

# Hifi Pig

## EXTRA

## & GadgetyReviews

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February 2016  
Issue #2

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## LAMPIZATOR BIG 7 DAC



**At €11000 plus taxes as tested the Lampizator Big 7 is certainly no budget DAC, but does it deliver on sonic ability? Stuart Smith finds out.**

I first heard the Lampizator Big 7 last year at Munich High-End in the Sound Galleries of Monaco booth, along with a pair of Avantgarde Duos, cables from Tellurium Q and room treatment by GIK and for me it was one of the standout sounds of the show. Now we put an order in for a pair of the new Duo XDs at Munich and we use TQ speaker cables in the main system much of the time along with GIK's room treatment

panels and so it seemed a sensible to at least audition the Big 7 to see if we would get along with it at home. Of course, if we liked it, there was always the option to dig deep and make it a permanent fixture. And you will need to dig deep if the Big 7 does the sonic business for you as it comes in at a not inconsiderable €11 000 plus appropriate taxes as featured here.

## LAMPIZATOR BIG 7 DAC

Let's get the negatives out the way first because there are a few issues I have with this unit, and, whilst these issues are not deal breakers by any stretch of the imagination, I do think certain features could be improved upon. First of all we have the packaging that this particular unit came in. Yes it arrived safe and sound, but this is a premium product and as such I expected much more than (an admittedly double boxed) package with what looked like off cuts of packing foam to protect the unit – I expected that Christmas morning feeling that we constantly bang on about! Of course this would add to the already not insignificant cost of the Big 7, but come on guys! Secondly is the joke of a remote control which is a cheap, plasticky affair that would be more at home with a seventy five quid portable television from CostCo or Argos. Finally the unit supplied had a loose digital RCA input that required tightening...this meant taking off the top of the DAC and sorting it out myself...this really should have been checked at the final stage of packing!

Now I've got that little lot off my chest let's begin with the review proper.

So what do you get for your money when you buy the Lampizator Big 7? Actually you get a pretty comprehensive unit that, although expensive, can save you a few quid elsewhere in your system. The sample we have here has the preamplifier board built in that has one input via RCAs, meaning that you can use the Big 7 without a separate preamplifier and feed it straight to your amplifier (s) of choice, saving you the added expense of buying a pre. This of course only works if you have a relatively basic system, but to be fair the vast majority of folk will be catered for in this respect as you can put your CD's digital out in to the Big 7's S/PDIF input, your computer's USB out into its USB input (32 bit/384 kHz PCM and DSD upto 128x ) and your phonestage (or whatever else you have that feeds a line signal) into the preamplifier section's RCA inputs. Outputs offered on the model we have are a pair of RCAs and a pair of balanced XLRs. There's also an AES/EBU



# LAMPIZATOR BIG 7 DAC



input on XLR but that hasn't been used. So, connection wise you are nicely covered with the Big 7 and could run a system with just a computer or transport, the DAC, amp and speakers should you wish.

On the front of the unit you get the volume knob (on this version) and an LCD display showing you the input you have selected and volume...it's not a great display and I had to be close by to see what was selected.

Via USB you get a DSD engine that will deal with 64x and 128x and whilst I'm well aware that there is a number of people who believe that DSD is little more than a fad I would say that these folk should go out and take a listen to a properly encoded DSD recording on a proper DAC and then make their minds up. The DSD engine uses "unmanipulated, filtered, raw, native data-stream as the signal" which essentially means there is as little as possible happening to your DSD signal before it is output.

Inside the Big 7 it has to be said that it is beautifully put together and is a bit of a testament to the engineer's skill. There are two standard chokes (the Golden Gate version has "premium chokes") Copper/wax Jupiter caps and the unit comes as standard with four 101D Psvane tubes and a Shuguang 274B rectifier tube. Now as we are on

**The immediacy and realness of what was coming out of the speakers was, in my experience, simply without match.**

with the tubes, you can do a good degree of tube rolling (I chose not to) and use 101D, 45, 245UX or 2A3s with the heater voltage being changed accordingly by a switch inside the DAC. Wiring inside the unit is all silver in Teflon and you get separate transformer windings for the valve circuit, a separate transformer for the digital section and separate secondary windings "for every task". As with most reviews I write I won't get bogged down in the technical side of things as I just don't have the knowledge or interest other than the end result and the music that comes out the speakers and so urge you to read the Designer's Notes that follow this review.

## LAMPIZATOR BIG 7 DAC

The Big 7 is so called with good reason because whilst it may not actually be that heavy (it weighs 16KG) it is pretty large, particularly in depth, measuring 45cm in width, 12cm in height (25cm if you account for the tubes) and...wait for it...53cm deep. Most racks will not accommodate this depth of course, but the Big 7 has six feet underneath meaning that the front two pairs will sit nicely on a standard depth rack, with the remaining pair and the back end of the DAC overhanging by 12cm on the IKEA unit I had it sat on. This is not a problem for me as I have plenty of space behind the current racks, but will mean you'll need to pull your rack away from the wall a little further than usual...and don't forget you'll need space for cables too.

Apart from the gripes I outlined at the start of this piece, the Big 7 we have has been well put together, looks pretty neat (despite its size) and whilst it's not got that "built like a tank" or luxe feel to it, it is reasonably nicely finished and feels relatively solid. I used the Big 7 with the usual suspects – Musical Fidelity NuVista CD as transport, Laptop running JRiver and set up as per the instructions Lampizator publish online, Merrill Thor amps and a variety of cables from Chord, Tellurium Q, Atlas and Vermouth Audio. Over the time the DAC has been with us it has been used with a whole host of loudspeakers including the hORNS Mummys, Leema Xens and more latterly the Avantgarde Du XDs. Power to the DAC was filtered using the LAB 12 gordian.

First let's have a chat about the Big 7 in use as it is not your usual "plug and play" type scenario. You turn the Lampy on with a big toggle switch located round on the back panel. This is centrally located and whilst it's pretty easy to find, I would have preferred to have this on the front, on the side, or even underneath the DAC. Flick the switch and the unit slowly comes to life and the warm glow of the valves begins. Now you need to pick up the remote, choose your input and then turn the volume of this input up. As you turn the volume up there is an audible



# LAMPIZATOR BIG 7 DAC

clicking inside the DAC which was at first a bit disconcerting. The unit defaults to zero every time you turn it off and this is a bit of a pain in the arse in the beginning until you get used to it, and the remotes “unique” layout...I can't help thinking that a dedicated and nicer remote would be far superior, but I have to temper my frustration here and remember that

the Big 7 is made for audio enthusiasts in the truest sense of the word...but then at the same time I can't help thinking that we live in the 21st Century and really don't need to be wearing hair shirts to get the best sound out of our systems.

I'm reading this review through in my head and I can sense that a good few readers will be thinking that this review is going to absolutely pan the Big 7 given everything I have said up to now, but I urge you to read on as despite the obvious shortcomings of certain aspects of the DAC's makeup, in the end what interests me most in a product that comes in for review is the pleasure (or otherwise) that it affords me sonically.

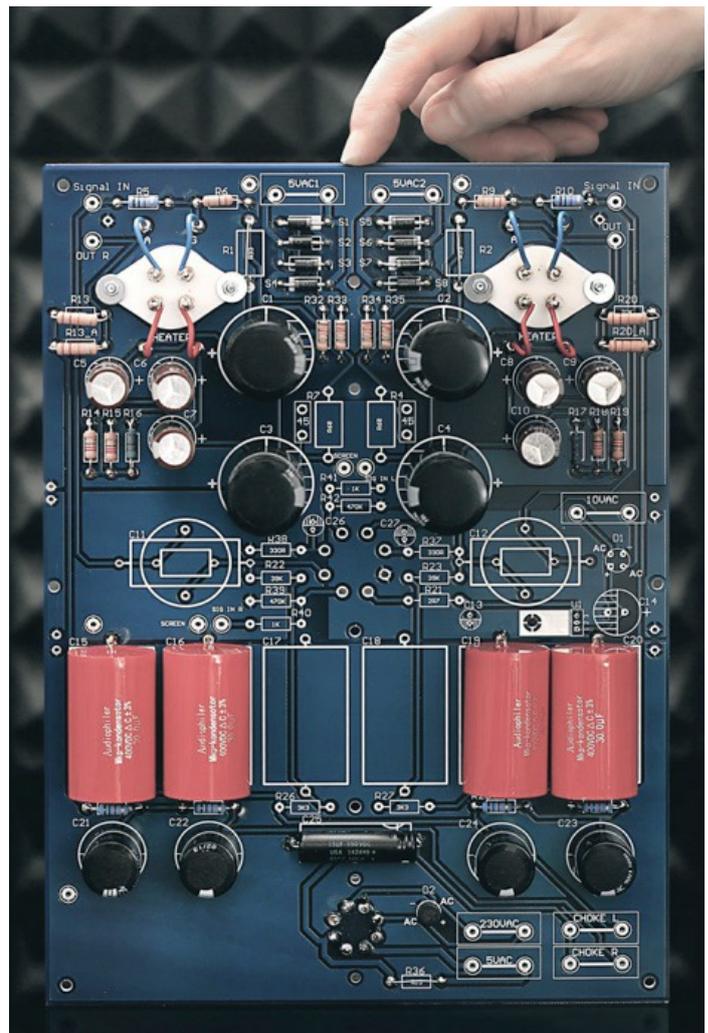
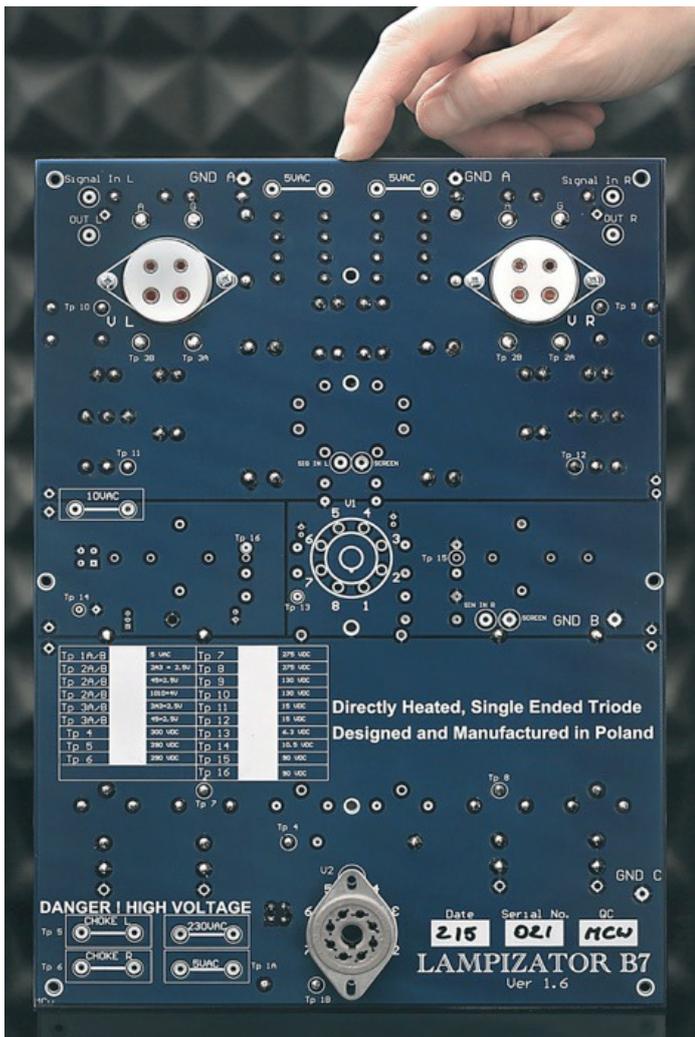
## SOUND

OK, it would be easy to sum up the sound when listening to DSD files as nothing short of an absolute aural revelation that simply took my breath away with each album I listened to. The immediacy and realness of what was coming out of the speakers was, in my experience, simply without match. Jazz At The Pawn Shop is a great recording in any case, but using the Naxos 2xHD file at 128x DSD ( [LINK](#) ) was nothing short of overwhelming. This is as near to a group of musicians sitting in my front room as there



has ever been. This may well sound like reviewer hyperbole but I mean it...this is stunning stuff. Every nuance of the recording is laid before you, every part of the musicians' playing style becomes apparent and you cannot help but just get lost in the music and the experience. I found myself listening to classical music on DSD simply for the sonic thrill of it all...I may not appreciate or particularly like the tunes, but the Big 7 lays an orchestra before you like I have never experienced before. Native Stereo's "8 Ensembles in 1 Bit Stereo" is gripping, with the New Amsterdam Voices version of Randy Newman's Short People being a bit of a standout. You can sense the recording space and you can hear every nuance and inflection in this septets' delivery. I know it's a bit of a Hifi cliché to harp on about the musicians "being there", but with the Big 7 playing DSD files this is truly what you get...and it's addictive stuff. There is a purity and rightness to the sound that is hard to describe. Yes all the component parts of bass, mids and treble are of course there, but the Lampizator does something exquisite to the DSD signal that "adds" another, wholly beautiful aspect to the music. Soundstage and imaging are "reach-out-and-touchable" with you able to aurally see the performance that is being presented before you without it feeling false. Sadly I don't have a whole

# LAMPIZATOR BIG 7 DAC



load of DSD files but the few that I do have are presented in such a fashion with the Big 7 that I became somewhat obsessive in playing them, again just for the pure and unadulterated feeling of flawlessness I got when listening to them.

Feeding the Big 7 with hi-res files from the laptop was only slightly less impressive and this is more down to the format than the fault of the DAC itself I reckon, although on techno and more “machine-made” music I did feel the Lampy lost a bit of the pizzazz you get when throwing properly recorded musicians at it. This is not to say the Big 7 is not impressive with this kind of music, it is, very, it’s more that where this DAC really does shine is on well recorded, live music where you get to

**...where this DAC really does shine is on well recorded, live music where you get to experience the real feel of the recording space and the musicians within it.**

experience the real feel of the recording space and the musicians within it. With techno you still get that reach out and touch it feel of the mix that surrounds you in an almost (another cliché alert) three dimensional

way, but it’s just not as extraordinary as when listening to the other music I mentioned. However, what you do get when playing this kind of music is a full representation of what is on the original file – bass is hefty and pumping and hats are shimmery and sparkly. I listen to a lot of this kind of stuff and again became really addicted to it playing on the Big 7.

I should add here that the settings that Lampizator suggest you use for JRiver (as I understand it) upsample the PCM signal to DSD and I reckon this is certainly a good thing. I didn’t bother listening to

# LAMPIZATOR BIG 7 DAC

straight PCM files from the computer as I really saw no point.

When playing CDs through the DAC you get the feeling that you are losing a little of the three dimensionality you get when playing DSD and hi-res files but you still get a really beautiful rendition of the music and that “live” feel. On rock like Deep Purple’s Live in Japan there is the gut wrenching bass apparent on Smoke On The Water (any product that can’t do this gets short shrift from me) and again a feeling of there being real musicians in front of you, but there is a feeling that you are using a really refined and beautiful product to reproduce music that is just the opposite...sort of like having Lemmy (RIP) play a Stradivarius... I hope that makes sense. Where the Big 7 really shone for me on CD was with vocals and real instruments. The DAC just brings a feeling of rightness to proceedings that you just can’t help but sit there with a smile on your face and get lost in the moment.

## CONCLUSION

I have real issues with companies that feel it is OK to skimp on things like packaging and finer details like decent remotes and I do think that Lampizator need to pull their finger out in this regard. It is inexcusable that a creation costing this kind of money should come packaged like a second hand product you bought off Ebay and the less said about the sorry excuse for a remote the better!

That said, sonically, the Big 7 from Lampizator is without a doubt the finest DAC that I have yet to experience in my home, though I would love to have it up against the completely different approach of the Chord DAVE. When compared to my reference DAC (VAD DAC) it comes across as (simply put) just better in every regard other than build which it equals...it should as it’s more than twice the price. The Big 7 manages to sound unprocessed and pure in its presentation of everything you throw at it and with a fluidity and openness that just has you glued to your seat. The Big 7 is a truly breathtaking creation that brings a degree of enchantment to a listening session that is hard to ignore, and with live, well recorded music it is truly spectacular in what it does. There are going to be reviews of the Big 7 that will waffle on about how it makes the digital format sound analogue, but that is to miss the point completely I believe. Of course it doesn’t make

digital sound analogue...it takes a digital signal and presents it in a fashion that is natural and unadulterated and as such allows you to connect emotionally with the music you are listening to...and for me that is what all this is about.

Build quality, aside from the loose RCA on our sample, is acceptable in a no-nonsense kind of way and, whilst the Big 7 isn’t going to win any beauty contests, it looks pretty neat sat on the rack. This is not a product for the average person I don’t think and you do need to be able to look (and hear) beyond the Big 7s physical presentation, but if you do you will be amply rewarded.

Would I recommend the Big 7 from Lampizator? It is expensive without a doubt and the value is not immediately apparent – there is no bling, no ostentatious detailing and it all looks pretty workaday, but turn it on, fuff with the remote (it’s not immediately intuitive), settle into your listening position with a glass of something nice and you will be transported to musical delight. So yes I do recommend it and if you are on the look out for a new DAC and can afford the asking price I would strongly suggest you audition it.

**Build Quality: 8.1/10 (simply down to the remote and packaging)**

**Sound Quality: 9.5/10**

**Value for Money: 8.5/10**

**Overall: 8.7**

### Pros:

**Simply stunning sound**

**Tube rollable should you feel the urge**

### Cons:

**Packaging and remote are poor**

**Display too small**

**Expensive**

**Stuart Smith**

## DESIGNER’S NOTES

“I have something very special for you. Something from the heart. My gift. “ I heard my Master of tubes Evgennyi saying something like this very rarely, if ever. He was a shy, down to earth engineer, totally immersed in the electron cloud.

## LAMPIZATOR BIG 7 DAC

He pulled from the box a strange preamp, with huge tubes. It looked like a typical 300B amp.

“Why such gigantic tubes?” I asked, “what is so different about them?”

“I can’t explain this, nobody can. But they have special grown up sound.” What? grown up sound? What do you mean? He did not answer, and I never saw him again. He passed from lung cancer with a cigarette in the corner of his lips, just few months later.

To this day I can’t explain it myself, because we can’t measure it or pin it down but the big DHT tubes do sound different compared to typical small signal novals. Even with the same amplification, same current, same signal – the sound is ... well ... grown up. It is effortless, smooth, dynamic and 3D. It is addictive. I made my prototype 4 years ago with Russian 300B and ever since the DHT DAC became my obsession. It took us one year just to get the heaters right and another year to do everything else.

These DHT tubes present huge challenge. The heating circuit and the music circuit are mixed together, entwined. ...try try try to separate them – it’s an illusion ...” as the song goes. For whatever reason working with DHT for me was 10 times harder than working with small signal tubes. Still the sound from the early prototypes was encouraging enough to keep me going. We needed to design and order custom wound power transformers, use bigger chassis enclosures, rework everything I knew about grounding, etc. The first sellable unit went to Las Vegas show in 2014 and made a splash there. That’s how the Big 7 was born. Ever since this is my best seller and the marriage of big tubes and DSD made Lampizator what it is now. I take pride in designing a “current source PSU” for tube heaters allowing us to use 101D, 45, 245, 345, 300B, 6A3, 2A3, PX4, 242, – just to list the basic DHT pool of tubes for rolling. Some of them are 100 years old. Some of them cost 5000 Euro a pair. But they have one thing in common – PEOPLE LOVE ROLLING THEM. And I tend to agree.

Lukasz Fikus

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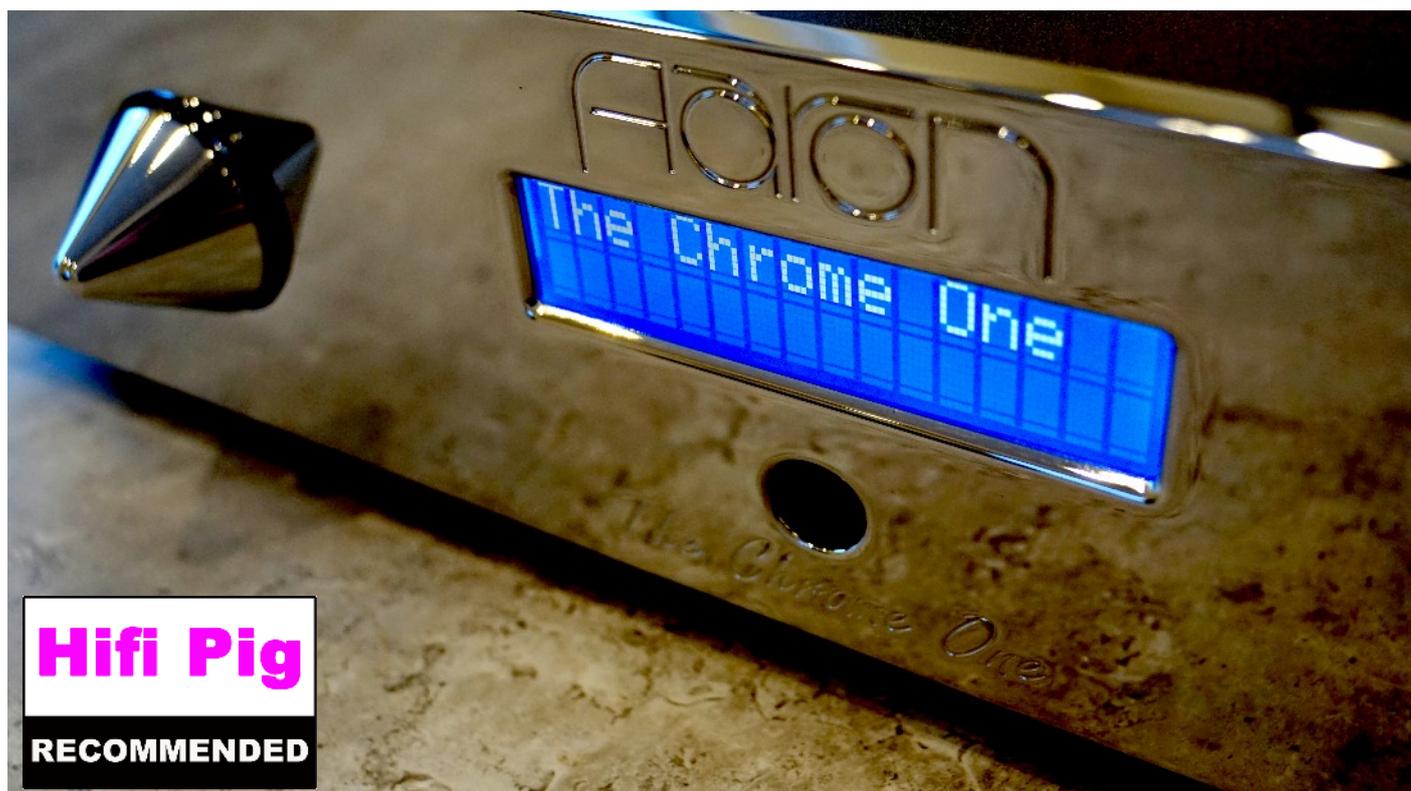


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**AARON « THE CHROME ONE » INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER**

**Dominic Marsh takes this €4790, chrome plated integrated amplifier from German manufacturer High End GmbH for a whirl, to see if its sonic attributes live up to the amps good looks.**

**A**aron? Who? I hear you ask. Let me tell. Aaron and Sovereign are the two brand names of High End GmbH, a German company owned by Thomas and Marita Hoehne situated in Elze, Lower Saxony and founded some 20-odd years ago under the then name of Neumann Audio Technik, which was changed to Aaron in 1989. The Aaron brand represents their value products, while the Sovereign brand represents the very best products this company produces. All their products are hand built. I like the way they communicate with people by calling them “Music lovers” and wish you “Happy listening” which sums up their take on their own products.

I personally have owned an Aaron product in the past, namely a Millennium Number 3 power amplifier. Have any of you owned a product then sold it on, only to rue the day you did that ever since? Yep, that’s me too we are talking about here and if ever there was a truly dumb thing to do, it was selling that amplifier. I am not very good at running, but if I could have managed even a short sprint I would have chased that courier’s van down the street to get it returned for sure. You live and learn as they say.

