library.

be viewed through your TV, tablet or mobile.

A very useful feature is Gracenote which is used to provide easy recognition of your music and track/album artwork which is displayed on the front screen either when a track is playing or during a search. You can build your library of recorded material from analogue or digital sources onto the ample 2TB built-in hard drive.

CONSTRUCTION

The unit is very neat being only 370mm wide by 300mm deep by 130mm high. It is substantially built from high quality alumi-

ENTOTEM PLATO

um and weighs 14Kg... so it isn't a lightweight. Controls are few on the front panel with just a discrete power switch, USB socket and the touchscreen. The front corners are curved and make for a very smart appearance which my wife approved of. Designed very much like a desk top computer, Plato has a series of modules that can be slotted into the back of the unit onto the chassis for easy servicing and upgrades. Power output is 45watts RMS per channel into 8 ohms (*stereo*) but sounds louder than that, and can drive a variety of different speakers no problem. Entotem spent a lot of time and money developing the amplifier and wanted it to be audiophile quality, not just another AV amp.

There is a dedicated phono input for your turntable which caters for both mm and mc cartridges and has variable settings for output level, impedance and capacitance and a rumble filter. The designers are passionate about their audio and particularly like vinyl so this is well covered by a very good and versatile design. The settings can be changed on the fly as you use the unit so instant comparisons and adjustments can be made. The Plato also has three other line inputs on RCA sockets which can all be individually assigned a name etc, and four digital inputs, one coax and three optical. There are two optical outputs. On the front panel is a USB socket for importing or exporting files onto or off Plato. Speaker connection is by two Neutrik speakon output sockets which are a pro industry standard for safety and reliability (*also they fit more easily on the compact rear panel*). I

reckon they decided these were a safer option than the usual 4mm binding posts or sockets associated with hifi kit and fair enough as I had no problem with them.

CD recordings again were faithful to the original and Gracenote was excellent in tagging everything accurately.

Entotem will provide the relevant connectors if requested, or I am sure your dealer would oblige. For standard cables this shouldn't be a problem, but if you have expensive cables and connectors an adapter lead may have to be made as Neutrik don't do a high-end plug for hifi use. (*Maybe someone might manufacture one?*)

IN USE

I particularly concentrated on the vinyl facility of Plato as it is my love and was pleasantly surprised how good it was. I played several albums to get a feel for the sound and let the system settle in and warm up. As soon as you put a record on the Gracenote software quickly identifies the album and each track, displaying the artwork and details on the Plato screen and your tablet. The sound was crisp, detailed and open, being very good for an AV unit which isn't always the case, even on more expensive and well known brands I have used in the past.

The versatility is exceptional for a unit of this type. When archiving your records it is very simple to operate – Select your record, play a few seconds of it through the system to check your record levels and make sure these aren't too high (*otherwise distortion will ruin the recording*) by altering the settings on Plato via your tablet or the front screen, press the record symbol after re-cueing the record and away you go. The record levels are then displayed for you

ENTOTEM PLATO

Once again a British company flying the flag, showcasing our design flair and manufacturing capability.

to monitor the signal and can be monitored by the monitor switch to compare the original with the recorded. Meantime the Plato will recognise every track individually and

separate them as on the record. A unique feature I feel, and one to be proud of as I don't know of another unit currently that does this. I tried years ago archiving my vinyl onto my computer but gave up as the software available then was flaky and it didn't separate tracks out without a lot of editing and patience. It

also meant a lot more wiring and messing about.

I recorded several albums and when finished allowed the software to seamlessly write

these to the hard drive and add to the media library. It was then a simple matter of selecting which album or track I wished to play and enjoy. If you make a mistake during recording or change your mind, deleting the recording is child's play. The recordings were very good and pretty faithful to the original. It would be churlish to criticise the quality given the simplicity of operation and standard of playback. For someone serious about archiving their records or other analogue sources it is superb.

Now, recording is done on the fly and in real time so there are no shortcuts in the time taken. This means you have to listen to your records etc. whilst archiving them or go away and do something else in the meantime. Some might ask why we have to wait so long as it is a tedious process? Well the simple answer is why would you record it in the first place if you didn't like it...and with a vinyl record I don't see another option! The same goes for recording your CDs. There is no high speed ripping capability as on a PC with a disc drive, as the designers felt quality was paramount and anyway there wasn't room to fit an optical drive into Plato and quality would have been an issue again of drive type etc.

CD recordings again were faithful to the original and Gracenote was excellent in tagging everything accurately. The other facilities such as streaming internet radio were pretty much as I expected. I used to have a Squeezebox and hoped that would pique my inter-



Preamplifier Module

ENTOTEM PLATO

est in radio and widen my music choice, but sadly the bit-rate quality was so variable and usually very poor, that I gave up on it. This is not a criticism of the Plato, it streams very well, it just internet radio doesn't float my boat. Even analogue radio on vhf bores me and I mainly listen to it in the car to catch up on news or new releases of popular music. My friend calls me a heathen for this but then he loves radio and wants to be a radio ham!

CONCLUSION

The facility to be able to stream music around your home or video is very useful and a lot cheaper than many systems out there now. The cost of a Plato is £3600, so not cheap, but when you compare what it can do against the opposition (*and so simply and without needing to be a computer geek*) I can highly recommend it. The unit I was loaned came in piano black finish and very smart it was too. Other finishes are available and if you want a particular colour Entotem will happily oblige from a vast colour palette of automotive quality finishes, albeit at a premium additional cost.

The only caveat I will say is that if you use a tablet to control the Plato, then use a decent brand, cheaper brands will work, but my experience is that they won't be as reliable. As soon as Entotem release their iOS application, I can see a lot of iPads and iPhones being used to control Plato.

Finally, the Plato is British designed and made here in Derby at their factory. Research is done down in Newbury, where the boffins hang out, and they are very helpful if you ring them up with queries. Once again a British company flying the flag, showcasing our design flair and manufacturing capability. The UK is still a world class producer of superb designs and they don't have to be all made in China.

Build Quality – 8.8 /10

Sound Quality – 8.6/10

Value for money – 8.5/10

Overall – 8.63/10

Pros:

Simple to use and effective ripping software

A one box entertainment solution for audio and video

Good sound for a unit of this kind

Great connectivity

Cons:

Realtime ripping of CDs

Speakon outputs may be an issue for some using high-end cables

Ian Ringstead

Designer's Comments

The original design brief for Plato came from the three core design team individuals, who also founded Entotem. They each spent many years (and many £££) buying various HiFi components, most of which we were very happy with; but wanted something which would integrate our current media collections with emerging technologies, provide a great sound, and package it into a small easy to use form factor which our wives and families were happy to live with as well. Since we were a startup company, developing our first product, we had the very rare benefit of starting with a true blank sheet of paper with no legacy designs or IP to re-use. So we embarked on a ground up design process which resulted in Plato.

Straight away it was clear we needed a modular approach to the system. This would provide flexibility in the final product spec, good re-use opportunities

ENTOTEM PLATO

later, and allow for key component upgrades without having to re-engineer everything.

For the audio design Andrew, our Technical Director and analogue guru took a similar ground up approach. The in-house discrete A/B design of the power amplifier meant we were able to squeeze the module into its small footprint, and choose the specific characteristics of the sound we were looking for: clean and accurate, without any signs of edginess or harshness. The wide, flat frequency response, coupled with low distortion products and a high damping factor combined to make an accurate, fast amplifier.

The pre-amplifier was a more difficult challenge. Extremely low noise op-amps provide switchable gain and phono equalisation, and volume control is via a switched resistor network. All switching is done via relays to allow us to control the unit remotely, while providing the greatest flexibility. The high gain MM/MC phono stage presented particular challenge with noise injection. Any noise coupled into the phono stage is catastrophic due to the higher gain (lower SNR floor), so additional effort was required in the chassis design to ensure stray magnetic and electric fields were contained in the power supply. The pre-amplifier also houses DAC and ADC for digital playback, and analogue recording functions.

Power is supplied by a large fully linear power supply. The power supply has a huge impact on the quality of the sound, it has to deliver large (unlimited) amounts of 'instantaneous' current, without generating stray fields or other sources of noise. A switch-mode design was discounted early on, even for the digital parts of the product, as this inevitably generates an additional noise source which will require elaborate techniques to keep under control. The toroidal transformer is wound to our spec and delivers separate taps for analogue and digital power.

The digital module integrates all digital operations including network, HDMI outputs, USB ports, disk drive and microprocessor. The integrated disk drive is a standard 2.5" SATA drive, so larger capacity drives will be incorporated as they become available. The fact the drive is integrated is essential to our original concept of a single box solution, and the full gasket chassis ensures acoustic noise is kept as low as possible. The 4-core ARM based processor provides plenty of horsepower, in a low power package which is essentially designed for the low power mobile market.

Choice of software platform was also a key decision for Plato. It was very important to provide a platform which would be flexible and powerful enough to keep up with emerging technologies. Android was an obvious choice. The open nature of the architecture, and the strength and depth of our in house software skills, meant we were able to add significant under the hood customisation to accommodate high quality audio playback; and the comprehensive feature support meant we could leverage a whole host of additional features and functions to support a comprehensive product like Plato. However, the biggest advantage of selecting Android as the core system platform is its user interface. Mobile devices have revolutionised the way we interact with technology. They have stripped away the geeky computer controls, or complex button-swamped remote controls, and essentially hidden the complexities of modern technology from the user. The design brief for Plato was simple: if you have to read the manual, we have something wrong. To be honest, Plato does so much I am not sure we have achieved this in full, however, I have seen true technophobes pick up our control app and start playing music almost immediately, so we cannot be far off the brief!

David Belcher (Development Director)

Some Follow

others

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ZONTEK ART-DECO PHONOSTAGE



Esprit Nouveau

Janine Elliot takes a listen to the distinctly art-deco looking (*and named*) phono-preamplifier from Zontek in Poland costing €8990 and having three inputs, allowing for three arms on your turntable.

I was honoured to be given a chance to play the heavyweight [Zontek turntable](#) complete with twiglet wooden arm a few months. At 60kg, this was no walk-over. I was also introduced to the Art-Deco phonostage, hot from the High End fair in Mu-

nich, and given its name because of the metal Art Deco style trellis to protect the unit.

This, too, was not only giant in price, at €8990 – about the same as my iconic elderly Manley Steelhead – but also in weight, bearing in mind the mahogany and brass sandwich structure matching the

ZONTEC ART-DECO PHONOSTAGE

turntable. Its butch weight and solid structure contrast with the minute 5636 pentode and 6N16 dual triode tubes lining up in a row on the top looking like shy pupils on their first day at school. Covering them up in Art Deco wire seemed pointless. Being used to seeing large B300 or ogling over the obscene Russian GU81 single tetrode transmitter valves on the Icon MB1 monoblock, I wondered whether this

Having three inputs is intentional, allow you to fit 3 arms on your Zontek turntable, if your needs or cash flow allows.

novel looking product would hit the right frequency hotspots. So I decided to give it a listen. The Art Deco comes in two units, like my Manley, with a power stage linked to the phono-stage with an umbilical cord. It seems Zontek would like the power unit to be kept on show, not least because the cord is only around two feet long, meaning its placement cannot be too far away. Hiding it would be



ZONTEC ART-DECO PHONOSTAGE



criminal as it is a magnificent looking unit with the Art Deco trellis and solid wood build. Both are minimalist in appearance, with the green illuminated on-off button on the left of the phono-stage matching that on the turntable, and a single 3-way selector knob central on the front on the phono-stage as the only indication that you can control anything. There are no lights to help you know which input you are listening to. The back end of the unit is much more user friendly than the front, allowing for any setting of moving magnet or moving coil cartridge being catered for using the micro-switches at the back. Having three inputs is intentional, allow you to fit 3 arms on your Zontek turntable, if your needs or cash flow allows. The phono-stage, turntable and a single Delta arm will set you back a tad over €20,000, and

in combination sound like a honeymoon, if not a marriage. I'll explain that later.

Only the best components are used, as one would expect at this price, including LCR modules, Lundahl transformers and Mundorf Supreme components. On the back as well as RCA in-and-outs it also has balanced XLR output. Where my Manley Steelhead works well is that I can adjust settings easily from my chair (I have long arms...) because "factory settings" don't always account for cable loading or resistance and, most importantly, your ears. With the Art Deco, all adjustments are done at the back with six sets of micro-switches, one for each channel of the three inputs. Anything micro on something big always worries me. Luckily Greg from GPoint Audio had preset the Ortofon MC2000ii attached to his Delta arm in such a way that it worked flawlessly

ZONTEK ART-DECO PHONOSTAGE



with the phono-stage and my Townshend F1 cable.

SOUND

It was seamless; I mean everything was flat from the deepest pedal notes on my Saint Saens *Organ Symphony* to the ride cymbals on Brubeck Direct Cut Disc *A Cut Above*.

The sound was fast, with a clarity that put many phono-stages to shame whatever price. The MC2000ii has low output compared with my own Kontrpunkt *b*, but the noise floor of the Art Deco showed no sign of being touched with this product. Similarly the phono-stage had an ability to muster anything the grooves of my records threw at it,

Its speed of retrieving soft or loud, high or low, slow or fast was as fit as any athlete whether on drugs or not.

showing no sign of getting anywhere near the ceiling.

Its speed of retrieving soft or loud, high or low, slow or fast was as fit as any athlete whether on drugs or not. Only the bottom end was slightly recessed, lacking any excitement. I didn't get lucky with Mark Knopfler's solo album *Get*

Lucky, his 7th solo album

and released in 2009. This Celtic influenced album opened up in a clarity I would expect from DVD Audio, rather than LP, and for me that seemed to spoil it. The bite from the drums in *Cleaning My Gun*, using a tight drum rhythm at the end of each phrase, was not far away from his earlier song *So Far Away*.... it just sounded too clean and recessed for

ZONTEC ART-DECO PHONOSTAGE

me. Playing it through the £7000 Manley or the Time Step T-01MC at under £1000 gave me a more exciting bass end. But, the introductory words and heavy bass thumps in *Hard Shoulder*, itself reminding me of John Lee Hooker *Deep Blue Sea* had much more control in the review machine than either of the other two. Maybe something in the middle would be perfect, if there is such a thing. Where *Border Reiver* was fast and fun on the Zontek the flute at the start didn't breathe enough for me to smell the Glasgow air of his birth town. Knopfler's Dire Straits *Brothers in Arms* was iconic at release for its sound engineering and establishing the CD as a potential means of sound carrier (*even with a few bad tape edits thrown in*) but this stage was too perfect and relaxed. I remember reviewing a headphone amplifier 10 years ago and saying it had the personality of John Major. That went down about as well as his own tenure did, so I won't make any jokes for fear of upsetting anyone bland.

But, do you really want to spend €8990 on what Peter Walker once said of his Quad amp as "a straight wire with gain". Anyone knows that old Quads actually sound quite mellow and laidback with considerable bass and midrange warmth. But not so many know that that same phrase actually originated in 1964 by Harmon Kardon and their Citation ampli-

er, which isn't on my list of "must haves". What I am getting at is that the perfect amplifier or phono-stage may never happen, and whilst we all aim for that perfect 10, will we know if we get it, and then what do we do?

Music is a personal thing, and we all have our own tastes of music and equipment. For this set up to be perfect for me I need to be amongst the musicians, and I wasn't. But, if you want a phono-stage of purity such as this then you will certainly not go wrong. This phono-stage is without doubt a honeymoon, but that is it. Being married to someone who is Mr Perfect and never ever argues just isn't for me and I'd soon get bored. OK, the Manley has been surpassed by many top-notch phono-stages, such as the Boulder 2008, and if you really do want to spend lots of money, then you won't go wrong with the Zontek. This was a stonker for a first release. However, whilst my Manley offered a more intimate affair with the musicians, keeping me amongst them rather than being sat in the back row, it is also more forgiving of less than perfect recordings. The Zontek hides nothing. Do have a listen to it. I will keep married to my trusty partner, but if you want something flat chested and with a cute petite bottom, then you'll like this Polish Art Deco.



ZONTEC ART-DECO PHONOSTAGE

Sound Quality – 8.8/10

Value for Money – 8.5/10

Build Quality – 8.8/10

Overall – 8.7/10

Pros:

Flexible and with three inputs allowing for three arms

Fast and Clear Presentation

Cons:

Adjustments and micros-witches are on the rear

Front panel could be clearer

Slightly recessed bottom end

Hides nothing

Janine Elliot

Designer's Comments

The preamplifier is based on three stages and LCR modules for RIAA correction. Tubes used are long life military grade (miniature) – pentode 5636 and dual triodes 6N16.

To drive LCR modules we are using Lundahl inter-stage transformer. Preamplifier is supporting three inputs, each one is configurable for MC (stepup) or MM with appropriate R-load settings. Balanced output is driven by signal transformer.

Power supply unit is equipped with polypropylene capacitors, high quality audio grade power transformer and the choke.

Pawel Zontek

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ROTHWELL SIGNATURE ONE PHONOSTAGE



Signed and Sealed

Janine Elliot takes a listen to the £2200 Signature One transformer coupled Moving Coil Phono-Stage from well known British manufacturer Rothwell.

I love Class A and large toroidal transformers, and if you have followed my reviews over the years you will know my love for anything passive. So, to be offered a chance to listen to a moving-coil phono-stage with Class A amplification and capacitor-based RIAA EQ was like being offered my favourite ice-cream. Rothwell-designed products date back to 1989, and have included step-up transformers, attenuators, phono-stages and passive preamplifiers.

Set up by Andrew Rothwell, like many manufacturers a budding musician learning classical guitar repertoire at a young age and with a love of rock and

later jazz, he went on to study a degree in physics and working as an electronics engineer for British Aerospace. His interest in music and professional music technology (*there's not much of that on ships and planes*) influenced his decision to leave this career and ultimately designing his Indus passive preamplifier in 1989, something he did after being disillusioned by the sound quality of some "high end" active products on the market. And, whilst the world turned to everything transistor, his first experiments with a valve phono-stage were positive proof for him, and many other cottage industries, that valves were, and still are, better. Whilst not the earli-

ROTHWELL SIGNATURE ONE PHONOSTAGE

est, the first Rothwell standalone phono-stage came at a time before such products were the norm, and his current catalogue boasts no fewer than seven phono related products.

The Signature is a high-gain moving-coil phono-stage, offering switchable 6dB gain selecting either 62 or 68dB gain, with a switch at the rear for 1:10 or 1:20 transformer turn ratio catering for input load of 470Ω or 117Ω, allowing the majority of cartridges to be well catered for. My Kontrupunkt *b* works best at a little above 100Ω, so the latter setting was found best for my audition purposes. The refined looking blue illuminating off/on front button relies on a smaller finger than mine to switch it on, which whilst a lovely looker took me a while to get used to as you need to literally push in the middle of the button. But once I mastered this, *(the light is also a bit weak for me, but most will find it OK. It reminded me of the touch sensitive lights on the Philips GA212 turntable I had in the 70's)* my initial thoughts was the openness and silky smooth

The use of exceptional Swedish Lundahl transformers coupling and a capacitor-based passive EQ stage shows why this can beat even the very best of valve and transistor behemoths.

refined sound, as plush as the classy-looking silver front and black sleeved unit it came in. This didn't mean it wasn't clear. Far from it. Muse's Drones album is still very energetic but not out of control or rough. "Mercy" was indeed compassionate in its delivery and the triple ribbon speakers in the Zeta Zero Piccolo speakers up for review had a sheen making for a tireless performance.

Detail in Mike Valentine's 'Big Band Spectacular' featuring The Syd Lawrence Orchestra and the legendary track "In the Mood" (Glen Miller), was all there and very clear. The sound was set back, rather than forward like many phono-stages, allowing for a good depth of sound allowing the orchestra to sit clearly in my living room, with the solo saxophone and then trumpet in "Little Brown Jug" to take front of stage when their time came. I started to really enter the recording studio live-area as I listened, rather than being in front of loudspeakers, which is after all the aim of all serious hifi designers. And whilst I loved what I heard I did feel it was still just a very



ROTHWELL SIGNATURE ONE PHONOSTAGE



little too laid back for me. Soundstage was as good as it gets, and the velvety performance I know will find many devotees.

The use of exceptional Swedish Lundahl transformers coupling and a capacitor-based passive EQ stage shows why this can beat even the very best of valve and transistor behemoths. Moving coils, even high output MC's, are still very low-output generators, less than 10% of moving magnets, and therefore require circuits with a very good noise floor, something a transformer cannot be bettered for. This Rothwell is a very quiet baby, only requiring me to ensure I earth it really well to remove the very minutest hum, and with earth lift/earth link switch I could select my preference. The core material for the transformer itself is a cobalt based uncut amorphous strip which gives a high inductance factor (*to extend the low frequency bandwidth*) without the need for an excessive number of turns of wire, which in turn keeps the winding resistance, and hence noise, low.

The coil itself has unusual inter-winding geometry to keep capacitance low, which extends the high frequency bandwidth and minimising ringing. This design also benefits from rejecting interference from external stray magnetic fields and therefore minimises hum.

For the first active circuitry a Class A amplifier is chosen, since it offers the purest and simplest circuitry, free from crossover distortion and nasty little op-amps often employed in a Class A/B design. After this is the passive RIAA EQ which utilises audiophile polypropylene capacitors. This is followed by a second active gain stage with a compound transistor configured output buffer for low output impedance and low distortion.

As well as exceptional noise floor, the extended frequency bandwidth provided me with a sound that just lit up my face with smiles. This was like home-made full fat ice-cream. Only when pushed a bit with complex mid-high frequencies did it sound slightly like a little bit of lemon sorbet, for example Pink

ROTHWELL SIGNATURE ONE PHONOSTAGE

Floyd 'The Division Bell' track "Cluster 1", after matching output level, was a lot more powerful in performance at 117Ω than the low gain 470 Ω input, where the sound was less cluttered largely because the higher impedance opens the sound more giving the better top end and stereo at the expense of accuracy, especially in the bass. Having a switch to adjust to your cartridge is one thing, but this had two, one for each channel, which did surprise me somewhat, though I guess it was to do with performance and certainly not ergonomics. Perhaps there should be two on-off switches, one for each leg. Setting the best load for your cartridge is absolutely vital if you want the correct sound from your cartridge and certainly a "one fits all" isn't likely to be the best move, as seen in some 5-figure offerings out there. So, two different settings as in the Rothwell are helpful, though I always personally favour phono-stages with variable impedance and capacitance. At £2200 I would like more settings. This is only a slight criticism as I

This is a truly good product showing that the thought into, and physics of, the design really do work, and I have no qualms in suggesting you listen to it, certainly if you want that purity and ease of performance.

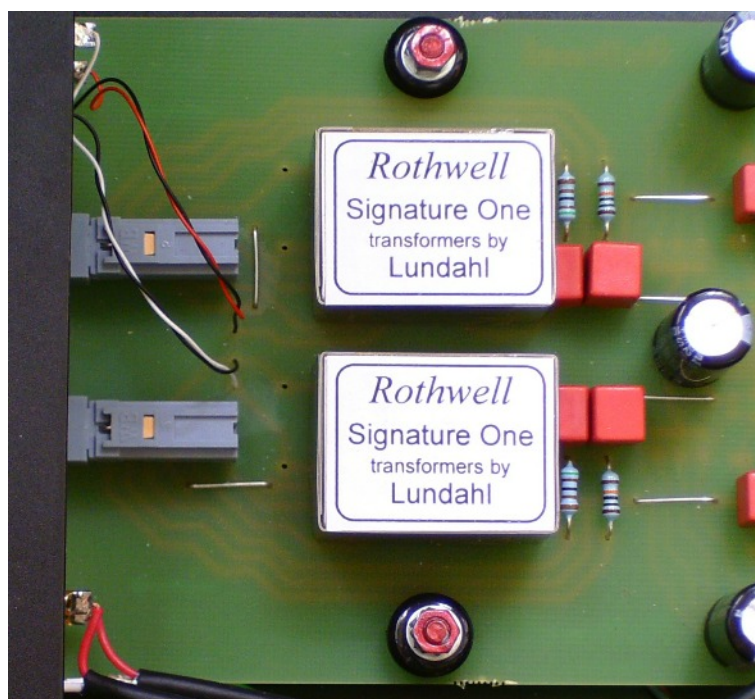
couldn't quite get the setting that is best for my Kontrapunkt .

For me, the Signature One just wasn't quite as controlled in its delivery as some phono-stages when mid/high frequencies were energetic. Pink Floyd 'The Division Bell' offered everything, but just not quite controlled enough when excited for me to give it that 9+. Floyd's 'Marooned' ride cymbals were very clear, but bass

and kick drum didn't give enough authority to warrant that top mark. Clarity in the tops allowed for a great sound-stage, but David Gilmour's voice lacked grunt I know I can get from my phono-stage of choice, though I have to admit that is substantially more expensive.

The ideal phono-stage shouldn't leave a signature,

and this Signature One is very neutral for most of my listening; only a few times sounding a bit like a panicking teacher when faced with the most unruly brats. The accompanying blurb claims the sound to be 'simply unrivalled', which is always a dangerous statement to make, and whilst the leaflet is a



ROTHWELL SIGNATURE ONE PHONOSTAGE

last thought, with several typos and perhaps missing a picture to show connections, it is not short of looks and design innovations.

Rothwell's CV also includes some amazing guitar pedals (*I also play the guitar*) with titles such as "F1 Booster", "Atomic Booster", "Hellbender" and "Tornado", and I only wish he had put a bit of the titles of some of these products into the Signature One's recipe; then it would have been up with the very best of them, at any price.

CONCLUSION

My job as a reviewer can be frustrating. Whilst I do want to give everything I hear that very top mark, I need to be critical, and so I very, very rarely give anything 9 unless it absolutely the best. This is a truly good product showing that the thought into, and physics of, the design really do work, and I have no qualms in suggesting you listen to this product, certainly if you want that purity and ease of performance. Some might find it just a little too relaxed and then panicking slightly with complex input, but what it can do, unlike many phono-stages is to be as happy on classical and jazz as it is with heavy rock. Now, that is something to be very proud of.

Sound Quality – 8.8/10

Value for Money – 8.6/10

Build Quality – 8.5/10

Overall – 8.63/10

Pros:

Mostly neutral

The accompanying blurb claims the sound to be 'simply unrivalled', which is always a dangerous statement to make...

Ease of performance

Good with a wide range of genres

Cons:

Can get a little too relaxed and panicky with complex material in the mid-high frequency range

Janine Elliot

Designer's Comments

Obviously, the primary design decision behind the Signature One was to use on-board step-up transformers. In my experience you can't beat transformer coupling low output moving coils. It isn't a popular way to go for manufacturers because it's considerably more costly than using op-amps or transistors, and most audiophiles are wary of using step-up transformers at all, probably based on ugly rumours circulating on forums, but I wanted to produce a great-sounding phonostage and demonstrate the benefits of step-up transformers in a convenient one-box package. The on-board step-up transformers in the Signature One can be set for ratios of 1:10 and 1:20 so the vast majority of modern MCs can be accommodated. They are supplied by Lundahl and are superb.