The Chrome One is not simply a variant of the company’s standard No.1.a model wearing a new coat, but is totally different, particularly the preamplifier section which is built to be totally novel

# AARON « THE CHROME ONE » INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

and totally discrete. The same amplifier and preamplifier section found in The Chrome One is also available in “Let’s Rock” guise which has a cast and polished alloy front panel adorned with skulls, stars, Fleur De Lys and other motifs, a top plate with a large cast skull figure, specially designed by Marita Hoehne and comes in two variants; a Silver Machine which is the bare casting and a catacomb style which has an applied dark relief coating to the casting. If polished chrome and cast alloy figures are not your scene, then the No.1.a. base model sports a brushed aluminium front panel and top plate to match. At the time of writing, there is also another variant called the “Aaron XX Anniversary Limited Edition”, with a black anodised front panel, ‘XX’ being the Roman numerals for 20, representing the number of years the business has been trading.

**In keeping with solid build perception its outward appearance suggests, the sound too can be summed up in one word . . .**  
**SOLID.**

## CONSTRUCTION

The two most obvious things that strike you with this amplifier is the chrome frontage which isn’t in the slightest bit blingy and I will tell you why I think that. The QUALITY of the chrome is exemplary in the flesh and that takes it well away from being tacky or tasteless, because simply put, it isn’t. The second thing that you notice is the conical control knobs which are similarly attired in high quality chromium plating. Someone nicknamed it a “Madonna” look, for the star of the same name’s famed stage appearances wearing a brassiere with large conical points. In actual fact there was a considerable delay in the delivery of The Chrome

One for review as Thomas Hoehne wasn’t satisfied with the finish of the plating and he had to source another electroplater who could satisfy his demands for the finish quality he wanted.



## AARON « THE CHROME ONE » INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

That aside, it's measurements are 440mm wide X 108mm high X 375mm deep and chassis/cover is made from plate steel with a flecked black finish. Weight is 15.5kg.

The two conical front panel controls are for menu and source selection for the left hand control and the right hand control sets the volume and power standby. In the centre of the front panel there is a rectangular blue fluorescent display showing the selected source and the volume control setting, doubling up as the menu options display when the left hand control is pressed. Below the display is the remote sensor window which also houses the standby LED. Inputs are all line level with CD, MD, TUNER, DAT, TV and AUX inputs via RCA single ended connections, each of which can be level matched by software control in the menu system. To the rear panel we find the corresponding RCA inputs plus a single set of good quality speaker binding posts which will accept bare wire, 4mm banana plugs or spades. Mains input is via a standard chassis mounted 3 pin IEC plug connection. An optional Phono module is available at extra cost.

A remote control is supplied which gives direct input to any of the 6 sources, a pair of buttons to adjust volume up/down and a standby button. Looks

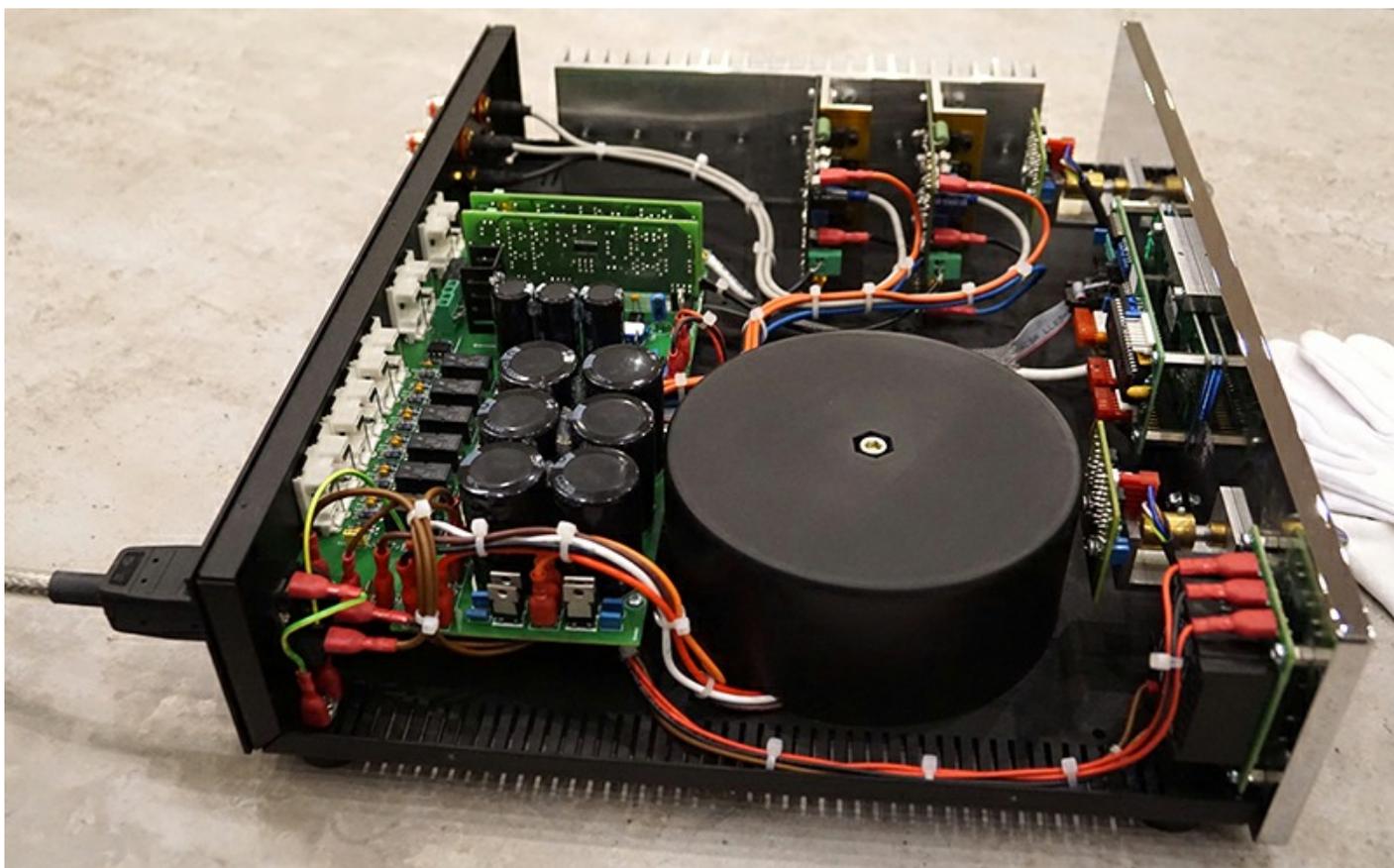
almost hewn from a solid billet and the domed metal buttons are fantastic functionally and appear to be able to last a lifetime, although both the remote and the rotary knob were none too precise in setting the level I wanted with up/down fiddling around as it's a touch too sensitive. In fact the amplifier also has that similar look, the same way as you admire a 1930s Rolls Royce driving by and you are in awe because it doesn't belch out clouds of smoke, sound like a rattled bucket of stones and the bodywork looks as pristine as when it left the factory.

Incidentally, the square chamfered metal panel mounted on the lid isn't just there for show purposes, it is also part of the chassis damping system and it has significant weight to it, as I found out when I popped the lid off for a quick surreptitious peek inside. Internal layout is superb by the way.

### SOUND

Mercifully, all of High End GmbH's products are soak tested before leaving the factory, so they are ready to play straight out of the box. Connect CD player, then my resident Russell K Red 100 speakers, connect the power cord and hit the right hand conical control knob . . . . . POP! Wasn't loud but wasn't expecting it either, so Dominic here had to R.T.F.M (Read The Flaming Manual) which informed me this is perfectly normal as there is no soft start relay fitted



**AARON « THE CHROME ONE » INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER**

because it degrades the sound, so Aaron say. So a pop when switching on or off is part of the design and to be expected.

In keeping with solid build perception its outward appearance suggests, the sound too can be summed up in one word . . . SOLID. This amplifier is unflappable and whatever you throw at it, it just does its job exactly as it should do. No bells, whistles, or fireworks, it just puts out of the speaker terminals whatever you shove in at the input. The specifications say it is rated at 100 watts per channel into an 8 Ohms impedance and 180 watts into a 4 Ohms impedance at 0.1% total harmonic distortion and 7 amps current draw continuous, but then Aaron go further by stating it can deliver 360 watts into 2 ohms and 440 watts into 1 ohms on short burst peaks of 100ms duration with a maximum 22 amps of current draw. This is evidenced by superb and immensely powerful dynamics that are lightning quick and with no hesitation. The leading edges are crisp and clearly defined, so you never think to yourself it is ONLY a 100 watts per channel amp because the sound makes that number entirely irrelevant. I don't have any speakers to hand that are deemed to be a difficult load and I couldn't put

Aaron's claims to the test, but if those figures are accurate then you would be hard pushed to get this amplifier to clip in a normal domestic listening environment.

So much for the overall picture of the sound, let's move in to look at the closer details. Of course, the reference CD went in to the player and it has to be Fink's "Wheels Beneath My Feet" live album. From the first bar onwards you can tell the calibre of this amplifier is a stunningly refined act. Treble is defined in every sense of the word, separated out from the rest of the music as is the midrange and bass for that matter, each having its own space and boundaries within the music, with no clashing or muddling. Soundstage is exemplary, plus the imaging is wide and deep, although not as high as some I have heard. The intro strikes on the Ride cymbal the drummer plays on track one called "Biscuits For Breakfast" is so convincing and so . . . what's the word I'm looking for . . . . tangible, it makes the hairs on the back of your head stand up. This CD has been recorded in different venues throughout Europe during one of Fink's many tours so the venue ambience is different for each location and the Aaron amplifier homes in on this like a laser

# AARON « THE CHROME ONE » INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

guided Cruise missile and misses none of it. Each audience reacts differently too and this is the first amplifier I have installed into my system that really does make you feel you are sat in amongst the audience. No “shooshing” sounds like bacon frying in a pan during the applause, each audience member is an individual, clapping, whistling, cheering and cat calling enthusiastically all around you. Was it my imagination, or was I actually hearing that annoying person behind me rustling their toffee papers? Loved it.

You can actually hear each individual string of the guitar playing during chords and riffs, you can even tell what the string is made from and what it was plucked with (Plectrum or fingers) from Fink’s acoustic guitar playing and it felt rather smug to say “nylon” while the music was playing. When we talk about this level of fine detail, it might be crossing your mind reading this review that this amplifier is a bit explicit or somehow spot lit in its treble and midrange resolution, but be assured it isn’t, as you can listen to this amplifier for hour after hour and it never fatigues, despite the sheer torrent of fine details and nuances it is feeding you. If it did, I would have no hesitation at all in saying so, as the Russell K Red 100 speakers take no prisoners in this respect.

I have left the best analysis of this amplifier’s performance until last. When I listen to this particular album, it is the drums that get the closest scrutiny from me, because there must be a latent hidden aspirational drummer inside me busting to get out and start bashing those skins myself. Kick drum must have a clearly defined start, middle and end to each strike and you must be able to hear the shell of the drum, not just the actual strike by the beater alone – be it a hard or soft faced beater being used. Some drummers remove the front skin for a tauter less reverberant sound and that too must be easily deciphered. Snare drum is a very revealing instrument, full of timbres and resonances, particularly so during rim shots where the rim and the shell has to be clearly heard during each strike, but above all else it must be realistic, similarly so with the tom toms and the floor tom. I cannot abide any “tish” sort of sound from any of the cymbals, particularly the ride, crash, or riveted cymbals and if you cannot clearly hear that a wooden stick is making contact with a metal cymbal and the resulting

shimmer following the strike then something is amiss with your system. That is a roundabout and long winded way of saying that the Aaron ‘The Chrome One’ amplifier passed all of those benchmark criteria with ease.

Put some funky Jazz music on and this amplifier will soon get you out of your chair and bopping along with the music, it is so infectious. I was even minded to play some Classical music excerpts too (Yes, but not a full symphony for me I’m afraid!) and the scale and power of the entire orchestra was delivered through the speakers effortlessly with awesome weight and dynamics, even though Classical isn’t featured at all in my regular listening sessions or evaluations as a rule. Must be a good amplifier then!

## CONCLUSION

I can assume you get the perception that I like if not love the sound of this amplifier and you would be right in thinking that. But, there are other factors to consider before Dominic starts handing out the plaudits and gongs. All this eulogising about how great it sounds and the one thing I haven’t mentioned at all is price. The amplifier featured in this review will set you back 4,790Euros, which equates to GB£3,582 or US\$5,238. Uniquely though, Aaron offer payment terms if you so wish with a deposit down and monthly repayments plan of up to 36 months which is available on their website. Given that this could be the last amplifier you would possibly buy and which will last for many years, it might be worth considering that route as a long term game plan if you don’t have the available reddiees. If you require the matching Phono module, then that will set you back another 1,590 Euros. That makes it a fairly expensive proposition and sets it above its immediate rivals in the marketplace too, but if the price fazes you not, then go ahead and audition this very fine amplifier.

As much as I greatly appreciate the quality of the Chrome One’s appearance, if I had the money (which I unfortunately don’t!) I would personally forego that luxury finish and head towards it’s cheaper predecessor, the No.1.a. amplifier in brushed aluminium priced at 3590.00 Euros, as it’s performance is on a par with the Millenium No.3 power amplifier that I used to own and I already

# AARON « THE CHROME ONE » INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

know that move wouldn't disappoint me in the slightest.

In my annual letter to Santa Claus I specifically requested a Chrome One to be in my stocking on Christmas Day morning. I woke very early especially in eager anticipation. All I got was a Satsuma.

**Sound Quality: 9.6/10**  
**Build Quality: 8.9/10**  
**Value For Money: 8.3/10**  
**Overall: 8.93/10**

**Pros:**  
**Awesome sound quality that's hard to find fault with in any area.**  
**Beautiful chromium plated highlights**

**Cons:**  
**If pops on switch on or off bother you, then avoid**  
**Price is a tad steep compared to its rivals, but hand built quality never ever comes cheap**  
**No built in phono stage**  
**Remote control and front panel rotary volume control a touch too sensitive**

**Dominic Marsh**

## DESIGNER'S NOTES

The AARON "The Chrome One" was developed to reproduce complex Music events in a live-like sound quality and volume.

It is an integrated amplifier in modular method of construction. Composed with separate monaural output stages, preamplifier and operating sections. The preamplifier section consists of two mono-boards in a discreet design with high precision, for each channel selected components.

The power supply for the preamplifier and control section and the output modules is made by using two separate transformers.

The AARON "The Chrome One" works very stable and is also for low impedance speakers suitable. The power output stages work in collector follower circuit.

The amplifier is equipped with discrete channel-wise selected and matched parts in a shortest possible signal path layout. This, for a short signal path optimized layout, without the use of any sound damaging capacitors, guarantees a perfect natural

and balanced sound.

Six Stereo devices with line outputs, can be connected. The input and output levels of each connected device are high precise adjustable. The high quality metal AARON remote control is included. The amplifier can be used as a pure high-end amplifier in solo mode. Alternatively, the operation of speakers with an additional power amplifier, such as AARON No.3 Millennium, in Bi-amping operation is possible.

A Phono stage is available as an option.

### Specifications:

Output power continuous sine wave: 100 W/8Ω 180 W/4Ω 0.1%THD

Output power pulsed: 360W/2Ω 440W/1Ω 0.1%THD

Maximum continuous current: 7A

Maximum pulsed current: 22A (100ms burst)

Minimum load 1Ω

Distortion THD: 0.0115% 8Ω -5Watt- 1kHz

Distortion TIM: 0.012% 8Ω -5Watt- 50Hz/7Khz4:1

Humand Noise level: -98dB ref: Max, output level

Bandwidth: 0 - 130kHz -3dB 1W/8Ω

Gainmax: 100x =40dB 280mV for max output

Input impedance: 47KΩ

Damping factor: 600

Slewrate 21V/μS

AC voltage: 115VAC/230V AC internal switch 50/60Hz

+/-10% Power consumption: Idle 9VA - Max 550 VA

Power supply: 500VA toroidal transformer and 6x10.000μF

Volume control: 64 step Log digital controlled ladder switch

Features: Each input channel programmable - input gain (-16dB). Each output channel programmable output gain (-16dB). Programmable processor switch

2 channel in/out, Infrared remote control

Protection: Internal fuse on power rail only (no current limiting). Power amp mute on switch off

Inputs: 6 x 2channel line input RCA gold plated

Outputs: 2channel preout +2channel proc.out RCA gold plated

Controls: 2x rotary encoder with push button

Loudspeaker outputs: 2 x pairs binding posts gold plated

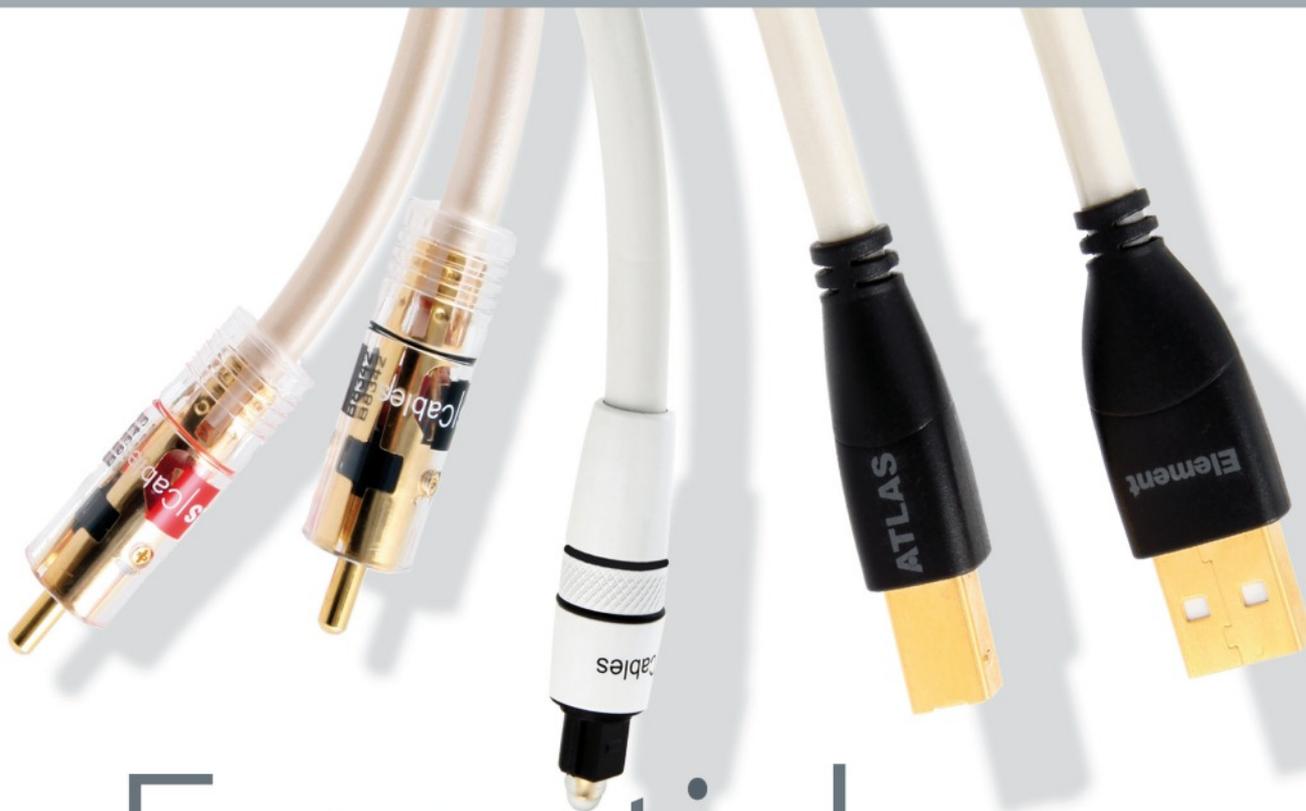
Dimensions: 440x108x375mm WxHxD

Shipping weight 15,5 KG

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WHAT YOU FEEL  
THEY DON'T SEE  
WHAT YOU SEE  
THEY DON'T HEAR  
WHAT YOU HEAR  
THEY DON'T HAVE  
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The Element range is the starting point in our product line-up. But we view it as essential to getting a great performance from your kit.

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Our latest Element sc USB cable is based on research showing solid core cable delivers superior results to conventional multi-strand.

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## PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE PREMIUM HP INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



**The Prima Luna DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier at £2,998 is billed as a fit an forget valve amplifier that avoids many of the headaches traditionally associated with valve amp ownership. Ian Ringstead takes one for a spin.**

**T**his was always going to be an exciting product to review. Firstly because it was a product I had always wanted to review and although not new to valves I had never taken the plunge in the past to buy one and so when given the chance to try the Prima Luna I couldn't resist.

I have followed this manufacturer from their beginnings and heard the amps at many shows over the years and have always been very impressed with what I heard. Valve amps have a certain mystique amongst audiophiles, love them or hate them, but I

have always been open minded and every time I have heard one at the numerous shows I have attended over the last 40 years they always fascinated and usually impressed me. Prima Luna is a relatively young company compared to its established rivals from the USA and Europe being founded in 2003. The name Prima Luna is Italian for first moon and founder Herman van den Dungen adopted the name from his Grandparents and a place in Italy.

More than 30 years of high-end experience in the fields of design, manufacturing, export, import, retail, and after-sales-service is the basis for a range

## PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE PREMIUM HP INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

of affordable and reliable, yet highly musical products. Together with Marcel Croese (of Goldmund fame) and Dominique Chenet (of Jadis fame) he heads his team to simply bring the best products, with the best service and for the best price. The philosophy of the PrimaLuna team is that it is not just the PrimaLuna products, but also the people involved in PrimaLuna that have to be top-of-the-bill. So the goal for PrimaLuna is to give you excellent designers, highest quality manufacturing and a first-class sales and after-sales network. This is all without becoming unaffordable and involves Western design and marketing, combined with Far East manufacturing under European control and Dutch after-sales-service. PrimaLuna say they are proud that skilled and experienced distributors and dealers from all over the world have now started to recognize the potential of the PrimaLuna brand for themselves and their clientèle.

With a philosophy like that I was eager to try the DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier in my system. Absolute Sounds, the distributors here in the UK, very kindly supplied not just the standard EL34 valves that are normally supplied, but also a set of

KT120 valves. This was great because I could then compare the difference between the valve types (tube rolling as it is called).

The DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier is very solidly built and extremely well put together, being neat in appearance and footprint. Unlike some valve amps I have seen at this is not a great behemoth and fitted neatly on my equipment rack, being no wider than standard separates. The only proviso is that you must give it room to breathe with adequate ventilation as tubes obviously get hot, so it rested on the top shelf. I had the black version, but it is also supplied in silver. The quality of finish is to automotive paint standards and there are five coats of paint applied, not as many as a Rolls Royce, but still very impressive. The front panel is simply laid out with a volume control on the left, the input selector on the right and headphone socket. The controls are well weighted and solid in feel and use. In-between are power indication LEDs and a neat touch is the green and red valve operation LEDs as you can switch on the fly via the remote control between triode and ultralinear mode, allowing one to alter the sound at the flick of a remote switch. What a great



**PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE PREMIUM HP INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER**

feature. Although not a new innovation, being switchable via the remote is so convenient. PrimaLuna amps are famous for long tube life and running relatively cool. What they've done is increase the power and output transformer size, designed and built a larger Adaptive AutoBias board, and all the supporting circuitry required to run eight power tubes instead of four. This doubles the power and increases bass slam. Customers can use almost any tube on the market and the new DiaLogue Premium HP can be shipped with EL-34s, Gold Lion KT88s, or Tung-sol KT120s.

The headphone amp runs from all the power tubes and the elegant, well designed circuit allows you to switch from speakers to headphone as you wish. If you love private listening, this amp is ideal. I tried this feature near the end of my time with the amp and I have to say it was excellent with very low noise and no detectable hum.

The design and development that has gone into the PrimaLuna range is astonishing. As with all PrimaLuna amps, you never have to worry about biasing your amp ever again, and the

need for matched tubes is eliminated. Just plug in EL34, KT88, or KT120 (as well as many others) and the on-board Exclusive Adaptive AutoBias does the rest. Tubes are constantly monitored and kept in their best operating range, reducing distortion by up to a claimed 50%!

Silver-plated, oxygen-free continuous crystal (OCC) copper with a Teflon dielectric wiring is used in the critical signal paths (point-to-point wiring is used throughout) and an ALPS Blue Velvet motorized volume control is used as standard. TAKMAN premium resistors made in Japan are used inside the amp, as are SCR Tinfoil Caps in the critical signal paths and while they are expensive, the PrimaLuna team felt they could not be left out.

PrimaLuna custom-winds their own AC toroidal transformer and instead of a cheap selector switch, PrimaLuna has a relay and circuit mounted at every input. If you select a CD player input, for example, a relay closes and a perfect load is presented to the item you are listening to. All other relays are open so as to prevent crosstalk between inputs. If the power transformer should overheat, the "Power

## PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE PREMIUM HP INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Transformer Protection" circuit cuts primary power, allows the amp to cool down, then resets itself.