The next design decision was to use discrete transistor circuitry. Although op-amps have become ubiquitous throughout the hi-fi industry, the fact that they have class B output stages seems to be overlooked. They're very much like Class B transistor power amps, but in miniature, and suffer from crossover distortion in a similar way to power amps. Large amounts of negative feedback are used to reduce the

ROTHWELL SIGNATURE ONE PHONOSTAGE

crossover distortion, but in a high gain circuit such as a phonostage there isn't a lot of negative feedback available, hence there's a limited ability to control the distortion. But class A circuits don't suffer from crossover distortion at all, so they're the obvious way to go, and that's the reason behind the decision to use discrete transistors – simple class A circuits. We use two transistors in a configuration similar to a complementary feedback pair for each gain block, that way there's local feedback in each gain block rather than global feedback over the whole circuit. You can get remarkable performance from just two transistors this way.

The RIAA equalisation is performed passively between two gain blocks using the usual type of RC filters, but we use multiple capacitors where others might use just one. That improves the accuracy of the playback curve. We also use polypropylene capacitors for their audio performance.

Another aspect of the Signature One's design which is unusual is the use of discrete transistor regulators within the power supply. Audiophiles are familiar with the idea that power supplies are important but all too often confuse that with big power supplies. However, we don't need a lot of muscle for a class A circuit drawing a few milliamps, we need finesse. That means a very clean voltage with no high frequency "fuzz" on it. Big transformers do nothing to give you that, and they can cause problems by producing a large magnetic field which can affect a sensitive circuit like a phonostage. The key to making a good power supply with low noise is the use of good voltage regulators. There are lots of cheap, general purpose voltage regulator ICs available and they perform well enough for most purposes. They're particularly good at maintaining a precise output voltage over a very wide range of temperatures, making them reliable for use next to large heat-generating

devices or in freezing cold conditions, and they can be used for a wide variety of non-audio circuits, but they aren't entirely free of fuzzy noise – which doesn't really matter in a lot of applications. However, for the Signature One I chose to design a regulator for one application only – that is for this particular circuit and for low noise. Most other manufacturers use IC regulators but I prefer my own discrete transistor regulators. Sure, the output voltage will drift a little if you use them at The North Pole but that's less important than maintaining low noise in my opinion.

The decision to have an onboard power supply instead of a power supply in a separate box is also perhaps a bit unusual at this price point, too. The reason for that is because an onboard power supply is much more convenient for the end user and extensive testing showed that we could get performance from an onboard power supply every bit as good as from an outboard power supply. I think that an outboard power supply is all too often used simply to justify a high retail price, and to make the power supply look "big" and therefore "good" in the eyes of consumers who don't know any better – and why should they know any better? They aren't electronics engineers, so they can't be expected to know why an outboard power supply is better – or not – but they can be wowed with an extra heavy box.

Finally, there are some audiophile aspects to the Signature One which just add the finishing touches to performance. The main circuit board for example is soft-mounted to isolate it from vibration, and silver-plated oxygen-free copper wire with PTFE insulation is used internally. These aren't primary design decisions, more like paying attention to small details. After all, every little helps.

Andrew Rothwell

Paint It Black

"I felt I was listening to a more lifelike rendition of the music...good vocal projection combined with tight timing and a natural tonality make this cable extra special"

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ICON AUDIO MB30 SE POWER AMPS

Icons Of Their Time?

Icon Audio's MB 30 SE mono power amplifiers use no PCBs in their construction and come with a two year guarantee. Stuart Smith takes a listen to these £2199 amps.



Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

Icon Audio are based in Leicestershire in the UK, where, headed up by David Shaw, they have been designing amplifiers and other valve based electronics since 1999. Their website is at pains to point out that they do not use PCBs in their amps and that all their amps are hand built with quality materials that are designed to give long service, using parts that are easy to source. They also stress that there are no transistors or microchips in their

amps and that their design is “pure valve”. I like this philosophy a lot and it immediately instils a level of confidence in the product and the company. Quality audio components are not cheap items and longevity of service will be a major factor for many when parting with their hard earned cash and Icon’s two year guarantee and full back up service is a good sweetener.

ICON AUDIO MB30 SE POWER AMPS

The MB30 SEs arrive very well packaged, with good, easy to follow instructions and so within a matter of minutes you can have them up and running in the system. Biasing is a doddle... flick the switch on the front of each amp to bias, fiddle with the little screw atop each amp until the large and easy to read VU meter on the front gives the desired reading and that's it, ready to play some tunes.

Construction appears to be solid and the amps certainly feel nice and weighty – they weigh 12KG each, much of which will be down to the transformers used. The amps are point to point hand-wired and use silver plated copper PTFE cable.

Valve stock on the model supplied is a 5AR4 rectifier, a CV181 drive valve and a KT150 output valve (*though you can use KT88/90s should you wish*). The online blurb says that the amps come with the KT120 so I enquired and was told that the KT 150

will work fine. The valves fit in their sockets tightly and very securely.

The KT 150 is a relatively new valve from Tung Sol and it is finding favour with many in Audioland, as well as being used by tube giants such as Audio Research in their Reference 75 SE, Reference 150 SE and Reference 250 SE. The valve is relatively cheap coming in at less than \$100 in the US and available for £54 in the UK which makes good sense in a relatively budget amplifier like the MB30 SE, it also makes sense when it comes time to buy new valves.

The output from the MB30 SE is pure Class A with a Class A triode front end. You have a little toggle switch on the front of each amp marked “Triode” and” Ultralinear” where the amps will offer up 16W and 27W per side respectively. ” “Ultralinear” is a combination of triode and pentode, in order to get good power with the triode sound” says the Icon website.



ICON AUDIO MB30 SE POWER AMPS

Also on the front of each amp you have the aforementioned VU meter (*I'm a sucker for VU meters*) which will show your power output or, when the toggle switch is flicked, biasing information. Round the back you've got an RCA input, 4 and 8 ohm speaker terminals, the IEC power input and another little toggle switch for hi and low sensitivity. This latter makes pairing with your preamp much easier!

The amps are slim, neat and to my mind look very nice indeed with fit and finish being good for an amp costing £2199.95.

THE SOUND

Throughout the review process I used the usual suspects of Coffman Labs G-1A pre, the VAD DAC, Analogue Works turntable with Graham Slee Elevator EXP SUT and Reflex phonostage and a dedicated music laptop running J River. Cables are by Tellurium Q, Merrill Audio, IsoTek and Vermouth Audio.

On first powering up the amps you get the immediate sensation of them being very quiet indeed, with the only nasties I could hear being the usual slight hum from the pre, which is only audible when you get your lugholes close to the speakers, which again are our usual hORN Mummys.

The Mummy's are sensitive beasts and I used to run them pretty loud with my 18W 300B amp (*Parallel Single Ended*) so it seemed the natural thing to start

off with the amps in triode so see what their 16Watts can do.

I've been hammering Miles Davis' Kind Of Blue of late and with the MB30 SE I'm not disappointed. There texture to the music that's not dissimilar to

how I remember the aforementioned 300Bs being (*this is a good thing*). This textural quality (*particularly to the midband*) is underpinned with strong

bass that seems to be a tad more controlled than that of my old amp, but not as controlled as the

Tellurium Q Iridium (*20W of transistor Class*

A) I'd been using up until recently. At the top end there is

good air and space around the cymbals and brushwork on the snare, but it

is definitely in the mids, and particularly

upper-mids, where this little amp shines. Trum-

pet cuts through the other instruments (*as it surely should*) and you are left feeling that what you are getting is all very natural and unforced music.

There's rasp and there's a true to life character to the trumpet that belies the relatively modest price of the MB30 SE ...a sense of musical ease where the tunes just flow freely and effortlessly.

On more modern dance oriented music (*Madonna's American Life...no, it's really very good*) the bass is relatively tight and fast and this is really where I was expecting this amp to fall down. Don't get me wrong, this is not the last word in bass control but it ain't bad at all! Hats are crisp and appear in their



ICON AUDIO MB30 SE POWER AMPS

own space, whilst Madge's vocal comes well forward in the mix. There's enough grunt in Triode mode to get things across as they should, but with this kind of music I preferred the amp switched to Ultra Linear – there just seemed to be more oomph, which this genre demands. I've compared this amp to my old 300B amp in this review but here the Icon Audio amp clearly has a bit of an edge, particularly in the area of controlling the bass...and the option of switching from Triode mode to Ultra Linear is a big bonus.

On rock (*Deep Purple's Made In Japan*) the bass test track of Smoke On The Water is very good, grunty and controlled in Triode mode, but again flick the switch and you get a little more, particularly down low where it's needed. There's good pace and timing to the music and you're never left feeling that this is a slow amp in any way – instruments stop and start as they should, but where an instrument hangs in the mix you also get this effect really nicely. The Live in Japan record is a good one and you can clearly "see" where the musicians are on the stage – even though on the front cover Mr Blackmore's appears to be at the wrong side of the stage.

On female vocals there's a lovely rich texture apparent and lovers of this kind of music will be well pleased with the Icons. I know I keep harping on about the 300B amp I used to have, but again this is the feeling I get with this kind of music. The mids are just so smooth and silky you're left in no doubt that these amps have been voiced with the audiophile palette in mind. However, this mid-band smoothness has not been achieved at the expense of the other frequencies and there is the impression that these are nicely balanced amps.

The Icon's aren't the last word in ultimate definition when compared to our reference amps, but what they

lack in absolute resolution they make up for in sheer musicality that keeps you listening for hours on end.

CONCLUSION

In the grand scheme of things these are relatively inexpensive amplifiers for what you get in terms of fit and finish... and the all important sound quality. There are compromises in terms of absolute resolution when compared to our reference amps (*as there is always going to be at this price-point*) but these are damned musical amps that just get on with delivering the goods in a highly enjoyable fashion. They are simple to set up, quiet and fuss free and have enough power to keep all but the least sensitive of speakers happy. The Icons always had a feeling of control over the speakers, whilst offering up a smooth presentation that is pretty addictive.

As always the proof of the pudding is in the asking of the "Could I live with these?" question and the response has been a resounding yes.

Sound Quality – 8.55/10

Build Quality – 8.60/10

Value for money – 8.65/10

Overall – 8.60

Pros:

Well built and smooth sounding amps with a distinct "audiophile" and musical character

Extra grunt available at the flick of a switch

Easy to set up and use

Cons:

Little to criticise at this price-point, but not as resolving an amp as the reference we measure against

Stuart Smith



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NUFORCE DAC80 & HA200 HEADPHONE AMP

May The NuForce Be With You!

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Janine Elliot takes a listen to the NuForce DAC80 (*Top pic*) Digital to Analogue Converter and the company's HA200 Headphone amplifier (*bottom pic*). Linette Smith then takes the HA200 for a second opinion.

With DACs and Headphone amplifiers becoming the must-haves of today's audiophile bread and butter, it is no surprise that NuForce, taken over in 2012 by Optoma – famous for projectors – would have a few new products up their sleeves. Their DAC80 and HA200 are available at £695 and \$349 respectively and therefore fit in at the lower to mid-price points, already occupied by brands such as Cambridge Audio, Creek, Schiit, Chord, etc. Forgive me for reviewing these two together, but hopefully the reasoning for this will become clear as you read on.

Both well suited together; identical shape, looks and both with a potentiometer on right hand side and use same unit for IEC at rear. Where the HA200 has a single miniature pin-point “on” red light emanating from a hole, which looks lovely, the DAC80 has a series of miniature holes indicating drilled with precision which read U, C, O, C, depending on which of the 2 coaxial, USB or optical inputs you select. A further 6 LEDs on the right hand side inform you of the sample rate. If multiple of 48kHz then it lights blue or if multiple of 44.1kHz lights white. Lovely so far. But there's a problem; when you turn on the device at the back, the four inputs flash once and

NUFORCE DAC80 & HA200 HEADPHONE AMP



DAC 80 Back Panel

then all goes quiet for 6 seconds whilst it wakes itself up and makes breakfast tea. Perhaps a cyclical display of the U, C, O, C indicators would make the unit look even ‘more flashy’ (sic). Otherwise the minute “on” indicator as on the

HA200 would have been an alternative. Small point, but I did worry if one of my mains leads was faulty when I first tried the unit. Once the unit is awake you push the volume knob or use the remote (very cute little silver unit, though could get lost, and looks cheaper quality to that of the main unit) to select your input.

Unlike the instruction manual which tells you to press one of the four buttons labelled 1-4 to select source (which you have to do for the older DAC100, which is what this is based on), you actually press the volume control repeatedly to select the desired input. Now registering the correct input, I could start to listen, though did feel that unless you look head on, it could be hard to see which input it is reading if the room was bright. Looking straight on this is a beautifully looking unit. Enough complaints, as this DAC80 is vastly better looking than the DAC100 before it, in my opinion.

Both units come in either silver or black at 8.5" x 9 x 2" the DAC weighs 1.2Kg, whereas the Class A headphone amp a more substantial 2.26kg. As men-

tioned earlier, the DAC 80 is similar to the DAC100 which came before it in that it could act as a digital input preamplifier thanks to its 32-bit digital volume control implementation. Like its predecessor it has

The DAC80 is a simple to operate unit and looks worth the price tag.

inputs for asynchronous USB, Toslink, and transformer isolated coaxial SPDIF (x2), all operating to 24/192 maximum input. However, unlike the DAC100, it doesn't have a headphone output though it is half the cost. Adding the HA200 obviously increases the outlay but does give you freedom to choose if you need it or not. The headphone stage on the

DAC100 was excellent, though not as substantial as the HA200. The DAC80 provides inputs for a max of 24 bit/192kHz digital inputs for any of the sources. Via laptop Using Foobar 2000 once the WASAPI plug-in had been loaded I could select input. For most of my listening I used my aged Kenwood DVD-A player, and the S/PDIF output from the excellent Fiio X5 digital player, though I did find the NuForce PC and Mac drivers to be sensibly laid out and easy to use, unlike many I have tried before.

The DAC80 is a simple to operate unit and looks worth the price tag. I first listened to Wagner Rienzi Overture (Netherlands Philharmonic orchestra) through my Krell, Music First Audio, Wilson Benesch set up. All was there, but I felt there

NUFORCE DAC80 & HA200 HEADPHONE AMP



HA200 Back Panel

was a slight peak in the mid band. This mid-band warmth was also particularly noticeable in “Isn’t This a Lovely Day”, Ella

Fitzgerald/Louis Armstrong “Ella and Louis” remix. Ella’s voice is beautifully clear, but Louis’s voice with its distinctive upper-midband sibilance was for me a tad too annoying, let alone that the recording itself is in mono (I actually hate mono recordings!) In other recordings I found the sound a little more confined and mid-band emphasised than, for example the aged Cambridge Audio

DAC that I partnered it with for the review. Everything was there, just a little too nasally for my liking. I felt tops weren’t as crisp as I would expect a top-notch DAC. The analogue specification quotes 20-25,000 Hz +/- 0.25dB, but no mention of +/-3dB, which I expect to see as my “rule of thumb” reference. “Rise up in the Morning” (Modern Jazz Quartet ‘Blues on Bach’), with the triangles, Santa Claus sleigh bells and harpsichord should wake up all the bats and cats in the town. This DAC didn’t do it as much justice as I had hoped, though the main tune made famous by Kenny Everett’s miming clown sketches in the 80’s was clear enough. Time limits

prevented me getting a chance to measure pink noise upward of 30,000Hz. Listening with the Townshend

...the two just worked so well in tandem with the extremely wide frequency band of the headphone amp allowing the DAC to breathe musicality that seemed a tad stifled on its own.

Audio £40,000 combination of the Glastonbury speakers with an array of six ribbon tweeters and a super-tweeter all on the front, and their soon-to-be-released Class D/Valve bi-amp system, I soon became tired. I don’t like doing A-B comparisons but I did find it a tad disappointing. The similarity with components used in the DAC100 makes me feel that a completely new design would have been a better option.

Once I listened via the HA200 headphone amp suddenly the sound opened up and the detail and musicality was on par with the best such combinations I have listened to and I could understand why the DAC100 had been so good. This made me wonder why the sound was so much better; the two just worked so well in tandem with the extremely wide frequency band of the headphone amp allowing the DAC to breathe musicality that seemed a tad stifled on its own. The unit has a high performance Alps volume control, though this time without a white line position indicator that festoons the DAC80’s knob!

NUFORCE DAC80 & HA200 HEADPHONE AMP

Playing my Audio Technica ATH-W1000 cans the sound was very efficient, though my higher impedance Sennheiser HD650's needed to be driven quite hard to get a good listening.

Using the line-out from my Fiio X5 into the HA200, the

Audio Technica showed me just how high the Hz could go,

though I actually found the sound too bright. Bass was still all there; just that it was overpowered by the top frequencies, making the sound a little too clinical for comfort. The Sennheiser HD650 and planar designs such as Oppo PM1 and Audeze LCD-2 were a lot easier to listen to. They worked really well, and no surprise.

The HA200 is a very classy, pure and punchy performer, largely due to the Class A topology. Having been brought up on power thirsty toroidal transformer beasts, my eyes lit up when given a chance to try this product. This is no slouch, weighing in at 2.1kg, and is unlike many has-b Class AB products, with their two amplifiers operating for both sides of the waveform acting in push-pull and therefore sharing the wave form polarity from positive to negative in each cycle, the side effect being crossover or notch distortion. There is no distortion from this little beauty. In Class AB, and B for that matter, there is always a point where one of the two halves of the cycle switches off, which NuForce claim to add distortion every time they switch on. In pure Class A, it never does, making it more current thirsty, and also meaning that the sound is pure and less fatiguing. I

loved this little beast. Being pure class A does have its downside in that it is continually eating away 24W of power, whether idling or running. A small price to pay for such a promising performance.

And it can get even more expensive to use; the unit can allow for a balanced



anced input, meaning that each HA200 could produce a balanced mono output via the XLR socket at the front (which is hidden behind a cover when not needed). In Balanced Mode, four completely separate amps (2 per unit) are used to drive the four phases of the music signal (i.e; right normal, right inverted, left normal and left inverted). Having to use two HA200's mean 48W, but this is a serious piece of kit which I liked more and more as I reviewed it. Even at twice the price for the balanced combi, it was well worth the outlay. NuForce really do know how to produce an accurate but still very natural and musical product which gave me no listening fatigue and endless fun, unlike the DAC80.

CONCLUSION

These are two products that work exceptionally well together but one half not so good on their own. For me the DAC80 is too close to the older DAC100 for comfort, and things have moved on over the last few years. However, I found the HA200 to be one of the best headphone amplifiers I have heard; it is very accurate and ideal for sound engineers like me. So, if

NUFORCE DAC80 & HA200 HEADPHONE AMP

you want something that adds things to the music, be it warmth or colouration, then go somewhere else, but if you want a player that quite simply does your music justice, then this is a really good choice, and even better if you buy two.

DAC80

Sound Quality – 8.1/10

Value for Money – 8.2/10

Build Quality – 8.4/10

Overall – 8.23/10

HA200

Sound Quality – 8.7/10

Value for Money – 8.65/10

Build Quality – 8.4/10

Overall – 8.58/10

Janine Elliot

At the time of review an overall score of 8.5 was needed for second review...this is now 9/10. The HA200 Headphone amp will go to Linette Smith for second review and possible Outsanding Product Award.

NuForce HA200 Headphone Amplifier

I was very interested to get my hands on the NuForce HA200 Headphone amplifier. The last time I did a second review for a product that Janine had reviewed first, the Flare Audio R2 IEMs, we had a complete 'Marmite' experience. She loved exactly what I didn't about them....would the same happen with this NuForce Headphone amp? Interestingly, I was reviewing it with some of the same kit as Janine, we both use the FiiO X5 and I had the Audeze EL8 and Oppo PM1 headphones at my disposal

too....both of which tend to be my 'go to' desk headphones.

Out of the box the signs were good. It was packaged in a no nonsense but careful way. Like Janine, I was impressed by the design. The HA200 is slim, black and understated. It has that Stealth-Hifi look to it with nothing unnecessary to the design, the minuscule red LED is a great touch. It looks smart and serious and has a good weight to it (2.2kg) and a nice, solid front plate, all in all a quality item. It is not a small beastly though, in fact it has nearly as big a footprint as an A4 sheet of paper so this could be an issue if you are looking to use it in a desk set up and have limited space. As the DAC80, that Janine reviewed with the HA200, did not get a recommended award, I only received the headphone amp to review, so I stuck with my Ami Musik DDH1 as a DAC and used either my laptop as the source via a Chord Company SilverPlus USB or the FiiO X5.

Being pure class A, the HA200 soon started to warm things up on my desk. We have had class A amps that you could comfortably fry an egg on but the NuForce (*thankfully*) doesn't get into the realms of scary 'oh my god, call the fire brigade' hot....its a nice hand-warmer on a chilly day! Moving onto some music, I decided to take a different angle to Janine. I mostly listen to Electronic music at my desk and Janine had covered Jazz and Classical, so I went over to Soundcloud (*yes, I know MP3 quality*) and happened upon a Live & Direct Carl Cox set to start with. The most obvious thing was that there was an immediate difference in the bass from using my usual DAC/headphone amp combo. The bass had a great detail to it and there was a massive sub kick...this was sounding like a great combo with the Audeze EL8s. I try out a Perseus Trax sampler next ...a teaser for their vinyl only 303 copies limited edition release. This is proper squelchy 303 laden acid

NUFORCE DAC80 & HA200 HEADPHONE AMP

techno of the highest order. I really got a sense of detail and the HA200 was playing to the strengths of the EL8s with the soundstage seem wider and deeper than usual. I switch onto the FiiO X5 as my source which is mainly packed with Flacs. Carl Cox gets an outing again with his Phuture 2000 album. It's a bit of a favourite of mine, gutsy, powerful and fast jungle.....with some deep sub bass. I get a

real sense of all the little detailed noises which shine out whilst underpinning it

all is the solid current of bass, punching the tracks along. Trying the Oppo PM1s there seems to even more of a synergy with the NuForce with the music becoming even more all-encompassing. 'Time to blackout' kicks in and it sounds exceptional, plenty of bass but detailed and controlled with now overblownness to it...it feels like I am hearing the track exactly how Carl Cox meant it to be. There is definitely a theme developing here and the HA200 is very listenable, with comfortable headphones like the ones I was using you could just sit back and enjoy for hours. I flick through many of my electronic favourites, stand outs include Age of Love (*Jam and Spoon remix*) which has a wonderful sweet-sounding choral vocal. The Hardfloor remix of Blue Monday (*which is THE best version*) has great spatial detail and a wonderful textural 303 sound. The horns in Rudimental's track 'Feel the love' really sing out and the bass (*which can get a little out of control*), like on everything else I've played through the HA200, is superb. I do find it quite hard to choose between the Audeze EL8 and the Oppo PM1 head-

phones but with the benefits of the HA200 the Oppos just have the edge....they do seem like a match made in heaven!

Sometimes when I am reviewing, it feels like the quest for detail is everything, even at the cost of musicality and I have found sometimes that hyper detail is very sterile to listen to. Janine and I come at kit

from very different angles. She is very much a music professional and sound engineer and I the casual listener, so we can often disagree.

However, I found myself very much echoing her findings with the HA200. It is accurate, detailed but very musical and natural....maybe because it complemented the Audeze and the Oppo headphones so well, and I do also have a bit of a soft spot for pure class A amps! It is not a portable headphone amp and would possibly be more at home in most people's main systems on their desks (particularly if you go for the two unit balanced system option) but if you really want that main system feeling at your desk then I am sure room could be made.

CONCLUSION

Recommended if you really want to take your desktop system to the next level and make it as good as listening to your main system. It is in no way a headphone amp just for bassheads, but, if listening to music that sounds natural and exciting with a clear and detailed bass is your thing, you will seriously love the NuForce HA200, add a good pair of planar headphones and you will be onto a winner.

Sound Quality – 8.7/10



NUFORCE DAC80 & HA200 HEADPHONE AMP

Value for Money – 8.6/10

Build Quality – 8.6/10

Overall – 8.63/10

Pros:

Natural, non-clinical detail especially on the bass

Seriously looks the part

Surprisingly low price for such great performance

Cons:

Quite a large, hot thing to have on the desk

Linette Smith

**It is in no way a
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if listening to
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and exciting
with a clear and
detailed bass is
your thing, you
will seriously
love the
NuForce
HA200...**

Designer's Comments

Reuben Klein, Optoma's Product Manager said: "The HA200 produces clear and accurate sound and gives a real live presence for instrument and voices.

"This Class-A reference headphone amp, with its unique circuitry, transforms the performance of ear-

phones and is the nearest that you will ever get to valve sound.

"Using a Class-A power supply makes everything clearer. This gives better definition from the deepest bass to the rustle of leaves. You will simply hear so

much more. Yet this detailed sound is never fatiguing at any volume.

"We believe that it offers a superior quality sound than similar equipment produced by rivals which are three times more expensive."

Capable of driving any set of headphones with more detail and greater scale, the HA200 uses a purist Class-A design in a constant current configuration and offers true single ended output performance.

Unique to the HA200 is its ability to quadruple output power by simply adding a second unit and operating them together in Balanced Mode. This gives even greater fidelity with the two

units easily configured for simultaneous use to provide a true balanced mode operation with increased transient speed, dynamic control and quadrupled output power. Sonically, the resulting

sound is completely 'grain-free'. The soundstage is wide and deep while instruments and voices are reproduced with extreme clarity and purity of tone. The incredible power and dynamic control over the music simply must be experienced to be appreciated.

The HA200 has a 6.5mm outlet for professional

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MAGNIFIC ACOUSTICS M521 LOUDSPEAKERS

Dial M For Magnificent

UK Loudspeaker manufacturer Magnific Acoustics make just two models, Ian Ringstead takes a listen to the company's £2500 M521 stand-mount.

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



MAGNIFIC ACOUSTICS M521 LOUDSPEAKERS

Magnific Acoustics are based in Loughborough and are a husband and wife team keen to let the world know about their unique design. The female side of the team is Natalia Guzakova who, along with her husband Mike, hails from Russia originally but are now happily settled here in the UK. Like many new business they have daytime jobs and this speaker came out of a passion for music and Natalia's fathers dream/ design idea back in the 1970's. He felt drive units needed to be light and efficient in order to work at their best and certainly many years ago when low powered valve amps or transistor amps were the norm this certainly helped. Nowadays this isn't a problem, but efficiency is not a bad thing if the speaker is designed correctly and can handle real world wattages. Modern materials with more power-

ful magnets mean many more ingenious designs can be conjured up.

The M521 is classed as medium sized and yes it is, but at 480mm high by 280mm wide and 300mm deep it is quite a presence in your average sized living room. When I saw them at Whittlebury they immediately stood out in the small room and on their solid metal stands (not included by the way but which are an essential accessory) certainly take over your room. This is not a criticism of the design, just an observation from an aesthetic point of view.

When installed in my living room the same was noticed and my wife did not appreciate the size, but she didn't complain about the sound (a good thing in my books).



MAGNIFIC ACOUSTICS M521 LOUDSPEAKERS

The speaker is necessarily fairly big in order to accommodate the light-weight paper cone bass mid unit (200mm) and silk dome tweeter.

The drive units come from an Italian company called 18 Sound, the crossover is first order and Magnific's own design. They use Jantzen Audio and Clarity Cap components and are very proud of this design.

Power handling is 200W and can be used with amps from 5-100W. Impedance is 8 ohms, frequency range is 30Hz to 20kHz with a 95dB /1W/1 metre efficiency. So all in all an easy to drive design that will go loud.

The pair I received were finished in black

stained ash real wood veneer and can be ordered in other finishes with cherry and American black walnut as standard options. The fit and finish is excellent and the speaker has a standard black cloth detachable grille. Behind the cabinet are a pair of good quality gold plated binding posts. The tweeter is above the bass/mid unit and the cabinet is front ported with an 80mm opening. If you look down the port you can see a perforated baffle. Magnific state it is an acoustic resistance panel but because it is their own design they prefer to call it an acoustic registra-

**The first thing
that struck me
was the
control these
speakers have
over the music,
not in a vice
like grip way,
just
composure.**

tion of speakers. I can only surmise that this panel restricts and controls the airflow within the cabinet especially aiding the bass performance.

Magnific Acoustics aren't the first company to try this type of approach with acoustic resistance, but they certainly seem to have hit upon a clever way of dealing with an age old problem with ported loudspeaker cabinets, i.e. chuffing from the port and poor bass clarity. Ports are there in order to improve sensitivity and aid bass performance but unless the airflow out of the cabinet is controlled properly it has bad side effects. I've

listened to countless speakers over the years and it is immediately obvious when a designer doesn't get the cabinet/port design right. Many blame rooms and positioning as the culprits but I firmly believe if the speaker is designed correctly in the first place then it will sound good in most locations unless the room is truly dreadful. My living room is average in size and typical of what most people have or can afford. I have looked at room treatments but practically these are limited and not guaranteed to work.

SOUND

MAGNIFIC ACOUSTICS M521 LOUDSPEAKERS

Now to the sound. The first thing that struck me was the control these speakers have over the music, not in a vice like grip way, just composure. They went about their job confidently and it took a few hours listening to really appreciate their qualities to the full. Initially you might think they sound dull but that is down to the recording. When I listened to complex jazz and live recordings like Lee Ritenour or Fourplay the skill of the musicians was obvious and all the intricacies of the interplay between the instruments and backing singers were clearly portrayed. I know these recordings extremely well and revelled in the detail and ease at which I could hear everything. Now my sources are not super expensive, a Sony CDPXE 3000 and currently a Project RPM3 with a Sony TAFE3000 amp. The set up sounded good but when I then substituted the Sony amp for my Tisbury Audio passive pre and Meridian 556 power amp the sound took on a whole new perspective. Grip and control were greatly improved which shows a good amp with plenty of current is definitely worth having.

Although these speakers will work with lower powered amps they love a quality amp whether it is valve or transistor. They portray detail very well and are speedy when required, but they don't shout at you. I could listen to them for hours and not feel fatigued. The sound field always stayed within the boundaries of the speakers but depth was well portrayed. Female vocals were lovely and on Clannad's albums Maire Brennan's voice sounded sublime being crystal clear. I love Irish music or Celtic in general, maybe it's the Irish blood in my veins from my dad's side (he was born in Dublin of an Irish mother and English father).

I tried rock and other forms of music and like any good product the M521 performed admirably. The speakers cost £2500, so they are not cheap, but when

you consider the quality of the crossover components along with good drive units and quality Missing Link silver wiring in a very nicely made real wood cabinet then I feel they offer good value.

The design is intended to control the bass output, so it is accurate and may seem lacking on first listening, but persevere and you will be rewarded with clean lows that don't boom. I have always been an advocate of tight accurate bass and would rather sacrifice some lower end if the speaker sounds better in the room. Too much is greed and we all know what greed does to you if not controlled. I prefer lean and mean like my steaks.

Natalia and Mike have done a great job in wanting to bring to our attention a new design that is truthful and was her father's original brain child back in the 70's. Modern methods and materials with sound theory and maths have born fruit I feel. As a new venture Magnific Acoustics have made a good first attempt to enter a very competitive arena. This is an honest design that does not try to impress by being brash but just gets on with producing long term listening pleasure. In a larger listening room they won't seem out of place unlike my smallish living room, but credit due to them that they still worked well. I heartily recommend anyone interested in them to contact Magnific Acoustics and arrange a trial. They will be only too happy to oblige.

Sound quality – 8.7/10

Build quality – 8.5/10

Value for money – 8.4/10

Overall – 8.53/10

Pros:

Great sound with good control, nice build, efficient and easy to drive.

Cons:

MAGNIFIC ACOUSTICS M521 LOUDSPEAKERS

Not small and need good solid stands to work at their best, so factor that in.

Ian Ringstead

Designer's Comments

Loudspeaker design is a skilful art and there are many ways that a good sound can be achieved. A designer has to contend with many issues such as cabinet resonances, crossover irregularities and cone break up to name but a few. Many materials can now be used to try and overcome these issues, but getting the balance right requires skill and a lot of trial and error.

At Magnific Acoustics we use a principal we call Acoustic Registration to get around the resonance problems. These resonances particularly cause problems in the 125Hz and 430Hz which create

drive unit deformation of the cone and stationary wave effects, thereby ruining the sound. A perforated baffle inside the cabinet controls the airflow and allows the drive units to perform at their best.

A fast light weight paper cone driver is used for the bass /mid unit that produces a linear response over a wide frequency range. The silk dome tweeter was chosen for its smooth linear response to provide hours of fatigue free listening.

The crossover uses high quality components from Jantzen and Clarity , and silver wiring from The Missing Link for far greater musicality. It is set at 4400Hz first order, being higher than a lot of designs, in order to achieve a good balance and compromise between the tweeter and bass/mid unit that we use.

Mikhail Martynov

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OAK AUDIO HURRICANE LOUDSPEAKERS

The Eye Of The Storm

Oak Audio are a British company making the interesting Hurricane, transmission line loudspeaker that costs £599 and uses latest generation Mark Audio Alpair 7 full-range drive unit. Dominic Marsh puts them through their paces.

I very much liken hifi to good food, in that a good sounding hifi system is the equivalent of a tasty meal cooked superbly with skill using simple fresh ingredients, which to me tastes far better than a complicated menu with a plethora of ingredients from indeterminate origins served up cold, no matter who has cooked it.

Oak Audio are a newly formed British company which seems to have grasped that simple notion of taking a few in number of fresh ingredients and creating a dish that satisfies the taste buds and the hunger in one go without adding superfluous flavourings or padding to the dish.

CONSTRUCTION

How simple do you want this product to be? A machined MDF carcass, painted in whatever colour you may

wish for, a single driver per cabinet, no crossover, no grilles, one pair of binding posts per speaker? The real value of this speaker however, is the design implementation.



OAK AUDIO HURRICANE LOUDSPEAKERS



OAK AUDIO HURRICANE LOUDSPEAKERS

The pair submitted for review arrived in a deep pink colour and I suspect this was a Hifi Pig plot come challenge with Oak Audio to send us a pair of speakers in the corporate pink colour we are so well renowned for, or it's a standard catalogue colour of theirs by sheer coincidence? Oak Audio say that they can take a colour sample, a Dulux paint name or number, or a Pantone colour code and match it exactly. If however you require a veneered

finish or a high gloss lacquer, then these are not offered as an option on the Oak Audio website.

The cabinet itself is a folded transmission line design with an additional baffle arrangement within the cabinet, with a full width rear exit throat that is a slot cut into the cabinet.

The real stars of this show are the diminutive Alpair metal coned drivers and you will probably be doing as I did, asking yourself again and again how such a small full range drive unit can produce the sounds that it is capable of producing. The drive units are wired with Audioquest cables so Oak Audio say, although the construction and materials of same is not specified.

A bespoke stand is available from Oak Audio designed to fit the Hurricanes exactly and is an extra cost option. These were not supplied to Hifi Pig for the review.

Price at time of testing: £599.00 per pair.

SOUND QUALITY

**Close your eyes
and you would be
hard pressed to
tell by listening
alone if there was
indeed a single
driver full range
speaker in front of
you...**

I have met Alpair drivers before, albeit in another design incarnation entirely and that design needed to be fine tuned for the room they were to be installed in. I was hoping that the Oak Audio Hurricanes were not that critical in what environment they were going to be used in and thankfully no adjustments or tuning tweaks were needed at all when installed into my listening room. Not having the correct Oak Audio speaker stands available, I sat

them onto a pair of black 24 inch Atacama stands which didn't look all that elegant, but they served their purpose admirably for the listening sessions, taking the drivers up to approximately ear level.

First impressions fresh out of their box was very pleasant and I wasn't too fussy about setup and placement either, so they ended up around 10cm from the rear wall and no side walls to reflect from in a moderately damped listening room. Some full range driver speakers can sound rather peaky especially around the mid range, vocals in particular, but the Hurricanes produced a realistic and coherent sound right across the board from bass right up to upper treble with no discernable peaks at all. Close your eyes and you would be hard pressed to tell by listening alone if there was indeed a single driver full range speaker in front of you, although the slight beaming effect of the sound in the sweet spot might have given the game away.

Moving on to some actual music then, I spun Fink's "Wheels Beneath My Feet" live album in the CD

OAK AUDIO HURRICANE LOUDSPEAKERS

player. The opening bars on the track “Biscuits” has some delicate strikes on the ride cymbal and my fear with that metal coned driver is that it would be a shade over emphasized and sound just a bit too metallic, but no, it was recreated very accurately and full of subtle timbres. Throughout that whole first track on the album we have a repetitive single kick

drum beat with the hard face on the beater and the sceptic in me again was doubting whether that little Alpair driver could deliver the weight and heft of that instrument, but once again it proved my fears were entirely unfounded. The real test of bass performance though comes in the track “Sort of Revolution” on this album where the drummer really does drive into the Floor Tom with power and force, so there is a pounding slam to it and of course the speakers have to have a fast excursion to it’s travel and have quick recovery too, otherwise the speakers simply won’t convey that energy in the way it ought to. Don’t ask me how the Alpair driver does it, but it does, presumably the way it interacts with the enclosure it is mounted in. Oak Audio say it extends down to 50Hz and I wouldn’t argue with that claim at all and I could detect no chuffing at all from the rear facing port either.

This album has the tracks recorded at various venues around Europe and each one has a different ambience which is clearly audible. Some tracks sound almost like they are recorded in a large venue with the reverberations echoing around the walls and others are more intimate with a damped almost soft background. Coupled with that is the refined imaging and sound staging the Hurricanes ably demonstrate. Not quite holographic, not quite walk through and around realism, but a very good portrayal nonetheless, with the

Saxophone had a real breathy and earthy rasp to it, the piano had a solid depth to the sound and the drums had some real crisp impact and

images hanging in space and not wavering, staying put where they should be.

On then to the acid test of what the Hurricanes would do and into the CD player went Porcupine Tree’s “Deadwing” album. This album takes no prisoners with it’s raw unbridled energy and it quickly became apparent that Hurricane owners are not

the breed of audiophile that would play this kind of music, or indeed any kind of heavy rock music, much as an owner of a thoroughbred race horse wouldn’t set the animal to plough fields because it simply isn’t suited to that task. Deadwing is a coarse and uncouth recording and the Hurricanes simply let you the listener know that it was exactly that because they dished it up in it’s entirety, warts and all which quickly became fatiguing. This isn’t a criticism of the Hurricanes, it merely points to the fact that they excel in other areas, so I set myself the task of finding out what those areas were.

Some Loreena McKennit seemed a good choice at that moment, so into the CD player went her “An Ancient Muse” album. Loreena’s voice simply soared out into space with a refreshing cleanliness and vibrancy, so the Hurricane’s were thriving on this kind of music, the simplicity of textures and crispness suiting them admirably. Spurred on by that, I then chose to play some Jazz. “What did he just say?” He said “Jazz, which he never normally plays or mentions in reviews”. Dominic also played some Classical, but let’s deal with one shock at a time please, with no disrespect to all classical music fans out there, but it isn’t a genre of music that enervates me personally. Dave Brubeck’s “Take Five” went into the CD player and that was a delight too. Saxophone had a real

OAK AUDIO HURRICANE LOUDSPEAKERS



breathy and earthy rasp to it, the piano had a solid depth to the sound and the drums had some real crisp impact and rawness which was very beguiling and much to my surprise had me listening more than once, where even the once is usually more than enough for me in any one session. Overall, the sound was very much alive, full of subtle energy and spatial pinpoints which were very easy to follow with the Hurricanes

and I don't think there are many multiple driver and crossover equipped speakers that can master that level of refined simplicity in their presentation. Next, some classical music and the keep it simple rule applied here too. Large orchestral works were somewhat diffuse and it wasn't an easy task as a listener to keep the various orchestra sections separated and in their rightful place in the soundstage, but move to trios, quartets

OAK AUDIO HURRICANE LOUDSPEAKERS

and quintets, then the Hurricanes excelled with an uncomplicated and uncluttered yet still refined presentation.

Finally for completeness more than anything else, I played Derrin Nauendorf's "Live At The Boardwalk" album and as the title suggests, it is recorded live with his acoustic guitar, a set of drums and that's it in total, apart from Derrin's singing, which at times is executed as

well as a cat with it's tail caught in a cat flap. That is of course no matter, as what the man can do with an acoustic guitar that is the focus of this album. Close mic'd and well put down in the recording, it brings out the visceral energy of this instrument and the Oak Audio Hurricane's did a fabulous job of relaying that sound directly to you, with rich deep textures and tones from the instrument's body. Finger fret work on the guitar was real enough to set your teeth on edge and each string's vibrations and harmonics delivered with crisp taut precision.

CONCLUSION

If you are looking for a loudspeaker that handles heavy rock music with ease, then the Oak Audio Hurricanes are not going to satisfy that desire, so let's not pretend otherwise. As you wouldn't put paraffin into a Ferrari's fuel tank for it to run at it's peak performance, so too would the Hurricanes flounder with reproducing rock concert pressure levels, so don't even think about it, it will only end in tears.

They do however love clean simple music that's well recorded and gives it polish and refinement that will delight. Feed them some acoustic, Jazz, solo artists, simple orchestral, small ensemble and chamber music

They do however love clean simple music that's well recorded and gives it polish and refinement that will delight.

and they are in their true element, so their benefits then have far outweighed their drawback in not excelling with bigger scale music and hard rock. Horses for courses, as they say.

Build quality: 7.8/10

Sound quality: 8.7/10

Value for money: 8.5/10

Overall: 8.3/10

PROS

Choice of any colour

Seamless sound quality

Good value for money

CONS

Restricted in music genres

Dominic Marsh

Designer's Notes

Technically, the Hurricane is a standmount transmission line loudspeaker employing the latest generation Mark Audio Alpair 7 full-range drive unit. The Alpair series drivers are at the cutting edge of contemporary full-range driver technology and incorporate a number of features that are not found in any other units. All components apart from the magnet are designed in-house, from the ground up. The cone is made of a low-mass magnesium-aluminium alloy, multiformed into a very shallow profile to maximise off-axis dispersion and ensure the drivers provide a well-balanced sound across a wide listening window, far removed from the notorious 'beaming' of high frequencies most full-range drivers suffer from. The suspension and voice-coil also provide exceptional linear excursion. Where many full-range drivers have

OAK AUDIO HURRICANE LOUDSPEAKERS

less than 0.2mm of linear travel before distortion rapidly increases, the Alpair 7 has over 8mm point-to-point travel and a unique arrestor, which provides both an audible warning, and physically limits travel to prevent damage occurring. Despite their large excursion abilities, the total moving mass of the Alpair 7 is less than 4 grams, and the coil, suspension and cone are designed to maximise resonant sensitivity, allowing low-level signals to be properly reproduced. Like other full-range drivers, it is also a point source.

The Hurricane cabinet is designed to extract the maximum bandwidth from the Alpair 7 in a compact package with interesting proportions, and is optimised for general listening in small – medium sized listening rooms. Unlike many standmount loudspeakers, the Hurricane is deeper than it is tall, to reduce the visual impact and minimise the baffle area. Coupled with the inherent driver response and the gentle roundovers, this helps ensure audible diffraction effects are minimised. Internally, the Hurricane enclosure packs a highly tapered transmission line / damped quarter-wave into its compact dimensions.

There is probably more myth, misunderstandings and outright nonsense associated with transmission lines than any other type of loudspeaker enclosure. The name itself, derived from the electrical transmission line, is unfortunate. First popularised by Bailey in the title of an article written in the 1960s, it has become a ‘catch-all’ phrase, and is often employed to describe speakers that are functionally the exact opposites of one another. A pure acoustic transmission line is a cabinet designed to provide the flattest possible impedance, with no other design considerations whatsoever. The term is rarely used so narrowly however, and has come to be used to describe most cabinets that use some variation of quarter-wave resonant characteristics. A few common of the most common myths are:

-A TL is tuned to 1/4 wavelength of the driver’s resonant frequency.

Not true. A TL / quarter-wave should be tuned to achieve the specific design goals, like any other vented enclosure

-A TL should have proportions that are multiples of the driver’s surface area (Sd)

Not true. Driver surface area has no direct relationship to the cross section of a transmission line / quarter-wave cabinet

-Long-hair wool is the optimal type of damping material to use in a TL

Not true. There is nothing mystical about long-hair wool. Long hair wool is an effective damping material, but all damping materials possess a different set of benefits and trade-offs. Other types work perfectly well

-Damping material significantly slows the speed of sound in a TL, and this can be up to 50%

Not true. The speed of sound is not reduced to such an extent. 10% is the maximum encountered.

-The tuning frequency of a TL is purely created by axial length

Not true. Acoustic length and physical length are different things. A highly tapered (narrowing toward the terminus) TL will have a lower resonant frequency than an untapered or expanding line of the same physical length.

The Hurricane standmount uses a highly tapered, lightly damped line, exiting to the rear of the cabinet, with the driver offset from the end of the line. The high taper ratio and offset driver position provide a low tuning frequency with tight control over the driver, while minimising unwanted harmonic resonances of the line. The impedance load is relatively unreactive, allowing the speakers to be used with a wide range of amplifiers.

S.Lindgren

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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WYRED4SOUND REMEDY (DIGITAL RECLOCKER)

The Right Medecine?

Dan Worth checks out the \$399 Remedy “digital reclocker” from Wyred4Sound.

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Remedy from Wyred4Sound is a re-clocking unit which takes the digital signal from any piece of equipment that has an SPDIF coaxial or optical output. Utilising the Femto clock the unit is powered by a 9v switch mode power supply (SMPS) which I would strongly recommend ditching and replacing it with a good linear supply to reduce the nasties injected into the signal path and back into the mains.

The idea behind the unit is to give the end user the ability to add a new clocking system to standard digital sources such as streamers, Apple TV's, computers and TV boxes etc to lower the jitter which the DAC receives, making for a more stable signal and more musical performance.

There are two inputs on Remedy, firstly a coaxial RCA and secondly an optical. A switch on one side allows for choice of input. On the opposite side Remedy has a RCA output as well as BNC and also an optical. You will need to double up on cabling as this is an in-line product.

The casework on Remedy is very nice indeed, a good solid metal powder coated enclosure with machined logo on the roof, all sockets are of high quality and the overall finish is very smart.

THE SOUND

I had the perfect units ready to be 'Remedied' – an Apple TV2 running the latest release of Kodi playing my NAS files and various internal music repositor-

WYRED4SOUND REMEDY (DIGITAL RECLOCKER)

ies, a Pro-Ject Streambox DS Net with NAS and Spotify files and a Virgin Media TiVO television receiver box which is connected to a Bose system in the bedroom and also running the Spotify App.

First up was the Pro-Ject Streambox DS Net.

Now this unit can do with a helping hand and since adding a linear power supply to the DS it has become a far more interesting unit, but its sound can be a bit limp and weedy.

When adding the Remedy into the system it took no time at all to ascertain the effects. The entire soundstage matures and a fullness comes over the music. Bass is more tuneful and digs deeper into the depths reflecting a more natural rendition of instrument tone and timbre. The entire sound simply had more stability.

John Legend and Megan Trainor's 'Like I'm Gonna Lose You' came through with a new found crispness and simplicity to the upper registers allowing for a slightly more effortless listen and most notably tim-

ing errors seem to have decreased and a graininess (which I hadn't really significantly noticed before until implementing Remedy) had vanished. The sound was more accurate and musical, allowing for the duos vocals to really shine.

Soundstage throughout my listening tests and various music genres was nothing short of impressive. The width, height and depth, along with three dimensionality was substantially improved. Instruments and vocalists both grew in size and shape, with more air around them, free floating in a noticeably darker background allowing for smaller details and micro dynamics to become more prominent.

My overall impressions here were that the sound was less strangled and freer... more engaging, with a better detail extraction and musical appeal.

The Apple TV2 is a device which is used everyday without fail in my home. I have a good range of old classic gangster movies which I love and old classic English series such as Only Fools and Horses. Along



WYRED4SOUND REMEDY (DIGITAL RECLOCKER)

with the direct NAS streaming of my music libraries the system I have in this room covers all of my needs and wants.

I currently use little Fiio DACs, one from the ATV2 and one from the TiVo. As my TV has a few USB's what I do is power the DACs from the TV rather than the wall so that when I turn the TV on or off the DACs respond accordingly.

Adding Remedy to the ATV2 gave a new lease of life to watching films through the Bose system. Dynamics were more intense and speech was clearly better defined. Dependant on what I'm watching and where and how it's streamed overall quality does really vary, but with the Remedy in place the sound was considerably more active and lively, pitches and tones were more energetically portrayed and an increased sense of realism was reached.

The same was apparent in music playback through the ATV2. The Acoustimass module for the system lives in a sea grass trunk with the cables routed inside skirting and with the lids on this keeps everything neat and tidy. I've never had any complaints about the bass and the levels are set so that the lower frequencies just come in enough to fill out the sound, so the unit's location is never pin pointed.

With the W4S Remedy aiding the flow of digital signals bass notes had a bit more punch to their upper frequencies, the lower mids were cleaner and better defined... which is an area where the Bose will leave a bit of a void. The brand isn't much loved by the

average Hifi enthusiast, but in its location and use it's fantastic and exactly what I wanted for my bedroom.

Kick drums had that slap they very well needed, better rhythm was achieved and the areas of the sound I had grown to ignore were no longer ignorable. I would have to get used to this a little if Remedy was to remain in this system, sometimes when something is good we can all appreciate it and just listen, but when it gets past good we naturally begin to criticise it more and more.

My conclusions in this matter were that yes Remedy was giving a better performance all round, movies

especially were far more interesting. Music though had good and bad points – the good was that the sound became more cohesive, the bad was that if I was using this



system purely for

music the Remedy highlighted its flaws and better it was than without Remedy... but it just wanted me to want more, but then that's the audiophile brain we all have unfortunately.

I'll touch on the TiVo box for completeness as this runs through the same system in the same room. My findings were very much like the ATV2. What did stand out though is how well recorded adverts are. There is an awful lot of spatial awareness, good clean speech and music embedded in adverts was coming over in excellent form.

WYRED4SOUND REMEDY (DIGITAL RECLOCKER)

The quality and levels of recorded material are no doubt specified and we all know adverts are louder in volume than the main event, in an attempt to try and force some revolutionary toothpaste down our throats. This aside, on advertisements and some Dolby digital sound re-

cordings I was absolutely take by the Remedied sound. Overall sound of course was heightened with a more solid stable and clearer nature, but 1080p and Dolby was excellent. If I still had a home cinema I would have loved to try Remedy between Bluray and receiver, or TiVO and a high-end multi speaker system.

Bear in mind with Remedy its performance is still relative to the device in hand. It will revive and upgrade units it's paired with, but if the unit in question is shockingly poor in the first place it won't give Remedy much to work with and the effects will not be as prominent as an item with an already good starting point.

With the three units I tested Remedy with I was extremely pleased with the results, although if I wanted one for each of these the overall cost would outweigh the implementation. I would suggest that if you are listening through a moderately priced streamer as a main source (such as the Pro-Ject or even the ATV for instance) Remedy is an outstanding add-on, but unless the cost is not an issue I wouldn't be rushing out to get one for the TiVO box or any item that wasn't listened to in a crucial way.

CONCLUSION

Many CD players and DACs have a BNC to permit World Clock control, allowing users to add a sepa-

The Remedy's main characteristics are better clarity, timing and extension of a note.

rate Master Clock for overall control. These items are usually very expensive and the means suits the price.

Remedy however is simply an in-line product which will fit neatly between any coax or optical output and any coax or optical input ie on the DAC or receiver.

Adding the famous Femto clock to any unit within reason (not a four box DCS CD) will enhance the sound reproduction of movies, TV or music. The Remedy's main characteristics are better clarity, timing and extension of a note. It affords a blacker background, allowing for smaller details to be heard and a more cohesive rhythmic sound. The Femto is not a detail extractor, think of it as controller which cleans up all the nasties and orders the 1's and 0's to fall back into an orderly line.

I was going to send the Remedy back to W4S but decided to buy it... it's such a fantastic upgrade to an Apple TV I can actually listen to music through it now quite comfortably!

Build Quality – 8.4/10

Sound Quality – 8.4/10

Value For Money – 8.2/10

Overall – 8.33/10

Pros:

Adds an uncoloured improvement to digital sources

Flexible connectivity

Solid and attractive build

Cons:

Would have liked to see all connections on the rear of a chassis

Dan Worth



Power to perform.

We live in an electrically noisy world. Cell phones, computers, wifi networks, the fridge and even your equipment itself can all add various types of noise & interference.

Yet we expect our hifi & home cinema systems to deliver maximum performance regardless.

Combining power cables and an innovative modular distribution system with optional per socket filtering, Eos has been designed as a complete power management system.

Think of it as the clean power 'foundation' for a great performance from your music and movies.



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the performance connection
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MCRU EXCELSIOR DC BLOCKER

The Mains Event



Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

DC on the mains supply has been a hot topic in the last few years as audiophiles understand the importance of a “clean” supply. Ian Ringstead fits the MCRU Excelsior DC Blocker to his system to see what effect it has.

Mains power is something most people take for granted and never give it a second thought unless there is a power cut. Now as a hifi enthusiast I’ve known for a long time how important a good power supply is to the quality of the sound an amplifier or source component produces, but it wasn’t until more recently that I read articles on the quality of one’s mains power and how it is affected by many outside influences. Dirty

mains can cause transformers to hum because the laminates rattle due to interference on the power supply with mains voltage variations or from industrial plants etc. Also our home is full of mains borne pollution from switch mode power supplies in our computers, routers etc.

Life is therefore quite hard for a decent hifi system to perform at its best if mains pollution is bad in your home. The wiring in your home is usually on a ring

MCRU EXCELSIOR DC BLOCKER

main (or radial) and this means many sockets can be joined together on a common circuit. Anything plugged into that circuit will therefore be affected by a component when it is plugged into that circuit and will interfere with the circuit as a whole. I decided to get around this problem by installing a dedicated circuit isolated from my house's mains by having a separate consumer unit, using 30 amp wiring and a dedicated earth spike buried outside my house in the garden to provide a separate earth point. This may sound extreme to some readers and I have been scoffed at by some friends, but the effort in my view was

well worth it. I got a lot less interference from things like my fridge freezer or central heating thermostat switching on and off and the bass was a lot better. I have also invested time and money in buying or making up good quality mains leads and have a good quality mains block. The socket my hifi plugs into on the wall is silver plated, again for better contact and it enhances the performance. I think anyone who spends a reasonable amount of money on hifi and listens to music a lot should try to do what I have. It is up to individuals how much they spend on doing this and thousands can be spent on exotic mains conditioners, leads and cables, but this does not guarantee good results.