The DiaLogue Premium uses three 12AU7 tubes per channel and as mentioned previously you can switch between Triode/Ultralinear from the remote. In ultralinear you get the flattest response, whilst in triode mode you get a sound that PrimaLuna say people have compared to 300B single-ended amps. On the chassis' deck in front of each power tube, is a small LED that lights up if the tube goes bad. The circuit then puts the amp into protection mode, you just replace the tube it tells you to and turn the amp back on. Another useful safety feature is the "Output Transformer Protection" circuit that protects the output transformers in the event of users crossing speaker wires. A "+B relay" replaces the plate fuse and works in conjunction with the OTP-circuit to protect the amp against tube failure.

The amp has dedicated subwoofer output for those that prefer smaller speakers and a sub. That is one comprehensive list of features but what about the sound of the amp? I found this amp

immediately engaging, solid and real sounding with a lovely depth to the sound being produced. There is no hint of a syrupy sound or lack of clarity here which is a negative attribute that is often levelled at valve amps, particularly older designs. All types of music were beautifully portrayed. I tried Fink's album *Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet*, a favourite of my colleague Dominic Marsh, because it is a superb live recording from several venues during their European tour. Each venue has a different acoustic and it was easy to hear the differences with the PrimaLuna in place. Also very apparent was the excellent quality of the sound recording and I was able to pick up every nuance of the atmosphere and characteristics of the guitar, bass and drums. The kick drum on *Sort of Revolution* was amazing and had a real palpable feel and wallop to it...almost as if the drummer was in the room with you. Tracey Chapman's *Fast Car*, amongst the many great tracks from her first album from the eighties, sounded fresh and still had a joyous feel to it even all these years later. Great music never dies out.



**PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE PREMIUM HP INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER****CONCLUSION**

What I learned listening to the PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier was valve amps can be domestically acceptable as well as "fit and forget", something that has not always been the case and one of the reasons valve amps have not gained universal acceptance. PrimaLuna have certainly done their best to arrest this issue and I feel they have succeeded admirably. Now as to which mode was best is truly down to personal taste and will depend on many variables. I switched many times and although it was obvious on occasions, I wouldn't like to say which was best. The same was true of the output tubes, EL34's or KT120's, with the KT120s having a more powerful sound than the former. Again you choose. Both were excellent and it may well depend on your room size and speaker efficiency as to which ones you choose.

At £2,998 this amp isn't cheap, but when you appreciate the effort that has gone into this design I think it is fantastic value compared to many of the more expensive brands out there. The remote control is excellent, hewn out of metal with rubber protective bands either end. Recently PrimaLuna announced you can add a Phono module, allowing owners to use a turntable with a moving magnet or high output moving coil cartridge on one of the amps inputs for a very reasonable cost. Nice touch and keeps the box count down.

The power output was more than adequate and I had loads on tap, after all valve watts are certainly more powerful than transistor watts in my opinion. Power output is quoted as follows: EL34 - Ultralinear 73 watts, Triode 42 watts and KT120 - Ultralinear 89 watts, Triode 51watts.

All in all a truly versatile amp. What more could you ask for? Well PrimaLuna also make pre amps, power amps and a nice looking CD player. If you fancy taking the plunge into valve territory the PrimaLuna range is a great way to enter without fear of problems. There are of course other excellent companies producing valve amps, but PrimaLuna seem to have covered all bases and although not budget they don't bankrupt you if you are serious about owning a very reliable long term investment.

**Sound Quality: 9.2/10**

**Build Quality: 9.1/10**

**Value for money: 8.9/10**

**Overall: 9.06/10**

**Pros**

**A true "fit and forget", easy to use valve amp with remote control**

**Great sound with tube rolling capability and switchable triode/ ultralinear mode**

**Headphone output**

**Valve cage included**

**Excellent build quality**

**Cons**

**Remote is metal and very heavy so don't drop it on your foot!**

**Requiring eight output tubes can make changing expensive.**

**Ian Ringstead**

**SPECIFICATIONS :**

S/N Ratio: 93 dB (KT120), 92 dB (KT88 & EL34)

Input Sensitivity: 360mV (KT120), 320mV (KT88 & EL34)

Input Impedance: 100k Ohm

Power Consumption: 255 watts

Dimensions: 15.9 " x 8.1 " x 15.2" (WxHxD)

Weight: 66.3 lbs

Inputs: 5 pair RCA / 1 pair HT bypass

Outputs: 4 & 8 Ohm output taps

RCA Subwoofer output

1/4" Headphone output

Tube Compliment: 6 - 12AU7, 8 - EL34

KT88 or KT120 tubes also available

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## ARCAM FMJ CDS27 CD PLAYER AND A19 INTEGRATED AMP

**A full size integrated amplifier with phonostage, plus a CD player that is also a streamer for just shy of £1200 seems like a good deal. Stuart Smith investigates.**

### **FMJ CDS 27**

**Hifi Pig**  
**RECOMMENDED**



### FMJ CDS 27

**T**he CDS27 is a bit of a swiss army knife of a player and will get your tunes from SACDs, normal Red Book CDs as well as from your network, in our case NAS and Melco units connected to a straightforward and unmodified home network. Handily the CDS27 is UPnP compatible as well as

CIFS...I'll be using UPnP because that is what I know.

Inside the player you have a DAC in the form of the TI/Burr Brown PCM1794 and this is coupled with a linear phase Bessel output filter and reclocking system. Power supplies for the drive, audio and DAC boards are all discreet and "sub-regulated". The DAC will handle files up to 24-bit 192kHz.

# ARCAM FMJ CDS27 CD PLAYER AND A19 INTEGRATED AMP



On the front of the unit you've got a pretty workaday look to the player and I actually quite like this as it harks back to the glory days of the mid 80's when hifi looked like...well it looked like hifi really. There are no pretensions with the looks of the CDS27 and as soon as you see it you know what it is and what it is made to do. You've got four nicely functioning push buttons that control the CD player's transport, an on off button, the CD drawer and a large LCD screen so you can see what is playing and where from. You can also mess with all the settings via the remote and screen too. All pretty normal and standard stuff, but all nicely done.

Round the back you have balanced audio outputs as well as the more standard RCAs and coaxial and optical outputs for digital signals allowing you to connect to an external DAC should you feel the need.

Inputs provided are a remote in (didn't try) and an RS232 (didn't try), a network connection to connect by wire to your home network and a USB input which allows you to access files stored on a directly connected hard drive. The upper limits of media supported by the USB input are FLAC (24/192), WAV (24/192), AAC (24/96), AIFF (24/192), OGG (24/192), MP3 (320/48) and WMA (192/48) so you are well covered whatever your files...unless of

course you are wanting to play DSD which, given what I feel is the target market for this unit is sensible. Also on the back cover is the aerial input to connect wirelessly to your network.. the aerial comes packed with the comprehensive and well written/illustrated owner's manual. The remote that comes as standard is a pretty normal looking affair with all the functions needed being available.

## FMJ A19 Integrated Amplifier

The A19 is a perfect visual match for the CDS27 measuring the same 423 x 275 x 85 cm (WDH) and comes in matching black. Again, nothing to get the bling merchants hot under the collar, but nice and functionally pleasing to look at none-the-less. Claimed output power into 8 Ohms is 50W and into 4 Ohms 90 W with a quoted distortion at 80% power (8 Ohms 1kHz) of 0.003%.

Inside the A19 Arcam say there has been a focus on the power section of the amp and (I wondered what the two weird little cables in the pack were for) you can power up to two of Arcam's r-Series products from the amp. Now I didn't really get the point of this a first but it's actually a pretty neat solution allowing you to add the rBlink, airDAC, irDAC or rPAC to your set up without having to fanny about



**ARCAM FMJ CDS27 CD PLAYER AND A19 INTEGRATED AMP**

with having extra wall sockets available to power them...good thinking I reckon.

Also good to see on the unit is a MM phono stage that will allow you to listen to vinyl. Sensible also they went for the MM option as I reckon the target market for this amp will be the kind of folk that will want a no nonsense kind of deck like Pro-Ject's low and medium priced offerings that come installed with good MM cartridges. There's also a headphone amp included, with the output socket being the mini-jack type...I'd have preferred a standard quarter inch jack here, but again this may be clever thinking given what I reckon will be the people who shell out for one of these...more of that in a mo'.

On the front of the amp you've got eight source selector buttons, a power on off, a large infinitely turning volume knob, a self explanatory mute button, a balance button allowing you to set the output from each speaker and a button to control the brightness of the display. You've then got left just the minijack for the headphone amp and a minijack input so you can connect your MP3 player or mobile phone.

Round the back you've got 8 line level inputs which should be enough to satisfy pretty much everyone out there, plus the phono in and ground, the 3.5mm socket for the accessory power I mentioned earlier, a voltage select switch so you can choose between 120V and 240V and a pair of speaker terminals that will accept spades, bananas or bare wires. You also get a record out (stereo RCAs) to attach to a tape

player or whatever the modern equivalent is and a pre out so you can bi-amp should the fancy take you.

**WHAT'S THE MARKET FOR THESE?**

You see not all people who want to enjoy music in the home want to have myriad boxes and wires all over the show that mess up their harmonious family lifestyle, and I reckon this is who Arcam are squarely aiming this pair of products at. The boxes look like hifi everyone will recognise and whilst they are standard width, they are pretty low profile and look nice stacked on top of each other and placed on a cabinet or AV unit...most people buying these will not want, or need to have dedicated racks and what not and will stack them. The headphone output on the amp is a mini-Jack of course, but look at the headphones most people who are not certified audio nut-jobs (I include myself in this latter social grouping) will be carrying about with them on a daily basis...the ones they will use to listen to their iPhone or whatever and these will invariably have a mini jack. And whilst we're talking about smartphones, the inclusion of the aux input on the amps front panel allows folk to easily and simply get tunes off their players and into their main living space, so that when the teens of the house come home and treat the place like a hotel, they can simply plug in and delight their parents with the best of what the 21st Century has to offer. And then there's the MM only phono input I've already mentioned that allows folk to listen to vinyl on relatively budget decks that are readily available and without faffing about with separate phono stages. Then you've got all

## ARCAM FMJ CDS27 CD PLAYER AND A19 INTEGRATED AMP

the connections on the amp, some of which I have no idea what the acronyms for mean, but will be self evident to most members of the human race that were born after 1970, don't obsess about their hifi and want a box that integrates into their entertainment system and life. You have: AV so you can connect your telly or VCR, PVR (new one on me) intended for connecting your "Personal Video Recorder", BD for your DVD or Blu-ray player, SAT for your satellite box, Tuner for radio, CD for attaching the CDS27 (or other CD player). Finally you've got that nifty pair of power supplies for the r-series stuff meaning you can add an r-Blink (or other r-Series kit) and stream tunes off your phone via blu-tooth.

On the CDS27 you have the normal array of stuff you'd find on a normal CD player, but then you've got the advantage of being able to stream your tunes wirelessly or via wire from your NAS.

It's an increasingly connected world out there and this is a connected set of kit, and whilst the partnering offered up here may well be scoffed at by some of the audio snobs in hifi-land, I reckon that Arcam know what they are doing, have been smart in the features they have included and have pretty much nailed it as far as offering units that are simple, elegant and useable by more members of the household than just the audiophile patriarch/matriarch. I like this approach! It is inclusive and democratic.

### SET UP

I was initially a bit disappointed to find that Arcam's UPnP app (Music Life) was iOS only and I think this is a mistake on their part given what I have said about who I think is the target market and the inclusive nature of the products on test. I would have loved to have seen this available as an Android app and whilst I am aware that a significant proportion of the population use iOS, there is an equally significant number who don't. I do hope Arcam will address this in the very near future!

Wiring up the pairing is the usual affair for all the basic stuff and the pair power up with an attractive (I really like this) green hue to the displays. Remote is intuitive for basic functions and works well at distance, though the display isn't great for looking at from a distance when streaming.

Connecting to the network was a doddle using the remote (the only option) and involved no more than clicking the remote to Network Setup, scanning for available networks (it found our home network immediately) and then pressing OK to connect. You

then find the media you want to play from (NAS drive and Melco) and then load the library of tunes to the machine. All good, quick and very simple...we like simple! Next up was to update the firmware which again was a simple affair of scrolling through the on screen options with the remote and pressing OK. A couple of minutes and the CDS27 is all updated and ready to roll.

**I'm playing Miles Davis' All of You while I'm sat here typing and my right foot is tapping away to the music and I'm finding I'm typing in time to the rhythm!**

Now you can of course scroll through the albums and artists you have on your NAS using the remote and the screen on the CDS27 (not great), but it is more likely that the vast majority of people will choose to use a suitable app and I used BubbleUPnP to control the tunes I wanted streaming. Setting this up was fuss free too with the app seeing The Arcam "renderer" immediately. The CDS27 reacts with a slight delay when there's a change in tune or album which was a bit annoying.

### SOUND

I'm a firm believer in placing items sent for review in appropriate contexts and whilst I could pop each of these units into the main rig, I don't think that would be relevant or useful to the people who may well be considering these products. With that in mind, the pair have been sat on an Ikea unit in the sitting room next to the television and have been partnered with a pair of mid-priced loudspeakers in the form of the Leema Xens. No special racks, but

## ARCAM FMJ CDS27 CD PLAYER AND A19 INTEGRATED AMP

the cabling is Chord's Epic Reference for the speakers and some Merrill Audio RCAs for connecting the two together...I'm well aware a "normal" user will probably use less expensive cables, but these are what were to hand and of suitable lengths.

What's not to like to be perfectly honest and at this price. This combo plays music and it plays it well.

No, you do not get the resolution and finesse the main rig brings to the table, but let's not forget that this pretty all inclusive pairing costs just £595 (at the moment) per box...so for 1190 quid, plus the cost of your chosen speakers and cabling, you are getting a pretty comprehensive set up. I'd purposefully not looked at the price these were available at until having heard them for a while and quite frankly I'm a little more than gobsmacked at these units' capabilities on a bang for buck basis.

I'm playing Miles Davis' All of You while I'm sat here typing and my right foot is tapping away to the music and I'm finding I'm typing in time to the rhythm! The top end is a bit much and a tad harsh-sounding in absolute terms (if I was to compare to the reference) on some of the piano parts and upper registers of trumpet, but the bass and mids are really quite involving and thoroughly enjoyable. I turn the volume up a little for Bye Bye Blackbird and there is good if not spectacular presence to the music that is really agreeable. The little Xens don't go super low, but in a smaller room (I have them set up in the telly space that is about 6 x 4 m with the wall opposite the speakers being open into a larger area) I think much more would be overkill, but the Arcam amp controls the lower frequencies pretty well and with only a slight bloom at this louder volume and with these speakers.

Switching over to the rather excellent Crown Electric by Kathryn Williams plays to the set ups strengths and there is a nice creamy quality to her voice. Mids are a little forward in the mix, but this is what I

would expect for relatively budget amp, and whilst there isn't the resolution, or absolute detail and finer refinements you get with some more expensive kit, you are presented with an enjoyable and appealing sound that sounds great. If I was being uber-critical here I'd suggest the sound is a little "flat" perhaps, but nothing that would stop me recommending this kit.

**I like the idea of having a simple phonostage on a budget priced amp and again we've got the target market thing ticked off and added another reason for prospective buyers to consider this amp.**

Popping on a bit of techno from the early 90s in the form of Mark NRG's Military City presents crispy and snappy hats and snare and there's good insight into the stereo mix without it being holographic. Ok, you lose the vigour and verve you get with a bigger system and realistically this music demands bigger speakers, but it is still enjoyable. I have the Triangle Titus EZ speakers here and popped them into the system for a short while but the bass

proved to be too much for the room at volume, but showed that bass control isn't perfect in the very lowest registers with the Arcam amp, but it's tolerable.

Popping on an MP3 of my old reggae band shows the Arcam kit to be forgiving of poor recordings and files and, despite what many may think, this, to my mind, is a good thing given the market place I think this kit is targeted at. Lots of people buying these will have a whole host of MP3s that they have either ripped from their CD collection or have stolen off the internet (this is not me condoning this in any way, rather it is a reality of the free for all society we live in) and do not want kit that is so utterly resolving as to render it impossible to listen to.

As you would expect given that the digital signals are going through the same DAC, you get a similar presentation with CDs as you do with streaming and to be fair I'd struggle to tell the difference.

Now, our youngest has a Pro-Ject Debut Carbon Esprit turntable at the moment that came fitted with the Ortofon 2M Red and, as I mentioned, I reckon this is the kind of level of turntable that folk buying

## ARCAM FMJ CDS27 CD PLAYER AND A19 INTEGRATED AMP

the Arcam kit will partner it with if they have any vinyl...so that got pilfered from his room and set up through the Arcam amp. I like the idea of having a simple phonostage on a budget priced amp and again we've got the target market thing ticked off and added another reason for prospective buyers to consider this amp. Rather than offering perfect fidelity the phonostage offers up a presentation that is commensurate with what you would expect from this price point. This is not to suggest that listening to vinyl on this set up isn't great fun; it is and it really took me back to the days that I first got into vinyl in my early teens where I would listen to the music for the music's sake.

### CONCLUSION

For just shy of £1200 you get a capable streamer, CD player and well specced amplifier that it is really hard to fault given the price. Partnered with a good but relatively budget priced pair of speakers (Q Acoustics' offerings would be excellent if budget was tight) and turntable as I have and you can have a system that will give you years of satisfaction. Yes you could go on EBay and buy better gear secondhand, but with the Arcam kit you are getting brand new kit, in their boxes and with a guarantee... and that will be important to the target market. Their price is commensurate with the kind of gear you would have called budget in the '80s and that would have been seen as the perfect system through which to enter the world of high-fidelity audio – this has not changed and the Arcam gear here fits this market nicely.

Whilst not the final word in absolute resolution and fidelity, the partnering gives you a great deal of enjoyment and pleasure, where you will find yourself listening to the music you own for the music's sake rather than what your system is doing. Again the "upper echelons" of the audiophile world need to recognise that the vast majority of people just want systems that function properly and without quirks, are reliable and give them access to the music they love in an acceptable quality... and you get this in spades with these units.

If I was looking for a relatively budget system with loads of connectivity, streaming capabilities, was simple to use and offered great value for money,

without being too pretentious and fuffy, then the Arcam units would definitely be on my short list. The Phonostage is an added bonus that is the cherry on top of the cake for me and as such I can do nothing but heartily recommend both the FMJCDS27 and the FMJA19 to Hifi Pig readers looking for this kind of level of kit.

**Sound Quality: 8.2/10**

**Build Quality: 8.5/10**

**Value for money: 9 /10**

**Overall: 8.57/10**

#### Pros:

**Easy to set up**

**Great value**

**Engaging and yet forgiving sound**

**Phonostage built in**

**Good remote**

**Great value**

#### Cons:

**Not the last word in absolute fidelity**

**Arcam's app is iOS only**

**Screen not really suitable for streaming purposes**

**Stuart Smith**

## SPECIFICATIONS :

### FMJ CDS27

#### Analogue Audio Output

Digital to Analogue conversion: 24-bit 192kHz

Delta-Sigma DAC

Signal to noise ratio: 110dB CCIR

Harmonic distortion (1kHz): 0.002%

Frequency response (±0.5dB): 10Hz–20kHz

Output level (0dB): 2.2Vrms

Output impedance: 47Ω

Minimum recommended load: 5kΩ

#### Digital interfaces

USB: USB 2.0 High Speed (480 Mbit/s)

Network: 10 BASE-T / 100 BASE-TX / Wi-Fi

#### Physical

Dimensions: W433 x D278 x H87mm

Weight: 6.2kg nett/8.5kg packed

Power consumption: 20W maximum

Digital output connection: 75Ω co-axial optical TOSLINK

#### Supplied accessories

## ARCAM FMJ CDS27 CD PLAYER AND A19 INTEGRATED AMP

Mains lead  
CR902 remote control  
2 x AAA batteries  
Wi-Fi antenna

### FMJ A19

Continuous power output (20Hz—20kHz at 0.5% THD), per channel  
Both channels, 8Ω, 20Hz—20kHz: 50W  
Single channel, 4Ω, at 1kHz: 90W  
Harmonic distortion, 80% power, 8Ω at 1kHz: 0.003%

### Inputs

Phono (MM) cartridge  
Input sensitivity at 1kHz: 5mV  
Input impedance: 47kΩ + 100pF  
Frequency response (ref. RIAA curve): 20Hz—20kHz ± 1dB  
Signal/noise ratio (AwtD) 50W, ref. 5mV input: 80dB  
Overload margin, 50mV at 1kHz: 20dB  
Line and AV inputs  
Nominal sensitivity: 1V  
Input impedance: 10kΩ

Maximum input: 4.6Vrms  
Frequency response: 20Hz—20kHz ± 0.2dB  
Signal/noise ratio (AwtD) 50W, ref. 1V input: 105dB

### Outputs

#### Preamplifier output

Nominal output level: 630mV  
Output impedance: 230Ω

#### Headphones Output

Maximum output level into 600Ω: 4V  
Output impedance: 1ohm  
Load range: 16Ω—2kΩ

#### Accessory power output

Using accessory power cable supplied, provides two 2.1mm DC connectors: 6V, 1A

### General

Mains voltage: 110–120V~ or 220–240V~  
Power consumption (maximum): 350W  
Dimensions W x D x H (including feet): 432 x 275 x 85mm  
Weight (net): 8.5kg  
Weight (packed): 10.2kg  
**Supplied accessories:** Mains lead, CR108 remote control, 2 x AAA batteries, Accessory power cable

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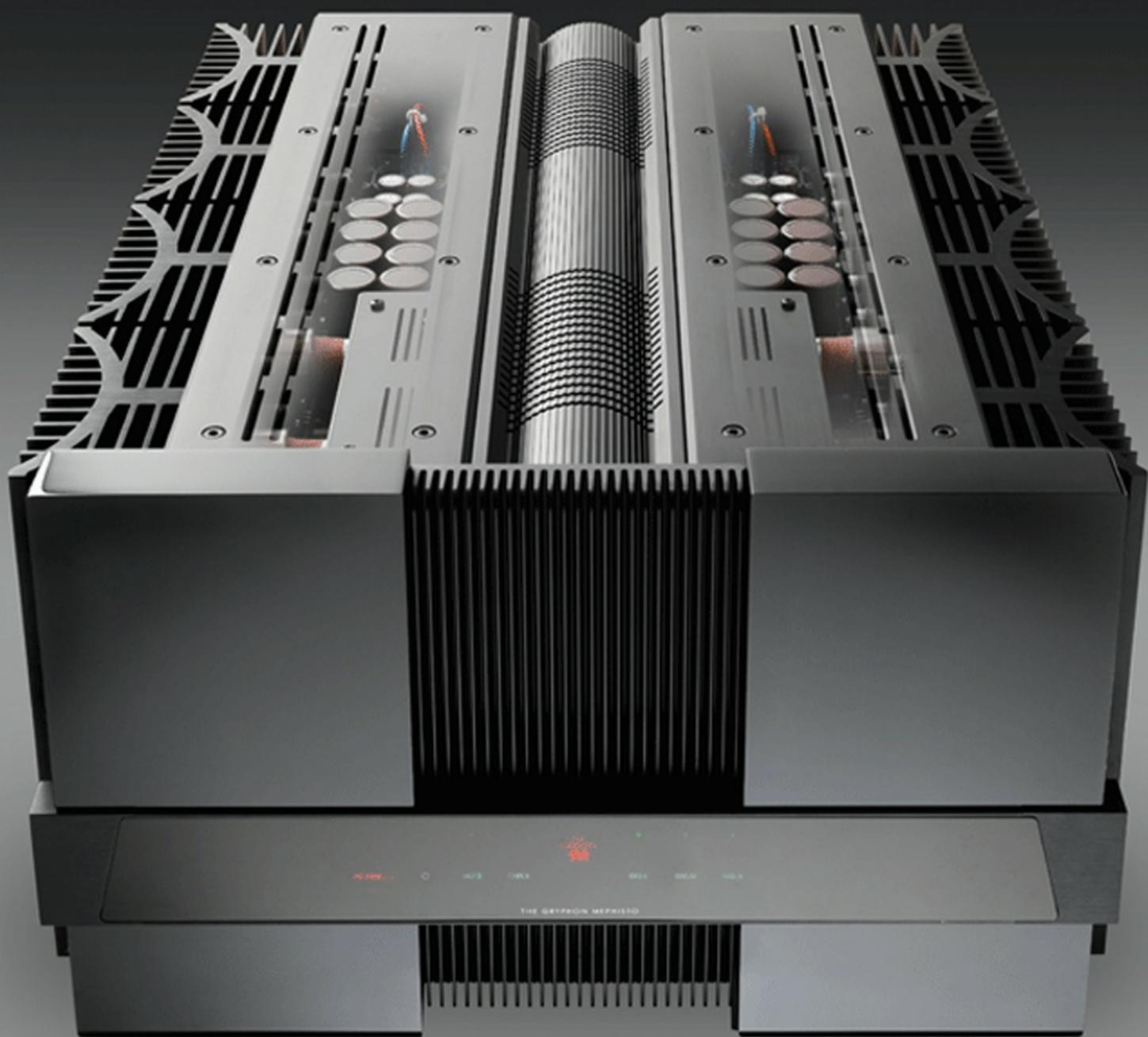
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## NAIM MU-SO

**John Scott is entranced by the sleek, stylish beauty of Naim's £850 all-in-one speaker system but will she sound as good as she looks?**



**T**he Arrival Of The Queen Of Sheba. I described in the November 2014 issue of Hifi Pig Extra how I fell head over heels with the Naim Mu-So in the middle of the John Lewis department store without ever having heard her sing a note. So, you can imagine my delight when she turned up on my doorstep and asked if she could stay for a few weeks.