The reason for this lengthy introduction is because I was recently asked to try out a new mains product by Huddersfield based company Mains Cables Are Us (MCRU). David Brook the proprietor and down to earth Yorkshire man contacted me to see how I wanted my DC mains blocker configuring. Basically this is a very high quality mains lead that has a filter placed between the mains plug and the other end of the lead that plugs into your mains block to supply current to your equipment. Mine came fitted with a Furutech mains plug (*others countries are*

available) and 16 amp IEC socket to plug into my mains block.



So-
phi
sti-
cated technolo-

gy has been used to produce a mains power lead unlike any other manufactured and designed to block the DC that occurs in the mains supply. Manufactured using the best available materials the Excelsior Mains Lead utilises substantial OFC mains cable with 4mm sq individual conductors which are terminated with a gold plated audiophile mains plug and gold plated IEC connector (*either the standard C15 IEC or C19 high current*) and used solely on their own this would be a formidable mains power lead in its own right.

MCRU have taken the design further and housed a powerful mains filter in the centre of the cable, the aluminium enclosure houses a specially designed DC blocker. As mentioned earlier DC (*direct current*) occurs in the mains supply from house-hold appliances and has been present in the supply but not cor-

MCRU EXCELSIOR DC BLOCKER

rectly addressed or acknowledged until recently.

Transformer hum is as a result of DC in the mains. MCRU state their power cord will remove it and also improve the overall sound quality from your system.

The power lead has been tested to prove its effectiveness on a live mains supply and also in a computer simulation programme specifically for this task. Standard length is 3 metres overall, but longer lengths can be made to order.

Now I know for a fact what mains hum can do to power amps in particular. Back in the 80's when I sold Naim amplifiers we would every so often get a customer who would ring up or call in to say their amp was buzzing badly. We would try it in the shop and have no problem, but as soon as they took it back home it would buzz again. We contacted the manufacturer who said it could only be bad /dirty mains causing the trouble. If it persisted we would change the amp as part of our good customer service, just in case that particular transformer was sensitive to dirty mains. At the time mains filters weren't really talked about and better quality mains leads were not considered necessary. Then in the 90's this problem of dirty mains was talked about far more and companies started to sell mains filters, power blocks and leads that they claimed would dramatically improve the sound of your hifi system.

**Having used the
Excelsior DC Blocker
now for a few weeks I
can say it has just sat
there and done what it
is supposed to do,
improve your systems
sound.**

The sceptics amongst you might still think this is all snake oil and how or why should good mains cabling and isolation products make any difference. Well I for one have definitely reaped the benefits of taking care with my system and using good components to address the issues. I haven't gone crazy and

spent thousands, but just been sensible; I like anyone else have become sceptical of wild claims for cables and other products transforming your system, especially when these items cost a lot of money. David just said to me try it in your system and if it sounds better then great.

CONCLUSION

Having used the Excelsior DC Blocker now for a few weeks I can say it has just sat there and done what it is supposed to do, improve your systems sound. It isn't a "wow what an amazing change has been made" type of experience, simply my system sounds great and I can really appreciate what the units are doing and all my music is highly enjoyable. Sound staging is solid and clear and there are no nasty harsh higher frequencies. I have had several different components I have been evaluating over the last few weeks and they have all worked flawlessly with no mains pops or the sound being grungy. Often when I listen to the system during the day it can sound variable and they say your system will always

MCRU EXCELSIOR DC BLOCKER

sound at its best late at night when most people are in bed and industrial plants are running down.

All I can say is that MCRU Excelsior DC Blocker works. It is very well made and unobtrusive. The fact David will make it to whatever specification you want is a bonus and at £599, although not cheap due to the quality of components used, I feel offers good value compared to the other items I have either had or tried over the years.

Sound Quality – 8.6/10

Build Quality – 8.7/10

Value for money – 8.5/10

Overall – 8.6

Pros:

Great build quality, easy to install and unobtrusive. Your system will sound better.

Cons:

Not cheap but if you want to try it David will happily let you buy on a trial basis so nothing is lost.

Ian Ringsted

Designer's Comments

The Excelsior started life as an idea aimed at owners of amplifiers that hum loudly. Customers were contacting us asking if the hum could be eradicated, we explained it's not really the amp humming its the

Basically this is a very high quality mains lead that has a filter placed between the mains plug and the other end of the lead that plugs into your mains block to supply current to your equipment.

transformer inside the amplifier. Usually caused by DC present on the mains. Eradicating DC kills the hum and improves system performance.

DC offset can be introduced into your mains supply by both other devices in your house and from other houses in the street, or light industry that you are unlucky in sharing a phase with.

Another way of considering DC offset is asymmetric mains waveform, the peaks one way are smaller than the other.

DC offset on the mains will cause the transformers in your equipment to saturate. Saturating transformers work far less efficiently and generate a lot of noise both physical and electrical.

The DC blocker removes the offset from your mains, while maintaining the low impedance supply to your equipment.

As well as blocking DC we wanted the Excelsior to function as a high end power lead so even if the dc blocker was not present it would still improve sound quality when compared to kettle leads, we think we have achieved that by using audiophile grade plugs and connectors and an often over looked item, the mains fuse which we up-grade.

The final pieces in the jigsaw are mains cable with 4mm sq conductors housed in a special carbon infused braiding to prevent pick up of RFI.

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TEN FREE ANDROID APPS FOR AUDIOPHILES

I was dragged kicking and screaming into the world of smart-phones and tablets but now I've embraced them I really couldn't be without them. However, your android device is only as smart as the apps that you install on it and so we thought it would be fun to highlight a handful of the free Android apps that we use every once in a while. Of course there are a whole load more free and paid for apps out there, including apps to control specific brands kit, and we'll be adding more to our list as and when.

RTA Analyzer

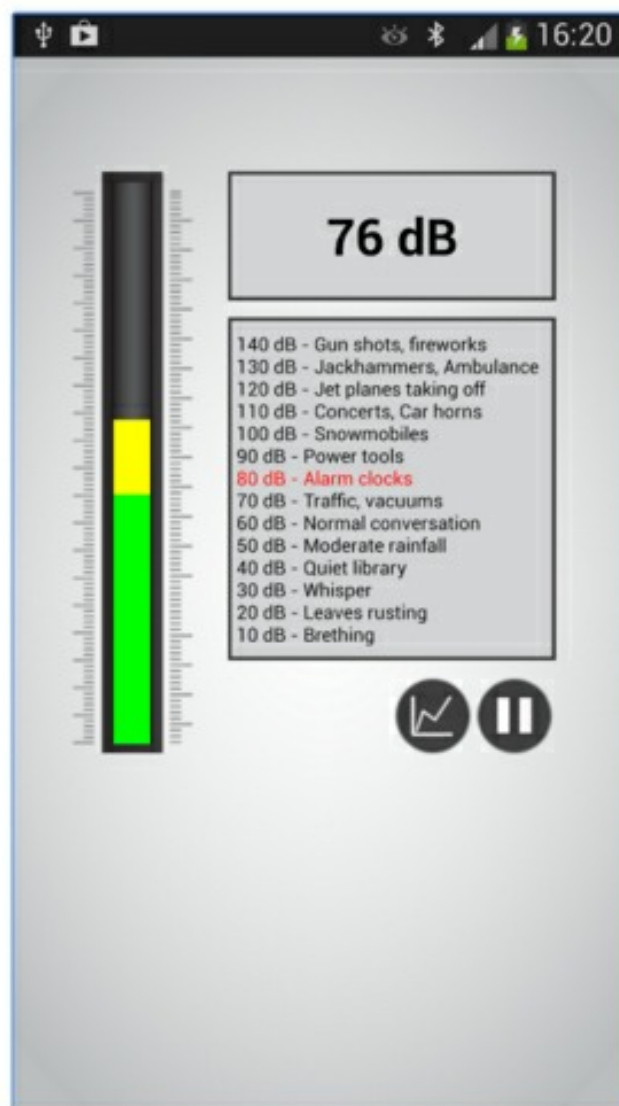


A frequency analyser that seems broadly accurate with the test tones that I tried with it. Clearly this is not going to be anywhere near as good as a measurement mic attached to a laptop or specialty unit as it's always going to be compromised by the microphone on your phone/tablet. However, it is good for identify-

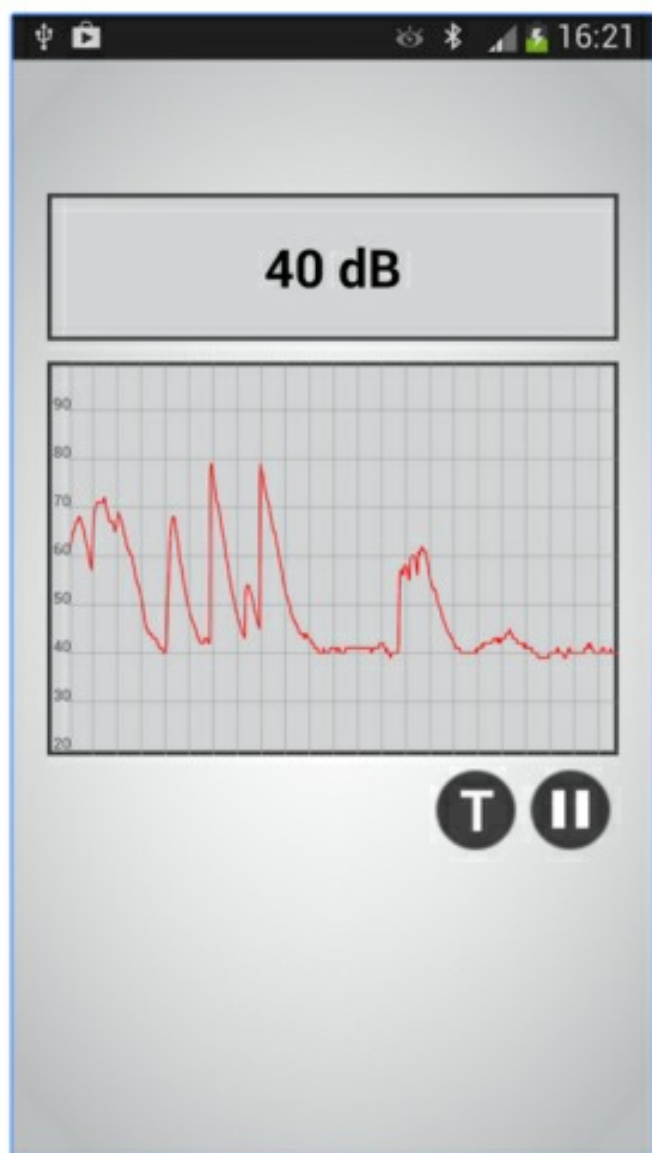
ing areas in your room you may want to look at re treatment etc.

Sound Meter Pro by Mobile Essentials

This Android app claims to offer you a "Professional sound meter in your pocket" and it seems to be pretty accurate given that this is a free app. You get to calibrate it and have a very simple user interface with a live reading in numbers and on a simple level meter, or a continuous graph, depending on the mode you run it in.



TEN FREE ANDROID APPS FOR AUDIOPHILES



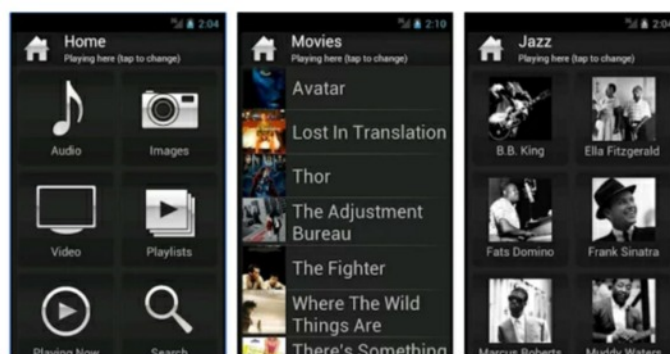
Spirit Level by Keuwlsoft

Needless to say the name of this app gives what it does away pretty much and you may think why the heck I've added a spirit level app to this list of Apps for audiophiles...but it is really useful. Calibrate it and you have an accurate way to get your turntable, equipment racks and whatever else you want to ensure are level, level. No good for tonearms for obvious reasons of size but good for everything else.



Gizmo

I use J River for playing back my audio files and Gizmo is a little app that allows you to control the media player from the comfort of my armchair. You get to search your tunes by cover art and it's all pretty simple and with an attractive interface. Set up of this app is a doddle and it will also play to any zone or DLNA Renderer, including a copy of MC if DLNA has been enabled. Will also play video.

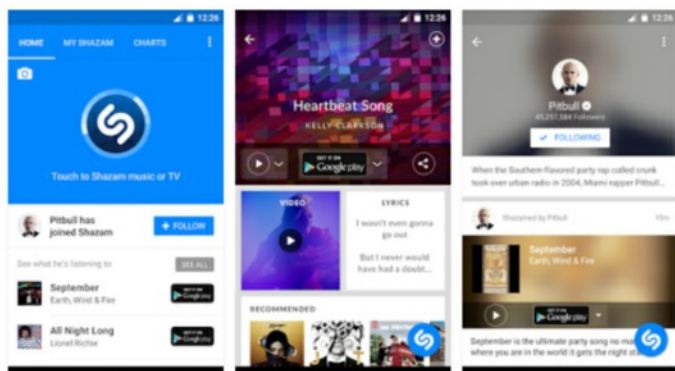


Shazam

Not really a tool as such but a great app to identify music whilst you are out and about. Press the Shazam button, point the microphone of your phone or tablet at the tune playing and Shazam will try and identify it for you. They are adding new features all the time

TEN FREE ANDROID APPS FOR AUDIOPHILES

and the daily pushed messages can be a bit annoying. A fun app none the less.



PlatterSpeed – Vinyl Tool



This little app does what it says on the tin...it helps you calibrate the speed of your turntable to 33 1/3 or 45 RPM using a 3150 Hz test tone....of course you'll need a record with this tone on there and the company recommend a specific one to use.

Not used this app, but again it looks fun and will satisfy the tweakers and measurement fanatics out there in audiophileland.

Seismograph

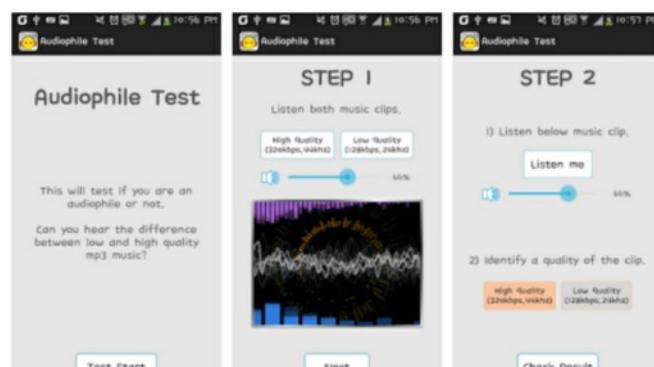
Max at Townshend Audio really ought to take the credit for bringing this app to our attention and it certainly makes for an interesting demonstration of his isolation products. Basically you place this on your speaker, or any other bit of kit, walk around the room and watch the seismograph go crazy

as your feet hit the ground. The more isolated from the ground your kit, the less the seismograph will jump around.

If you are looking at isolating your equipment efficiently then this is a useful little free app will help you find out if you have been successful or not.



Audiophile Test (Hearing Test)



The general purpose of this little app is to tell you if you can hear the difference between low and high quality MP3 files. Good fun... many will not want to share the results I fear. Relies on you having good quality headphones already I would suggest...and perhaps an out-board DAC....and headphone amp.

Box Tune Calculator

Another free app for making speaker enclosures aimed at the audiophile DIY market and the car audio. It's a pretty comprehensive

TEN FREE ANDROID APPS FOR AUDIOPHILES

toolkit of an app to be fair including a nvent-ed box calculator, Wedge box calculator, Box volume calculator, Port size calculator and an ohm calculator so you can work out the overall impedance of your speakers based on how you wire them and the individual impedances of the drivers you use.

There are wiring diagrams and a cut sheet to help you put your project together. I'm certainly no DIYer to I've not used this one but it looks intuitive enough and should be a useful one for folk to have in their arsenal.

Select Input type:

Wood Thickness

All Box Displacements

Enter Outer Dimensions

Length x Width x Height

Volume(cft):

Volume(L):

Please select a Port

☐ Slot Port

☐ Circular Port

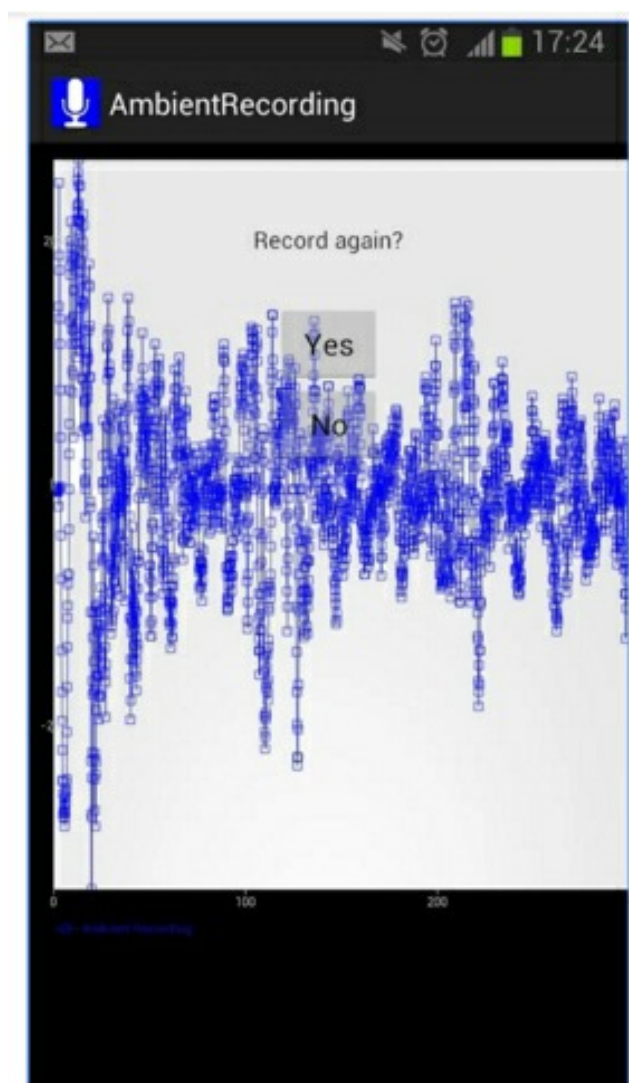
Perfectone

Perfectone is a nice little free Android app that aims to get your speakers in the right po-

sition for your room. The bump on Google Store says "Using a revolutionary new algorithm to calculate Reverberation Time, PERFECTONE determines the best place to put stereo speakers in YOUR room".

To use it you turn down the volume on your device, press the button and a graph is displayed. You then add your room dimensions and are told where your speakers will be best placed. Far more easy to use than the screen grab would initially suggest.

It's an easy to use app and the science does seem to be solid enough with it. However, I would only ever use something like this as a rough-guide and then fine tune by ear.



RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY JANINE ELLIOT



Janine Elliot takes us on a brief tour of the history of Japanese company Stax, who many readers will know for their “ear speakers”.

Talk of Stax and all you think of is headphones, or as they very much like to call them, ‘Earspeakers’. I ogled for one of their headphones when I first set sail on my voyage into hifi, walking past KJ Leisurecentre in Watford on the way to my piano lessons each week. But I had to settle for a PWB Electrostatic headphone at £36, because that was all my meagre pocket money had allowed me to amass. Not that I didn’t feel highly about the speed and accuracy of that Peter Belt product, long before he turned to aluminium foil,



magnets and furniture polish to “improve the sound of your hi-fi”. That story is for another day. No, my first sight of the Stax headphones was their SR-LLambda series, a design from 1979 which survives in new SR-207, 307, 407, 507 metamorphoses.

But Earspeakers are only the latest products from a company set up in 1938. The first product to hit the shelves was a highfrequency condenser microphone of 1950, followed in 1952 by the CP-20 electrostatic cartridge with a re-

RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY JANINE ELLIOT

spectable 20-18,000Hz frequency response and a 1.5g playing weight. It wasn't until 1960 until their first electrostatic Earspeaker, the SR1, came into being, after further detours including tone arm, electrostatic speaker, and an Oscillator detector.

Looking like most other headphones of the day, including my PWB from 20 years later, this was a unique product in its electrostatic design, and Stax Founder Naotake Hayashi quite rightly called them Ear Speakers because that is exactly what they are. The principle of electrostatic design meant the sound is generated by the force exerted on a very thin (*less than 2 microns*) and light high-polymer film diaphragm sandwiched between two electrically conductive grids. This creates a speedy and accurate sound production without the heavy armature of a conventional speaker design. Initially power to energise these grids was generated by connecting them to your speaker terminals, though this did mean perhaps you had to fiddle about at the back of your amplifier if you wanted to change between cans and speakers with just one speaker terminal. Energisers to power these directly from a line level source were soon to follow, originally with 6-pin 230 volt bias, referred to as "Normal" bias, with the latest 5-pin models with a 580

volt bias, referred to as "Pro" bias. That said, even as late as 1977 the SR-Sigma, for me their most pivotal product, still powered itself from your speaker terminals. This model was probably their very ugliest, with drivers looking like mini loudspeakers that sat at angles to your ears clearly looking

like ear speakers, but by fashioning it this way gave the most realistic sound that cans will ever do without giving the impression of an orchestra inside your head.

From this model spurred the more aerodynamic Lambda appearing in 1979, a model morphed into the SR-207, 307, 407 and 507 of today. Whilst I had to wait a further 30 years before I myself could afford my [SR407](#)/SRM006tS

Earspeaker/Energiser combination, the wait was well worth it. The effortless speed and clarity of sound was and still is hard to copy in a moving coil headphone, and the rectangular shape is not a process of bad design, but the most appropriate dimensions to house an electrostatic plate. No, this iconic looking beast feels just right when

SR-3



wearing and the angled plates means the sound arrives as natural to your ears as headphones can possibly do. If only Stax would re-release the Sigma, then that experience would be even more natural.

I laughed when I first saw the Sigma, and then I saw the Jeckin Float, the most ergonomic headphone ever made, though that one was much more uncomfortable to wear than the Sigma. No, the Stax was surprisingly comfortable for its size and shape, and considering you usually only wear headphones when you are on your own, there wouldn't be anyone to laugh at you if you had them on your head anyway. Whilst the top of the range, and more conventional looking [SR-009](#), [reviewed here a while ago](#), is



the Royal family. What makes me still proud to own a Stax is the fact that they are still hand built in Japan. Just how long Stax will remain that Rolls Royce brand is hard to guess, but a lot will depend on where and how it is made. Edifier bought it so that they could take ideas and

probably the best headphone or earspeaker ever created, a product costing so much to develop that it put Stax close to financial ruin, the Lambda and its grandchildren are not that far behind. Correctly driven with matched tubes and settings on the latest 'Kimik' Energisers, these Japanese hand-built babies are the bees-knees.

Whilst Japan could rightly be proud of its origin, an iconic giant of company with a miniature collection of only a handful of employees, the company sadly became insolvent in 1995, revived in the following year only to be sold off in December 2011 to the Chinese loudspeaker company Edifier. Stax didn't get much out of the

sell-off. Just as Quad, makers of electrostatic speakers was itself sold to the Chinese in 1997, the design and philosophy of both companies remains as paramount today as it ever was, though myself as patriotic citizen through and through wonder sometimes if companies owned by another country are quite so iconic and collectable as they were before. Even having your products built in another country can sometimes be irritating at times, and influencing Manley to advertise "Made in China, not China" on their website. Today's world is different to many years ago. Something labelled as 'British' will have components borne from more nationalities than even

build in their own headphones, and even to use their "own" R&D facilities to develop new models, though that idea worries me somewhat, as has it to numerous Stax aficionados. So much so that Edifier chairman and general manager, Zhang Wendong, sent out a letter to worried Stax enthusiasts stating that 100% of the R&D and manufacturing of Stax brand products would continue in Japan, and that Edifier would use its manufacturing strength to produce diaphragm material for Stax and 'the new brand' it wants to develop in house. That latter idea of a Chinese Stax might take me some getting used to.

Janine Elliot

THE VOICE OF DOM!

THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF
AN AUDIOPHILE AT THAT TENDER
AGE...BY DOMINIC MARSH



Dominic Marsh continues with his personal thoughts on mains cables and why he believes they can make substantial improvements in the sound of your hifi.

Hifi Pig does not advocate anyone making ANY unauthorized or unsafe changes to their mains supply or equipment in ANY way! Always consult a professional and qualified electrician.

In [part one I dealt with the basics of mains cables](#), their construction and some basic metallurgy, so in this part I will offer my explanations of why I think an after-market mains cables brings improvements in sound quality that you can hear through

your hifi system. But I will reiterate . . .

I will say yet again though that none of this is based on absolute scientific evidence, mainly because I don't believe any truly exists in any detail and my own personal observations have been repeatable and consistent enough for me to rely upon for many years. I am not asking anyone to take what I write at face value, it is not the Holy Grail of mains cables or The Gospel According To The Wise One Dominic Marsh, it is merely me making my private

opinions wide open for you to read and if you see any sense in it at all, it has been worthwhile writing it for you.

First up then is the old cry I have heard so many times over the years and this is it; *"There are countless miles/kilometers of cable between the power station and my wall socket, so how can a mere one meter of it from the wall socket make any kind of difference?"* Yes it is indeed true that there is indeed miles of cable from the power station to your house and you should stop thinking about that because it is mostly irrelevant in my opinion. The cable from the power station's diameter is huge, greater than the thickness of your arm for most of the distance and losses have been calculated for in their design, using the best materials available within budget constraints. *"Aha, but if pure silver cables are so wonderful, why don't they use them in the*

grid?” They do and have done for quite a few years now. Liquid cooled as well no less. I will bet that has surprised you – it did me. In the larger conurbations of the USA like New York or Los Angeles which consumes a LOT of electricity, they were faced with adding more and more, bigger and bigger cables to meet demand, so they have capitalised on silver’s conductivity to build more efficient power transmission lines.

In the illustration (Fig 1), there is a brief sketch of the average electricity power grid which applies to almost any country in the world. We are concerned with what is happening within the red box, from the nearest local substation or transformer to the consumer unit or fuse box inside your home. Whether the power enters your

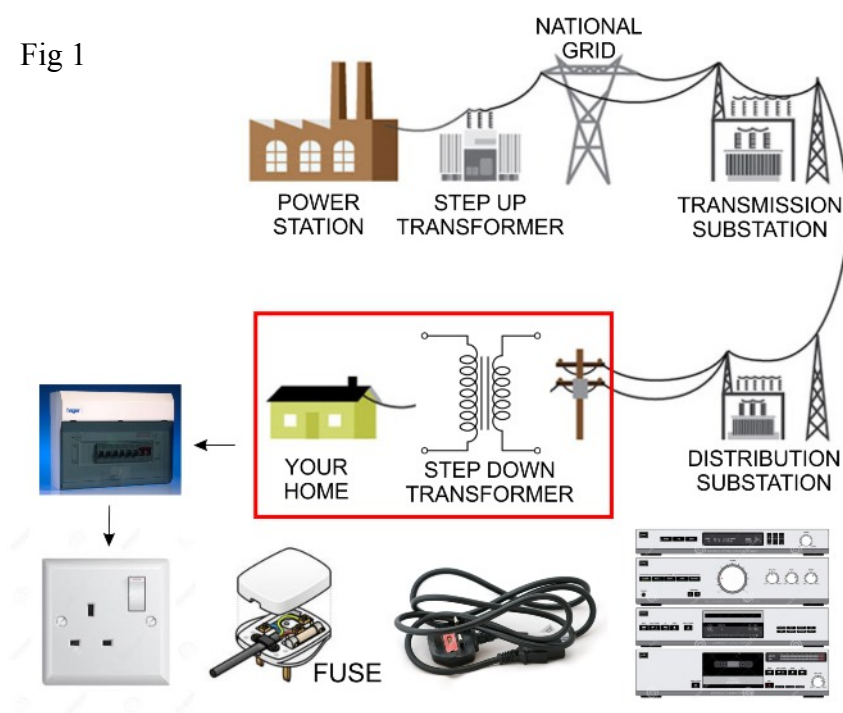
home through underground cables or overhead power lines makes no difference, the vital component in this scenario is that last transformer before it reaches your house.

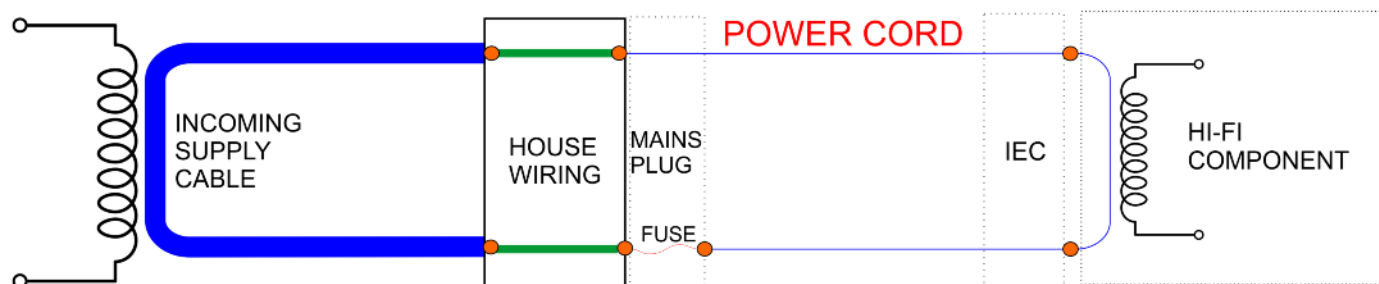
When the supply enters your home it will pass through a meter and a fuse/distribution panel, then via copper cables to your wall socket. I won’t be discussing ring mains wiring or radial spurs, because as long as the wiring is of good quality it still plays no major part in that final one metre or so from the socket to your hifi component. In the UK we have ring mains wiring with each having its own fuse or breaker unit to cut the power in the eventuality of a fault arising, plus we have a mains fuse in the 3 pin input connector plug which does (*I believe*) have an effect within the subject we are discussing here.

On the continent with the Schuko connection system there is no additional fuse in the line, the same as the USA, Australia and many other countries too. The fuse, being of a thin resistance wire is designed to rupture during current excursions beyond its amperage rating and I think it as being a large bottleneck with regards to current flow, given that the cabling either side of it has considerably less resistance than the fuse itself.

The actual “business end” of an aftermarket upgrade mains cable lies between the transformer of your hifi component and that last transformer outside of your home. These two components form a circular AC loop between them and we need to look for components within that loop that are the weakest link in the chain and I have already highlighted the mains fuse in the plug as being one of them. The fuse located within the mains plug is there to protect the power cord in the case of a fault condition, there are (*or should be*) fuses within the component to protect that component in a fault condition situation. If you find a fuse blows repeatedly, there is a permanent fault condition present and under no circumstances should a higher rating fuse be fitted...get it to a competent and registered repair shop, or back to the manufacturer.

Fig 1





NOTE: EARTH REMOVED FOR CLARITY

Fig 2

As a safety note again at this point, you must not fit fuses of a higher amperage, or bypass/override the fuse altogether. Be very safe out there in audiophile land folks.

The table below shows the effects of cable diameter on current handling capacity, the larger the diameter of the cable, the greater the current load that can be safely drawn through it.

Core size mm2	Current (Amperes)	Wattage (kW) at 240v	Typical applications
1.0	14	3.25	lighting
1.5	18	4.25	lighting
2.5	24	5.75	power circuit
4.0	32	7.75	power circuit, shower
6.0	40	9.75	shower, cooker
10	53	12.9	cooker

These figures relate to current rating of copper cables in “free air”, that is in installations where the cables are not bunched or confined in an environment where cooling air cannot circulate to dissipate any heat the cables produce internally. And yes, they do produce heat even during normal use.

Despite many hours of searching, I haven’t been able to locate a table similar to the one above which translates the power ratings of pure silver cables, but the more knowledgeable amongst you could probably work the increased conductivity of silver over copper and formulate a rough guide.

And therein lies the reason why the ubiquitous freebie 5 amp rated mains lead with a 1mm core (*I*

won’t call it a “kettle lead” because that is a total misnomer) simply isn’t up to the job of delivering the high currents and fast transients a large amplifier demands when driven hard. In Part One I mentioned metallurgy and purity, so the greater the impurities in the cable wire, the less the amount of power can be drawn

before the cable heats up and saps energy flowing through it. How can we tell this is actually happening? If your bass is slow sounding with a booming overhang, you need a better quality mains cable and fitting an aftermarket mains cable with a high current rating makes this booming sound vanish instantly in my experience and my systems. So many people over the years have told me they have put

up with this booming sound believing it to be “normal”, blaming it on their speakers, their room dimensions, their amplifier, but never once considered a mains cable is

responsible – until they try one. By putting in a better mains cable, you have not ‘improved’ anything at all, you have in fact removed an inadequate performing component and installed another one with less flaws than the one that you have just taken out. Remember what I wrote in Part One about this? I

thought not, so I will clarify this point before we move on.

If I start with the “freebie” cable which is of generally indeterminate parentage and quality, rated at 5 amps maximum then replace it with a £30 after-market mains lead it tends to sound “better” and so I assume the £30 cable has less flaws than the freebie cable because it sounds better. If I spend £100 on an after-market upgrade cable and it sounds “better” than the £30 one, which to me says it is less imperfect than the £30 one.

Then if I spend a £1,000 on an after-market cable and it sounds “better” again, it suggests to me it has less imperfections than the £100 one. Even though you have spend £1,000 on a cable it is still not perfect because there is no such thing as the “perfect cable” to begin with and with each cable purchase in that scenario above you have bought one with presumably fewer imperfections than the previous one, so it sounds ‘better’ at each advance. Does that make sense to you? I sincerely hope so, because that is the foundation of all cable related discussions and in my experience applies equally to interconnects, speaker cables and even more surprisingly, digital interconnects too.

“To screen, or not to screen, that is the question, whether it is nobler to suffer the slings and ar-

Why would you have metal screening on a mains cable you may ask?

rows of outrageous fortune

. “ (apologies to the Bard here).

Why would you have metal screening on a mains cable you may ask? Dominic will now give you the answer as I see it. I believe it to be a complete and utter waste of time. If the makers suggest that screening a mains cable will “reject RFI” (*Radio Frequency Interference*) then I will eat one whole if they are correct. In a small signal, high sensitivity conductor like a phono cartridge interconnect I can see the virtues of keeping out airborne interference, although it has been many a long year since a local taxi firm has intruded into my listening pleasures with a call for driver Bert to go to 34 Acacia Avenue to pick up Betty to take her shopping. For a radio signal to imprint itself onto a cable carrying mains voltages it would have to be so powerful the fillings in your teeth would be glowing red hot long before any actually

entered a mains cable carrying 13 amps or more. Ooer, that’s going to ruffle a few feathers I bet, but show me otherwise if I am mistaken. I recall an amateur “hifi reviewer” wheeling his motorcycle indoors and running the engine in close proximity to his hifi system to test for “RFI rejection” to mains cables under test. His needlepoint work was outstanding and he loved his pet slugs with a passion too, so I believe.

What about RFI leaking OUT from a mains cable? RFI certainly not unless someone deliberately creates the equipment to make it happen and even then, not much if any chance unless you enjoy a mouth full of red hot fillings if you are stood nearby. A mains cable does however emit EMF forces, screened or unscreened. Beg, borrow or steal an EMF meter and wave it around near a mains cable and the meter needle will give full deflection even a few inches away from it. This is because “electricity” is electromagnetic force generated at 50 cycles per second, so every 35 centimetres or so (*I cannot recall the exact distance*) along the length of the cable the meter needle will swing to full peak. If the cable is wrapped in copper close-weave screening (*no matter how dense*) it will offer no resistance at all, nor will steel screening, nor will silver screening

either. What did shock me was when I waved the EMF meter over an amplifier which had no less than three layers of solid steel screening over the mains transformer and still had a full scale deflection on the meter. To the best of my knowledge, the only metal impervious to EMF energy penetration is [Mu-metal](#) and I don't know of any cable manufacturer that uses that unique and not inexpensive metal in this particular application.

“Night and day differences, with blacker blacks!”. You been on the old home brew again Dominic? Many people have reported a much quieter background noise level from an aftermarket mains cable upgrade, so what's all that about? It is generally attributed to grain boundaries in the crystalline composition of the metal itself, but rather than bore you to death typing page after page of science, I will use analogy to explain what's going on. Imagine if you will that your mains cable is like a stream or small river and the electricity is represented by water flowing along it. If the bed of the stream is littered with rocks and boulders, the water will have a tortuous route along it, with the rocks creating lots of noise as the water flows over them. Take all the rocks out of that stream and what happens to the water? It flows smoothly,

without ripples and completely silently doesn't it? The “experts” said for years that is complete rubbish, more a case of wishful thinking than having any basis in science. I had a furious row with a leading light in the hifi press years ago about a pure silver mains cable having significantly less hiss heard through a sensitive horn speaker than a copper mains cable did. He went off on an aggressive and indignant diatribe about the hiss originating from “semiconductor transistor junction conductance breakdown” or some such and I was deluded if I thought a mains cable could be responsible for any hiss reduction heard through the speakers. He was so busy being indignant and outraged; it had slipped his mind that a VALVE AMPLIFIER was being used in the trial. I didn't argue the point, but glad to say I have since been vindicated by a very nice man from Japan called Professor Atsumi Ohno.

Professor Ohno took a very long hard look at the crystalline structure of metals and deduced that electricity flowing through a metal is very much like a river flowing along with too many rocks littering the river bed and impeding the water flow, creating noise. Where have I heard that before? His answer was to rethink the way the metal wire is drawn through the

die during the manufacturing process and rather than do it in an uncontrolled manner, he devised a strict regime of metal temperature, draw speed and cooling routine which resulted in a wire than had far fewer grain boundaries at the crystalline level of the metal. In other words, he removed the rocks from the river bed and made the water flow smoothly and silently, the process commonly known today as Ohno Continuous Casting, or OCC for short. Anyone who uses and has compared an OCC manufactured cable will attest that it does have a lower noise floor than a standard copper or silver wire using conventional drawing and production methods. More about this process by clicking on this link: [Ohno Continuous Casting Patent](#)

or look up the filed

Patent: **US5074353 A**

Well there you are then, that concludes Part Two of this tome and in the next issue I shall be talking about power supplies and what happens when you create alloys or hybridise with various metals to manufacture mains cables.

Hifi Pig does not advocate anyone making unauthorized or unsafe changes to their mains supply, cables or plugs in ANY way. Did we make that clear? Always consult a professional and qualified electrician.

FIDELITY MATTERS

A LIFETIME OF MUSIC AND AUDIO EXPERIENCE AND COMMENT...BY IAN RINGSTEAD



Ian Ringstead loves a Hifi Show and has been going to them for many a long year...

Hifi shows love them or hate them, have been going for a long time and I for one have attended for over 40 years and still get excited when the next one comes around. My adventures into hifi as a teenager were fuelled by magazines, window shopping and finally going to actual shows to see and hear my beloved products. Shows used to be on a grand scale and in the 70's and early 80's the best show was at Harrogate, where several large hotels based in the town centre (*The Majestic in particular*) had lovely

large rooms which lent themselves rather well to the best systems of the time. There was plenty of room to move around and as long as you organised your itinerary well you could leisurely see and hear everything without the rooms being overcrowded and too hot.

When I was a Lad

One year Cerwin Vega were demonstrating some large 15" speakers that were very efficient and went very loud (*a trademark of that company*) in a smaller room along one corridor playing the 1812 overture,

and when the cannon sounded near the end they had to open the windows to stop the glass being possibly broken due to the air pressure being so great. It may not have been an accurate sound but it was certainly impressive to some folk. Japanese manufacturers like Hitachi and Sansui used to make fabulous looking amps with large VU power meters and were festooned with knobs and lots of controls. As a young man I was mightily impressed. I visited London in the 70's and went to Sansui's main showroom which was an amazing experience as Quadraphonic sound was still popular then and companies like Sansui and JVC really tried to get this technology off the ground. Sadly this never took off and was ditched due to lack of interest by the music industry and poor customer interest in adopting another sound format when stereo was the king and still is today.

The Times They Were A Chang-ing

As the 80's moved on companies attitudes changed and the larger venues became unpopular due to costs and possibly lower attendance rates. London became the next epicentre for quality hifi shows and the Penta hotel at London Heathrow airport was the place to be. It was a pain to get to if you didn't live in or near London, but from an international dealer or manufacturers point of view it was great as they could just fly in, unload and set up quickly and easily and then pack up when going back home. American companies in particular liked this and there was a plethora of American brands at one time, but as time went on and budgets tightened they stopped coming and decided shows in Vegas (CES) and Rocky Mountain Audiofest were better for them and most of their sales probably came from that continent anyway. Japanese companies were more shrewd having global markets that they wanted to dominate with high quality cheaper products. That was fine whilst the general population wanted a hifi system and was high on their must have list but this all changed in the 90's when sales slowed down for them dramatically, and many pulled out of traditional hifi or reduced their product range considerably.

This all meant shows in the UK started to become regionalised as London became less popular for northerners etc. to travel to. Bristol became very popular and still is for manufacturers to launch new products in February, Whittlebury in September is more central and Hi Fi News has their show in October now for the very high end brands.

New Kids On The Block

Last year [The North West Audio Show](#) at Cranage Hall in Cheshire became a very welcome newcomer for up and coming smaller manufacturers as well as the more established brands bringing a great mix of differing products and budgets to suit everyone's pockets. Next year Cranage will be over two venues due to its popularity and an exciting new fresh format which attracts not just the older enthusiast like me, but wives and families. This is essential if we want to keep our beloved hobby and passion alive. Music is the driving force but we need the youngsters to adopt our enthusiasm for reproducing our favourite tunes on great kit not mobile phones and downloads of poor quality.

The format of shows has changed as well going from large venues (*unlike CES and Munich*) because the UK general public just don't have the same interest in hifi anymore. The internet and changes

in lifestyle have dramatically altered people's hobbies and interests over the last 40 years, even music which once dominated Thursday evenings with Top of the Pop's and the charts is now a distant memory and youngsters probably aren't even aware of its existence unless enlightened by their parents. People would regularly buy records in their millions each week and singles drove the charts. What a difference a few decades makes.

So shows are still vital to keep our interest in music and the equipment we so love alive and kicking. Manufacturers and designers need somewhere to exhibit their ideas and wares and for us, the buying public and hobbyists, to have our needs satisfied. As hifi retail outlets become scarcer due to running a business becoming more and more challenging and companies now selling online to maintain an edge by keeping costs down and offering better value for money, the public need venues in order to sample new products under one roof and discover exciting new companies and groundbreaking new designs. Hifi is forever evolving to keep us interested and seduce us like any other business wanting our money. Passion drives inventors and innovators and shows help fulfil our desires. Long live the show.

Ian Ringstead

THE VIEWS OF STU!

COMMENTS, RANTS AND THE
OCCASIONAL TEMPER
TANTRUM...BY STUART SMITH



Cable wars must surely be the biggest single cause of conflict and injury between audiophiles and the reason I've not got involved in one in a good old while...better just to keep quiet, watch from a distant hilltop and let the troops on the virtual front line battle it out ad-infinitum, though casualties will inevitably be high. Here's my guide to the elements taking part in this ongoing conflict.

Like most conflict and war, it would seem that cable disputes are utterly pointless in that neither side is willing to shift (*in the main*) from its entrenched position, and the likelihood of their being a DMZ (*demilitarised zone*) being effected as a buffer between the warring armies is slim. You think I'm exaggerating when I refer to these discussions as war don't you...well

I am a bit, but folk in both camps do get rather heated when the topic of cables comes up and what at first may seem like an innocent enough comment on a Facebook Group can soon turn into an incendiary mortar, resulting in a Charlie Foxtrot ([look it up](#)) situation and heavy casualties on all sides.

THE ARMIES

There are two armies at play here, both of which have various fac-

tions within them, which leads not only the inevitable main battle ensuing, but also to various infighting and squabbling between the troops on the same side of the fence, thus furthering the Charlie Foxtrot state of affairs.

So broadly we have the following:

The Anti Absolutists Faction (AAF) – cables cannot and can never have an effect on the sound in a system unless said cable is unfit for purpose, to say otherwise flies in the face of science fact so shut up everyone else. This group will often start flinging the **Molotov Cocktail of Double Blind Testing** into the fray so beware!

The Pro Absolutists Faction (PAF) – of course cables of different construction make a difference in a system, I have heard it with my own ears and whilst I can't quote you any hard science as to why cables affect the sound, they

THE VIEWS OF
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COMMENTS, RANTS AND THE
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TANTRUM...BY STUART SMITH

do, so shut up everyone else.
These will often pick up
the Molotov Cocktail of Double
Blind Testing (MCDBT) before it
has chance to do any damage,
flinging it back at the AAF as a
useless methodology

...this back and forth with the
MCDBT can go on and on and has
become known as the **Thousand
Year Cyclic Cable War (TYC-
CW)**.

Now within these two broad fac-
tions (AAF and PAF) there are
myriad sub-factions vying for po-
sition and wanting to take pot
shots at anyone who threatens
their position. Let's take a look at
some of them:

IAARO – It's All A Rip Off.

These are an interesting sub-group
of militants and they're a danger-
ous lot to have around as they can
be seen as having a foot in both
camps. Basically their position
can be one of two mindsets; the
cables make a difference, but
all cable companies and
anyone associated with
them are thieving impe-
rialist scum, bent on
bleeding the proletar-
iat audiophile dry of
every penny he
has...or, the cables
make no difference and
all cable companies
and anyone asso-

**Now within these two broad factions
(AAF and PAF) there are myriad sub-
factions vying for position and
wanting to take pot-shots at anyone
who threatens their position.**

ciated with them are thieving
pond-life looking to line their own
filthy capitalist pockets. Same end
conclusion, but very different ide-
ological starting points.

Now, within IAARO you have
two further subgroups. First off
you will have the people who can-
not afford to spend large sums on
cables so want to rail against those
that can afford
them (**SBI-
AAROA –
Skint
But It's
All**

A Rip Off Anyway), and then you
have those that can afford to spend
large sums but feel it is pointless
to do so...this one's sort of quasi
political, let's call them
the **AIQWBIAAROA (Actually
I'm Quite Wealthy But It's All
A Rip Off Anyway)**. But beware
dear reader for all is not what it
first seems from early reconnais-
sance, those who cannot afford to
spend large sums on audio cables
(**SBIAAROA**) will often take the
quasi political stance of the
AIQWBIAAROA in an at-
tempt not to feel "beneath"

anyone else... and so
knowing your ene-
my becomes ever
more complicated.
Difficult isn't it?

**YAAD – You
Are All
Deaf.** This
is a sub-
faction of
PAF
whose
stance is
one that be-
littles anyone



who cannot hear a difference in cables. They can be seen as broadly thinking of themselves as a superior kind of human-being.

YSIC – Your system Is Crap.

Another sub-faction of PAF who take the opinion that the only reason you don't hear the differences in cables is because your system is not resolving enough. These can be seen as feeling superior to others, but it's not to do with biological superiority and more to do with having achieved a technologically superior position, either by having loads of dosh, or being very canny with their purchases. Now, members of the YSIC brigade can fall-back to a position more akin to YAAD if they feel threatened, often by someone who clearly has a superior system but comes from the AAF position.

IKS – I Know Science. This subgroup has members in both PAF and AAF and so you need to tread very carefully for fear of setting foot on the **Landmine Of Ineptitude (LOI)** – it can go off at any time when you let your guard down and don't seem to know everything about everything.

The IKS have been known to cause thousands of innocents to become caught up in this war through no fault of their own.

The IKS lot from the PAF will spout endless formulas and mathe-

matical jiggerypokery at unsuspecting victims in a sort of virtual waterboarding exercise until the victim gives in and accepts that of course cables make no difference because he is now evangelically in the IKS camp.

Now, the IKS lot from AAF will spout their version of science (*which the IKS from PAF will call quasi-science or snakeoil*) until the victim relents and declares his undying allegiance to IKS. This section will often take the IKS stance but twist it somewhat and use the **"IKSBTSHBFY"** argument – **I Know Science But The Science Hasn't Been Found Yet.**

You would expect that the majority of the members of IKS would be electrical engineers or physicists, but it would seem that anyone with a passing knowledge of Ohms Law can twist the science (*or quasi-science*) to his own ends. On both sides of the IKS coin you are batting your head against a brick wall if you dare argue with them, for these are the religious foot-soldiers of this war and because of this they are absolutely sure that they know everything about everything and if they don't then it's not science or it's not worth knowing...or it hasn't been discovered yet.

YAD – You Are Delusional. Not to be confused with YAAD under any circumstances and a very dif-

ferent beast. Again this combatant may come from either PAF or AAF and the basic viewpoint is that whatever you think you are imagining it to suit your own ends.

The Peacemakers (TP) – these can be seen as the United Nations of cable wars and they can fall into either the PAF or AAF camps. TP's basic point will be that whatever you choose to believe, hear or spend your money on, or however ridiculous your standpoint may be in terms of the arguments that have been presented, it is your own personal choice what you do. Whilst initially TP could be seen as a force for good in the cable war they tend to do little but stir up trouble between the warring factions... who now all have a common enemy to point their artillery at.

So there you have it in its broadest terms. I've chosen not to go into the factions within factions within factions as we would be here until the end of TYCCW. However, if you ever feel compelled, for whatever reason, to enter the fray and jump onto the roundabout that is cable wars, make sure you have your flack-jacket and body armour on you at all times and remember...it's only a bloody music centre!

Stuart Smith

BIRD'S EYE VIEW

AUDIOPHILIA AND MORE FROM THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY LINETTE SMITH

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Last month I wrote about [why there seem to be so few women into the Hifi scene](#). I came to the conclusion that there are actually a lot more of us around than you might first think, but that we tend to be less visible because we make less of a fuss about it than the guys do and, for one reason or another, we don't inhabit the generally male stomping grounds of the forums. One subject that reared it's ugly head (and does so any time you mention Hifi and women) was WAF. Wife Acceptance Factor. I am guilty of using this term myself in the past, to explain a piece of hifi has nice looks as well as sounding stunning ...but the more I think about it, the more it grates...its just such a picky little

derogatory term to use. My article got quite a few comments from other audiophile types. Some very supportive, and some from guys who accused me of bringing 'the itchy blanket of gender politics' into hifi ...as if challenging the status quo was a bad thing, perhaps they don't like us invading their 'Man Caves'. See, we can all play at sexual stereotyping if we want to.

Pussy Footing About

I think as an industry we should be kicking the WAF term into touch. I am not some kind of rampantly bra-burning, man-hating feminist...I'm just a normal woman, who happens to be involved in an industry that is constantly reinforcing casual, everyday sexism with a little acronym that implies

that women will only 'accept' a new bit of hifi into their home if it is pretty and inoffensive enough. That they don't have the capability to make a decision based on the sonic benefits and need to be bamboozled into 'accepting' its presence because it goes with the curtains ...like I said earlier, its beginning to grate. We are refusing to accept sexism in most other parts of our life, is the hifi industry one of the last bastions of sexism? Imagine if we were calling Women's Football 'Pussy Foot' or saying that kitchen appliances had a high CPFW (Christmas Present For Wife) potential...I don't imagine that would go down too well at all. Some guys that responded to my article suggested that WAF is just a bit of a joke and that I

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BIRD'S EYE VIEW

AUDIOPHILIA AND MORE FROM THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY JESSICA SMITH

should grow a thicker skin, but, just as Mother in law jokes aren't really that funny, neither is WAF and it is just as outdated.

The Origins Of WAF

Stereophile magazine writer Larry Greenhill first used the term "Wife Acceptance Factor" in 1983, but he credited fellow reviewer, Lewis Lipnick as the person that came up with WAF. Lipnick himself said that the origin was from the 1950s when hifi, in particular loudspeakers, were so monstrous that they overwhelmed most peoples' living rooms. Actress Lynn-Jane Foreman, Lipnick's wife, coined a different phrase, Marriage Interference Factor (MIF). Foreman suggested that audiophile husbands should buy their wives things like jewellery, holidays or clothes to compensate for their purchase of an ugly or ungainly piece of hifi and to generally keep the home harmonious. Perhaps if you are in a relationship where one partner has to 'buy' the consent of the other, you are in the wrong relationship.

The Times They Are A Changing

Now there is no getting away from the fact that

in the past men and women had very different roles in life. Hubby went out and hunted and gathered, wifey stayed in and made the cave nice and had babies...it really is

no wonder that we can be hard wired differently to this day, it's overcoming nature and nurture to shake of what is expected of you because of your gender. But hey,



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BIRD'S EYE VIEW

AUDIOPHILIA AND MORE FROM
THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY
LINETTE SMITH

its nearly 2016 now, not the dark ages or even the 1950's. Things are changing and men and women are (or should be) equal...when was the last time you saw a guy out spear hunting the Sunday roast in Tesco? A couple, may be married or not, may be two people of the same gender or of different genders, but most in a successful relationship have a partnership.

They make decisions on what's for Sunday dinner or what's being allowed in their cave together. They may have different likes and dislikes some of the time, but basically they can come to an agreement if one wants one thing and the other something else. Using WAF (*or SAF, Spouse Acceptance Factor*) to describe the aesthetically pleasing qualities of a particular piece of hifi suggests that the other person in the relationship, who usually has to somehow be cajoled and perhaps even bribed into agreeing to the new piece of kit, can be easily hoodwinked into accepting this new item! It is so discreet or beautiful that the wife/spouse will simply welcome it into the lounge with open arms and without realising what it is...am I the only person that thinks that is totally screwed up? Surely, its much bet-

ter for a couple to go to the hifi show/shop together and decide on the new purchase...there may be a bit of compromise from both sides but you are much more likely to get something that you both like the looks, sounds and practicalities of and can appreciate together.