Okay, I'll try to stop anthropomorphising the Mu-So now before it gets really annoying but I can't promise. The Mu-So arrived a day earlier than I was expecting and I was just about to go out with my wife to the cinema. "I suppose you will want to stay home and play with that now" my wife said, pointedly – how well she knows me. I was as

surprised as she was when I heard myself say that I did still want to go out but that I'd just get the Mu-So out of its box and set it up in the sitting room in the half hour we had available before we had to leave.

So, Mu-So out of box, power cord attached and plugged in, Ethernet cable attached and Mu-So powered up. Music immediately started playing from one of its pre-set internet radio stations. Set up and playing music in no more than five minutes, I was impressed. I had already downloaded the Mu-So app to my iPad in anticipation of its arrival so I fired this up and tapped the Tidal button, typed in my registration details and my Tidal music library was immediately available to play. Impressed again.

## NAIM MU-SO

Tapping the UPnP button brought up a Windows Media Server icon and an LMS server icon, as used by my Squeezebox Touch streamer. Tapping the LMS icon gave me access to my extensive digital music library stored on a networked external hard drive. Could I be more impressed?

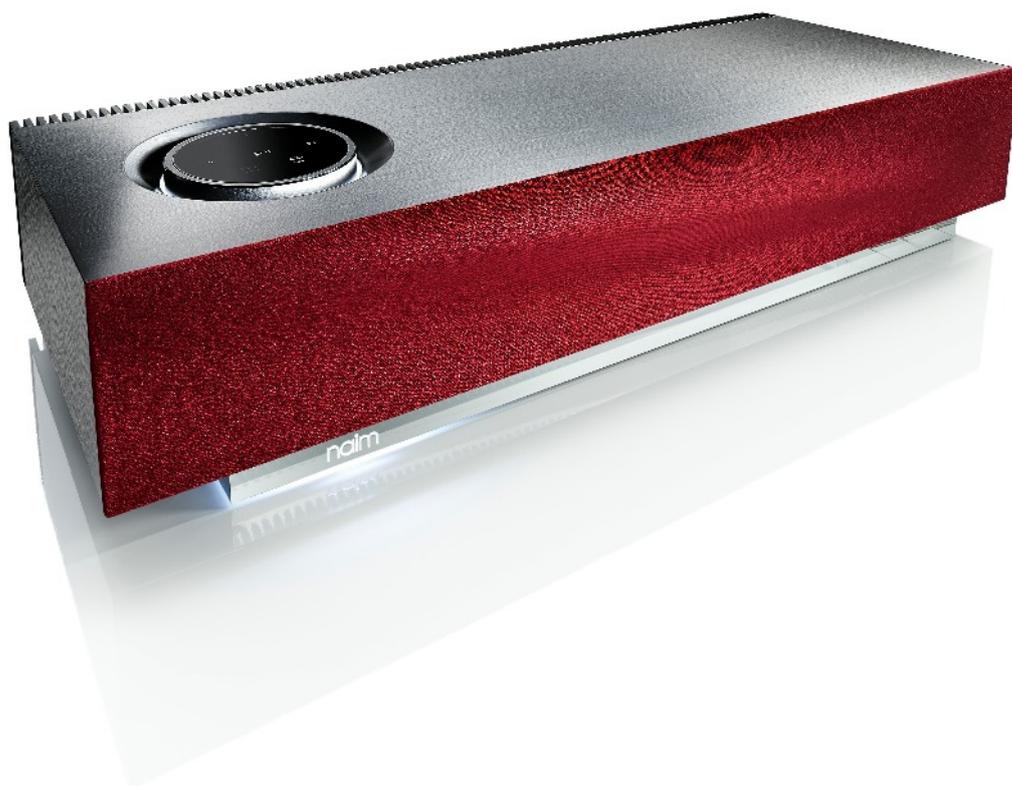
At this point I was physically dragged away to the cinema (Spectre, thanks for asking). As much as I was enjoying the film, my mind kept slipping back to a certain sleek silver box that was waiting for me at home. When my son texted me to say that he had forgotten his house keys and would be shut out in the wind and rain for the next two hours I took a lot less persuasion than I normally would to leave the film and return home.

Firing the Mu-So back up, I was surprised to see no sign of the LMS icon on my app and no evident way of making it appear (Tip: tapping the iPad screen really, really hard doesn't help and shouting at the iPad is, if anything, even less helpful; now, Siri wants to call the police any time I try to ask her a question) so I contented myself with listening via

Tidal and resolved to sort out the UPnP issue in the morning.

I'd been advised that the Mu-So had come direct from another reviewer and that it would be advisable to reset it to its factory default settings so bright and early next day, I did this – it's a simple matter of pressing a recessed button with a little pin-like tool – and then set about activating the Windows Media Server on my laptop – I'd never used WMS before – and importing my music library. WMS clearly didn't like the look of my library and kept crashing so after about an hour of restrained swearing I began to google for an alternative solution and came up with a free server called Serviio – other free servers are available but Serviio worked like a charm. It download and installed easily and I left it alone for a few hours to become acquainted with my music library while I went Christmas shopping with my wife, totally of my own free will and with absolutely no complaints whatsoever (ahem).

Back home, lighter of wallet and heavier of heart, the app now cheered me up by presenting me with three icons: WMS, Serviio and, you've guessed it, LMS; I



## NAIM MU-SO

can only imagine that the Mu-So was flirting playfully with me. I'm happy to say that all three icons remained in place afterwards. Also, there are differences in how Serviio and LMS present your music library within the Mu-So app and each have their individual good points so having both installed is not a bad thing.

If the set up process was slightly more involved than my first 5 minutes with the Mu-So had suggested, it was still pretty straightforward. Having said that, if buying a Mu-So is your first experience of streamed, networked audio then you will have a bit of a learning curve to contend with. The start up guide that comes with the Mu-So is pretty basic but the Naim website does contain more comprehensive support.

Before serious listening could start there were a couple of small adjustments to make. The app allows the Mu-So to be set up to compensate for its position in the room; if it is far from a rear wall, the lower frequencies can be boosted and if the Mu-So is to be played at low volume, a loudness filter can be

activated. I set the Mu-So to play close to a rear wall and with the loudness setting deactivated.

### **A Small Technical Diversion**

Behind the Mu-So's grill lie six custom-designed speakers, each of which is powered by a 75 watt digital amplifier. A bass port enhances performance of lower frequencies. Naim claim that Mu-So's 32 bit digital signal processor is capable of one hundred and fifty million calculations per second, running a custom-designed code to ensure that each speaker receives the right frequencies at exactly the right time. Connectivity is either by Ethernet cable, wireless, USB, Airplay or Bluetooth. WAV, FLAC, AIFF, ALAC and MP3 formats are all supported. High resolution formats required a wired connection.

### **A Thing Of Beauty Is A Joy Forever – Not Just Three Days, George**

George Bernard Shaw said: "Beauty is all very well at first sight; but who ever looks at it when it has been in the house three days?" George clearly



# NAIM MU-SO

## “How can something as small as that be producing a sound as big as this?”

wasn't a Hifi fan; if I lost my heart to the Mu-So at first sight there was no chance of my ardour waning during the time that I had it in my possession – it truly is a lovely thing, it's sleek, modern lines fitting in seamlessly to the traditional décor of my sitting room. Mu-So's cabinet is made of wood, covered by a skin of anodised aluminium to increase rigidity and damping. The front grill features a sculpted wave that echoes the design of Naim's flagship Statement amplifier. The grill comes in black as default but replacement grilles are available in other colours albeit at the slightly eye-watering price of around £70.00 each. On the top panel sits the beautifully tactile input/volume control made from a perfectly weighted solid ring of aluminium, illuminated from below. Tapping this control turns the Mu-So on and off and provides input choices. Turning the control adjusts the volume (from zero to eleven for Spinal Tap fans). Control is also available via a supplied remote control or an iOS/Android app. Such was the quality of the app that I found the remote to be entirely redundant.

### Easy Listening

As mentioned above, the Muso's app allows you to access and play music stored on your network or via the Tidal streaming service (if you have a subscription). Hundreds of internet radio stations are also available and you can select five of these as pre-sets. Whatever music source you choose, navigation is quick and simple.

Having got the Mu-So set up, it time to get down to some serious listening. As the Mu-So had been out to other reviewers before I received it, no run in time was required. What I hadn't anticipated however was that I was the one who was going to need a period of running in: for the first couple of days

whenever I sat down to listen to some music I found myself staring at the Mu-So and thinking: “How can something as small as that be producing a sound as big as this?” Fortunately, that feeling faded and I was soon able to give the music the attention it deserved. Playing the title track of John Martyn's Solid Air album, all the familiar warmth and ambience I expected was present. Martyn's blurred vocals hung in

front of the Mu-So with the instrumentation arranged around him and I could almost see the haze of cigarette (?) smoke rising in the air. Why So Serious from the soundtrack of The Dark Knight is a challenging track for any system to resolve correctly but the Mu-So took it in its stride. Punishing dynamics, deep, deep bass and high rising strings were all handled without any obvious sense of strain. Inevitably, the Mu-so's size and design means that it never going to present the biggest of sound stages but it does a better job than you might expect; the Mu-So seemed equally at home whether playing solo acoustic guitar of large scale symphony orchestras.

It wasn't all plain sailing though. An Ethernet connection allows the Mu-So to play high resolution files up to 24/192. I found that 192 files were prone to stuttering and drop outs but I'm confident that this was a symptom of my network set up rather than a failing on the part of the player. My set up gave me no option but to make an Ethernet connection to my router via powerline adaptors. If you intend to use 192 files then I would strongly recommend a wired Ethernet connection directly from router to Mu-So.

### CONCLUSION

Naim's Mu-So delivers a level of performance that is in keeping with its build quality and stunning good looks and that belies its size. If you already have a

# NAIM MU-SO

high-end traditional Hifi system made up of a collection of boxes and speakers then it is unlikely that you will want to replace these with a Mu-So. If, however, your living arrangements make a traditional Hifi set up impractical, or if you want a second system for another room then the Mu-so is worthy of serious consideration. I still look at the space where “my” Mu-So used to sit and feel a little pang of loss. But while she was with me we made beautiful music together.

**Sound quality: 8.2/10**

**Value for money: 8.7/10**

**Build quality/styling : 9/10**

**Overall: 8.6/10**

## Pros

**Excellent build quality and styling**

**A sound you would expect from the Naim pedigree**

**Easy set up**

**Intuitive, comprehensive app.**

## Cons

**Limited soundstage (to be expected)**

**May be fussy about network quality**

**Replacement grilles expensive**

**John Scott**

## SPECIFICATIONS :

### Audio Inputs

Digital (S/PDIF)

Optical S/PDIF (TosLink) up to 96kHz

USB

Side USB Type A

Analogue

3.5mm jack

### Other Inputs

UPnP,™ AirPlay, Spotify Connect, Bluetooth (with aptX), Internet Radio via wired Ethernet or Wi-Fi and multiroom client from an existing Naim streamer system

### Remote Control

Infra Red (RC5)

### Network

Ethernet (10/100Mbps), Wi-Fi (802.11b/g) 2.4GHz

### Formats

Audio Formats

WAV, FLAC and AIFF up to 24bit/192kHz ALAC

(Apple Lossless) up to 24bit/96kHz

MP3 up to 48kHz, 320kbit (16 bit)

AAC up to 48kHz, 320kbit (16bit)

OGG and WMA up to 48kHz (16bit)

Bluetooth SBC, AAC and aptX

Note: All formats to 48kHz maximum over wireless network

### Internet Radio Provider

vTuner premium 5\*

### Internet Radio formats

Windows Media-formatted content, MP3, ACC, Ogg

Vorbis streams and MMS

### User Control

### Product

Touch control user interface with rotary volume control

### Handheld

Remote handset included and optional control app for iPad, iPhone, iPod Touch and Android devices

### Power

### Amplifier Output

450W - 6 x 75W (into 6Ω)

### Power Consumption

Typical use: 17W

Standby mode: < 4W

Deep sleep: < 0.5W

Mains Supply

**100V, 115V or 230V, 50/60Hz**

### Physical

### Dimensions (HxWxD)

122 mm x 628 mm x 256 mm

### Weight

13 kg

### Supplied with

Remote control, mains cable (+ plug adaptor market dependant), reset pin-hole tool and quick-start guide

### Finishes

Brushed aluminium casework, silver anodised heatsink, black fabric grille.

Grille options in Deep Blue, Vibrant Red, Burnt Orange.

### Certification and Licenses

### Certification

Apple (Made for iPhone), Airplay, vTuner Premium, Spotify Connect, Wi-Fi alliance

### Licenses

Apple MFI and Airplay, Bluetooth, aptX, Spotify Connect, Wi-Fi alliance

### Speaker

Dual, three-way



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**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



**Russell Kauffman's Russell K company make just two models of loudspeaker. Here Dominic Marsh takes a listen to the bigger Red 100 standmounters costing £1784 in the piano gloss finish and with grilles, though less pricey options are available.**

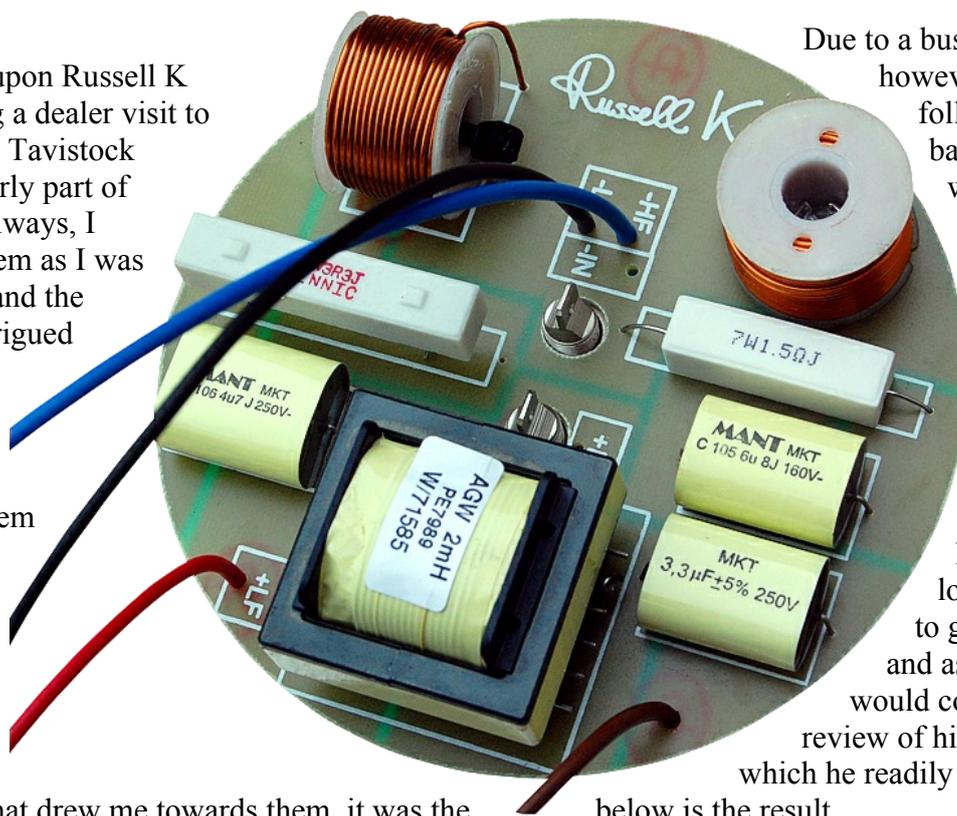
# RUSSELL K RED 100 LOUDSPEAKERS

**A**s a reviewer for Hifi Pig Magazine you mostly get assigned what you are going to review by our editor Stuart. But, every once in a while either he asks if we have any components we have on our 'hit list' we would like to review and this particular review is the result of one of those instances.

I first set eyes upon Russell K speakers during a dealer visit to Bob Hesketh at Tavistock Audio in the early part of this year. As always, I only spotted them as I was about to leave and the looks alone intrigued me to say the least, but there wasn't the time available then to hook them up and have a quick listen. It wasn't the piano gloss black cabinetry or the bright red baffles and grey cabinets that drew me towards them, it was the name "Russell K" screen printed on the tweeter surround that said to me if someone puts their own name to a product in that way, there was a real driving passion behind it for doing so. Brave man.

Russell who? He has worked as a speaker designer for some famous names in the industry for a good number of years, the last being Morel, so although you may not recognize the name, he has probably been the brains behind a goodly number of class act speakers. It has always puzzled me why the large corporations harbour a massive wealth of talent under their roofs, yet manage to frustrate them so much they end up leaving and flexing their wings and being highly successful in their own right. Russell left Morel because him being based in the UK and Morel headquartered in Israel wasn't conducive to a fruitful working environment. Their loss is our gain it seems.

One of the (few!) upsides of a reviewer's job is you get to meet the people behind the brands and the overwhelming majority are nice friendly people with the same lunatic passions as the consumers of their products possess, so they mostly understand what we in the audiophile fraternity actually seek from the products we might buy from them.



Due to a busy schedule however, I had to put a follow up call on the back burner for a while and when I did at last have to the time to make further enquiries, Russell Kauffman was not easy to get hold of with his busy schedule either. Such is life. Anyway, at long last I managed to get hold of Russell and ask very nicely if he would consider a Hifi Pig review of his speakers, to which he readily agreed and here below is the result.

## CONSTRUCTION

According to Russell K's website, either side above and below each bass unit is a bracing shelf containing multiple apertures with the reflex port located under the bottom shelf. The midrange energy from the rear of the bass/mid unit is contained within the two shelves which mean only bass escapes into the full volume of the enclosure. The result is a drastic reduction of midrange standing waves and almost no midrange energy making its way out of the port tube. The very low port tuning frequency of 35Hz on the Red 100 produces a bass that is extraordinarily tight and very well extended. Another feature of the design is the complete lack of damping material in the cabinet, either in the form of bituminous panels or long haired wool or fibre type material. Russell Kauffman says this gives rise to sloppy bass characteristics so has completely eliminated it from his designs, by using those braces

# RUSSELL K RED 100 LOUDSPEAKERS

and baffles to effect the necessary damping of the bass/mid drive unit.

The crossover circuitry too plays an important part in a loudspeaker's sound characteristics, so the design brief was to keep it simple and is centered around a 12db per octave slope crossing over at 2.2KHz with only one inductance coil for the bass driver and just one capacitor feeding the tweeter, also maintaining a benign load for the driving amplifier, even low powered single ended valve amplifiers I am told. Nominal impedance is 8 Ohms. Connections are made via a single pair of good quality 4mm binding posts that will accept bare wire, spades or banana plugs, with no bi-wire or bi-amping facility.

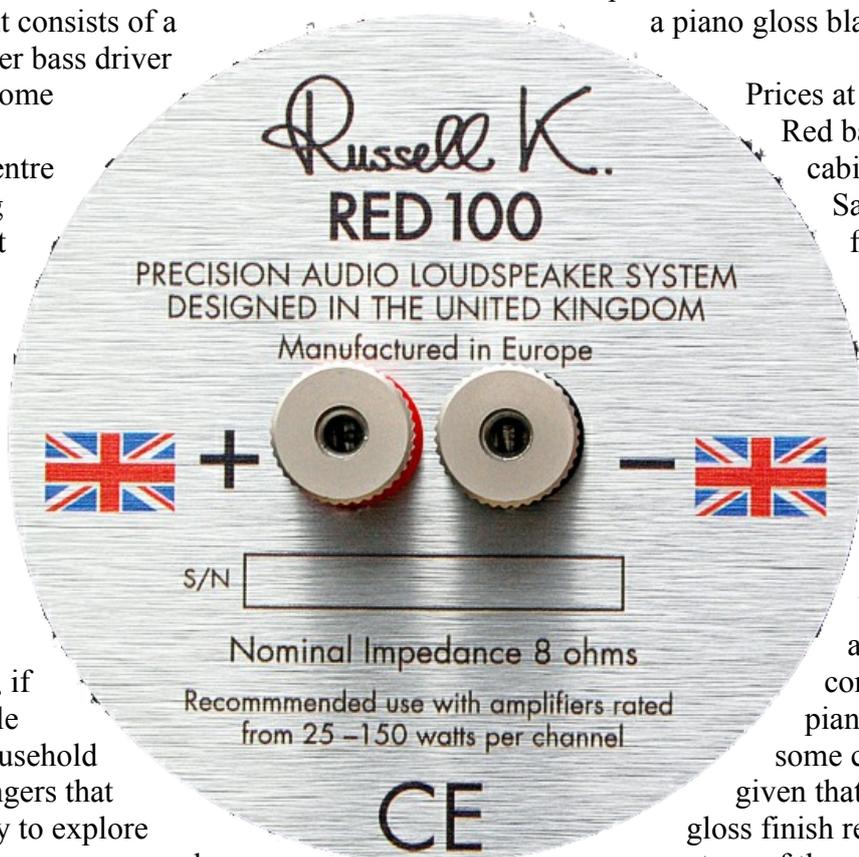
Driver complement consists of a 165mm doped paper bass driver and a 25mm soft dome tweeter in vertical alignment to the centre of the baffle, along with the reflex port near the bottom edge. I haven't tried this myself, but Russell assures me that if someone pokes the tweeter cone in it will pop out of it's own accord some time later. I will take his word for that. However, if you have some little persons in your household with inquisitive fingers that have the propensity to explore button-like protuberances on speaker drivers, then grilles are available to protect them from the aforesaid mischievous digits.

The grilles are an extra cost option at £84.00 a pair you will note, as the standard speaker is supplied without any grilles at all. The grilles themselves are made from a perforated metal sheet with a metal insert in each corner to hold 4 individual magnets which for their size are quite powerful. Embedded into the front baffle during construction are 4 equally powerful magnets which line up with the grille and

are hidden from view due to the baffle's final surface finish. I am pleased to say that the magnets are strong enough to hold the heavy grilles in place, yet not so strong as to make removing the grilles a grappling match either.

Cabinet dimensions are 40cm high, by 26cm wide, by 27cm deep, making it slightly squat and boxy in appearance. The buyer has a choice of finishes to choose from, ranging from a red baffle with a plastic type of grey vinyl material to the rest of the cabinet as the base model, to a satin black baffle with either real veneered Oak, Walnut, or Mahogany finishes, or the full monty piano gloss black or piano gloss white finish on all sides including the baffle.

The pair submitted for review were finished in a piano gloss black finish.



Prices at time of testing are:

Red baffle, grey cabinet:£1,250.00 inc VAT

Satin black baffle, wood finish:£1,475.00 inc VAT

Piano gloss white or black:£1,700.00 inc VAT

Front grilles (Pair):£84.00 inc VAT

The price differential between the basic grey and red variant compared to the full piano gloss version raised some concerns with me, given that the cost of the piano gloss finish represented a good percentage of the speaker's base cost to

begin with. Russell said it was a high price due to the fact that the piano gloss finish is hand prepared with rubbing and sanding down between the base paint coats and the final lacquer coats which is of course is highly labour intensive work and the additional cost is reflected in that.

I am informed that a dedicated stand is being designed for the 100s and will be completed in due course. In the absence of same, I tried them on 50cm stands which were too low and a 60cm pair brought

# RUSSELL K RED 100 LOUDSPEAKERS

the speakers up the correct height for me. Russell said they were a bit finicky with what stands they are paired with and I am not aware if my Partington Ansa stands were on his approved stands list but they sounded fine to me.