The Hub Of The Home

Hifi is becoming a prominent feature in many more homes. Rather than being hidden away in a room that the 'Audiophile' has to go in to and listen in solitude, it is in the main living area so that all the family can enjoy it. Long standing and well known brands, as well as new names, are manufacturing hifi that looks as good as it sounds...and they are not just doing it to sneak in past the wife, they recognise that good looks are important to men and women, old and young. Today's audiophile is very discerning and wants their amazing sounding hifi to be something they can be proud of even before it's turned on. We also inhabit smaller spaces and many brands are putting a lot of work into making hifi smaller and more functional for those smaller spaces, just look at the number of hifi companies that are now making

things like wireless, multi-room speaker systems that still play music to an audiophile standard. Look at Focal and their new Sopra speakers or the Avantgarde Acoustic Zero1. The Bowers and Wilkins Zeppelin or anything made by Devialet, in particular the Phantom. Are they just trying to get products under the radar of the wife? Of course not, they're making products to suit today's market. Using the term WAF just reinforces an outmoded gender divide that just isn't applicable these days as far as hifi is concerned. Great design really should not need to compromise great sound, the two can, should and do coexist. We don't need to say something has 'high WAF' as a selling point, just that it is well designed and made, and looks beautiful and/or discreet, as well as sounding exceptional...qualities that are appreciated by everyone, not just wives. We don't need WAF to describe hifi any more, lets be a bit more creative, stop relying on it as a measure of good design and recognise that it is an outdated, sexist, and frankly, irrelevant term in today's hifi market.

Linette Smith

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DEALERS VIEW

HIFI AND AUDIO FROM THE
PERSPECTIVE OF A DEALER...BY
MIKE TWOMEY

**Mike Twomey
continues his series of
articles and focuses on
how the dealers choose
the lines they carry.**

When I first began my lifelong interest in all things Hifi and audio, I frequented a store in New York City. For me it *was* Disneyland. Amplifiers, Tuners, Turntables all laid out for me to lust over. The salesmen viewed my buddies and myself as annoying little brats that need to be escorted out of the store as fast as possible. I would go home and grab my audio magazines and check off the products that I saw and heard that day. I kept wondering why Valhalla Audio

didn't carry specific brands that I wanted to hear even though my eleven year old allowance of 3USD a week couldn't land any item worth mentioning.

Fast forward many decades as we now enter our 13th year in the business. The decisions that I make along with my team as to what lines we carry and those we don't are critical to our success and to keeping our customers interested. I've learned from experience on how *not* to choose our lines. Like

many in this business I'm an unabashed fan of most of the equipment being sold. This is particularly true of loudspeakers having tried my hand at making my own in days gone by. So one of the rules in selecting lines is to set aside your own taste (*or prejudice*) for one line or another. When our team meets every two months to discuss product strategy, we all agree what the customer wants is far more important than what we think. We carry some lines that I personally don't care for but the customers do. We also carry a line or two that I happen to think are superb products but the customers yawn at.

We think that the customers should have a significant say in what lines they see in our store. I ask everyone who comes in here are there any lines that you don't see that they would like to see added. The answers range from the ridiculous to the sublime. Our absolute died in

DEALERS VIEW

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MIKE TWOMEY

the wool audiophiles think we should carry *every* speaker line; especially those starting at 15,000USD. Given the realities of budgets, it's just not possible. Of course we also get people asking for ultra cheapie headphones as well. So what ends up happening is an act of striking a balance of what makes sense for the market and what we think represents good business value for us. My suspicion is that my brethren in Europe do the same thing.

There's a true saying that you cannot please everyone. This is fact. But we try to have a product in every category and one that represents good value. We also have a category advocate; meaning each category has a store employee who represents what she or he thinks we should be buying in that category. We have a turntable expert, a home theater advocate, a speaker expert, and so forth and so on. There are certainly influencing factors that come into play. Many manufacturers have defined geographical territories for their dealers. We carry two such lines. The manufacturer tightly controls the distribution of the product. If you sell outside your territory bad things can occur like losing the line. Many manufacturers want their lines only in specific stores and only those stores that have a proven history of paying their bills. That annoying little

thing called financial responsibility rears its head. The dealers in turn like working with manufacturers who are reliable and have good quality control. This is a daunting issue for us as calls from unhappy customers are what we want to avoid at all costs. There are certain facts that bang on our door each week. If the product has lots of moving parts, there are going to be service issues. So our turntable repair expert gets Christmas gifts from us as well as good single malt scotch on occasion. Turntables lead the list on items that require service. So we consulted with our guru on what tables had a solid service record before we brought in a turntable in to sell to our customers.

Do we ever drop lines? Yes we do. We make mistakes like everyone else. There are no shortage of products made today. We occasionally make bad judgments. Here is an "oinker" that I personally had a hand in....pink and blue chassis colours on flat panels (*pink hifi? – take a look at our specially commissioned power conditioner from LAB 12 below -Ed*). Okay, I know what you're saying. What was I thinking? I was drinking tequila the night before. That's the best I've got on that one. I ended up giving them away to child protection agency here.

There is also the sticky wicket of product quotas to talk about. When

we add a line we have to sign a contract with the manufacturer which invariably details yearly quotas. To hold that line we must meet our quota. It's not optional. Thus our discussions in adding lines always include the question of whether we can meet the quota. This can be very difficult for a dealer. There is also an intangible that ends up being discussed. Does the manufacturer's style of business match ours? Many manufacturers put significant pressure on the dealer to sell their products. This includes weekly calls asking from sales managers asking for sales results. This doesn't match well with our philosophy of making the customer visit an enjoyable one. High pressure sales tactics are poison in this business. We steadfastly avoid companies that have an aggressive sales approach. This is true even when their products are ones that we would like to carry.

If you would like your local audio dealer to carry a new line I encourage you to ask. We have a sign here that says "what would you like to see us carry?" We actually do listen and care about what you think.

Mike Twomey owns [Big Kids Toys AV](#) in Greensboro North Carolina. The staff at Big Kids Toys AV typically do not invite Mike to product line decision meetings.

Dave Robson runs the Facebook group “Audiophiles UK. Hi-Fi and Music” and here talks Hifi Pig through his musical and Hifi journey.

Where does your music journey begin?

I have mine on good authority from the all-powerful mother!! Apparently, my journey started in the early 1970's, with a blue potty and a copy of Kenny Rodgers “Ruby” (don't take your love to town). We had a little Pye standalone record player. The type with the arm to hold records in place and if you left it open it would just repeat over and over. It drove my poor mum mad! I actually had 4 copies, one frizbee'd into the frying pan, destroying the evening's meal! The second yet again frizbee'd out of the top floor of our block of flats, the third left upon a bus. This left my grandad trolling around the

Music shops of Liverpool trying to find another copy! Which he did!

Mum divorced when I was about 3 (*not because of the records but a motorbike so I'm told!*). We then lived with Nan and Grandad and my Aunty who was a teenager and we had a big wooden stereogram, I can't remember the make or model, but my aunt constantly listened to a lot of the 60's and disco funk of the 70's... Diana Ross, Four Tops, Tavares, Hot Chocolate etc. I remember the Top of the Pops type albums, the “Now” albums of the day, being played by dancing teens having good fun to funky beats.

These tunes became a staple from there on into my own first proper Hifi. I made do with radio and tape recorders, taping the Top 40 on a Sunday like most of us did. Finger

paused over the record button, waiting for our favourite tunes to appear (*yep, me too – Ed*).

The Amstrad Years

At the grand old age of 13 I managed to get my first “real” Hifi. After seeing a friend's older one I was lured by the “Stack”!!! An Amstrad 25ti (*or something like that*). Speakers hung on nails on the wall with thin bell wire trailing down the wallpaper (*mother not happy*)!!! This was musical Nirvana! Friends all jealous as hell! It was shiny silver, and none of those old fashioned Needle VU meters but soooo cool, LED lights flicking up and down!! I thought I was the bees knees.

I hadn't formed a following for any specific group or type of music, I still had disco and funk ringing in my ears from years past, so the single became my source of new entertainment. Once a week on a Saturday, going to my local store in Fazakerley, clutching my pocket money, buying my treasure and running home with my newest purchase, yet again to be played over and over, and over.

I think my first was Hungry Like The Wolf, Duran Duran. (*yeah, sorry no Led Zep or pink Floyd here just an 80's boy ha*). These great 80s bands mixed with mum's old Nat King Cole box set, my Step dads James Last and James Bond

theme albums and a few 70's compilations saw me through my life. That is until I went to my mates Brother-in-Law's house to babysit!

Me and Little Alan

That's where I saw it, that's where I heard it!!!! (*nope not his sister and her boyfriend making out, that's another story completely*). A separates system, it was actually separate! Not like my silly childlike Amstrad, Nooooooooooooo... this had wires connecting it all together, it was different colours, different shapes, it had big speakers, ON THE FLOOR!! I was immediately hooked like never before! Now,

Remember that the 80's where in full swing, the time of the Yuppie had arrived, advertising was king, product placement had arrived!

I'm not sure of all the bits, only a few, I think it was mostly Akai, a front loading tape deck, no door, Sony speakers and a Rotel amp. Now I'm not sure of the Turntable, but it was a good one, probably not in the Lenco or Thorens league, but a good Japanese one, I know this because I was warned by the very tough gorilla that was the keeper of this magnificent beast not to dam-

age it and to follow his instructions ALWAYS!! Which I did!!

Weekends where now filled with going to his place, babysitting and listening to not only our music but we now had access to HIS music too! This was a new ball game. Me and Little Alan were now best buddies!!!!

Playing the Top 40 tapes, some of my 80's electro synth stuff, and the



cool music of a 20 something. From what I can remember, those albums then formed the whole building blocks of my musical tastes to this day. There was The Eagles, Fleetwood Mac, Supertramp, Michael Jackson, The Commodores, Hall and Oates, Elton John and The Police to name a few. I was hooked on not only the music but the equipment as well!

Playboy Covers and Athena Posters

Hmmm my 16th birthday was on its way! Now guess what I'm after!!! YES! A touchy feely girlfriend and a new HiFi!

Unable to tear myself away from the stack system I opted for a Technics. Remember that the 80's where in full swing, the time of the Yuppie had arrived, advertising was king, product placement had arrived! At 16 I was Logo and brand happy. Technics was damn cool!

My new Technics logo branded smoked glass door was enough to put me in the BIG league! Or so I thought. The Technics receiver and tape deck with accompanying Turntable was Black and new. All now installed in my bedroom with my Athena posters and playboy duvet cover!!

The Technics Years

It was at this time I knew I needed a job to fund my new habit, so to the local supermarket I went, nothing but good manners to get me a job. RESULT!!!! Stacking shelves was the new fuel for Hifi nirvana!!! First on my list for me was one of those new CD players! I'd been to a new friend's house, he had gotten a Sony CD and I remember him playing it to me for the first time, Brothers In Arms. No pops, crackles or hiss! Gobsmacked! Immediately borrowed the loot from the bank of mum, and went off to buy a Technics SL-p220. It went in the Stack! Me with copies of Hall and Oates, Foreigner (4) and the Dire Straits (*Brothers in Arms*) in the bag too!!!!

Over the next few years I carried on with the Technics brand, the magazines always rated them highly and I was happy to hand money over without audition, blindly following the reviewers recommendations. I ended up with Technics' Top of the range CD player the SL-P990. I then went to a new shop to me as they had the New Top of the range Digital Pre / Power amp (SU-A60 / SE-A50). The salesman happy to recommend it as "the digital side of the pre amp will totally transform my CD"! Oooooops. It actually didn't. The DACs in the CD were exactly the same as the amp!!! My Musical Fidelity Reference 4 speakers confirmed this as it actual-

ly sounded worse through the optical cable than the RCA's. This is where my big Hifi learning started... £800 too late, an expensive lesson to learn, but lean it I did!

The Fish Years

My next real journey happened at the age of 21. I'd gotten my career underway working on the railway, gotten engaged and found a home. Luckily for me my new abode was a big old Victorian house with 5 bedrooms, no kids, lots of hobbies and a very understanding wife to be. She and her brothers were all into the music scene, all older than me and they were true rock fans... Led Zep, Pink Floyd etc. My Wife to be was a mad fan of Marillion, fronted by Fish (*Derek Dick*). It was just at this time the band broke up and Fish went solo. There were no arguments about upgrading Hi-fi! The game was on.

Now being steered by good Hifi shops in the north west of England I bought some Target spiked Hi-Fi stands and junked the Technics Amps in for the Audiolab 8000 C/P pre / power, and the CD player for a Teac VRDS T1 CD Transport and Audio Alchemy "DAC in the Box" DAC. On reflection I could have done a lot better with spending more on my cables. I was using Audioquest and Monster at the time. The cost of mortgages @ 15% and having to re-decorate a

READERS' LIVES

IF YOU'VE GOT A GREAT STORY TO SHARE WITH HIFI PIG EXTRA READERS THEN GET IN TOUCH

large house, funds where tight a lot of the time. We were also going to a lot of Fish concerts during this time as well. So I kept my older cables and put the extra into new equipment. My last purchase there was to upgrade the Speakers. The weapons of choice were the Mission 753's. I opted for these over the equivalent B&W at the time as although I actually liked the sound of the B&W more, the speakers hit their end stops at high volume. My listening room was big, 18" x 16" with 10" high ceilings! A lot of space to fill with music, so the 5 year guarantee and tank like build of the Missions won out. When I got them home the big bouncy wooden floors played havoc with the Bass of the Missions, I opted to put 2 full sized flag stones under the speakers this tightened everything up and gave great soundstage, massive in fact. Filling the void in my bay window!

I filled my CD collection with some of the old favourites, Hall and Oates, Supertramp, Simple Minds, Fleetwood Mac, The Eagles, Steely Dan, Queen, The Cult, Foreigner, Marillion, Fish, Elton John and Paul Simon to name a few. I never really had a massive music collection; I wasn't someone who needed to have "more". At the time there were no cheap CDs either.

A New Start

At 30 my world started to turn and change. My marriage broke up, things got blurry for a while, my Hifi was boxed up and put into storage for the next 2 house moves. I foolishly sold my Target stands and I made do with a little Sony midi system and a few choice CDs.

There is always a silver lining though, and a happy ever after! (*Hopefully*). A new life, new home new child came along. I was itching to get the Hifi out again. I just knew at the time we didn't have space for it. The old system was for a big room, it all took space and I knew I didn't have the space without chopping and changing it. Child care did away with having any spare money to spend for a while. The internet was now at the end of my fingertips and I was getting the bug!!! I bought a Sony A/V amp and some Q Acoustic 1020 speakers, got my CD transport and DAC out, and made a hifi rack from two Ikea units butchered together. IT WAS BACK!!! To a fashion anyway!! I added 3 small Mordaunt Short speakers and a 309 sub-woofer making a 5.1 surround system. One evening we were watching Sky arts or something. A concert by Corinne Bailey Rae was on TV. The sound quality gave me chills big time! I had to have my music back. That night we decided to extend our home with a rear extension, tagging on the detached

garage and turning that into a Hifi/cinema room!! First job..... Yeah find a second power amp in secret! Ha, managed to find a new/old stock of the Audiolab 8000p power amp, £250. Bargain!! Managed to sneak it in and hide it in the loft until the new build was finished! Yeah I'm a Bad boy!!! Having free reign in the converted garage I hid all the surround sound speaker wires in the walls and ceilings, fed HDMI, Optical fibre and Internet under floors from the Sky Box. Put heating in and got myself a big comfy chair. I unboxed all my kit and CDs but left my Turntable and few Albums in the loft as my mainstay has been digital.

I knew before I got it all going again the speakers wouldn't be any good in the small converted garage as they only really sung when pushed hard... I now had 2 power amps but the way the garage was connected to the house loud wasn't an option for us as a family and as a good neighbour!

Things were looking rosy until my CD transport started to fail. New ones looked expensive and anything other than that would seem like a downgrade. I decided to bite the bullet and look for something new. At this time the Audiolab 8200CD was just appearing on the market and getting rave reviews. It looked a good option with the Audiolab pre/powers. On dis-

READERS' LIVES

IF YOU'VE GOT A GREAT STORY TO SHARE WITH HIFI PIG EXTRA READERS THEN GET IN TOUCH

Finally, trust your own ears. The best equipment is on the side of your head.

connecting the CD I managed to break off the RCA connection on the back of the pre amp too!!! It was a common problem as they got older they fractured. On speaking to the local Hifi shop they said why not kill 2 birds with 1 stone and go for the Audiolab 8200 CDQ, CD and Pre amp in one. I had an audition and it was a good improvement all-round. My old Mission 753's where now my weak link. I went to Adventures in HIFI in Chester. I took my 8yr old Daughter with me. (*hoping to give her an insight into the right way to do things*). We listened to several speakers, stand mounters and floor standers. I'd liked the fast tight sound of the Missions and the B&W 684s2's fitted the bill in my smaller room. I chopped in my old cables and chose to try some Mogami Speaker cables and some handmade Silver cabling from Artisan Silver Cables based in Isle Of Wight.

Getting All Social

It was at this time I'd started to get into the Hifi scene on the internet and the groups on Facebook. It was quite interesting hearing other peoples journey with music and equip-

ment, how big the vintage stuff is and the resurgence of vinyl. On the downside some of these sites on a nightly basis descended into nasty bullying arguments over trivial matters and I really didn't need to read it. The solution was to start my own group. A small friendly group with lots of interests, and no bad attitudes. All levels from guys just starting out to some who have speakers that cost more than my house, but all on the same level wanting to be helpful and informative, some are even funny!!!!

I have recently gotten the bug to upgrade again. The Audiolabs were holding back the new speakers I felt. I managed to get a 2nd hand Roksan Caspian M2 power amp (*would like to try a pair*) for a reasonable price. I gained a lot more detail but lost some of the big 3D soundstage my Audiolabs gave me. I also found the Silver cables didn't suit and now I had the option of XLR cables I decided to give them a try. During the auditioning of the new cables I managed to short the amp out with the RCA's and pop the amp!!! So at the moment it's being fixed by Roksan, who have

been amazingly helpful. Im stuck with a 7.1 surround system and some Blu-ray concerts. Not too difficult really!

I'm tempted to get a new Turntable at the moment but I'm not 100% if I should concentrate the money on improving what I have with better speaker cables and interconnects. Choices, choices eh?

Am I an audiophile? I'm not sure. I do love Hifi and music? Very definitely.

What advice would I give budding enthusiasts? Find a good dealer and be honest with him in what you want and like. Join a hifi group, one person's advice is great, but 200 bits of advice gives you choices (*...and read Hifi Pig of course – Ed*). Don't discount second hand gear as there are some good items out there for sale. Buy good cables, there will always be the argument about them, but trust me it makes a huge difference. Play with positioning of speakers it probably makes the biggest changes to how your system sounds. Bigger isn't always better either, in size, watts or price.

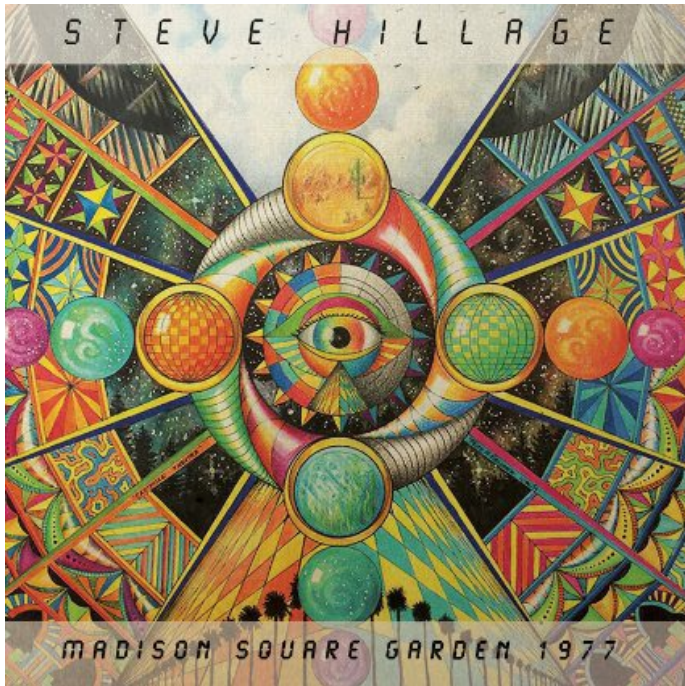
Finally, trust your own ears. The best equipment is on the side of your head.

Happy Listening!

David Robson

MUSIC REVIEWS

Steve Hillage – Madison Square Garden 1977 (Cleopatra)



Madison Square Garden 1977 may not be an essential purchase but if you are a Hillage fan like me, you are going to want to buy it anyway.

Having recorded his first solo album *Fish Rising* while still a member of Gong, Steve Hillage wasted little time in recording a follow up after his departure from the band in 1976. Decamping with partner Miquette Giraudy to Todd Rundgren's studio near Woodstock in New York

State, the resulting album, *L*, was something of a masterpiece, showcasing Hillage's soaring, melodic guitar with sympathetic backing from Rundgren's band Utopia and a cameo from jazz trumpeter Don Cherry. Hillage then formed a touring band comprising former Jethro Tull drummer Clive Bunker, aptly-named bassist, Colin Bass, Phil Hodge and Miquette on keyboards, Basil Brooks on additional keyboards and flute, and Christian Boule on rhythm and glissando guitars.

"This was a great performance from another fine period of my band in the late '70s" said Hillage. "This was my first tour of the US – Gong never played there while I was in the band in the seventies. Madison Square Garden in New York is an iconic major venue, so it was a fantastic honour to play there! We were playing to audiences who mostly didn't know our music too well, so we just let rip and went for it. The band was really firing!!!"

The performances have been sourced from a sound-board recording. Sound quality isn't quite top notch, cymbals are hazy and vocals occasionally slightly muddy, but this is made up for by a sparkling performance from the band. *Salmon Song* and *Meditation Of The Snake* from Hillage's *Fish Rising* solo debut are joined by 4 tracks from *L*: *Hurdy Gurdy Glissando*, *Hurdy Gurdy Man*, *Lunar Musik Suite* and *It's All Too Much*. The album is rounded off by 2 slightly puzzling bonus tracks: *Are We To Believe?*, a collaboration with Rick Wakeman and a version of the title track from William Shatner's *Rocket Man* album. Interesting as these are, they do not really fit with the rest of the album.

Madison Square Garden 1977 may not be an essential purchase but if you are a Hillage fan like me, you are going to want to buy it anyway.

John Scott

MUSIC REVIEWS

Penetration – Resolution (Polestar)



Punkers of a certain age will be well aware of Penetration (for it is they) and their classic debut single “Don’t Dictate”. The band hail from the North East of England and played with most of the big names of the heyday of punk and so it is with a good deal of relish that this album of new material, their first studio album in 36 years, was greeted when it landed on my desk. It’s released this Friday 9th October on Polestar and was instigated in early 2015 with crowdfunding platform PledgeMusic.

The current line up is Pauline Murray (vocals), Robert Blamire (bass), Paul Harvey and Steve Wallace (guitars), John Maher (drums)...some of these names will be familiar to a few folk out there.

Murray’s voice is still strong and distinctive with the music on Resolutions being fresh, accomplished... and so much more than the three chord, two minute explosions from the punk bands of yesteryear, but still with edge, vigour and vitality.

As for the album’s title, Murray explains that “*we felt we had taken on a mammoth task from the outset and we approached it with faith, determination and resolve. The title matches the name Penetration and also sounds like Revolution. It has a feeling of completing a circle and when you get to the end and put it back on at the beginning it all seems to fit together.*”

The aforementioned “punkers of a certain age” will enjoy Resolution as a bit of a blast from the past, but that would be belittling what I reckon is a record that will appeal to a much wider audience than that... it’s actually more than a little bit anthemic, melodic and a pleasing listen all-round!

The aforementioned “punkers of a certain age” will enjoy Resolution as a bit of a blast from the past, but that would be belittling what I reckon is a record that will appeal to a much wider audience than that

Standout track for me is Aquila which has a a Spanish feel to it (or do I prefer The Feeling?)... let’s be absolutely frank here and say that Resolutions is punk gone all grown up and with the experience that only life can bring... and it’s all the better for this with not a tune that doesn’t feel superbly crafted and wonderfully delivered.

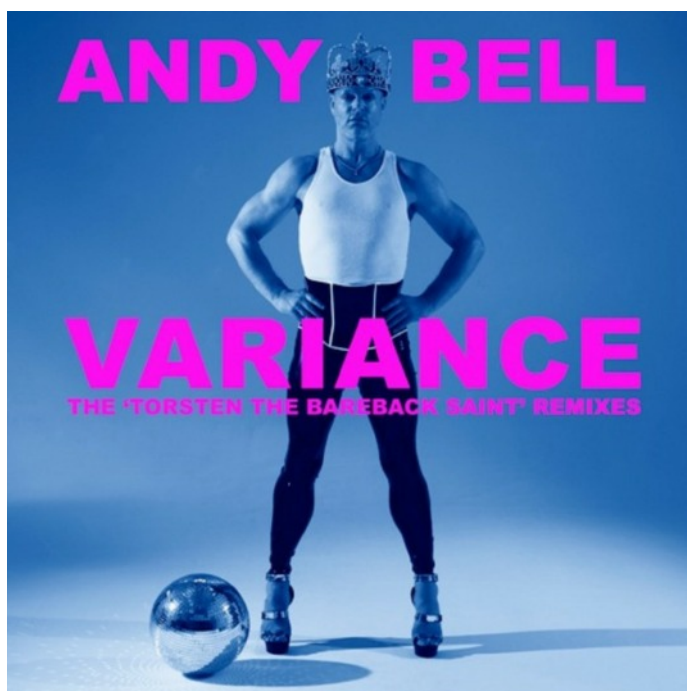
I finally decided on my fave track and it’s the spoken-word-over-mature-punk-orchestration of Outromistra that is a dystopian and forsaken conversation between mother and son speaking via machine with the son craving human contact...sort of Terry Gilliam’s Brazil put to music.

Brilliant!

Stuart Smith

MUSIC REVIEWS

Andy Bell – Variance, The Torsten The Bareback Saint Remixes (Strike Force Entertainment)



In 2014 Andy Bell, for it is he of Erasure fame, made an unexpected, and some would say brave career move when he launched his electro-acoustic cabaret show ‘Torsten The Bareback Saint’.

Before Bell started to write the next installation of his cabaret (Torsten The Beautiful Libertine) he and songwriters Barney Ashton-Bullock and Christopher Frost and producer Michael J Allison started remixing, resinging and rewriting some of their tracks and this is where Variance was born.

Five of the tracks on this record are made up by ‘remixes’ of Weston-Super-Mare, and whilst it is a good tune, as are the remixes, it seems odd to have the same track take up so much space on an album- this feels more like an EP to me. There’s a radio edit and a couple of dancier remixes and the tune is unmistakably kitsch and very English (“Bingo and Chips”), telling the story of a couple’s brief summer dalliance

Overall there is much to commend on Variance, the remixes of Weston are excellent and there’s something for everyone... and the other tunes are good too, I just can’t help thinking that this is a little disjointed and incoherent as an album.

in Weston, and Bells alter ego recalling the episode with a degree of melancholy. The mOOger Remix is a cracker by the way.