## SOUND

With a build specification like that, you might expect a sound that was well off the beaten path and you would be right to think that. While the overwhelming majority of the speakers out there are designed with a whole series of compromises (Including aesthetics and cost), the Russell K 100's are not that way inclined, as the designer has reportedly spent an inordinate amount of time, effort and no doubt money too, in refining the design to have as few if any of those compromises that others are plagued with. Russell Kauffman has put his very being into the design and every single aspect of them has been paid meticulous attention to and the sonic rewards to you the listener are immense.

The greatest triumph of the design for me has been the bass performance and while I am not an advocate of bass reflex designs as a whole with their chuffing

ports and woolly bass output, much preferring the solid weight and control of an infinite baffle design, the Russell K 100s sports the very same reflex port I am wary of and have quickly come to the conclusion after hearing these speakers, is that the reflex port per se isn't to blame, it is the poor implementation of the reflex port principle that is the real bogeyman. A large hole drilled into the baffle or back plate and some cheap plastic tube shoved in there, do not a reflex port make and these speakers demonstrate that rather concisely.

Russell Kauffman claims the port is tuned to 35Hz and I would be the last to dispute that figure, but what I can tell you is this speaker goes LOW folks for a mere stand mounted speaker and in complete control too I might add. No boom, no overhang, no wooliness at all, that leading edge is good enough to shave stubble off your chin, it is that keen and in truth puts many a large floor standing model to shame for good measure. There is a slight raising of upper bass energy which the designer is aware of and I think the sound benefits from that by adding a touch or warmth to the midrange which otherwise would be on the cool side.



# RUSSELL K RED 100 LOUDSPEAKERS

The word “articulate” is much bandied about by reviewers to describe bass that they hear and I often think to myself is that word used as a true description of what is being heard, or just another euphemism or plucked from the ether kind of word slotted in when the description memory bank starts running aground? The bass output of the RK 100’s is articulate in every sense of the word, inasmuch as it’s as real a standing next to the bass guitarist, drummer, cellist, flautist, whatever and hearing every single timbre and harmonic from those instruments deep into the bass registers. Let’s not completely ignore the tweeter’s role in this scenario either as it’s no shrinking violet by any means, as it’s not merely a supporting act for the bass driver, oh no, this driver is crisp and clean, insightful without being explicit. The pair are very well matched to the crossover, giving a refreshing cleanliness to the midrange and I couldn’t hear any bloom or fogging in that area of the audible spectrum.

Onto some music then and hoping that you own or have listened to my often played favourite album for putting a system through its paces. If you don’t own or have not heard it, then I suggest obtaining a copy of Fink’s “Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet” live album so you can relate to what I am referring to in my reviews. Fink’s artistic talents may not ring your bells (it didn’t mine at first) but it has certain elements in the recording that makes faults shine like a beacon, a joy when reproduced accurately. Tidal has a higher resolution than Spotify, which while acceptable doesn’t have the same resolving power as the original CD or high resolution downloads for a listen to this album. Dan Worth also uses this album for the same reason.

**The Russell K’s  
certainly did  
untangle and strand  
out all of the music  
and the bass was  
separated out almost  
into a compartment  
on it’s own,  
untroubled by  
whatever else was  
going on around it.**

Track one begins with “Biscuits For Breakfast” with some crisp cymbal strikes to the centre of the Ride Cymbal from the drummer that has resonances and ringing within the cymbal strikes and it takes a great tweeter to capture that essence, which the Russell K’s do admirably and run a very close second to some ribbon tweeters I have heard. Bass guitar has a taut deep growl to it and goes very low while at the same time it captures the fret finger movements from the guitarist with uncanny realism.

This album as I have probably mentioned a good few times in my reviews, has each track recorded at different venues and it takes a very competent speaker to let you the listener know that they have been, with reverberation and ambience cues ranging from intimate to large scale. On one track the microphone is slightly misbehaving too and the Russell K’s let you know that is occurring as well, whereas it slips under the radar with most other speakers.

When we come to the track called “Sort Of Revolution” the drummer drives down hard on to the Floor Tom and by golly it generally makes my listening room almost expand and contract with the power and energy released. The Russell K’s though do it rather differently, by exposing every part of that strike into separate compartments, as in you can hear and almost feel the drum stick hitting the drum’s ‘skin’, the body of the drum reacting to that and begins vibrating with an almost aural picture in the air of the drum itself and yes the energy is still there, but taut and very controlled, down to the decay. At first it was rather disconcerting, having become accustomed to a single powerful burst of energy

# RUSSELL K RED 100 LOUDSPEAKERS

emanating from the speakers, but since hearing what I have done from the Russell K's it has set a brand new benchmark for me that other speakers which follow for review will have to strive towards. This track has a visceral pounding rhythm to it and is a good test of both timing cues and separation between instruments, so while the drummer is maintaining a steady beat on the Kick Drum, the bass guitarist is mirroring that pace and the audience is clapping along. If this doesn't lift you up and enervate you into enjoying the music you are in need of help. Of course being an album recorded live, I will pay particular attention to how the audience sounds. Any speaker that makes the audience clapping sound like bacon sizzling in a frying pan or a thousand crisp (potato chips) bags being rustled is a complete no-no as far as I am concerned. I need to be made to feel as if I am surrounded by cheering enthusiastic people, catcalling and whistling as individuals I can place in locations around me (well, as far as a stereo image will let me perceive anyway).

As a contrast to that, some electronic music in the shape of Tripswitch's excellent album "Geometry". There is some superb layering in this album and it takes a sure footed pair of speakers to unfold and pull back all the layers so each strand is separated and clear. The bass lines are really deep, subtle in places too and can easily be muddled by the music around it. The Russell K's certainly did untangle and strand out all of the music and the bass was separated out almost into a compartment on it's own, untroubled by whatever else was going on around it. Naturally, I played a large range of music genres and the Russell K Red 100's acquitted themselves very well. My final test though was Porcupine Tree's "Deadwing" album and that will either sound dreadful with it's raw uncouth recording, or acceptable, with little middle ground in between.

The opening title track has the sounds of a train pulling into a station with plenty of brake squealing sounds and it's electric motor humming away in the background while the passengers alight. The Russell K's certainly picked up these sounds with great clarity and as is the norm with good sounding systems it fair set my teeth on edge. Now if the sound was smooth and rounded then I would have been concerned. Further into that same track there is a bass guitar riff with a long low note that shouldn't just 'emerge' as a grumble from the speakers, it has

to flow and roll out seemingly low down near the floor to be credible. I got that full effect from the Russell K's and to my surprise I could almost count the bass guitar's string vibrations. Spooky. If you are the kind of listener who revels in the sound of female vocals then these speakers will delight. Haven't heard Loreena McKennit sounding better and Dido's "Life For Rent" album took on some new dimensions that convinced me I should listen to it more often from now on as I had mostly dismissed it as being a typical commercial pop recording. Not so.

## CONCLUSION

When I first laid eyes on the Russell K Red 100's there was a gut instinct feeling that they were "right" somehow. Don't ask me to explain why because I can't, I just sensed it. I hadn't even heard of them before, nor of Russell Kauffman the designer for that matter, even less heard them fired up in action to make some sort of value judgment call and they weren't even red, but in a piano black finish. Certainly wasn't their looks as they are to me a short wide box rather than a slim elegant design that fits neatly into contemporary homes, nor was it a heady mix of exposed exotic drivers in the cabinet to get my juices flowing either. Maybe it was the screen printed name in white on the tweeter of the man himself and I could easily go nuts here trying to figure it out where this gut feeling sprang from. It was that gut feeling that drove me on to get in touch with Russell Kauffman to arrange a review pair and am so glad that I persisted because it has been very worthwhile.

These speakers may just change your perceptions about stand mounted speakers as it has changed mine. Reaching down to the bass regions where many a floor stander cannot get to is a revelation in itself, making that bass so controlled and so articulate is breathtaking and a tribute to the designer. Great bass is one thing, matching that to an equally impressive well performing treble and midrange says these speakers are no one trick pony and a lot of thought and expertise has gone into their creation.

I had visions of clinging on to my resident speakers until my final breath and while there has been a procession of speakers through my hands for review, none have tempted me to change until the Russell K's came along. I have ordered a pair for myself and

# RUSSELL K RED 100 LOUDSPEAKERS

if that isn't putting your money where your mouth is, then I don't know what is and how much better a recommendation would you possibly want from me? As ever don't just take my word for it, arrange an audition to gauge suitability for your tastes, preferences and system synergy which will always be the ultimate arbiter. But I do implore you to at least have a serious listen to them, as they may just raise the bar for you too.

**Build quality: 8.6/10**

**Sound quality: 9.3/10**

**Value for money: 9/10**

**Overall: 8.96/10**

## Pros:

**Exceptional sound quality and fine build in an affordable package. Few rivals within this particular price band or indeed even higher for the base model red and grey cabinet variant.**

## Cons:

**£84.00 for a pair of grilles. Ouch!**

**Dominic Marsh**

## DESIGNER'S NOTES

The design goal on the Red 100 was to make a loudspeaker that sounds as close as we could get to the real thing at an affordable price. As a new company with Red 100 being the first product, it was essential to bring some original thinking to the party in order that the speaker would not be instantly dismissed. As a starting point we decided to cut everything from the design that was not critical to the sound. Some examples of this thinking being; the grille is an extra cost option; many customers will take the grille off and never use it, but have paid for it in the complete speaker. A Russell K customer is given the choice. The packaging for transport is simple but safe and there are no brochures. The more controversial cuts include the decision not to use famous brands for drive units, but well made, good sounding drivers adapted for Russell K, and the now familiar ribbed plastic coated grey cabinet with a

Ferrari red front baffle. This finish option saves the customer a lot of money with no loss of sound quality. Starting with drive units, the first test is to connect a woofer, or for that matter a tweeter, directly to the amp with no crossover or cabinet and just listen. If the sound is bad then no crossover will really help, and it is amazing how different, and sometimes bad, even the best tweeters can sound. In the case of the Red 100 tweeter it sounds smooth and can even play a bass tune – in fact it sounds like a small speaker. The woofer size came next and we went for a nominal 6 inch unit. We feel this has the best compromise between efficiency, power handling, bass extension, clarity and dispersion. Next we did a bit of maths to find the optimum volume (size) for the cabinet and found it really was most comfortable being a stand mount rather than a compromised floorstanding enclosure.

There are many different ways to design a speaker and I don't claim to have the only correct way. In many respects I try to work to my strengths and avoid going into areas that I am not so secure about. This is a roundabout way of me saying that measurements and theory are always going to be the slave of what I hear. I do believe a speaker should have a relatively flat measured response, but I will not allow the sound to suffer to get it. This sets me free to bend some of the rules such as no internal damping in the cabinet, no resistors in the signal path, and not using textbook values for the crossover components.

The design studio allows me to measure and listen without having to move the speakers or disconnect them from the Hi Fi system. This means I can listen, make an adjustment, measure and then listen again allowing me to control the process of voicing the speaker. I use a lot of different music with no particular test tracks, along with spoken word. I also check and recheck many times to be sure I didn't fool myself into thinking I have made the best speaker in the world.

The final product is designed to work with both transistor and valve amps, and whilst it does not have a Hi-End price, it should be set up with the same care and attention. For sure I treated this speaker with the same respect during development that I lavished on a £25,000.00 loudspeaker designed for a company I was a consultant for.

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## HANA S RANGE MOVING COIL CARTRIDGES



**Air Audio are distributing this Japanese company's new range of cartridges in the UK and Ian Ringstead takes the first UK look at the high output and low output moving coil cartridges that cost £447 and both use a Shibata stylus.**

**T**he Hana range of cartridges is manufactured by Excel Sound Corporation, a 50 year old company based in Tokyo, who started off manufacturing low cost cartridges, such as the highly regarded Excel ES70. By 1978 the company was producing MC cartridges, with particular expertise in high output MC cartridges and specializing in OEM cartridge manufacture.

Excel Sound Corporation are perhaps seen as one of those slightly underground Japanese companies and they will certainly not reveal which cartridge brands they have manufactured for over the years.

Excel Sound Corporation prides themselves on their manufacturing quality and quality control processes at every stage, ensuring their handmade cartridges offer consistently perfect results.

The high performance Hana S range "SH" and "SL" cartridges use a nude natural diamond Shibata-stylus which the company say is capable of "excellent high frequency response with supreme transparency and excellent trackability". The S range comes in two output options offering either high output 2.0mv/1KHz (SH) or Low output 0.5mv/1KHz (SL). Both options are £447 each which places them as a relatively modestly priced offering.

I was sent both the high and low output versions and it was interesting to see what differences there were between the two, especially as they look identical and the specifications appear identical apart from the output level and impedance. The Shibata stylus is a design I remember well from my retail days and was a clever way of improving a cartridges performance.

When CD4 Quad 4 channel recordings were developed, the designers needed to be able to record

# HANA S RANGE MOVING COIL CARTRIDGES



and play back frequencies up to 45kHz – more than twice the highest goal frequency attained with the elliptical styli. The very fine corrugations in the groove required for 45kHz were more easily worn away and so a design was required that could 1) track much higher frequencies and 2) Reduce wear on the record. The first stylus that achieved this was the now famous “Shibata” (named after its inventor).

Rather than providing a small circular “dot” contact point with the groove, the more complex shape of the Shibata stylus allowed a long vertical line of contact to be achieved with the groove wall. The result of contacting more of the groove wall was the achievement of the two primary goals mentioned above.

Through better wall contact, tracking was improved and information retrieval improved (facilitating higher frequencies), and because the total contact surface area increased, the amount of pressure per square area was substantially reduced – less pressure equals less wear on both the record and the stylus.

In actual fact the side radius of the Shibata is about the same as a 0.2 mil elliptical stylus – so theoretically they have the same ability to track high frequencies, but the elliptical stylus only ever contacts the same small area – which can become worn – resulting in degradation in high frequencies over time.

Playing back a record with a Shibata stylus which has been worn with a conical or elliptical stylus can result in near pristine sound – this is because the Shibata shape can “read” the groove wall in areas that were not in contact, and as such not worn by, the simpler stylus shapes.

Now all this information is interesting but how does it translate into the sound of the Hana cartridges.

## SOUND

I first tried the high output model in both a Rega Planar 3 turntable with RB300 arm and my Project Extension 9 turntable running the both through my Whest Audio Two phonostage.

What immediately impressed me with both cartridges was the very low surface noise and how quiet they were overall. There was no hum even with the level turned well up and this made for an easy listen where the music was highlighted without being drowned out with irritating surface noise. I am sure the Shibata stylus helped contribute to this performance and proves what a clever design it is. High frequencies were clearly portrayed and detailing was very good on instruments like cymbals, hi-hat etc. and background detail was easily retrieved, making for an enjoyable listen. Vocals were clear and well projected in the sound stage which itself had good depth and spread. Bass was also well defined and detailed.

On trying the low output version what could this do? Well I have always liked low output moving coils and they seem to dominate the quality cartridge market, but not everyone thinks this way and some people even prefer moving magnets. I won't try to explain why, other than to state I have found in my own personal preference for low output moving coils by auditioning lots of different types over the years.

In this case the Hana low output model just added more to the listening experience in terms of better detailing and depth over the high output model. I cannot fully explain this, it's just what I heard and it wasn't a subtle preference when compared to the high output model.

I listened to Deep Purple Made in Japan from 1972 and although an old recording it still sounds detailed and exciting. “Smoke On The Water” was as always

# HANA S RANGE MOVING COIL CARTRIDGES

very enjoyable with the classic, catchy riff many an aspiring young guitarist has tried to emulate being ably projected between my speakers in all its glory. The Mule which follows this has a drum solo by Ian Paice which was de rigeur for all rock concerts back in the seventies and the Hana managed to pick out loads of detail and the subtle clues of the drum kit were beautifully laid bare and it was easy to hear all the different techniques of Ian Paice and pick out the drum types and cymbals. I have been to many live concerts and so I can recall what these solos were like and appreciate when they were well miked up and mixed by the sound engineer so as to excite the audience and show off the drummer's skills.

Joe Samples Carmel was played next and showed what a brilliant keyboard player he was. A jazz musician admired the world over; people will remember him for his time in the Crusaders and their huge hit with Street Life in the 80's with Randy Crawford on vocals. I also played another album from the 80's, Graceland, by Paul Simon. This album revitalised Paul Simon's career after he had split from Art Garfunkel and he was discovering new sounds and musical ideas in South Africa. The album has many great tracks on it and "You Can Call Me Al" was a smash hit that is so infectious in its beat and the superb bass solo near the end that makes me smile every time I hear it. Also "Diamonds on the soles of her shoes" showcases the superb vocal prowess of the Ladysmith Black Mambazo singers. The Hana SL really picked out all the subtleties of this track and how skilled the singers are as well as their fantastic vocal harmonies in all their glory.

## CONCLUSION

I really liked these cartridges as they were fuss free and just got on with their job of producing great music. The low output for me was better but this doesn't mean the high output was poor or wouldn't be preferred by some listeners. If you only have a moving magnet input on your amp or pre amp then the high output version is a no brainer. £447 is not cheap, but for a good quality moving coil it is very good value and is the lower end of a popular choice of cartridge type for audiophiles into their vinyl.

Full marks to Hana, who obviously know what they are doing, for putting their name to a range of



excellent value for money cartridges for the less 'well to do' vinyl fanatic.

Both cartridges work well in both budget and higher-end turntable/ arm combinations and are well worth seeking out.

### Low Output

**Build quality: 8.7/10**

**Sound quality: 8.7/10**

**Value for money: 8.6/10**

**Overall: 8.6/10**

### High Output

**Build quality: 8.7/ 10**

**Sound quality: 8.3/10**

**Value for money: 8.6/10**

**Overall: 8.5/10**

### **Pros:**

**Shibata stylus really works well**

**Low surface noise**

**Great detailing**

**Low and high output versions to suit tastes and pre amp capability**

### **Cons:**

**Not budget priced but otherwise hard to fault**

**Ian Ringstead**

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# A CHORD COMPANY BUDGET LOOM

**When we were initially discussing this review by Dave Robson with The Chord Company we wanted to see what the company's 'loom' would bring to the table 'off the shelf' and "untailored" to the specific system being used. Chord offer a service they call The Cable Doctor in which they tailor a combination of cables specifically to what they feel your system would benefit the most from. However, we wanted this first of two reviews to set a benchmark and in the coming weeks we will be conducting a second review using cables supplied by Chord after us using the Cable Doctor service. This will allow us to compare and contrast the bog standard, 'of the shelf' cables with a more bespoke set up.**

## The Chord Company C-Line RCA (1M) (ARRAY)

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



**Y**up, feels like Christmas!! I've been sent a full "loom" of Chord Companies C-Line and Clearway cables to review over the festive season. These consist of the C-Line RCA 1m (£45), Clearway Digital 1m (£100), C-Stream Streaming Cable 10m (£90) and Clearway Speaker Cable 2x3m pair (£10pm unterminated).

The C-Line RCA out of the box is a nice flexible cable; moulded pale blue RCA's cover a gold plated inner grip. These connectors look tough and hardwearing and there are little arrows on the cable showing that the wires are directional...one of those subjects that can get end in a heated debate when discussed but personally I believe it's good to know that the research has been done by Chord and a critical decision has been made. Even if you're not a believer then at least you can connect your RCAs the same way every time. The cables come separately which is a good thing as some electrical equipment connections are set wide apart and I have struggled in the past to get some joined cables to fit. The ARRAY Technology has been used in the past on Chords high-end cables with great results. This uses very high quality copper fibres in conjunction with

# A CHORD COMPANY BUDGET LOOM

foil shielding incorporated within the construction of the cable with the intention of improving the sound quality of this relatively inexpensive cable. I was advised by Chord that the burn in would take approx 48hrs before the cables were fully settled. My past experiences with cables from around this price

point is that usually they try too hard in one area or another, getting stuff “nearly” right but very rarely getting it completely balanced. I have seemed to accumulate RCA cables a bit like motorcycle gloves and compilation CDs over the years and have far too many of them... I’m always willing to take a punt when something is reasonably priced!

Onward with the review. A bit of all round goodness in the guise of Dire Straits (as it’s nearly xmas and I will be by January). On “Money For Nothing” Sting’s vocal intro’ comes out of the blackness followed by the famous drumming, bouncing from side to side. Well weighted drum slam followed by the clean guitar riff we all know. The separation of the instruments and vocals are clear and not congested or woody as I’ve heard Mr Knopffler’s vocal to sound with other cables. Next up is “Walk Of Life” with the electric organ coming to the fore and with a good lively vibe to it. Again I hear good slap on the skins and kick from the bass drum. The tick tick of the cymbals could do with being a little more forward and crisp for me, but it’s all there and it’s not offensive or harsh in any way. These C-Line cables are foot tappingly rhythmical and detailed enough to be able to distinguish all the vocals and the instruments spread out in a nice arc over and across the speakers. The following tracks on the Brothers In Arms album show this cable to be quite capable of holding its own with offerings several times its price point. Whether this is good engineering, good luck or the ARAY technology at work, the C-Line puts in a good show.

Moving from the male vocals to the female side of things and “Relish” by Joan Osbourne is slid into the CD slot. St Theresa, the first track on the album, starts with thumping bass and clanky guitar sounds,

## **The Chord C-Line RCA’s are a surefooted way onto the audiophile path. They are a rugged no frills cable**

the soundstage is wide and defined, each instrument in its own space forward of the speakers slightly. Ms Osbourne’s voice central to the music, this track can trip up equipment as her voice can get quite painfully sibilant on the more powerful high notes but the C-Line holds the vocals within their grasp,

not letting her get out of hand. These cables show definite control and grip on the music and on vocals especially. “One Of Us”, Joan Osbourne’s 1995 UK No.6 hit single, shows her vocals hold feeling and expression with her words hanging out in front of the speakers with good detail and weight, communicating well with the listener. I now change CDs to Duffy and “Rockferry” knowing that this album throws up several challenges. The first being on the CDs title track with the pseudo raw 60’s sound which, if let to get out of hand, can sound a bit rough and amateurish – it seems to be recorded with a lot of distortion in place. The Chord C-Line is up to the job though, not letting the music become congested or too sibilant. The tambourine is kept quite separate to the music and to the far right of the soundstage and it’s defined, crisp and clear. “Warwick Avenue” to me has a “live” club style quality to the recording with Duffy’s tuneful singing holding nicely in the middle of the soundstage. There is enough detail within the track and this is conveyed by the Chord cables to give the atmosphere of a personal concert in an intimate club scenario.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Chord C-Line RCA’s are a surefooted way onto the audiophile path. They are a rugged no frills cable. Holding its worth on the inside, the ARAY Technology works within the make-up of the wires and their construction. Soundwise they don’t taint the music with anything untoward and are quite transparent. Bass lines are easily followed and treble never gets unruly and is held in check. Vocals within the midrange are weighty and detailed enough to carry through the emotion of the singer. Separation within the soundstage is good. Definition of instruments to the left and right is solid and precise.

# A CHORD COMPANY BUDGET LOOM

Depth front to back isn't massive but it puts in a good effort. The C-Line majors in rhythmical timing and will make your musical party bounce along and won't become tiresome or irritating. If you're looking to spend less than £50 on a cable, whether it's your first foray into the upgrade path or your looking to add one to a new bit of equipment, the C-Line RCA is a thoroughly safe bet.

**Build Quality: 8.2/10**  
**Sound Quality: 8.5/10**  
**Value for Money: 8.9/10**  
**Overall: 8.5**

## Chord Clearway Digital RCA 1m (£100).



This Digital version of The Chord Companies ARAY cable looks and feels like a quality item. Its flexible blue ABS outer casing feels like it would bend easily around your other kit or curl up nicely in your pocket if you were using it on the move. I like the fact that the cable is directional too as this gives consistency to your connecting up. This from Chords website describes it in detail: "Fitted with Chord VEE 3 RCA plugs, including PTFE insulation between signal/return contacts. The ABS outer shell and direct silver-plating process improve signal transfer. The ARAY conductor design reduces interference and internal reflections. This new construction method prevents any direct compression on the signal conductor, eliminating changes to impedance. The cable also benefits from a solid core, oxygen free copper signal conductor, low loss, high performance, gas foamed polyethylene insulation, high density braided shield and ARAY conductor. The outer jacket seals and protects the signal conductor from mechanical interference. This cable is available in custom lengths and can be terminated with RCA, BNC and mini-jack connectors..." A far better description than I could assemble!

I let the cable bed in for 48 hrs giving it time to settle. I'm not 100% sure digital cable requires this burn in process, but as the connection has never been used on my test equipment I thought it best to let it breathe a while.

Running through steely Dan's "Gaucha" CD I immediately feel at ease with this cable and first impressions are that it has quite a smooth sound to it. Playing "19" the track bounces along nicely and it's a detailed and quite neutral rendition, erring on the brighter side of things... not acidic or sharp, but (reviewers' cliché alert) like a thin veil has



# A CHORD COMPANY BUDGET LOOM

## The Chord Clearway Digital is the real deal. It seems to transfer the digital signal without fuss or colouration.

been lifted from the speakers. Spinning “Time Out Of Mind”, the track itself lends itself to a great intro for getting the timing just right, bass drum tripping out, easily identifiable, electric piano with pronounced weight and feeling, cymbals carrying good detail and not becoming splashy and causing vocals to lose definition.

Swapping CDs to a relative newcomer to my collection of Supertramp albums is “Some Things Never Change” which is a great recording with plenty to keep you listening. The initial track “It’s A Hard Life” starts with several sound effects to test your system, including a wobble board and chimes, then breaking into deep bass rhythms. The Digital Clearway bringing all these sounds very clearly and cleanly to the party. I note a big, wide and deep soundstage across my listening space giving each instrument plenty of room to make itself known, the trumpet towards the end of the track poking its rasp forward into the room. The other tracks on the album have a similar story. The Chord Clearway Digital is a very neutral cable with a signature of being clean and rhythmical and not colouring the music with any untoward effects. There is a slight hint of the silver construction giving a shimmering treble and tuneful deep bass.

Swapping back to a no frills digital cable for comparison makes the music sound like I’ve downgraded every component and renders the sound very amateurish and clouded. I also connected to a Pure

i20 iPhone dock and apart from the obvious drop in the quality to the Mp3 files, the music remained uncoloured and as it should be.

### CONCLUSION

The Chord Clearway Digital is the real deal. It seems to transfer the digital signal without fuss or colouration. This cable would be a good upgrade to a budget cable, or if you’re going down the separate DAC/headphone amp route this will make your head-fi sing for you.

**Build Quality: 8.8**

**Sound Quality: 8.7**

**Value for Money: 8.9**

**Overall: 8.8/10**

## Chord Clearway Speaker Cable 2x3m (£60 unterminated, + £40 for banana plug termination)

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



# A CHORD COMPANY BUDGET LOOM

**O**ut the box, the Clearway cable is quite a thick and hefty bundle. There's a space age look to the Clearway with a clear plastic FEP (like polythene) derived from PTFE outer, with two contra wound silver foil sheathings beneath to eliminate interference with high frequencies.

The cable has been designed with a lot of emphasis upon the insulation and shielding to give a neutral presentation. The cables sent for test were terminated with two banana plugs on either end, although bare wires or spades can be specified. Things didn't get off to a great start. The 4mm Banana plugs fitted to my test sample are a bit of a bug bear with me I'm afraid, being the type with a single sprung bar. I have found these to be quite fiddly to fit in the past and, out of the eight plugs I had to fit, three needed to be inserted with the help of a set of pliers. It didn't help that the shrink wrap holding the banana plug was quite small around the 14 AWG wires. If the round edge of the sprung bar doesn't go into its receptacle cleanly then it takes a good bit of pressure to insert them and nobody likes forcing things into their prized possessions. On the positive side once in then you know they are secure and to be fair it's not a connection that you have to connect or reconnect very often. Chord recommended letting these burn in for about 24hrs but I felt that a little longer was required and I played these for about a week or so before I was happy that the sound had levelled out.

First up is Ben Howard's "Every Kingdom" CD. "Old Pine" starts with some nicely played acoustic guitar and the strings are clear and well weighted, with good detail and feel. The sound is powerful and room filling and there is a warmer tone to the music that gives it an easy-on-the-ear feel. On "Wolves"

**Driving drums and percussion, cymbals crisp and not too splashy, the classic vocals coming across with power and feeling.**

the initial haunting vocal demonstrates good sound-depth and clarity and the snare drum raps out with a clear crisp sound that is never harsh or too hard. Onto a faster paced track "The Fear" the bass drum again has good thump and I notice a slight rounding off to bass notes resulting in loss of a little detail. There is a similar effect at the top of the spectrum too and the rounding off of the treble

sound is pushing the warmth outward. However it's not overly obvious as the midrange has feel and detail. These cables, like the others from Chord, have great timing and rhythm. Julia Fordham's self-titled album is popped in to see how the bass would affect a deeper female singing voice and I'm glad to say it remains sweet on tracks like "My Lovers Keeper" and "Cocooned" with the vocals never becoming overly warm or reverberantly dull. The soundstage is a wide and expressive place, giving good atmosphere to all the recordings played and instruments are well placed. "Woman Of The 80's" bounces along with true pop verve, never getting harsh or muddled when things get complicated.

Heading for some 70's rock and Boston's self-titled outing, the classic "More Than A Feeling" hits out with concert like punch! Driving drums and percussion, cymbals crisp and not too splashy, the classic vocals coming across with power and feeling. Considering the age of the recording it still has great detail. My favourite track from the album is "Foreplay/LongTime", a track of two halves with a pseudo prog-rock instrumental start and electronic organ and piano with heavy crashing drums. The Clearway speaker cable is doing its best trying to keep it all together, only letting the fast, loud drumming get a little muddled and confused, but at the rate the skins and cymbals are getting struck it's not surprising it lets slip a little. Part two of the track

# A CHORD COMPANY BUDGET LOOM

is more 70's classic rock with a bounding bass rhythm leading the proceedings and with Brad Delp's singing taking the lyrics to the fans. Soundstage with the Clearway has good width and depth with a nothing seeming out of place or unnatural.

## CONCLUSION

This is a decent enough speaker cable from The Chord Company. It's sturdily built with the ARAY technology from its more expensive range added. My only gripe in its construction is the type of banana plugs used and the added cost of termination seems excessive given its moderate price unterminated. The sound of the cable is on the warm, rounded side and it can lose a little focus and detail when things get complicated and so may not appeal to the heavy rock fans out there.

**Build Quality: 8.5 (ignoring the plugs I don't like)**  
**Sound Quality: 8.0**  
**Value For Money: 7.8 (as tested, terminated. Cost of termination seems disproportionate to cable cost)**  
**Overall: 8.1**

## The Chord Company "Loom" Inc C-stream Streaming Cable



Adding the full selection of Chord Company cables to my system brought about the benefits of all the cables added together. Using all the cables ARAY technology in one hit gave the music great drive and verve.

Music from Jess Glynne's I Cry When I Laugh CD allowed the music to sing out with good timing and foot tapping rhythms, the warmer presentation doing wonders to smooth off the usual modern hardness I hear with many digital recordings. "Take Me Home" has great space around her fine vocal talents with instruments staying in the background, letting her voice project forward and giving the music an "alive" feeling. "Hold My Hand" pumps out with true disco diva bounce and funk – a powerful presentation, without becoming yobbish with the ARAY influence working together to bring about its benefits in timing and drive.

The C-Stream (10m) streaming cable was a bit of a conundrum for me to test properly. As I'm a bit outmoded when it comes to technology I don't "stream" as such. So best I could do was attach the C-Stream to my modem and Sony Blu-Ray player and connect it to my digital pre-amp via the Chord Digital coax. Playing various music videos and concerts via the Amazon Prime Service, the



# A CHORD COMPANY BUDGET LOOM

connection stayed stable and music had a good level of detail, picture quality via TV was good, colours rich and deep as was the music. Although I'm sure this Ethernet cable would really show its worth via a better dedicated streamer and using a high quality feed from the likes of Tidal/Spotify/Deezer etc... I must add one of these weird futuristic devices to my Christmas list next time round!!

## CONCLUSION

The Chord Company cables supplied are of good quality in their construction and build technology. The Phono RCA and Digital interconnects are possibly of a greater sonic quality than the Clearway speaker cable, although only for the fact that I believe both the RCA and Digital cable will suit more systems given their neutrality and I believe they would shine brighter with the next step up in speaker cables offered by Chord.

**Overall. 8.2/10**

**David Robson**

## DESIGNER'S NOTES

### C-line RCA (1M) (ARRAY)

The Chord C-line was developed to see if we could use an ARRAY conductor configuration in an affordable interconnect. The ARRAY conductor configuration was developed around the same time that we were working on the Tuned ARRAY configuration that we originally used on our – at the time – flagship Sarum interconnects. Traditionally, most Chord interconnects adopted a pseudo-balanced design. This means that rather than using a coaxial cable where the central conductor carries the signal and the return is made by the outer shield, the pseudo-balanced design uses two identical conductors – one for signal and one for return. By doing this, we are able to take the shield out of the signal path and currently our Crimson VEE 3 and Cobra VEE 3 cables use this configuration.

The ARRAY conductor configuration is different. There are three conductor runs within the cable and quite how these are connected remains a company secret. The reason for doing this is that during the development of the Tuned ARRAY cables, we were

quite astonished at just how coherent and musically involving digital music could be made to sound. The ARRAY version has a similar effect. The big discovery with Tuned ARRAY was really just how much cables got in the way of a system to produce properly coherent music.

The C-line is also the first analogue interconnect that Chord have had produced outside of the company. Although the RCA plug is a moulded design, the gold-plated components are the same as the ones we use on our VEE 3 series plugs. This means a direct gold-plating process. Conductors are oxygen free copper and multi-stranded. Shielding comprises of two over-wound foil braids.

### Clearway Digital RCA 1m

The Clearway Digital cable is another good example of how designs originally created for our high end cables can be used in more cost effective designs. The Chord Prodac has been our go-to affordable digital cable for many years. It was, like many digital cables, a coaxial design. The Tuned ARRAY conductor configuration was first developed as an attempt to reduce reflections and minimise noise within digital cables. It was the success of the Tuned ARRAY configuration that made us take the design principle and apply it to both analogue and other digital cables as well as power cables. Once again, it's about coherence.

The Chord Clearway Digital is our entry level digital cable to use the Tuned ARRAY configuration. The design of the cable is outwardly relatively conventional. Internally there is a high quality oxygen free copper conductor coaxial cable, featuring gas foamed polyethylene insulation as well as a combination foil and braid shield. What sets it apart is the introduction of a Tuned ARRAY conductor. What it does mean though is that like all Tuned ARRAY cables, the Clearway Digital has to be assembled by hand and because the application of Tuned ARRAY is absolutely critical, we use specialist cutting machines to provide a consistent accuracy. We think that the Tuned ARRAY configuration is extremely profound because of the level of performance, particularly in a musical sense, which it brings to digital systems.

### Clearway Speaker Cable

# A CHORD COMPANY BUDGET LOOM

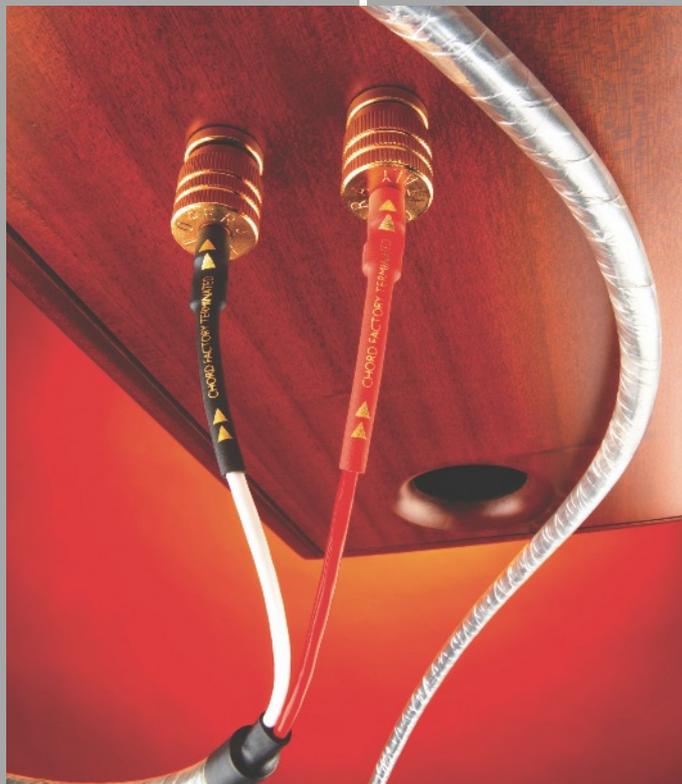
Chord have been producing shielded speaker cables since 2003. The reason for doing so goes back to the late 90s. Back then, several things were happening. First of all, switch mode power supplies were beginning to appear. More and more homes were beginning to use personal computers and also connection to the internet was rapidly increasing. This meant that homes and living spaces were beginning to fill with high frequency interference. A combination of personal experiences and conversations with dealers led to the realisation that high frequency interference appeared to be having a detrimental effect on the ability of systems to produce really coherent and involving music. What was particularly frightening about this was that whilst you can make a good argument that CD players of that time didn't do very well with producing coherent music, vinyl systems were also suffering.

The first response to this was to start experimenting with high frequency effective shields and the first cable to be produced using high frequency effective shielding was the Chord Signature. At that point though, it felt like we should start experimenting with shielding on speaker cables. Several early prototypes were produced and eventually we released the Chord Signature speaker cable – our first speaker cable to feature high frequency shielding.

The challenge then was to take the principle and apply it to other speaker cables throughout the range. The Chord Clearway is a replacement for the Chord Carnival SilverScreen. Carnival SilverScreen was a very successful cable and Chord Clearway is a fairly similar design. The chief differences are that Clearway features a heavier gauge stranded conductor (oxygen free copper) and critically, FEP conductor insulation. The choice of conductor

insulation has a profound effect on the performance of any cable; perhaps more markedly so with speaker cable than with interconnects.

FEP is a variation on PTFE. It has extremely similar performance characteristics. Our experience is that the choice of insulation material doesn't just influence the ability of the cable to carry a signal accurately; it also has a pronounced effect on the tonal characteristic of the cable. In truth, I suspect every cable designer sets out to produce a cable with as little tonal characteristic as possible. However, the fact is that most cable designs do have some influence on the tonal characteristics of the speakers it is connected to.



There is an interesting point here. When people change speaker cables, they often make judgements with a speaker in the

position that had been optimised for the speaker cable they were using. It is always worthwhile to experiment with the positioning of a speaker when a new speaker cable is introduced. It is very unlikely that the speaker will need to be moved more than a couple of inches in either direction but experimenting with this will help to produce the most coherent performance.

The two FEP insulated conductors are then encased in a PVC jacket – the idea being to reduce the effect of mechanical noise – before a two-layer foil shield is added and finally a protective outer jacket. It's often very easy to be pleased and excited about high end, high performance cables. The really exciting thing though is to take the design principles used on high end cables and work out how to apply them to more cost effective cables where material choices are constrained by cost. This we feel is what makes Clearway so special.

**Nigel Finn**

# RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY  
JANINE ELLIOT



I remember, way back in 1977 buying my PWB electrostatic headphones from KJ in Watford. I couldn't afford a Stax Lambda, and 14 years later, heavily mortgaged, I still couldn't. That year, 1991, Sennheiser made its boldest move with the 'Orpheus', a complete electroacoustic kit that was on another planet. Koss had been making electrostatics since 1968 with the ESP/6, and I remember much later trying the ESP/9s but found those very heavy and bulky, just as was the ESP/6. The reason for the weight was the fact that Koss believed it was preferable to put the transformers in the ear-cups rather than in a separate box next to your amplifier, like the Stax, and my PWB for that matter.

That all changed with the ESP/950's. Despite the hype from the electrostatic Sennheisers, most hifi fans only ever verbally connected the word 'electrostatic' with the word 'Stax', and the Orpheus never ran its life for long despite it being the world's most expensive and oft described 'probably the best ever headphone'.

**Janine Elliot continues her series of articles for Hifi Pig highlighting classic hifi from yesteryear. This month, given that Sennheiser have recently announced a new \$55 000 Orpheus, she turns her attention to the original Sennheiser Orpheus, first released in 1991.**

In its run of just 300 units, which were all sold very quickly, it was certainly the best ever engineered and most expensive headphone. Until 2016, that is. The announcement of a very new Orpheus comes at the same time that Kodak has announced their first Super 8 video recorder since 1982. But whilst the Super 8 is certainly a backward step (and one wonders 'WHY'), the new Orpheus is anything but. This, and its father, is the model serious reviewers all talked about, even if they never got to hear it.

Founded by a Dr Fritz Sennheiser and seven other engineers from the University of Hanover, the German company Sennheiser has produced some brilliant headphones over the years; notably the yellow-foamed HD414s, the HD600s which led to the HD650s, and later the HD800s. Their Orpheus is largely the work of Manfred Hibbing and contains the HE90 headset and HEV90 energiser/class-A valve amplifier. This model was never intended for mass sales; how could it at the price? No, Sennheiser had set itself the target of making the

best headphone in the world, whatever the cost. The Orpheus, looking like a HD600 with wooden wingnuts and supplied with beautifully designed valve amplifier, was a pure beauty, though I still felt at the time it didn't look quite as good as its hefty price-tag (the cost of four of them would buy you a house in Luton). In November 2015 Sennheiser again, like a scene from Groundhog Day, came out with the announcement of a no-expenses-spared headset pertaining to give the best ever sound quality, at €50,000 (again a quarter of the price of a 3 bed house) and with a frequency response from 8 to 100,000Hz. This one actually does look €50,000, though. Labelled their 'monument to sound' appropriately with a marble slab from Carrara in Italy (which apparently Michael Angelo also used in his sculptures) it has two black chromed brass boxes sitting rather out-of-place on the top. On switch-on firstly the knobs in the front come out to greet you, then the valves pop up from the box on the right and finally the headphones appear from under a lid of the box on the left. A sort of clumsy B&O, though still a cool idea, and as much fun as listening, I guess. This Orpheus is also labelled the HE1060/HEV1060 combination, though just like its predecessor, "Orpheus" will do nicely thank you. The original designer came out of retirement to help with the design of the 2016 version, too.

The original 1991 Orpheus cost \$12,500, and today 25 years later – if you were ever able to find one of the 300 up for sale – well, you would expect to pay at least twice that, perhaps as much as \$40,000 for a really good condition example. Looking more like a spaceship, everything about the original eschewed luxury; from the almost art-deco layout and chromed platform around the valves (almost copied by Manley and Shanling) to the fancy wood layers at the rim of the

electrostatic head



pieces.

This was no ordinary beast. The valve Class-A amp didn't have an on off button, but rather you had to insert a key into a lock and turn it clockwise to enable the unit, much like you start your car up in the morning. Good idea, then no one in your house would be tempted to switch it on, since the owner would undoubtedly keep the only key with that of their Porsche or Mercedes. If you lost your key then a call out to the AA would probably be required. The volume control was tastefully hidden at the top of the central front pillar holding the whole unit upright, and with a rated 118dB maximum output, these things can go pretty damn loud. There are provision for two headphones to be connected (an extra pair for your partner was

\$6500). Three inputs include analogue and optical (TosLink) and coaxial (S/PDIF) digital. The fragile electrostatic membrane includes a 1um-thick, gold-coated polymer foil. The electrodes are made of high-strength glass with a honeycomb of perforations. One side of each of the two electrodes in each headset is gold-plated which can be clearly visible through heavy stainless-steel protective mesh screens.

Where the new Orpheus is a minimalist and simplistic design, with even the three knobs on the front receding into the Marble slab when not switched on, the chrome fronted original Orpheus was a very dramatic design aimed at grabbing your attention (and your reflection) before you even started to listen. When I got to listen to the original Orpheus it did feel to me, I recall, to be amazingly clear mid and high frequencies, though the bass was very thin compared to the conventional cans I was used to wearing, and, from what I have heard, less than the Stax Lambda electrostatics that were gracing the hifi shops at the time. My PWB's were the best thing Peter ever made and with their less than clearest electrostatic top end made the Orpheus miles ahead of anything electrostatic I had heard until I bought my own Stax. That top end just amazed me and it felt, to me, like they could never be bettered. I am aware from those that have so far heard the new 2016 Orpheus that this one is even better. Perhaps, then, another even better one in 25 years' time?

**Janine Elliot**

# THE VOICE OF DOM!



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

I don't know what your own personal opinions are about hifi reviewers, but I am pretty sure that you have a mental picture of what it's like to be one, so I thought my latest blog should give readers a little insight into what it's like to be a hifi reviewer and if you aspire to becoming one, this might just change your mind. Consider a career in Crocodile hunting instead.

You probably think we are permanently surrounded by all manner of esoteric hifi components with price tags that read like the Starship Enterprise's odometer, with us positively bathing in these wonderful sounds day after day, week after week, month after month. Nope, you couldn't be more wrong if you tried.

Firstly, you really do have to bury your own personal listening preferences immediately, and trust me, that is not an easy thing to do. It is rarely, if ever pleasurable because it is WORK in the strictest sense of the word, the level of concentration required is immense and often very tiring. It can also

**Many readers may think the life of your average hifi reviewer is a non-stop round of high-end luxury, champagne breakfasts, fast cars and supermodel baubles. Think again says Dominic Marsh as he tells it like it really is.**

involve a lot of chopping and changing elements in your reference system to get the best sound out of the component under test to reveal its true performance envelope... and that brings a new

meaning to the word "synergy" in our world.

When you actually want to unwind with your own system and take a listen to your favourite music you have to go through the pain of putting your system back together

again and safely storing or packing away the review components...and that's before you can even begin listening! On the subject of which, you (or I) may not mind dozens of boxes heaped up all over the place because it is all part of the territory, but the significant other half is usually a lot less tolerant about having their home overflowing with mountains of boxes. When you have completed your listening sessions and written up the review, you let whoever sent the item to you know that you would like it to be collected as soon as possible. There have been one or two that need repeated prompting, so that that mountain of boxes has reached Everest proportions once or twice, much to the wife's annoyance.

So, the courier delivers a box or boxes, you crack them open and haul out some gorgeous item you relish playing with, yes? Nope, again. 99% of what gets sent to you is fresh off the production line or development department and it all needs running in before you even contemplate listening to it. One item is bad enough, but just before Christmas I had no less than 8 items, all minty fresh and most needed 400 hundred hours running in. EEEEEK! That was akin to spinning 8 plates at once and my electricity meter jolly near fell off the wall while this lot was merrily cooking away for hour after hour getting ready for the evaluations.

I am often asked why I don't write negative reviews and this is my definitive answer; yes there are some components submitted for review that are hopelessly inadequate and they are returned

to the manufacturer - smartish. "Why not review them anyway so we know what to avoid?" I hear you ask and the answer is simple when you are this side of the fence. Why should I or any other reviewer for that matter, waste an inordinate amount of time and hard effort reviewing a component that woofs, when there is lined up far into the distance some superb components that are more than worthy of high praise? Secondly, if the product gets withdrawn, then nobody will relate what was written in a review to a product that isn't being sold. Lastly, I do normally have the good grace to explain to whoever submitted the item why it doesn't meet minimum standards and most (but not all) take on board what you have said and modify the product accordingly, or withdraw it from the market completely. I am not in the business of savaging (or indeed over praising) anything for the sake of it and even the direst of components have had some redeeming features, but not I'm afraid sufficient enough to press ahead with a full review. Interesting enough, there have been a few instances where before I even receive the item I am literally bombarded with "technical information" which I would like to rename something else, but that would mean using a few choice/rude words, so I won't. In all of the instances of that so far, it has turned out that the products themselves were terrible, so I regarded it as no more than propaganda in an attempt to brainwash me into thinking I was getting something to review that was superb, when it clearly wasn't. My antennae start twitching immediately now when I get emailed a load of this

"information to help the review process". Hifi Pig also don't believe the majority of our readers want to read about poor hifi and from the outset our mission has been to "Snoofle Out What's HOT in Hifi"...and long may that continue.

Most of the time you walk a very narrow tightrope of what your own views are, what the readership demands, what the editor wants from you and what the people who submit items for review want, and sometimes it can all crash without warning and out with your own control. Boy, have I experienced some serious flounces from one and all of those sectors and it can be an error of only one wrong word and your backside gets toasted good and proper. Part of the reason for that is some manufacturers have literally put their entire heart and soul into the baby they have sent you and they all firmly believe they have created the best Hifi EVER and no mere reviewer is going to say anything otherwise. You might also think that we write effusive and fawning reviews to please whoever submitted the item(s). If that were the case there would be no point whatsoever in handing anything over to a reviewer and just let the marketing people loose on it to gush out the accolades in torrents.