It would be easy to slate this as a bit of an indulgence on the part of Bell, and perhaps it is, but then you then get four other tracks. Bingo Hall Baby tells the story of a bingo hall caller and is full of broken dreams and failed lives played out in the shabby seaside bingo hall where the punters “can win a tin of beans or a two pond chicken”. I Don’t Like and Fountain Of Youth are both fine tracks and both have a very cabaret feel to them telling little stories within stories that draw the listener in and you just can’t help but identify with the characters.

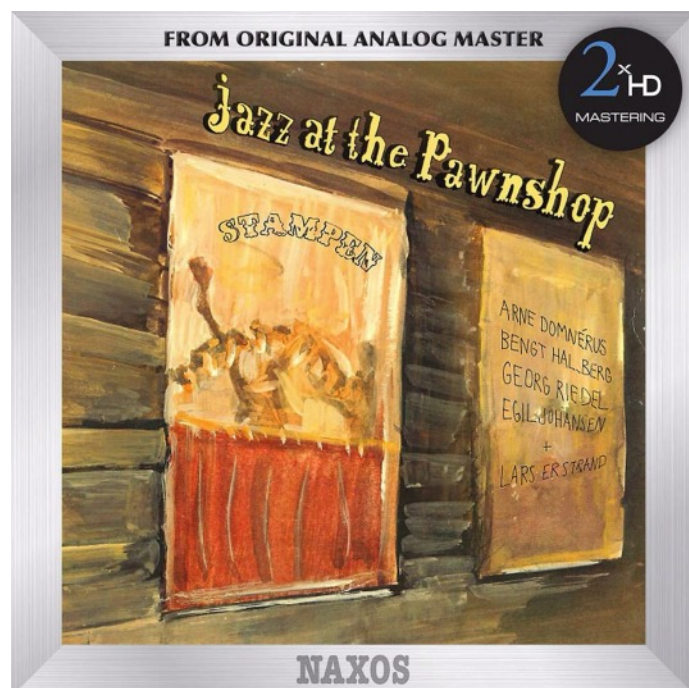
The album finishes off with a Promotional Melody and this is what it is – a mash up of the tunes from the cabaret that again feels a little odd stuck on the end.

Overall there is much to commend on Variance, the remixes of Weston are excellent and there’s something for everyone... and the other tunes are good too, I just can’t help thinking that this is a little disjointed and incoherent as an album. This said, many folk will rip this, make playlists and ignore the album’s order and it’ll be just old duffers like myself that have to hit the fast forward button on the CD remote to get to the mix I prefer.

Stuart Smith

MUSIC REVIEWS

Jazz At The Pawnshop



Not new by any stretch of the imagination and an album that will be familiar to many I'm sure, but this version on Naxos and downloaded in 128FS DSD... all 7.8 Gig of it ... zipped!... is really rather worth talking about.

Musically this record is not in question...the tunes are brilliant in a traditional jazz kind of way, but it's the way this is recorded, the noise of the audience and the ambience you get from it that sets it apart. It was recorded in 1976 at a club called Jazzpuben Stampen, oft' referred to as the Pawnshop, in Stockholm, Sweden and is tremendous in getting you "there"...right there in front of the band and being part of the audience.

There's loads of twaddle talked about hifi giving you that "being there" feeling, but this record, played on a great system, and particularly in this hi-res format, sounds like you are there like few other records I've had the pleasure of hearing. To get the 2 x HD transfer the original 15ips CCIR master tape was played on a Nagra IV-S tape machine, which was the same used to record the original (*I love this kind of*

attention to detail) using a tube preamp and posh silver cables.... This DSD version was done using a dCS905 and dCS Vivaldi clock.

Buy this for the music if you don't have it already (*it's very accessible even if you are not into jazz*) and buy it to show the people that come round your house that shelling out on a great hifi is really worth the money. As near to a live event in the sitting room as I have ever experienced and very, very, very addictive stuff!!! I can't stop listening to it!

[LINK](#)

Quote code HIFIPIG20 for a 20% Discount before the end of October

Stuart Smith

Various – 8 Ensembles in 1 Bit Stereo (Native Stereo)



Producer/Engineers Jared Sacks and Daan van Aalst have pooled their expertise in music production and recording in very high resolution audio. Their goal is to put together the best system for recording and reproducing music at the

MUSIC REVIEWS

highest quality with recordings in the new DSD 256fs (quad rate DSD) format, although 8 Ensembles is available in DSD 256, 128 and 64. It's the 128 format we're playing with here.

Tom Caulfield, the Mastering Engineer at Native DSD used specially developed software from Jussi Laako (the maker of the Signalyst HQ Player software player) for the conversion from DSD 256fs to DSD 128fs and DSD 64fs.

Once the three sets of Stereo and Multichannel DSD files were completed, the tracks were then converted from the DFF to the DSF file format. This enables Native DSD to add metadata to the recorded tracks. Finally the DSF tracks, cover art and album booklet in Acrobat PDF format are uploaded to Native DSD 's server where they can be purchased and downloaded.

Yeh, ok, its all done very techy and what not, but what does it sound like and what is the music like?

Here's the thing, I love samplers and I loathe them in equal measure. They do their job perfectly well, and this one is no exception, in leaving you want to hear more of the individual artists, but then they feel a bit disjointed in their musical styles...often.

Ensembles in 1 Bit Stereo is sonically wonderful it has to be said... and anyone who is out there and saying that DSD is a bit of a fad needs to get themselves in front of a good set up capable of paying them properly and realise that this is a different level of definition.

Musically you've got a smattering of classical, a smidge of jazz, some acapella (*Randy Newman's Short People arranged by Maartje Meijer and performed by New Amsterdam Voices is really great*) and everything has a distinct Dutch feel...it would, the musicians and singers are Dutch, but don't let that get in the way of buying this, it really is a fab' record and sounds great! Regular readers will know I'm no huge

fan of classical music but Ravel's Sonata For Violin And Cello is really quite pleasant. Yes there are different styles and "Ensembles" for you to further explore, but this album does sort of work as a whole and sounds truly fabulous to boot.

Highlight for me is Barcelona which sounds very live, and that's the feel I got from the whole of this album...it sounds live, which seems to me a distinctive trait of DSD downloads... I think I may well be addicted to this format!

This album is available at a discounted price, which varies between €13 and €17,50 (depending on whether you purchase Stereo, Multichannel or a Combi version of the DSD album!)

[Link](#)

The Johnny Almond Music Machine – Patent Pending (Esoteric Recordings)



I wasn't exactly sure what to make of this CD when it landed on my doormat. The band's name together with the cover art – kind of a cross between The Beatles' Yellow Submarine and Pink

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Floyd's Relics – made me wonder if this was some sort of arch parody in the manner of XTC's Dukes Of Stratosphere albums.

Patent Pending is a jazz rock album so redolent of its time that much of it would pass muster as the soundtrack to the next Austin Powers movie.

A quick investigation on the internet revealed that Johnny Almond had once been in a group with Jon Mark. This band's name was Mark Almond which only served to make me even more sceptical. As I read on though, it became clear that Johnny Almond had been a prolific and respected session musician as well as a band leader in his own right. I've heard it said that your brain retains all the information that it has ever processed and that with training, you can recall any of this information at will. If my brain had retained the information present on the back cover of my copy of Blues Breakers With Eric Clapton which quite clearly says that John Almond plays baritone sax on the album then it had evidently decided not to remind me of it.

Patent Pending is a jazz rock album so redolent of its time that much of it would pass muster as the soundtrack to the next Austin Powers movie. Almond plays tenor, alto and baritone sax along with flutes, organ, vibes, mellotron and bass clarinet. He is supported by Geoff Condon on trumpet and flugelhorn; Johnny Wiggins on piano and organ; Jimmy Crawford on electric guitar; Steve Hammond on electric and acoustic guitars and Roger Sutton on bass. Drummer Alan White would go on to join prog supergroup Yes.

I like a bit of brass and I'm fond of a bit of organ (settle down at the back) so I really enjoyed this

album. If opening track Ensingle were a stick of rock it would have "Groovy Baby" running right through it. An atmospheric cover of Yusef Lateef's Before Dawn allows the band to stretch out a bit as does Almond's own Voodoo Forest. Reversed For Two Horns takes a mildly psychedelic free jazz turn while Pequeno Nova adds a bit of Latin flavour.

Patent Pending wasn't the best jazz album to be released in 1969, nor was it the best jazz rock album of that year – Miles Davis can lay claim to both of those, having released both In A Silent Way and Bitches Brew that year – but it is great fun.

John Scott

Amy Helm – Didn't It Rain (Membran Records)



As the daughter of The Band's Levon Helm, Amy Helm has spent her life surrounded by music. The Band took a mix of rock and roll and traditional American music and invented the Americana genre, decades before the term became popular. A particularly impressive feat considering

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that 4 out of the 5 members were Canadian, with Arkansas native Levon being the sole American.

With Levon's talent in her blood it would be surprising if Amy had not followed her father's footsteps into the music business.

With Levon's talent in her blood – as well as a tremendous drummer, he was a fine singer and played a number of instruments including mandolin, guitar and bass– it would be surprising if Amy had not followed her father's footsteps into the music business. Having served an apprenticeship in Levon's bands, Amy joined Ollabel who have recorded 4 albums and also formed her own touring band Amy Helm & The Handsome Strangers.

Didn't It Rain carries forward the ethos of The Band in as much as it is easier to describe what it isn't rather than what it is: It isn't country, it isn't blues it isn't rock and it isn't soul but it is a fusion of all these things; a big bubbling stew of rootsy American music.

Fittingly, the title track opens with drums; a tight tattoo ushering in a bluesy guitar, bubbling bass and gospel vocals. Sky's Falling would be perfectly suited to Bonnie Raitt's next album – it you're reading this Bonnie, make it happen. In fact, there isn't a song on this album that isn't worthy of being covered by another artist. This is quality stuff from start to finish.

Sadly, Levon died in 2012 but he provided the drum tracks on two songs here, Spend Our Last Dime and Sing To Me. In Didn't It Rain, Amy Helm has made an album that can stand shoulder to shoulder with her father's work and that is no mean feat.

John Scott

Hawkwind – Love In Space (Atomhenge)



Hawkwind have a loyal following and you only need to look at the bust up between Nik Turner and Dave Brock and the camps fans have aligned themselves to understand that passions' run high when it comes to this iconic space rock band.

Ron Tree he does a great job in bringing a good deal of the feel of the original Bob Calvert to proceedings.

Love In Space was originally recorded in 1995 whilst the band were on tour promoting the Alien 4 Album and was then released a year later. The line-up is Ron Tree on vocals, Dave Brock, Alan Davey and Richard Chadwick and to be fair to Ron Tree he does a great job in bringing a good deal of the feel of the original

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Bob Calvert to proceedings. Alan Davey is without a doubt my most favorite of bass players and he doesn't disappoint here.

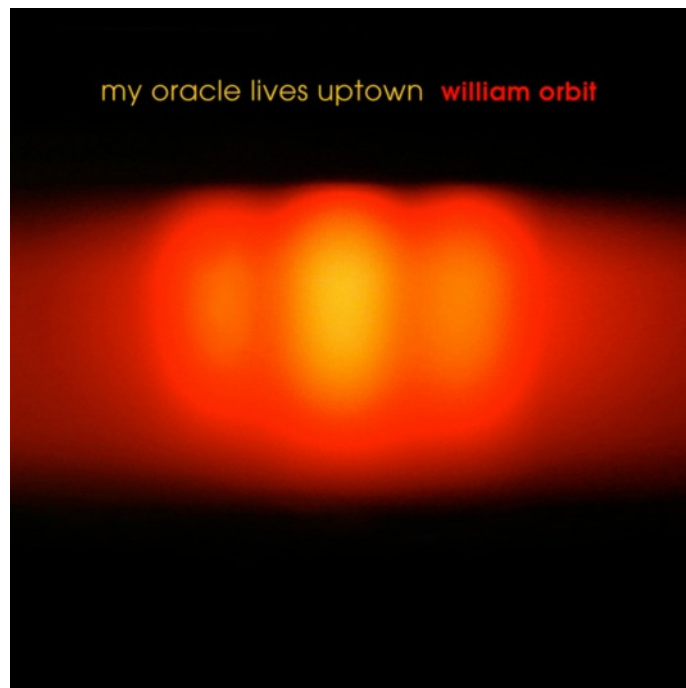
This rerelease is part of the ongoing efforts of Atomhenge to rerelease the output of Hawkwind and give fans old and new access to deleted records. There are three bonus track on the two CD set that are taken from the 1997 Love In Space EP and it's worth having just for these...but then I'm one of those for whom Hawkwind was (*and is*) a way of life. I'm just reading the liner notes as I type and note that one of the fire-eaters for the stage show was Wango Riley who used to have a stage at many a free festival...indeed Roughneck Sounds (*my old band*) played on his stage at Rock and Reggae in Nottingham many moons ago.

The live recording is good here and kicks off with Abducted, a spoken word and electronics piece telling the story of...an abductee, surprise, surprise and it sets the scene brilliantly for what is to come. There's the fabulous Death Trap that is a bit of a crowd pleaser and Are You Losing Your Mind which will be instantly musically familiar to fans and what I like about this record, as I like when I go to see the band live, is that there is a theme running through the record and a story being told. Ok, this may seem a bit clichéd in the wham bam thankyou mam world of throwaway pop culture, but called me old fashioned...OK, call me an old hippy... but I think 'concept' is a good thing.

The sound is, as you would expect from Hawkwind, big and multi layered with electronics, sound effects and segues that come together to produce a coherent, tripped out space adventure. This is pure and unashamedly one for the space cadets out there but it's also a very good example of what makes Hawkwind such a force to be reckoned with and why I continue to buy everything they put out.

Stuart Smith

William Orbit – My Oracle Lives Uptown (Linn Records)



This is not a new record having being released in 2009, but it is new to me and so I thought worthy of sharing it as I really enjoyed it.

William Orbit will not be a new name to many with my first exposure to his music being back in a dim and distant 90s when I got sent his Water From A Vine Leaf on Geurilla Records (*and excellent label of the day*). He's produced for loads of people not least Madonna on her Ray Of Light and MDNA albums...both very good records by the way and which get regular play here at Hifi Pig towers.

Orbit's music can be labelled, if that's what you want, as sort of ambient pop, and My Oracle Lives Uptown continues this theme, with perhaps more of a nod to the pop than the ambient, but that's not to suggest that this isn't a record worthy of your attention...it is and I've played it on heavy rotation since I downloaded it from Linn Records. It's sort of the kind of tunes you'd expect to hear in a trendy city

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centre bar full of beautiful young people with itchy noses and weak bladders.

It's the kind of record you are going to put on whilst pottering about or not paying too much attention to anything and I found it perfect to pop on whilst working.

There's not a lot to say about My Oracle really – It's all very nice music (VERY NICE) and it sort of unobtrusive and inoffensive. I'm perhaps suggesting this is a boring album, but I reckon that is doing it an injustice, it's more that it's all very... nice... beautifully produced and quite clever, but without ever really grabbing you by the throat and saying "listen to me!".

It's the kind of record you are going to put on whilst pottering about or not paying too much attention to anything and I found it perfect to pop on whilst working. I imagine it would have been (*and perhaps still is*) popular with folk wanting to show off their system.

[Link](#)

Stuart Smith

Better Late Than Never – AndersonPonty Band (earMusic)



Back in the 1980s, Yes vocalist Jon Anderson first mooted the idea of working with violinist Jean Luc Ponty but it has taken until now to make that reality.

Both Anderson and Ponty are, of course, legends in their own musical genres – Anderson is synonymous with Yes, despite his on-off relationship with the band over the years – and Ponty's work with The Mahavishnu Orchestra and Frank Zappa, along with a long string of solo albums, have helped to shape the history of jazz/rock fusion. Musical meetings of minds, however well-intentioned or well-suited don't always rise to meet their potential though and it was with some trepidation that I approached Better Late Than Never.

Thankfully, my fears were largely ungrounded. On Better Late Than Never, Anderson and Ponty have revisited some of their old work and the results, on the

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Only one track is totally misjudged: a cod-reggae version of Time And A Word sounds every bit as good as you might imagine – ie not very good at all.

whole, work remarkably well. Anderson has added lyrics to Ponty's tunes, bringing a new twist to them, and a selection of Yes classics are given a brush up and polish. Only one track is totally misjudged: a cod-reggae version of Time And A Word sounds every bit as good as you might imagine – ie not very good at all. Wondrous Stories, Roundabout, And You And I and Owner Of Lonely Heart can all hold their heads high; they are never going to replace the originals as your versions of choice but they make a refreshing change. Likewise, if you are a Jean Luc Ponty fan you will find much to like in the reworkings of his material here. With the basic tracks recorded live and then given a bit of studio tweaking, this is a surprisingly frisky collection of songs and Anderson and Ponty are supported by a really tight band with an extensive jazz/rock pedigree.

Better Late Than Never is better than you might have thought. If you are a fan of Anderson or Ponty, give it a go.

John Scott

A Night With L'Association Jazz Angle in St Brieuc

Is it really almost eighteen months since we last attended one of the Association Jazz Edge events? Let me put you in the picture dear reader.

Jazz Edge are an association (everything is an association here in France) who are passionate and extremely knowledgeable about all things jazz and every once in a while they put on an evening at the Conservatoire de St Brieuc where they pick ten tunes of jazz with a linking theme and play it all to an appreciative audience on some pretty high-end gear.

This time the gear was provided by French manufacturer Leedh and Jean-Luc Sazio, a local audiophile who we have had the good fortune to meet on a number of occasions...don't you just love how music brings people together?

For those who like this kind of thing the gear used tonight was a pair of Leedh E2 loudspeakers, a PrimaLuna pre, Wilson Benesch Circle turntable with an Origin Live arm (*my old turntable as it happens*) and Ortofon cartridge, with the power amp being the new Leedh creation. Indeed, the even marked the World premier of this power amplifier and despite its state of undress (*see pics*) it sounded very nice indeed and I can't wait to try one once it goes into production...this was so new the power supply was in a plastic bucket!

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First up let's look at the building that this event is hosted in. St Brieuc isn't a huge city or town but it does have a lively live music scene and the Conservatoire is an absolutely superb concept and space. The place is bustling with people young and old carrying a vast array of instruments even at 19:00 when we roll up. We find the room easily from the TV notice-board in the reception and the space is festooned with modern art and sculptures...not to mention a few photographs of famous musicians.

Tonight's event was hosted by the outstandingly knowledgeable Alain Loguillard and Christian Harlé, with the tunes being played being from the rich period of the 1960/70s and featuring musicians from the bop, cool and pre-free.

So, given the time period of the advertised chosen period it came as a bit of a shock that the first tune to

hit the turntable was Lester Young's Peg O My Heart from the 1945 Lester Swings album on Verve. First off the sound is marvelous from a sonic point of view with the large and high-ceilinged room being good, if not great, acoustically. The introduction to this tune, like all the tunes to follow was really well done by the guys and as the evening progressed it became clear why they started with this tune.

The rest of the night's tunes were as follows:

Bob Brookmeyer and Friends – The Wrinkle 1964 (CBS)

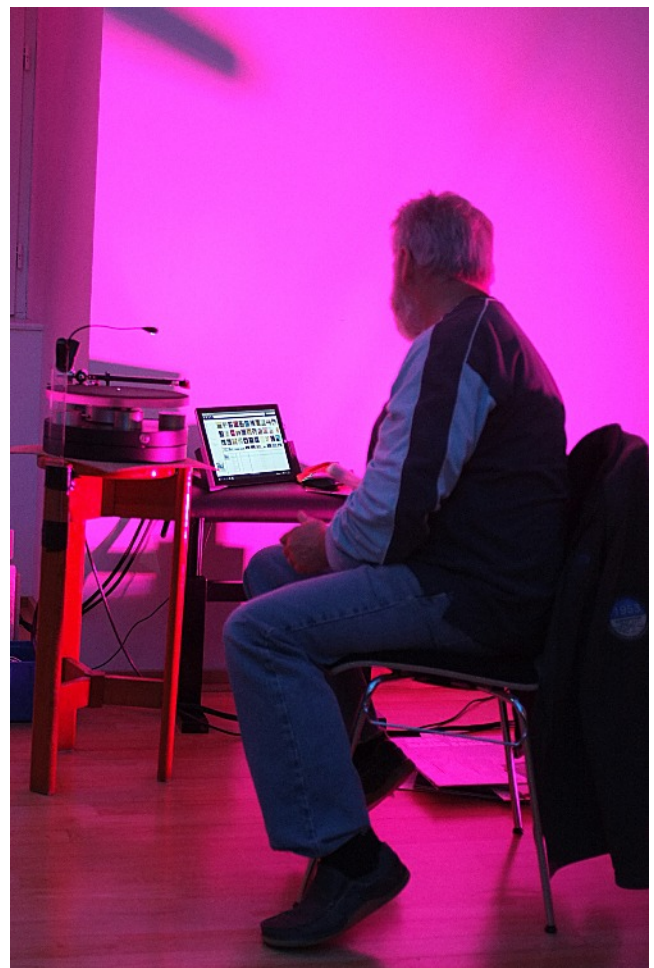
Jackie McLean – Riff Raff 1964 (Blue Note)

Paul Desmond featuring Jim Hall That Old Feeling 1963/65 (RCA)

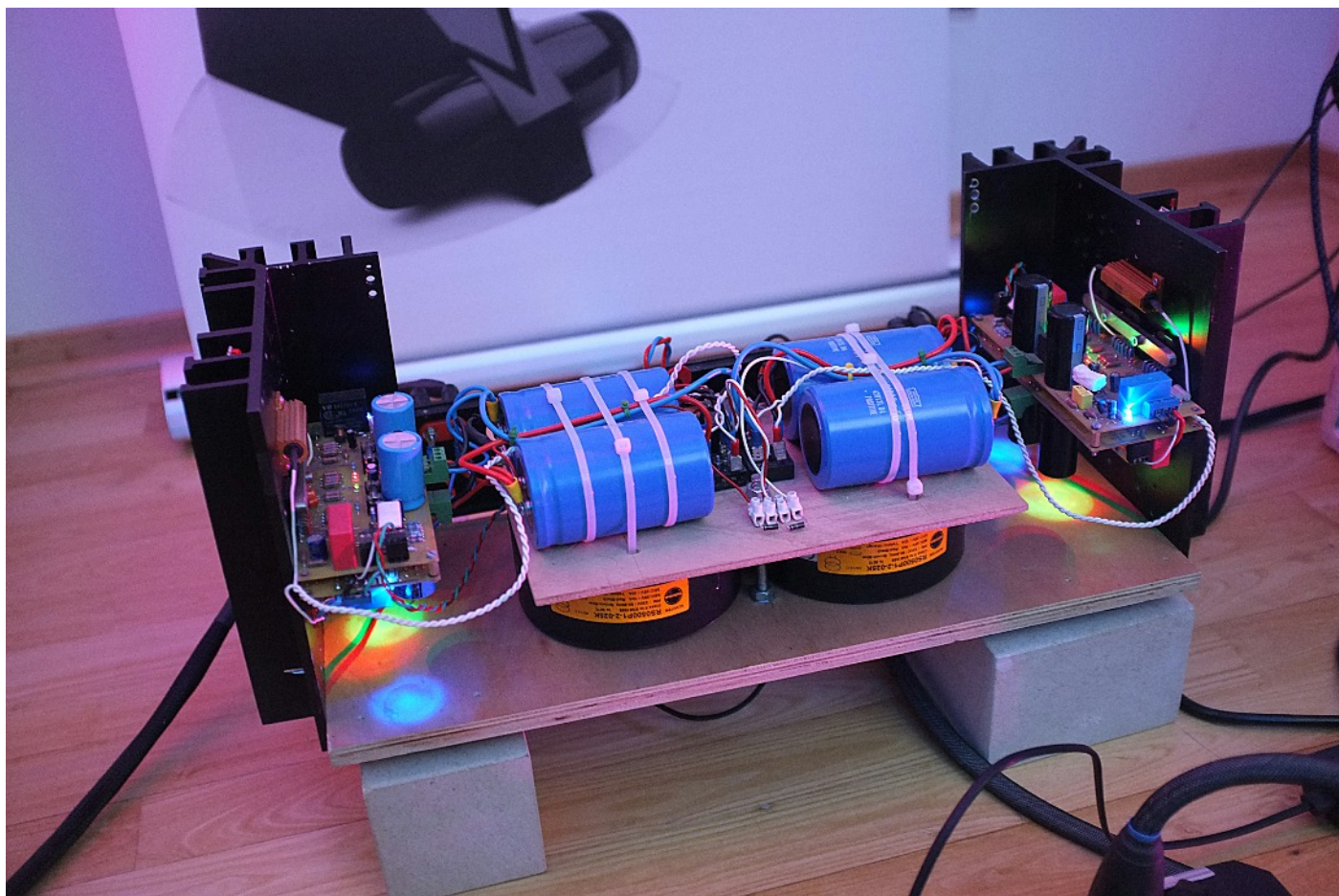
Charlie Mingus – Orange Was The colour Of Her Dress 1964 (1987 rerelease)



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And then we were played a mystery disk which was a bit of a highlight for me thus far in the evening. Turned out this was The Super Session with Tommy Flanagan, Red Mitchell and Elvin Jones from 1985 on the Enja label. Definitely one on my “to buy” list of records in the near future!

Gil Evans 1983 – A Merman I Should Turn To Be from the Gil Evans Plays Hendrix (RCA 1974) was another absolute corker of a tune making another to add to the list. Actually, I’d have liked to have heard a lot more of this particular record.

Ornette Coleman Trio – Dee Dee from the live At The Golden Circle album (Blue Note 1965). Now, Coleman is supposed to be challenging, but I really don’t find him to be challenging at all. Yes, it is different but still foot tappy and enjoyable. This is a live recording from Stockholm and very good indeed....a great recording.

Carla Bley – Dream So real from Dinner Music (Watt – ECM) 1977.

And then the finale to the evening, and what a finale. A drift away, close your eyes tune from Miles Davis’ Water Babies album called Sweet Pea (Columbia 1967). Again a jump back in time rather than a natural progression, but I can see why the guys chose to do this.

This is a great way to engage people in music...and good audio reproduction and should be encouraged...we’ll certainly be along to the next event and have promised to provide refreshments in the form of wine...pink of course!

A huge thank you to the Association Jazz Edge and all the people that gave their time so freely for what was a thoroughly enjoyable evening.

Stuart Smith

LIVE MUSIC

King Crimson – The Usher Hall, Edinburgh

King Crimson gigs are, it would seem, like buses – you wait 35 years for one and then 2 come along at once. I’m happy to say that I was able to attend both of their recent Edinburgh shows.