Did I hear a cynical accusation of bribery or being given a small bung to say nice things? Hahahahahahahahaha! Fat chance! I have never been offered any inducements of any kind from anyone and never would accept one anyway, as my loyalties must also lie with the readership who actually do read and absorb

**THE VOICE OF  
DOM!**

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

(sometimes act upon) what I write. We do not get paid for reviewing in-kind or in hard cash and while I bemoan it many times on a personal level, it still gives me true independence to write whatever I like without bias or favour. Stuart our editor and owner of Hifi Pig has never yet altered or amended any of my reviews and we do lock horns from time to time over some of the things I write, but a conversation between us usually sorts things out and I much prefer that to having the red pencil unilaterally applied to my reviews.

I see myself as simply a pair of ears who can translate what I hear into the written word that you the reader can relate to, nothing more, nothing less. I suppose the real indicator of how enthusiastic I may get about any component is when I put my hand in my pocket and buy it. I read a fellow reviewer's comments a few days ago on how he approaches his reviews and he says he is like the friend or family member who recommends certain products, full in the knowledge that if it all goes pear shaped it's his neck on the block! There is a lot of merit in that.

Another thing that frustrates is the lack of good available language to use to describe a sound. Not THOSE words you naughty readers you, I mean using a bigger

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more varied palette of words, aside from the well worn ones like "incisive", "coherent", "musical" (whatever that means) and a dozen other frequently dished out subjective words that can mean different things to different people. They say that Eskimos have a word for each different type of snow and that extends to a fair good number as I understand it and we English have the one – snow, which is a close parallel to what I am trying to say about words that describe music I hear to an audiophile. I'm sure you all 'get' what I mean here.

One of the many quandaries I face almost on a daily basis is scoring a product. There is very often an imbalance to be found where a "budget" component exceeds expectations (The proverbial "giant killer") and actually gets a higher scoring than a more expensive component, even though the pricier product is probably better in every way than the cheaper component. We at Hifi Pig Magazine fret endlessly about this one and have tried to work out a much fairer yet

consistent system, but no workable ideas that readers can easily comprehend and understand have yet surfaced. OK dear readers, have you got any ideas you could share with us as how to achieve this particular goal? Send them to [stuart@hifipig.com](mailto:stuart@hifipig.com) and I'm sure he'll be in touch.

Given all that I have written above in this article, the burning question that needs to be asked is why, when it is such hard work, having your house perpetually cluttered up, not being paid, dealing with every complexion of emotions from manufacturers, distributors, PR agencies, dealers and not forgetting the readers, to all the other foibles the job entails, do I still want to continue writing reviews? I will tell you why. It is when someone, no matter who, takes the time and trouble to thank you for what you have written in a review, it's as simple as that. If a reader has bought a component based upon a review of mine and is delighted with it, saying I made their buying decision easier, then that pleases me. If a manufacturer calls me to say I have nailed it 100% in an evaluation, that pleases me. I try whenever possible to inject some light hearted humour into my reviews and if it entertains as well as informs, then I am over the moon when people tell me they had a real hoot reading it. That is a fair trade to me!

**Dominic Marsh**

# FIDELITY MATTERS

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



**I** was born in the fifties when valves were the norm for electronics, but by the sixties a new kid on the block came into town called the transistor and that changed our way of thinking and listening. As long as I have been involved in hifi the debate over whether valves are better than transistors (or vice versa) has gone on and is still a contentious issue to this day.

When I was eight years old (1964) my parents bought a Pye Black Box stereogram which had a valve amplifier and that was not unusual, but around the corner the transistor was about to burst onto the scene and revolutionise electronics completely. I remember the valve amp well and as a curious youngster had the unit in bits to see how it worked and tinker with it. My knowledge of electronics then was limited, but it didn't stop me messing! My next experience of a valve amp was my sister's boyfriend's hifi amp during a summer break when he brought it to our house. It was a Tripletone unit and, as it was a decent upgrade on the Pye unit and a true separate amp, I had a very

**Valves or solid-state? Solid-state or valves? The question that is always getting brought up in audio circles. Ian Ringstead looks at a bit of the history and some of his preferences.**

enjoyable summer playing with it.

When I bought my first amp in 1972 it was a cheap transistor unit as valves had all but died out by then, but it wasn't brilliant. Over the years I made continual changes to my system and all the amps were transistor based. I had the Meridian 101 pre amp and 103 power amp, which for the seventies was an exciting new design and served me well for a few years. I moved onto a Musical

Fidelity Dr Thomas power amp and used a Yamaha pre amp as I couldn't afford the Musical Fidelity pre amp. These amps were classic AB designs (see more about this later) but then in the early eighties a company called Krell changed our way of thinking and the KSA50 Class A amp turned the industry upside down and caused a lot of excitement and controversy. Designs like the Naim 250 were looked upon as the reference standard here in the UK,

## FIDELITY MATTERS

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but Krell transformed all that and I was so excited when a customer of mine bought a KSA50 and brought it into the shop for us to listen to. Well it certainly divided opinions, but I loved it. Class A wasn't new of course, after all Sugden were great protagonists of it, but it didn't come cheaply. Class AB still proved the most popular and affordable route in the eighties, but then valve amps started becoming popular again.

The thing with valve amps was they were expensive and cost a lot more than most decent transistor amps. Size and heat was another issue. The output transformers required by a valve amp meant they were heavy, bulkier and more expensive to manufacturer, not forgetting that valves were very hot in use and so not domestically acceptable to many people. I went to a show where when I walked into the room there was a very large and exotic SET valve amp and whilst it sounded great, it produced so much heat in the smallish room on a hot summer's day that I couldn't bear to stay in there for long at all. I have to say this alienated me against valve amps as being impractical in a domestic situation, but it didn't stop me admiring their sound. Audio Research is a legendary American valve amp company and every time I've heard their amps at shows they have sounded sublime, but the problem for me was their price! Oh well a lottery win maybe.

Valve amps in the eighties had an issue; reliability could rear its ugly head. Unless well designed and quality components were used, they could fail more easily than transistors and valves inherently

wear out and have a limited life. The valve amps we used to sell in the eighties were good, but they were expensive and inevitably often broke down. This doesn't mean transistor amps were sonically superior; just that they tended to be more reliable in use than their valve counterparts and as a retailer the last thing you wanted was an unreliable product, so we therefore shied away from valves for some years.

Not all amplifiers are the same and there is a clear distinction made between the ways their output stages operate. The main operating characteristics of an ideal amplifier are linearity, signal gain, efficiency and power output, but in real world amplifiers there is always a trade off between these different characteristics. Generally, large signal or power amplifiers are used in the output stages of audio amplifier systems to drive a loudspeaker load. A typical loudspeaker has a nominal impedance of between 4Ω and 8Ω, thus a power amplifier must be able to supply the high peak currents required to drive the low impedance speaker.

### A Little About Amp Classes

One method used to distinguish the electrical characteristics of different types of amplifiers is by "Class", and as such amplifiers are classified according to their circuit configuration and method of operation. Amplifier classes represent the amount of the output signal which varies within the amplifier circuit over one cycle of operation when excited by a sinusoidal input signal. The classification of amplifiers ranges from entirely linear operation (for

use in high-fidelity signal amplification) with very low efficiency, to entirely non-linear (where a faithful signal reproduction is not so important) operation, but with a much higher efficiency... whilst others are a compromise between the two.

Amplifier classes are mainly lumped into two basic groups. The first are the classically controlled conduction angle amplifiers forming the more common amplifier classes of A, B, AB and C, which are defined by the length of their conduction state over some portion of the output waveform, such that the output stage transistor operation lies somewhere between being "fully-ON" and "fully-OFF".

The second set of amplifiers are the newer so-called "switching" amplifier classes of D, E, F, G, S, T etc, which use digital circuits and pulse width modulation (PWM) to constantly switch the signal between "fully-ON" and "fully-OFF" driving the output hard into the transistors saturation and cut-off regions. The most commonly constructed amplifier classes are those that are used as audio amplifiers, mainly class A, B, AB and C and to keep things simple.

### Back To Transistor Amps

American companies like Mark Levinson, Jeff Rowland, Boulder etc. have certainly impressed me, but once again their quality doesn't come cheap. About ten years ago I discovered a new type of transistor amp design called class D. The company was Flying Mole, a Japanese offshoot of engineers who had worked for Yamaha.

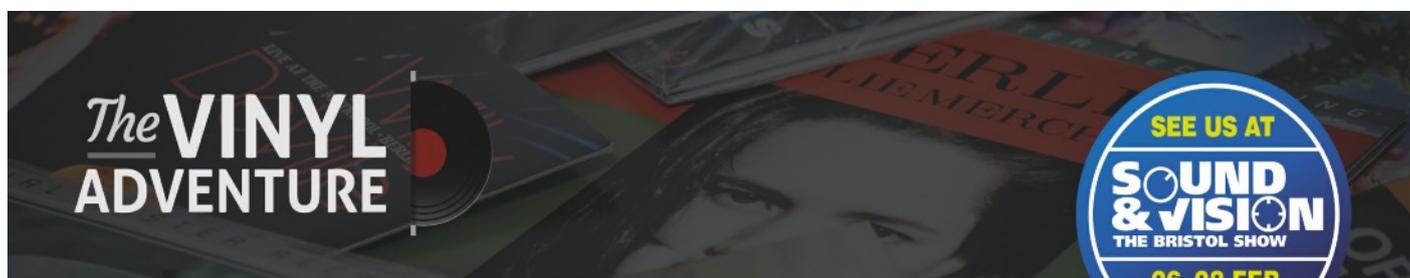
Here was a new design that was compact, powerful and very efficient. I heard the CAS10 model at Heathrow and I was immediately impressed, so much so that I purchased one. This was a lovely, compact, beautifully made integrated amp that was very clean sounding and detailed, but the press were divided, either praising it highly or being ambivalent. I personally really liked it and so did my friends, but class D was new then and it has taken a few years for it to be accepted as an alternative approach. Needless to say Audio Research, Jeff Rowland and a lot of other companies now use this design in some of their models. It's a design that has been refined and adapted in many ways by several companies and I believe is a brilliant addition at a cost effective starting point, although

some of the designs now aren't cheap, but certainly really deliver sonically. Class D has been adopted as a real alternative for many products in hifi, especially active sub woofers and active speakers because of their compactness and efficiency. Also they run fairly cool which is a real bonus and are cheap to run and green (so saving the planet). So where does this leave us in our debate on whether valves or transistors are better? I don't think there is an easy answer to this question. So many theories abound as to why amplifiers sound different that no one can agree. Peter Walker of Quad famously said "An amplifier should be a wire with perfect gain" and he eschewed many of the designs that came along after his original valve designs, then his classic 303

transistor amp and the 405 current dumping design. You will never get everyone to agree, after all we are human and, as they say in Yorkshire "there's nowt as queer as folk".

My recent experience with a modern valve amp design from PrimaLuna has shown me that the choice is entirely down to personal preference. There are great sounding designs from all the different classes of transistor and valve types. The world is your oyster and I suggest you keep an open mind to all the types and listen for yourself. Don't be prejudiced. Decide what price, qualities and practicalities suit you best in your room and system. You might be surprised at the outcome.

**Ian Ringstead**



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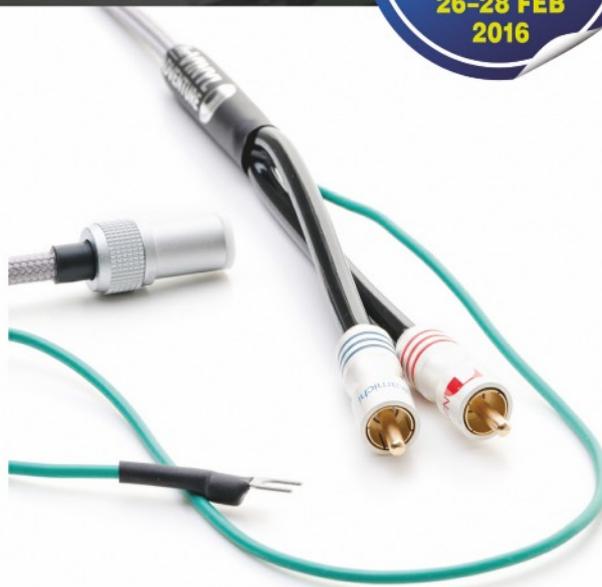
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# THE VIEWS OF STU!

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TANTRUM...BY STUART SMITH



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## Flying Saucers And Top Gear

So there I was the other night, sat in my favourite chair (the cat was feeling benevolent) with a glass of red wine and watching re-runs of Top Gear and Jeremy Clarkson was on the screen driving a car called the Disco Volanté (Italian for Flying Saucer, don't you know) which he reckoned cost about £600 000. The motorcar in question starts life as an Alpha Romeo 8C and then coach builders Carrozzeria Touring in Milan take it and transform it into something that looks completely different. It's an absolutely beautiful thing, but it's also a bit challenging looks-wise if you know what I mean...it is certainly not going to be immediately attractive to everyone.

Clarkson commented along the lines of "It makes you feel special. It's not the best car in the world, the brakes are spongy and you can see nothing out of the back

**High-End audio and why people buy into the whole concept is a complex subject...Stuart Smith talks about very expensive cars instead.**

window, but there is NOTHING that comes close to making you feel this special" and this got me thinking a bit as to why people buy into the whole concept of high-end audio...and also why some folk are determined to

question anything that costs over tuppence 'apenny!

### How Much?

I had a recent discussion on a Facebook group (do people really

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still read traditional forums any more) about a news item I'd published on Hifi Pig regarding the [Clearaudio Statement V2](#) turntable that costs 92 500 quid... without an arm or cartridge. I was being told that all a turntable had to do was be quiet and turn at, as near as damn it, the correct speed. Now I fundamentally do not agree with this argument I'm afraid, but that's really only half the story I think. Performance in absolute terms is only a part of the whole reason people are drawn to high-end audio, it's a much more complex process than that, and to be fair the

person I was having the discussion with fully understood this.

**Jackanory**

Let me tell you a little story. Are you sat comfortably? Then I shall begin. A few weeks ago we had a guy travel six hours to have a listen to a pair of pretty conventional, but quite nice loudspeakers in the form of the Audio Physic Avanti IIIs. He quite liked them, but they weren't for him and so we asked if he'd like to take a listen to the Avantgarde Duo XDs...he'd studiously ignored them to this point, despite them dominating the listening

room. He said yes, despite this meaning he'd be very late home, and then sort of walked around the room a bit bewildered and confused after we started playing some tunes. He was completely gobsmacked and speechless and when he came round from his reverie he tried to vocalize his experience. Now we've seen this reaction before and we've had it ourselves when listening to these speakers, but I know that this guy is now spoiled for life. He's not going to be able to go back to Paris and stop thinking about his experience and when he turns his current speakers on I know he's going to, at times, recall his

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experience in our room. This experience is not confined to just our speakers, of course, and I'm sure folk will have had similar things happen with lots of other gear. The point I'm making here is that I got as much pleasure out of the whole listening session as the Parisian did – a sort of reverse schadenfreude I suppose.

#### Machines For Joy

The speakers in question are just short of thirty grand in Euros which is a lot of money, but the cost of the speakers is only a small part of it. They, and lots of other high-end kit, are not just about the music that comes out of them, though it is something to behold – the ownership experience is much more complex than simply the sonic presentation that we happen to rather enjoy. It could be argued that we (I) get a much more emotionally charged connection when listening to music through these speakers and a lot to do with that is that we have done without other luxuries to buy them, but then there will be people for whom this kind of outlay is a drop in the ocean and they will still feel that connection and pleasure. Like I say, it's all very complex!

I could say, Like Clarkson intimates, that, like the Disco Volanté motorcar, the Duos (and other high-end products) are “A Machine For Joy” which Google Translate tells me the Germans would call “Eine Maschine geschaffen, um Freude zu geben” which fair trips of the tongue doesn't it? I don't have to even

turn our speakers on to gain pleasure from them, they can just sit there at the end of the room and if I catch them out the corner of my eye I get a feeling of delight at just having them there...not quite a “crisis” but you get my drift. I got the same feeling of happiness when I got my first second hand Linn Sondek LP12 when I was nineteen or so. I'm sure it's the same for folk who are lucky enough to own nice cars – they surely get a degree of satisfaction and joy just knowing that in the garage lurks something rather special. We had this conversation with our youngest son after I'd mentioned I had been speaking to the people at Carrozzeria Touring and his comment was along the lines of “I can't drive yet, but I'd love to have one of those and I'd be happy to just look at it in the garage”

Some will disagree fundamentally with my whole premise and say that all that matters in audio is the sound that comes out of the speakers and that they could build something that sounds as good or better for twenty seven and a half pence, but this to me is to totally miss the point of high-end audio. Yes the products have to sound exemplary and yes I'm sure the sum of the parts of lots of high-end gear is nowhere near the selling price demanded, but so what! I could sit in my listening space with a pair of cobbled together horns made from bits of this and bobs of that and I MAY be able to sonically emulate the Duos to a degree, but I can

guarantee anyone reading this article that I would not get the same level of exhilaration and delight from them as I do the Duos, though I also recognise that some get gratification from the whole “I made it myself” process. Like someone that owns the Disco Volanté motorcar, I know that I have something that not everyone is going to have; the speakers were specified a particular colour, they feel magnificently crafted, they are tactile, they are numbered, they look freakin' awesome...and I really love all this stuff and this level of detail, and that's before they are fired up. And I don't think it is the prices that these high-end items command that exhilarates me and others!

I'm immensely proud of these speakers (as well as other relatively high-end audio paraphernalia we own) and everyone that comes into the house is treated to the experience of sitting down in front of them and enjoying them... and I know that if I owned a beautiful car I would want others to experience my bliss and would want take them for a drive in it. This is not willy-waving or a “look at me and how clever I am” situation, I genuinely want to share the moment when someone sits down in front of our speakers and has an experience they've never had before...I know when I've been offered the opportunity to hear gear I could never expect to be in a position to buy I've jumped at the

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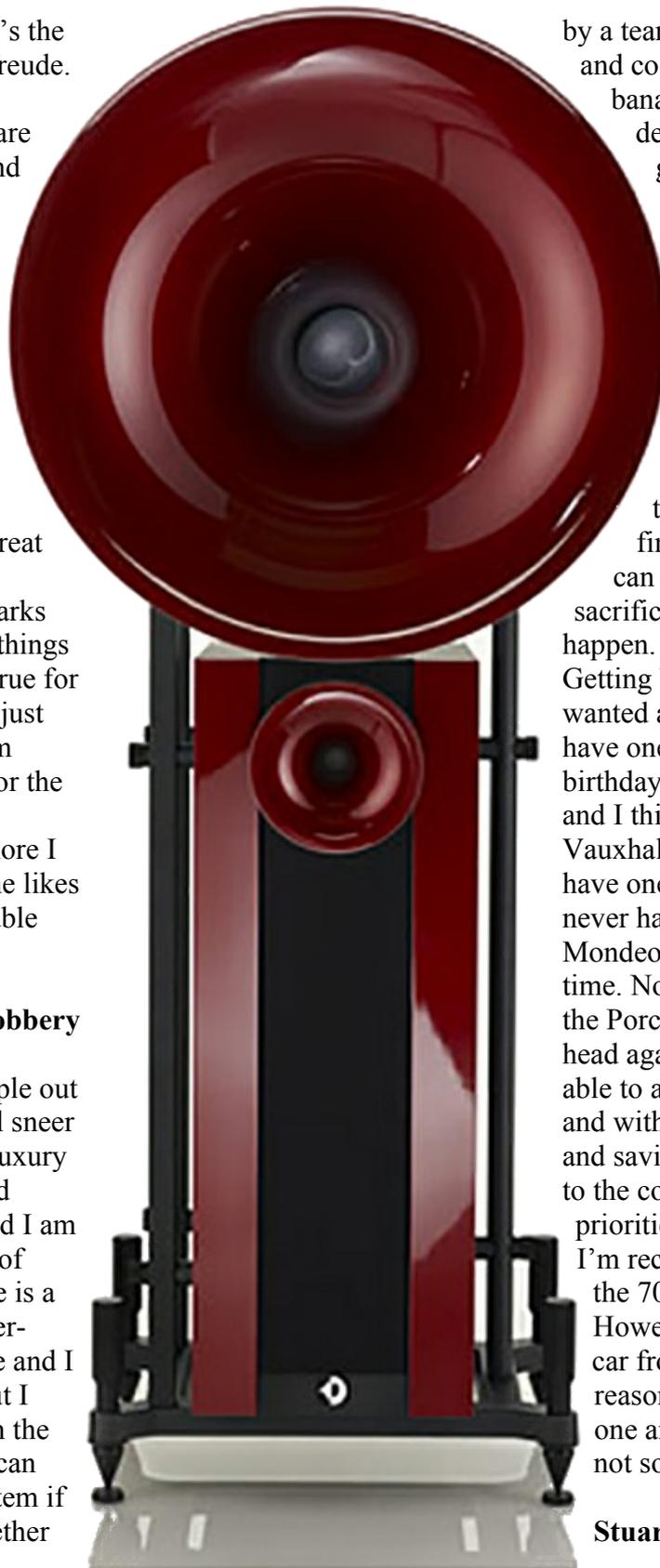
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chance. As I said before, it's the exact opposite of schadenfreude.

Like the car, our speakers are pretty visually imposing and they are not going to be to everyone's taste, but I don't give a monkey's toss about that. I love the way they look and that is all that matters to me, as it's me that's laid out for them. I don't personally really "get" the Disco Volanté visually, but I can appreciate it is a thing of great beauty, of meticulous craftsmanship and that it harks back to a time when these things mattered, and the same is true for high-end audio I believe – just look at the latest amps from someone like D'Agostino or the GS150 from Audio Research...there's loads more I could mention including the likes of the Airforce One Turntable (below).

**Chimps And Reverse Snobbery**

There are a number of people out there in the world who will sneer at people wanting to own luxury cars, have nice watches and possess high-end audio, and I am well aware that in a world of inequality and hunger there is a large degree of opulent over-consumption going on here and I do get that...I really do, but I think there's a real sense in the audiophile world that you can only truly have a great system if it looks like it was put together



by a team of short-sighted chimps and costs no more than a bag of bananas. There's a good degree of reverse snobbery going on here I reckon, and whilst I love to get a bargain as much as the next man and applaud and celebrate those companies who manage to make great sounding kit at affordable prices, there is nothing wrong to my mind in having gear at the other end of the financial spectrum if you can afford it, or want to sacrifice other luxuries to make it happen.

Getting back to cars, I've always wanted a Porche and I said I'd have one before my thirtieth birthday...that never happened and I think at thirty I was driving a Vauxhall Astra. Then I said I'd have one before forty and that never happened either...possibly a Mondeo or other rep-mobile at this time. Now I'm approaching fifty the Porche question has raised its head again, and whilst I may be able to afford a used one (at a push and with considerable cost cutting and saving elsewhere), I've come to the conclusion that I have other priorities and that's fine by me, I'm reconciled to never having the 70s 911 Targa in the garage. However, I can still admire the car from a distance, feel no reason to lecture those who own one and still sort of secretly (or not so secretly now) covet one.

**Stuart Smith**

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# BIRD'S EYE VIEW



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

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## The New Black

Happy New Year to all you hifi and music enthusiasts out there. What better time to have a think about what High Fidelity treats lie in store for us this coming year?

Just as in fashion and interior design there are trends that appear in the hifi industry, whether that's specific sectors of the industry that are on the up or a colour that seems to dominate everything hifi. Savvy hifi companies are rapidly realising that hifi is coming back in the home in a BIG way. No longer banished to the 'Man caves' of old, hifi today is proudly put on show in the living room. It's not just the traditional, stereotypical audiophile that is buying hifi, younger more image conscious types are getting in on the act and they want their hifi to be stylish and as good to look at as it sounds. Those companies who have clicked this are looking to interior design and fashion and

## Linette Smith takes a look into her crystal ball and see's if she can pluck out some trends for 2016 out of the swirling mists.

picking up on market trends. It wasn't really that long ago that most hifi was either black, silver or wood veneer boxes. Recent years have seen white become the new black and there has been a definite acceptance that bright colours and more adventurously shaped hifi is perfectly liveable with. Retro curves and mid 20th century design has been heavily influential, look at Davone speakers or the BeoLab 90, these would look completely at home in the clean, design classic interiors of recent years.

## Coppering Up

In 2015 we were seeing copper in interior design everywhere, from high-end designers to IKEA, so it's unsurprising that hifi manufacturers have picked up on this material...and not just for its electrical properties I'd wager. At the end of 2015 we were treated to the limited edition 'Expert' amplifier, Le 900 (or Original D'Atelier) from French style champions Devialet, in a beautiful copper finish. Brands like KEF and D'Agostino have proudly

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sported their touches of copper for a long time and we will see a lot more copper on the outside of hifi in 2016 I reckon. Confirming the trend, Astell&Kern, another brand known for their stylish design, have just kicked off the new year with a limited edition copper version of their flagship AK380 high-res music player, hewn from a solid block of the metal.