When I first discovered King Crimson back in 1979, the band had already ceased to exist, having split after their 1974 studio album *Red*. The band then reformed in a very different guise to release the *Discipline* album in 1981 and since then, a succession of line ups have toured and released albums. The band seemed destined, however, to come to a permanent end in 2012 when guitarist and leader Robert Fripp announced his retirement, commenting that business hassles had distracted from his ability to create music and had reduced it to “a joyless exercise in futility”. An announcement of a new “Seven Headed Beast Of Crim” line up in 2013 came as a complete surprise but with Fripp stating that “When music appears that only King Crimson can play, then, sooner or later, King Crimson appears to play the music” it was clear that he still had unfinished musical business to complete.

The current iteration of the band comprises three drummers – Pat Mastelotto, Bill Rieflin and Gavin Harrison along with Mel Collins on woodwinds, Tony Levin on basses and Chapman Stick and Jakko Jak-

czyk on guitar and vocals, and of course, Fripp – the band’s sole constant member since its foundation in 1968.

King Crimson have not played in Scotland since the 1974 split and anticipation is high. I can’t remember the last time that I experienced such a pre-gig buzz; people line up to have their photographs taken in front of the three drum kits that span the front of the stage. Conversations between audience members are of the “Have you seen them before?” variety. Regardless of the reply, the level of excitement is much the same. Whether they be veterans who have fond memories of the *Lark’s Tongues In Aspic* tour or younger fans whose parents weren’t even born when the band released their first album, no one really expected that they would be here to witness this. I wouldn’t have dared hazard a guess at the age of the oldest audience member but a girl of around 9 who was here with her Dad must certainly have been the youngest.

As the anticipation rises, our ears are caressed by a surround-sound ambient soundscape freshly composed and performed by Fripp just an hour before. Each new gig gets a new soundscape. The soundscape fades briefly to be replaced by a taped announcement from the band “sweetly” requesting that we put away all our portable devices and refrain from recording the performance in any way. The soundscape returns briefly as the band take to the stage to tumultuous applause and settle into their positions, Fripp shading his eyes to scope out the crowd. Removing the jacket of his perfectly tailored three piece suite, he dusts down his hands and the neck of his guitar with some mystery substance, gives a barely perceptible nod, and

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New or old, the interplay between the band makes every song riveting.

another taped introduction – Fripp’s orchestral count-in at the end of the *Islands* album – takes us into *Larks Tongues In Aspic Part 1*. The positioning of the three drum kits in front of the rest of the band make it clear that rhythm is very much at the heart of this band and the three drummers play together seamlessly. All three do not always play at the same time – when they do it is like one six-armed musician playing a single kit but their playing is dynamic in the true sense of the word, ebbing and flowing. Often, drum lines are shared between them, bouncing back and forward; drum rolls, err, rolling from one side of the stage to the other. Bill Rieflin, centre stage, also performs keyboard duties. Mel Collins, an on-off *Crimson* contributor from 1970-1976 shoehorns a number of quotes from other tunes into the flute section of *Larks’ part 1*, recognisable but not identifiable, not by me at any rate. Tony Levin stands legs akimbo, as if rooted into the ground and sends impossibly complex bass runs

thundering from his Chapman Stick. Jakko Jakszyk shares guitar duties with Fripp, often playing lead while Fripp spins off those crosspicked arpeggios that only he is capable of.

The set list on both nights is evenly split between brand new, recent, and classic material. New or old, the interplay between the band makes every song riveting. Inevitably though, it is the early material that really sets our pulses racing. *Pictures Of A City* is powered by Collins’ baritone sax. *Epitaph*, from the band’s debut album sees Rieflin recreate the classic *Crimson* mellotron sound. *The Letters*, a centrepiece of 1971’s *Islands* album is suitably dramatic and is followed, as on the album, by *Sailor’s Tale* featuring Fripp’s splintered, shredded guitar against Levin’s rolling, cyclical bass line. The set climaxes with my personal favourite *Crimson* tune, *Starless*. To be in the same room as Fripp when he plays that liquid guitar line that forms the core of the song is simply priceless and will live with me for as long as I am capable of memory.

The encore opens with *Devil Dogs Of Tesselation Row*, a showpiece for the drummers before we launched headlong into the unmistakable intro of *The Court Of The Crimson King* and never has the song sounded better. Finally, a 21st Century version of *21st Century Schizoid Man* with its precision start-stop drumming and screaming sax threatens to rip the roof off. The band acknowledge the audience’s rapturous ovation with waves and bows, Fripp scanning the crowd intently again, then file off the stage. Not a word has been said; no between-song patter or band introductions, and none have been needed. As we leave, strangers look at each other, visibly dazed, and smile, knowing that we have all experienced something unique; 2 hours of musical alchemy in the court of *King Crimson*.

John Scott

LIVE MUSIC

Richard Thompson – The Queen's Hall, Edinburgh

The last time I saw Richard Thomson in concert, a member of the audience shouted: “Where’s Linda tonight Richard?” Thompson replied that she was in hospital giving birth.

Linda gave birth to a daughter, Kami, who as one half of The Rails is opening tonight’s show. The other half of The Rails is Kami’s husband, James.

The Rails play folk music that is clearly rooted in the 60’s and 70’s folk-rock music that Richard and Linda Thompson spearheaded. However, Kami and James’ vocals are totally contemporary; no fingers are inserted into any ears at any time during tonight’s performance. Kami is a solid, if unremarkable, rhythm guitarist. James’ guitar skills are somewhat more impressive, pulling out several spectacular solos. Though I suppose you’d want to be a decent guitarist if Richard Thompson was your father-in-law. I expect James had to sit some sort of guitar exam before being granted Kami’s hand in marriage.

We are treated to a couple of songs from their new EP Australia, along with several tracks from their first album Fair Warning, the title track of which is a particular stand out. Kami and James’s voices blend effortlessly and they bring a real sense of charisma to

Meet On The Ledge takes us right back to Thompson’s beginnings in Fairport Convention and a dazzling Vincent Black Lightning shows that even on acoustic guitar, Thompson is electrifying.

their performance, receiving a warm reception from the audience.

After a brief intermission, Richard Thompson takes to the stage accompanied by The Rails to play That’s Enough from last year’s Family album. An evening of the three playing and singing together would be a fine night out but it’s not what we are here for tonight. Thompson is in Electric Trio mode and so The Rails take their leave and are replaced by Michael Jerome on drums and Taras Prodaniuk on bass. Thompson swaps his acoustic for a Strat and the Trio get stuck into All Buttoned Up from Thompson’s new album Still, Sally B from 2013’s Electric

LIVE MUSIC

album and another from Still, Broken Doll. For Shame Of Doing Wrong from 1975's Richard and Linda Thompson album Pour Down Like Silver, channels Clapton, Bruce and Baker in all their cream power trio glory.

An acoustic interlude provides temporary relief from the electric onslaught. Meet On The Ledge takes us right back to Thompson's beginnings in Fairport Convention and a dazzling Vincent Black Lightning shows that even on acoustic guitar, Thompson is electrifying. To make up for a slightly flubbed vocal he treats us to an extended solo section. One of my all-time favourites, Al Bowley's In Heaven, sees the band wander into jazz trio territory while Guitar Heroes allows Thompson to pay tribute to his influences by playing in the styles of Django Reinhardt, Les Paul, Chuck Berry, James Burton and Hank Marvin. "I still don't know how my heroes did it" he sings, but he is being unduly modest. Guitar Heroes may be a novelty song, and Chris Spedding had the idea first on his Guitar Jamboree track years ago, but it's still entertaining stuff.

There is nothing here tonight from Richard and Linda's classic I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight album but we do get a brace of tracks from their epically bleak Shoot Out The Lights: Did She Jump Or Was She Pushed and Wall Of Death.

We're treated to 2 encores, the highlights of which are a dizzying Tearstained Letter which I am almost certain features a tiny fragment of Julius Fucik's Entrance Of The Gladiators – you know it, it's that tune they always play at the circus – and a cover of Otis Blackwell's Daddy Rolling Stone – an early Who B-side.

Electric or acoustic, solo or trio, however you see Richard Thompson, you are guaranteed a great evening's entertainment.

John Scott

Hector Berlioz, Symphonie Fantastique – Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique conducted by John Eliot Gardner, The Usher Hall, Edinburgh



LIVE MUSIC

Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* was one of my first classical purchases way back in the early 1980s. I was initially attracted by the album's sleeve notes, which alluded to febrile opium-induced nightmares. Also, the instrumentation featured something called an ophicleide, which I hadn't encountered before and I'm not sure that I have since.

Symphonie Fantastique describes a doomed love affair, one that was rooted in Berlioz's own experience. At the age of 23 he attended a production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* where he became hopelessly smitten with the Irish actress Harriet Smithson. Berlioz wrote repeatedly to Smithson but received no reply and attempted to achieve some sort of catharsis by pouring his feelings into his music.

The piece is famous for featuring an "idée fixe" – literally an obsession – a musical motif that represents his beloved. This motif appears in various forms in each of the symphony's five movements. The first movement (Reveries, Passions) introduces the motif, weaving it through other melodies as the Artist muses on the object of his desire. The second move-

ment (A Ball) develops the motif into a waltz as the artist watches his unattainable beloved from afar. UK readers of a certain age may remember the main melody featuring in an early 70s TV road safety advertisement. The third movement (Scene In The Fields) begins peacefully but the distant rumble of thunder presages the Artist's doubts – has his beloved been untrue? Convincing himself of his misfortune he

attempts to poison himself with opium. The fourth and fifth movements (A March To The Scaffold and Dream Of A Witches' Sabbath) depict the Artist's fevered nightmares. He has murdered his faithless beloved and is condemned to death. Her motif is cut short as the guillotine falls and we hear the Artist's head tumble down the steps as he is condemned to hell. The final move to sees the motif transformed into a ghoulish parody as witches and demons mock and pour scorn on the doomed Artist. Funeral bells toll before the symphony rises to a monstrous climax.

The Parisian premier of the work in 1830 was not well received. Berlioz retreated to Italy to work on it further. A second premier of the revised piece was held in 1832. Berlioz invited Harriet Smithson who attended. This time, the symphony was a great success. More importantly, Harriet recognised Berlioz's message to her. They were married the following year and although they later separated, are buried together.

Taking my seat just before the performance, I thought there was something odd about the stage. As the orchestra took to the stage I realised what it was – a lack of chairs. The violins

and violas played standing up for the duration of the piece, the first time I have seen this happen. This has the advantage of spreading the sound of the string section across the whole width of the stage, with the basses practically backed up against the wall on the audience's right hand side. *Symphonie Fantastique* is scored for two harps and yet there are four on stage – two on each side. In another unconventional move,

The orchestra's brilliant performance of this is met with a grudging "yes, well that's enough for today, we'll try it again tomorrow" from the narrator.

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these are brought to the centre of the stage at the start of the second movement and arranged in a semi-circle facing the conductor. While it might be argued that this flurry of activity interrupts the flow of the symphony, the harps play an important part in the second movement. Doubling them and bringing them centre stage really does allow them to shine. The third movement calls for an off-stage oboe. John Eliot Gardner leaves his oboe soloist onstage but places him high above the orchestra in the organ gallery, which retains the feeling of distance while keeping us engaged with the music. The final movements require the most demanding playing from the orchestra as they bring to life the Artist's march to his decapitation and subsequent descent to hell. What are those two strange instruments in the brass section? They are ophicleides, those obsolete instruments mentioned in my LP's sleeve notes all those years ago. Another archaic instrument, the serpent, also makes an appearance. It is no doubt impractical for a touring orchestra to transport a set of large bells and so the bells that toll out dolorously over the final movement are pre-recorded and come to us via a PA system. They are, however, well balanced with the orchestra and do not sound out of place. From gentle reverie to demonic cackles the orchestra conveys all that Berlioz intended and following the fifth movement's furious climax are treated to a roar of approval from the audience.

Opinions are divided as to whether Berlioz was himself an opium user and we may never know for sure. He was fascinated enough by the drug, however, to compose a "sequel" to *Symphonie Fantastique* in 1831, before the revisions to the symphony were undertaken. Like the symphony itself, *Lélio* – the second half of tonight's concert – uses pieces of previously-written music. "Do you know this one?" asked the lady sat beside me. I replied that I didn't know it at all. "Ah, you're in for an education." She replied, mysteriously. As an elegant piano and a

chaise longue, both of which would have been at home in a nineteenth century drawing room, were wheeled on to the stage, I began to suspect she wasn't wrong.

The orchestra return to the stage, all seated this time, accompanied by the National Youth Choir of Scotland who fill the seats in the organ gallery at the rear of the stage. The Narrator, Peter Ayre, prostrates himself on the chaise longue with his back to us and two pianists take their seat at the piano. This is looking interesting.

The Narrator awakes from his opium-induced sleep, disheartened to find that he is still alive and haunted by his nightmares. Over the course of six pieces of music he despairs at the futility of his existence but is gradually pulled back to life by reflecting on his love of the arts.

Lélio is in a completely different style to *Symphonie Fantastique*, a mixture of songs for tenor, bass and choir and instrumental pieces, but it shares the symphony's *idée fixe* and we hear this in the opening piece where the artist remembers his friend Horatio and his fondness for the poem *The Fisherman* which we now hear set to music. To be honest the narrative of *Lélio* seems fairly spurious but Peter Ayre's narration is knowingly humorous and the music is lovely. The highlight comes when the narrator decides that life may be worth living after all and demands that the orchestra play a piece he has written based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The orchestra's brilliant performance of this is met with a grudging "yes, well that's enough for today, we'll try it again tomorrow" from the narrator. By the end of *Lélio* the Artist's appetite for life has been fully restored – signified by the return again of the *idée fixe* – and he storms off stage in search of new romantic adventures.

An education indeed and a tremendous end to a great evening's entertainment.

John Scott

CLASSICS

Yes – The Yes Album

John Scott delves into his collection and pulls out The Yes Album, the bands third album.



For many people Yes are the archetypal progressive rock band, synonymous with knotty time signatures, capes and Roger Dean al-

bum covers. Forming in 1968 as an evolution of earlier bands The Syn and Mabel Greer's Toyshop the band consisted of Jon Anderson on vocals, Chris

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Squire on bass, Peter Banks guitars, Tony Kaye keyboards and Bill Bruford on drums. Although early gigs focused on covers of songs by other bands such as The Beatles and Traffic, they recorded a self-titled debut album of mostly original material after signing to Atlantic Records. It's a confident debut, notable for an audacious reworking of The Beatles' Every Little Thing. Anderson's clear, choirboyish vocals and Squire's growling bass, key elements of the Yes sound, are already in place. Follow up album *Time And A Word* developed the band's sound but featured an orchestral backing on most of the songs, something that guitarist Peter Banks was unhappy with. This resulted in him leaving the band before the album was released.

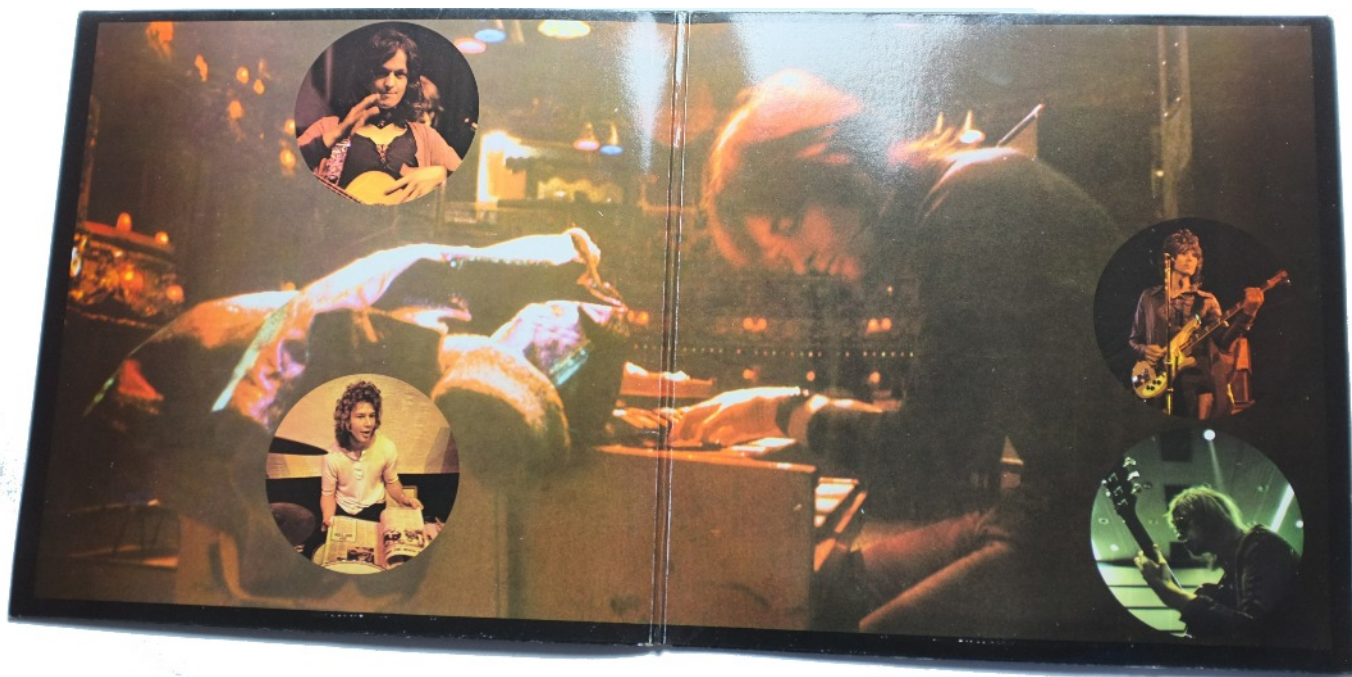
In June 1970, Banks was replaced by Steve Howe who had previously played in Tomorrow and Bo-

bast. Howe played a few gigs with the band before they holed themselves up in a Devon farmhouse to write the material for their next album. Released On 19 February 1971, the album was the band's first real commercial success and it is easy to see why. Right from the opening moments of Yours Is No Disgrace, the album is almost literally bursting with ideas. Squire's bass meshes with slashing chords from Howe. Kaye's Hammond organ is joined by a Moog synthesiser, adding a new sound to the band's palette. Bruford's drums are crisp and precise and Anderson and Squire's multi-layered

harmonies are full of melody. It is Howe's guitar that is the real star here though: cascading single lines, funky wah wah chords and delicate acoustic arpeggios tumble after one another in a dazzling display of invention.

The next tune Clap (mistakenly titled The Clap on early editions of the album) is a live acoustic showcase solo from Howe in a ragtime style. It's almost as if the band were setting down a marker to their contemporaries: "Hey, we've got Steve Howe in our band – can your guitarist do this stuff?". The Yes Album also sees Jon Anderson's abstract non-sequitur lyrics establishing themselves as part of the band's signature style. What is Starship Trooper about? Like most of the band's songs from this point on, the lyrics mean whatever you decide that they mean; make up your own wondrous stories. There is

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a bit of a musical non sequitur here too as Howe breaks out another brief burst of ragtime guitar before the song builds to slow burning climax courtesy of a smouldering chord progression.

I've Seen All Good People's a cappella vocal intro leads to a delicate Portuguese 12 string guitar part from Howe, morphing into chords to underpin Anderson's vocals and Bruford's bass drum. A guest appearance by Colin Goldring from the band Gnid-

rolog on recorder adds a further texture to the song before Howe shows us yet another side to his guitar playing with a solo bordering on country rock.

If The Yes Album seems to be very much a showcase for Howe, and I think it does, we shouldn't forget the contribution made by Squire, Bruford and Kaye. Squire's melodic, complex basslines are at the heart of all the songs. Bill Bruford would go on to be recognised as one of rock music's most accom-

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plished drummers. Here, his drumming is skilful without being particularly showy; serving the songs without ever getting in the way. Kaye occasionally comes to the fore but generally plays more of a supporting role with understated piano, warm, rich organ and very occasional Moog synthesiser work. Penultimate track A Venture and album closer Perpetual Change both make good use of Kaye's keyboards but it may be that he felt that he was playing second fiddle to Howe's prominence as he left the band before the recording of the band's next album Fragile, being replaced by Rick Wakeman. Kaye would return to the band in 1981 and at various points thereafter.

The band would go on to be one of the biggest rock bands in the world during the pre-punk years of the early seventies and were in fact exactly the type of band that punk was supposed to wipe from the face of the earth. Perpetual Change might well serve as a motto for the band who have gone through countless line up changes and permutations of core members. Chris Squire's death earlier this year means that the band will never be the same again but they carry on nevertheless.

The Yes Album was not their biggest selling album and it may not be their best – quite often though, I think it is – but it represents a time when they were still defining their style and before their music became, arguably, over complicated. If you are new to the album, or want to rediscover it, Steven Wilson's remix from last year is probably the way to go, giving the sound a bit of a brush up without radically altering it.

The Yes Album's organic sound and melodic strength makes it an album that is not just for old proggers. Just say Yes.

John Scott

AT A GLANCE

Released – 19 February 1971

**Recorded – 17 July 1970
("Clap"), Autumn 1970**

Genre – Progressive Rock

Length – 41:44

Label – Atlantic

Producer – Yes and Eddie Offord

TRACK LISTING

SIDE 1

Yours Is No Disgrace – 9:41

Clap – 3:17

Starship Trooper – 9:29

Life Seeker – 3:29

Disillusion – 2:20

Wurm – 3:40

SIDE 2

I've Seen All Good People – 6:56

Your Move – 3:32

All Good People – 3:24

A Venture – 3:21

Perpetual Change – 8:58

BEHIND THE BRANDS

Hifi Pig goes Behind The Brands with Russell Kauffman, the owner and designer at Russell K, makers of the well received Red 50 and Red 100 loudspeakers.



Your History

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

When I was 13 my mother told me to get a Saturday job, she was thinking Burtons. I could not bear the thought of measuring gentlemen's private areas so I took my girlfriend to Tottenham Court Road and got a job in Lasky's selling Headphones and Cartridges

Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?

Robin Marshall (Epos) he believed in doing the right thing regardless. An honourable person and a very talented designer

Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?

Red 100 the first Russell K product. To do it my way and have so many people enjoy the result

What product do you wish you had never conceived/launched?

StudioPower DMS series. StudioPower was a name attached to speakers imported from Denmark. The first series called MC was a success similar to Cerwin Vega ie power speakers sporting a lens over the tweeter and strong graphics. The DMS was a more traditional type of speaker that just failed

Tell Hifi Pig readers about your next project and what they can expect in the future from you and your company.

Red 150 the first Floorstanding loudspeaker going into production as I write. It is based on the Red 100 taking the sound to the next level. After that I am prepared to listen to Dealers, Distributors, Reviewers and your readers. I want people to connect with the Brand and be part of the journey, certainly it would have blown me away to think when I was younger I could influence my favourite companies

You and your system

What was your very first system?

Garrard AP-76/ Shure M44E/ Metrosound ST-20 MK 2/ Celestion Ditton 120

Tell us about your system history and the way it has developed to the system you have today.

First change was the amp to a Sansui AU-101 which did sound better .Then the cheapest deck that would

BEHIND THE BRANDS

take an SME 3009 S2 , that turned out to be an ERA MK 6 from France it was belt driven (In those days a Linn was judged by its rumble /wow and flutter). My Saturday job was at KJ Leisuresound in London where there was so much to like. Next up was the amp an Amcron IC 150 pre and D60 power which did sound good before my next change, either Spondor BC 3 or IMF Professional Monitor MK3 Improved, both very big for a 3 bed semi and much to my parents shock I had both at home at the same time to decide. I went for the Spondor as they had more mid focus which I preferred to the IMF's deeper bass. Final change the ERA/SME went for a Denon DP-3000 with Mayware Formula 4 low mass arm to go with a Sonus Blue high compliance cartridge. At that time KJ had not discovered Linn or Naim. Travel and marriage meant the equipment had to go and I started married life with Linn LP 12 Valhalla /Ittok/K9, Nytech CA202 and SKS Intaglio speakers from my first company. The speakers were a 2 way sealed box design using Sen Lab drivers that later became known as Dynaudio. I have to say it was a wonderfully simple system and great fun to listen to. Upgrades included an Ekos tonearm and Audio Technica OC-9 cartridge. A Lecson Quattrra amp which was very unusual in that it is a Bi Amp in one box the size of a Naim Nait 5 with a fantastic high-end sound...if it could drive the speakers. It was only 4 x 19 watts

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

None I would love to listen to the old stuff to see how it compares to the systems I listen to today

How often do you listen to music?

Almost every day

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

At the Absolute Sound Magazine demonstrated by the late Harry Pearson. Linn LP 12 with a Rabco Parallel tracking arm, Koetsu Onyx Cartridge, Audio Research SP 6C pre, Threshold Stasis 2 power amp



(the Krell of its day) driving the magnificent Infinity IRS loudspeakers - 4 columns, nearly 2 metres high line source design. The best system I have heard to date

The state of the industry

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

Fantastic! I love equipment that is fun to use and fun to listen to

Vinyl resurgence... what are your thoughts?

Wonderful ! It's connecting people to hifi and music.

Is CD a dying format?

I hope so, it's not about chopping music into pieces and reassembling it which is digital and here to stay. The CD never did what was claimed ("perfect music forever"). The discs were and still are too fragile, as are the cases. I am fed up with CDs that don't play and are wrecked because of wear.

BEHIND THE BRANDS

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?

It will carry on as too much money has been invested by large companies for it not to. I think there will be consumer mass market type products and an audiophile business, which will in my view become more stand alone as it was in the early days. How big that business is will depend on quality music (performers as well as recording quality) and if the Industry will accept that more than one person or company can have a good idea. The Industry needs to be seen as “cool” from the outside

Digital downloads, what do you think their impact has been on the way people listen to music?

I think it helps more people to listen to music so that can only be good

How do we engage young people, the audiophiles of the future?

Cut out the bull s..t , build products that are fun to use, cool to look at and (what a surprise) sound good

Online shopping’s effect on the retail industry?

To me it’s not good. As an example, the only way I can find out if Dunlop is better on my car than Pirelli is to buy them. That is what will happen if we lose retail shops and that will harm the Industry

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

Products with high prices and poor sound justified by some bulls..t story

The way you work



BEHIND THE BRANDS

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

I want the sound to be real. If a live performer is in the room it is impossible to read a magazine. Try the same test with a hifi system it's amazing how many fail

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

Same answer as above. I think many buzz words are used to excuse poor sound ie "foot tapping" is part of music, but if the sound is hard and bright it's not real and not satisfying

Turntable preferences...direct drive, belts, Idlers or what?

Doesn't matter if it's good it's good

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

I have heard both great small speakers and large speakers. The same is true for terrible speakers - they can be all shapes and sizes. The worst types chase one parameter at the expense of all else...it's very detailed but the sound will cut your head off. The



other type I don't like is the corporate speaker based on technical features that sound flat and boring

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

What is your favourite recording?

Don't have one

Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings.

For design I don't have trusted recordings. I have learnt that the recording may be true, but how it sounds to me changes as the brain is a processor. Any recording I hear too many times makes me feel uncomfortable, so my judgement is impaired

What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures.

Abba but only at the weekend when nobody is around

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?

For me it's about the moment. Right now I am enjoying the collection of Doobie Brothers Albums I bought recently. A month ago it would have been Beethoven conducted by Von Karajan