Of course 2016 is an Olympic year (does it really feel like four years since London 2012?) and the Olympics always brings out fashion's love of 'going for gold' so, along with copper, expect to see multi toned metallics, which

are set to feature heavily in interior design for the next few seasons, including rose golds, white golds and bronze, sparkling up our hifi. All that gold and copper could come over a bit 'bling' but interior designers are predicting a big use of natural materials to temper the metal. Words like 'Artisanal' are being used a lot; think chunky woods with natural stone in warm tones, and comforting fabrics, creating a safe, cocooning and relaxing sanctuary in the home. Hifi to fit into this kind of environment needs to be beautiful and subtle, adding to the ambience of the room rather than fighting against it. The Linn series 5

collection featuring their Fabrik speaker covers plays perfectly to this trend, as do solid wooden hifi racks that are as well made as the rest of the furniture in your home.

**The Whole Package**

Customers really do want the whole package, beautiful, ethically produced products that have a thoughtful and creative design to them, fit for purpose but also a pleasure to own from the moment of opening the box. People are not afraid to spend a bit more to get these qualities. The public in general is becoming more aware of how and where what they buy to eat, wear or put in their homes

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is made...they want to know that what they have just bought has been made by fairly paid, well looked after people using quality materials that will last.

That 'built to last' ethic is really important for hifi, so a timeless design that will still look classic in a few years time and be backed up by a good after sales guarantee will be more well received than cheap tat that breaks before Christmas. The 'Made in...' label will continue to be very important to hifi purchasers this year. Just as the public wants to know that their sausages came from a pig that lived a good life on a local farm, provenance is important in the hifi world. Having visited hifi HQ's and factories in the UK and France such as The Chord

Company, Roksan and Focal, we have seen that these are the kind of companies that value their workforce and invest in them. They are proud to have their 'Made in France, England, Germany, USA etc' label on their products and the public want to buy them because it signifies high quality, non mass-produced products with provenance.

**Boutique Brands**

'Sustainability' is also a buzzword for 2016 with people looking at what they have and re-purposing and recycling rather than throwing away and manufacturers that have green credentials will do well this year. People are craving individuality and are looking to more Boutique and Artisan brands

for their hifi purchases too – smaller companies with a meticulous eye for detail and for the customer experience should flourish this year if they can deliver the goods. The whole sustainability and recycling and buying good quality that lasts is being seen in fashion, interiors and product design. Rather than buy loads of cheap throwaway clothes, buy a few key pieces that last. Don't chuck away your settee, recover it. This is leading to an eclectic style in peoples homes and wardrobes and that fits really nicely with the way a lot of us buy hifi. Many people have vintage components and then buy some new pieces so the system evolves organically rather than just buying the whole thing new in one go.

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### Really Reel?

You couldn't read anything about hifi or music last year without the mention of vinyl...it was everywhere, even in mainstream newspapers and websites. When supermarkets start selling vinyl again, it's no longer the preserve of audiophiles and hipsters. Vinyl is set to carry on its crusade for format dominance this year too, so expect many more turntables to be sold and to make their way back into the family living space. Probably not quite mainstream this year but definitely making a strong resurgence with audiophiles is the Reel to Reel tape. There seems to be new companies springing up bringing us a wide variety of musical styles in the high quality format. Horch House are even launching the first new Reel to Reel player to be introduced in years, they are aiming to have the prototype available at High End Munich 2016 in May.

Reconditioned, vintage players from the likes of Studer and Tascam are flying off the shelves and are often used in films and TV series as the ultimate mark of audiophile 'coolness'. However the price of R2R tapes is likely to keep them as a niche product, targeted at the hardcore audiophile, for the foreseeable future.

### Heady Heights



If vinyl had a competitor for being the hot trend of 2015 then it had to be Headfi. It seems that you can't go anywhere these days without finding people sporting pretty decent headphones. Yes, of course those Beats are still around, but take a look at what's on, or in, the ears of a lot of the 'bright young things' and you will probably see more 'proper' headphones from brands that make well respected products. Sennheiser caught the headlines with the launch of the mark 2 Orpheus, so are they setting the tone for the trend in very high priced headphones to continue this year? Probably, but the high quality, more affordable headphone market will, I imagine, be the fastest growing sector...it's unnerving to be walking about with a couple of grand on your ears, you may as well have a 'mug me for my expensive headphones!' sign on your head.

Brands like Audeze are dripping down their technological advances from their top of the range products to bring their brand to people who may previously gone out to buy something much more mass market. The launch of the Sine makes Audeze much more budget friendly and the big ones can stay at home without the need for a body guard. Along with the headphones comes a whole bundle of headfi products, after market cable upgrading is going crazy, as is the portable market for digital audio players, DACs and headphone amplifiers. Chord did it with the Mojo late last year and expect more gorgeous and pocket friendly releases in 2016, with hifi companies packing their cutting-edge technology into tiny packages to give 'on the move' hifi junkies the same quality as they get at home.

**Linette Smith**

**Audio Cable Award Grand Slam**  
Gaining six products of the year in 2014

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# DEALERS VIEW

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

**P**eople open an AV business for a multitude of reasons. These include love of music and cinema and a love of the gear that makes all of this happen. Seldom do I hear my fellow dealers say “I want to help people.” And there is the rub. These articles I’ve written are usually outwardly focused; meaning they’re addressed at the customer. This article talks about something that every one of us have experienced in some form or fashion; customer service. People are quick to tell you about their latest horror story of dealing with some vendor. Furthermore, their experiences are topped with another terrible example of poor service by those listening. I would love to tell you that AV dealers are among the best at serving the customer. But that’s not the case I’m afraid. The dealer network needs to take a long hard look at how we are treating our customers and how we can change and innovate.

People ask me what’s the latest breaking technology that we are selling. I pause and say our bi-monthly training classes. That

**Mike Twomey continues his monthly look at the hifi and audio business from the perspective of the dealer. This month he focuses on that all important, but oft' forgotten aspect of the business that is customer service and why it is so important to the industry.**

always gets a quizzical look. We view free training classes as a customer service technology. Because...the customer is or should be the most important focus in this business. Without happy and curious customers, technology matters little. Dealers (and this includes my little dealership) should remember this everyday as we open our doors. I think that this has been forgotten

in the AV business. Here are thoughts that dealers should remember and enact daily.

#### **Remember the Dealer’s Rôle...**

The dealer is the customers’ first point of contact for the AV industry. Like it or not we have great influence in how the customer views the AV business as a whole. So that said we need to

## DEALERS VIEW

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

take care to thank the customer for coming in and actually listen to the customer. Listening is a key part of making sales. Our role is to represent the lines we sell and to educate the customer while making sure that the customer's visit is an enjoyable one. Our role is not to tell the manufacturers how to make their products. Rather our role is knowing what our customers like, how they spend their time and their hard earned money and how we can fit into this puzzle.

### Walk a Mile in Your Customers Shoe...

Dealers are selling equipment of all ranges of complexity to a wide range of customers that may or may not have the skill set to understand or use these products. The customers are experts in their field not ours. They rely on us to explain the equipment we sell and how to enjoy it all. Our little shop is located near a large medical complex. We're fortunate to have a number of doctors as customers. I was working with a neurosurgeon last week who was looking at Digital to Analogue Conve

rters (DACs) as he wanted to start doing computer based audio. Here was a man who spent 4 years in college, 4 years in medical school, 3 years in surgical residency and then two more years learning neurosurgery specific procedures. Clearly this is a highly intelligent man. We spent over two hours with him explaining how computer based audio works. Then we set up a system in his home to try. Will we make a sale? I hope so but perhaps not. Regardless I think that this our obligation to help him in every way possible.

### When Products Fail.

If you've been in this business for any length of time you will have firsthand experience in handling defective products and dealing with angry owners. This is where dealers need to show their true value to the customer. We think it's important to

understand fully what's wrong, how the error happened and most importantly to acknowledge the customers frustration

ion. There are too many situations in everyone's lives where companies provide shoddy customer service and view defective returns as an incredible nuisance. A good dealer has strong relationships with the manufacturers whose lines we sell. This is the subject of a different article perhaps but the point is this, if a dealer has a strong relationship with the manufacturer getting problems solved is significantly easier. Returns done well can show a dealers value-add and enhance the reputation of the manufacturer. When possible we offer loaner products while the customer's defective product is being repaired. If a dealer doesn't want customers shopping on the internet, this is one of the ways to prevent it; true value add and focused customer service.

### Taking the High Road...

There are times when being an AV dealer is not pleasant. My suspicion is that your job has similar moments. At least a few times each month we have customers who attempt to return items not purchased at our store or the product has been abused. Thankfully in our case these instances are rare but they do they occur. I think it's important to

take great care in dealing with this customer. To this

end I think

listening is



more important than speaking. Usually we get unloaded on. I let the customer vent and then turn the conversation towards fixing the issue. I ask the customer if they purchased the product here. If the answer is no or no answer is given, I try to get the support number of the manufacturer so

that the customer will have an avenue to get the product repaired. Sometimes a customer will demand a refund without a receipt. I ask if they recall who they worked with here and on what date. I then do a query of our sales in that corresponding period giving the customer the benefit of the doubt. If the search comes up empty I reluctantly state that our policy on returns for cash is based on the customer having a receipt and within our standard return period. But I also offer to call other retailers who may have dealt with this customer. Once a year or so we get an abusive customer who raises his voice at me or our staff and is completely unreasonable and out of line. I have an obligation to protect my employees from abusive situations like this. I will ask this type of customer to leave. I can count on one hand the number of times that this has occurred in 14 years of business. There are some customers you just cannot help. recognizing this customer and working with him or her takes time and challenges your own

## **There are some customers you just cannot help. recognizing this customer and working with him or her takes time and challenges your own patience and sense of humour**

patience and sense of humour. But it also makes me appreciate the vast majority of our customers who are great to work with.

### **The Value of Two Words ...Thank You**

If you want to change how people view your business, say thank you as much you can. Nordstrom is an American high end retail chain that views being polite to the customer as marketing tool. If you have ever been in a Nordstrom store, you will know what I mean. You're greeted enthusiastically everywhere you go in the store. AV dealers need to adopt this customer service model. Again we sell complex gear. It's up to the dealer to explain how the gear works and to answer fully any customer questions. Saying thank you to a customer and inviting them to return are keys in how the customer views his experience at our store.

### **Changing the Culture...It's about Music and Film**

Customers who take time out of their day to come here are almost always enthusiastic music and cinema lovers. Yes they like the gear that makes it all happen but enhancing music is usually their goal. So I always ask the customers what they are listening to and make a list. We publish this list in

our newsletters of what people are listening to (of course not what Stuart Smith is listening to but that's a given). People like this and will add their own recommendations. It's about the music....don't forget that Mr. Dealer!

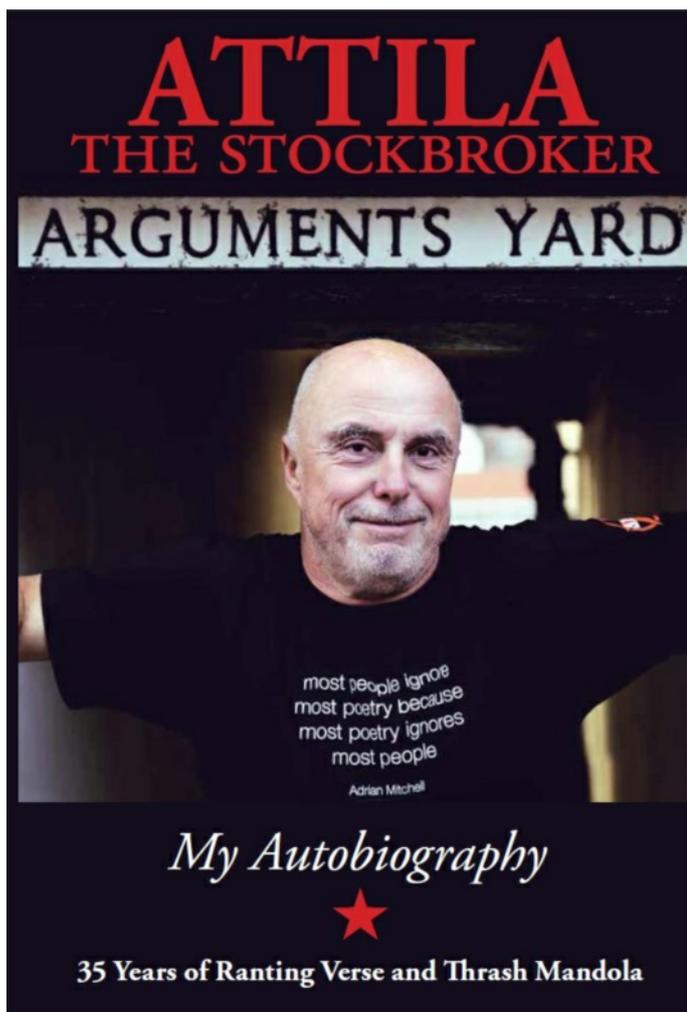
### **Teaching Customer Service....Setting the Tone**

If dealers want to change the tone of the business to be more customer focused we have to get the team together and talk about how we treat our customers and what we want to be known for. We can have the best products made but if we're indifferent to our customers we will fail. It's important to lead by example. I judge myself and everyone who works here on how we treat our customers. Our team knows this. So thank you for taking the time to read this. I wish you a happy, prosperous new year where your AV dealer treats you superbly.

**Mike Twomey owns [Big Kids Toys AV in Greensboro NC.](#)**

## MUSIC REVIEWS

### Attila The Stockbroker – Arguments Yard (35 Years of Ranting Verse and Thrash Mandola) Cherry Red Books



Ok, the first album review of 2016 isn't an album at all but we won't let that get in the way of things shall we!

On the front of Arguments Yard there's a picture of Attila wearing a black T Shirt that has a quote on it and the quote says "Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people" It's a quote by Adrian Mitchell and I like it. It pretty much hits the mark because when most folk think of poetry they think of poncey aristos writing guff that has about much relevance to them as something with no relevance whatsoever. For me at least this

perspective of poetry shifted a little with the advent of the likes of John Cooper Clarke and Attila The Stockbroker. Gone was the stuffy old crap and to replace it came poetry with attitude that spoke directly to me and with wit and with humour. With the advent of punk, poetry, although still on the sidelines of interest, suddenly became much more pertinent and with a message I and many others could relate to.

Some of you will know the name Attila The Stockbroker, but there will be many more who won't have a clue. He's not your archetypal poet by any stretch of the imagination (all la-di-dah and stuffy)..certainly not! He's acerbic, caustic and a right royal pain in the arse for the folk that get on the wrong side of his political beliefs or want to bugger about with his football team's ground. He's a "ranting" poet and Arguments Yard is the story of his life from primary school onwards and it's a bloody good read!

Attila's is a life that has been lived (since leaving home on the arrival of his step Dad on the scene) very much on his own terms and with punk's DIY ethic very much to the fore. He's been flavour of the month (as he calls it) with the music media of the day, but has managed to keep his feet firmly planted on the ground and has maintained a career in poetry, performance and music with little help from the establishment and this has to be applauded.

I thoroughly enjoyed Arguments Yard...it struck a chord (one of three) as it talks about stuff I know about and was involved in – Anti Fascist Action, direct action, punk and less mainstream politics. Attila even mentions the "legendary" Bunker in Sunderland where I've seen a good few gigs (including the first time Leatherface played an impromptu gig (RIP Dickie) right after Conflict finished... I think), recorded a record, had a studio and a record shop. The book has stories of fisticuffs and stand offs with fascists where things could have got right out of hand and the story of the direct action at Focus DIY is pure genius, but there is much more to Arguments Yard than a collection of punk rock anecdotes from a denizen of the left.

You get to feel a good sense of the man behind the mouth with this book – the caring son and the vulnerable partner - and this was good to read. It

## MUSIC REVIEWS

would have been much easier (and less painful I imagine) to write an autobiography focusing on only the “public face” of Attila, but there are moments in this book that will pull at your heartstrings, stories of everyday struggles with family illness and of coming to terms with difficult personal situations and it’s all the better for it.

For folk of a certain age and involved in punk in its broader sense, Arguments Yard will resonate. There are stories of life on the road (he's been all over the place), of Joesph Porter’s sleeping bag (whoda thunk there were other folk who liked Blyth Power), of visits behind the Iron Curtain before the fall of the wall and it’s all written in a way that manages to steer well clear of becoming all preachy and what not, which would have grated a bit.

Of course there are smatterings of Attila’s poems throughout the book and these will give you a taster of what you can expect to hear at a live performance...you will want to go see Attila after reading this and you still can catch the arse end of his current tour.

I began this “review” talking about the quote on the front of Attila’s T Shirt about poetry and I’ve not tried to write anything since I was about 16/17 (and it was all crap then) but I thought I’d “have a go” (in the true spirit of punk) and end with a poem myself...in for a penny, in for a pound and all that. I apologise in advance to all concerned.

Attila The Stockbroker is a poet and ranter  
extraordinaire

He’s a bit of an arsey type, you know a bit ... au  
contraire

He loves his footy and he supports Brighton and  
Hove Albion

But let’s not hold that against him coz he likes his  
real ale...oft by the gallion

He hates the fascists, the right and particularly  
loathed Thatcher

But behind all this gob there’s much more to his  
stature

He’s done what many couldn’t and wouldn’t... and  
then some

Coz when she was sick he took time out and cared  
for his Mum

He has a band called Barnstormer, they’re medieval  
punk

From what he says in this book they’re often quite  
drunk

But this books a bit more personal and at times you  
will feel sadder

And Attila I hope all goes well with the bladder

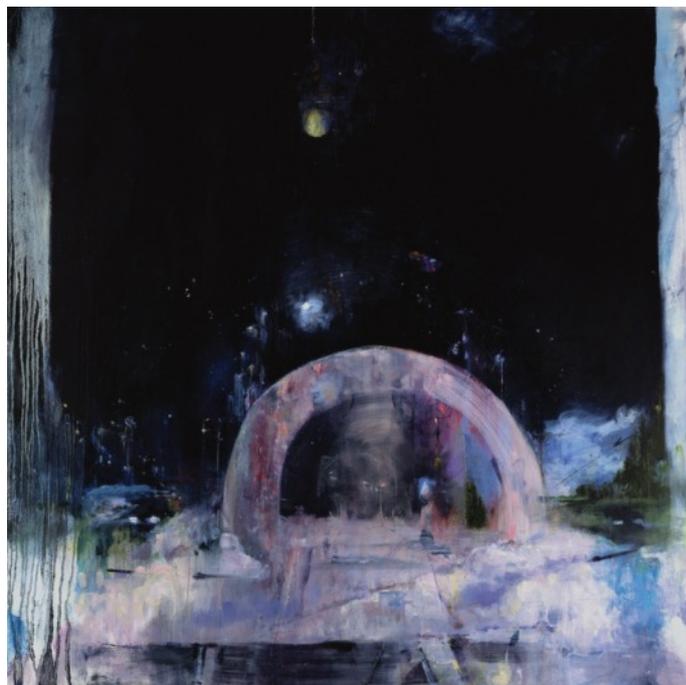
Ok, you get the picture and I’ll stop now coz I’m  
certainly no Bard

But you really should go out and buy Attila’s  
Arguments Yard

Out now...[Go buy it!](#)

Stuart Smith

### Daughter – Not To Disappear (4AD Records)



**B**ittersweet, fragile, sad, angry, reflective – collectively these are all emotions which neatly lay the groundwork for Daughter’s sophomore album ‘Not To Disappear’. Though the band’s sound has developed since 2013’s highly successful debut ‘If You Leave’, it has not progressed so much that you would now struggle to recognise it. I guess the overriding initial message here is “if it isn’t broke then don’t fix it”.

The key to enjoying this album is in dedicating enough time. Unlike the debut’s immediacy and ability to pull you in during the first couple of auditions, I’ve found that it’s taken me several

## MUSIC REVIEWS

sessions to fully immerse myself into this record. It's somehow more expansive, more widescreen perhaps.

Some elements are unchanged – Elena Tonra's voice, for instance, once again sits softly spoken atop the instrumentation. There's certainly a fragility to this hushed voice but also a pent-up anger struggling for release. "I hate living with you, I should get a dog or something", Tonra sings during 'Alone / With You'. At the same time, Daughter now very definitely feels like a collaborative whole rather than simply a vehicle for Tonra's song writing, as possibly indicated by some of the band's early EPs.

**It's somehow more expansive, more widescreen perhaps.**

'Numbers' was one of the first tracks to appear a couple of months back. It somehow feels like the glue between the first and second albums. There are elements of both familiarity and also experimentation within this track. The same backwards guitar and reverberation are in place, just as they were on 2013's 'Human', but everything drops back for the chorus, leaving just a barely-there synth and Tonra quietly announcing "I feel numb, I feel numb in this kingdom".

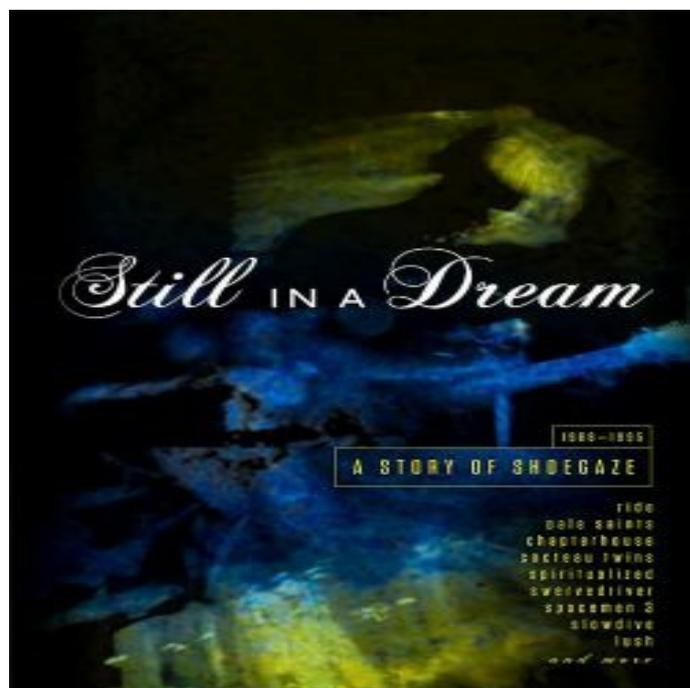
'Mothers' neatly demonstrates how a lot can be derived from just a little. An understated melody winds itself around sparse instrumentation and in doing so delivers one of the album's standout tracks. 'No Care' changes the whole context of the album – there's a sudden urgency injected within this track, helping it to sound something like Radiohead on sleeping pills.

I don't think there are any real surprises herein. Existing Daughter fans will find much to like but whether newbies will be swayed by 'Not To Disappear's charms remains to be seen. They really should – because there are plenty of reasons to cherish this album.

Out Friday 15th January

**Paul Lockett**

### Various – Still In A Dream: A Story Of Shoegaze 1988-1995 (Cherry Red)



Wikipedia has this to say about the genre that is Shoegaze "Shoegaze is a subgenre of alternative rock that emerged from the United Kingdom in the late 1980s and reached peak popularity in the early 1990s. The style is typified by significant use of distortion, feedback, obscured vocals and the blurring of component musical parts into indistinguishable "walls of sound".

The term "shoegazing" was initially devised by the British music press as a gibe meant to ridicule the stage presence of a wave of groups who stood still during live performances in a detached, introspective, non-confrontational state, often with their heads down; the heavy use of effects pedals also contributed to the image of performers looking down at their feet during concerts."..so now you know!

The whole movement sort of passed me by first time round, but then listening through this album I realise that, despite being in full on house and techno mode for the whole of this period, I must have been a bit of an unwitting fan of the genre as I had a good few records by bands on this album. House Of Love,

# MUSIC REVIEWS

Cocteau Twins, Spacemen 3, Loop, Pale Saints, Slowdive and more were in my collection, and some still are. This is Sunday afternoon comedown music of the highest order and I guess this is where I was first made aware of it.

**Take a listen to many of the 82 tunes on this series of discs and yes, you're transported back to a downhearted and contemplative yesteryear, but by the same token this is real and creative music that is still eminently listenable today.**

Still In A Dream is out the 29th January on Cherry Red and it represents an absolutely superb introduction to the Dream Pop scene, spread as it is over five CDs. Musically you get a distinctly indie, melancholy, psychedelic, and I would argue British sound that crossed the pond and spawned a whole host of acts. The first disc has your classic and inspirational bands from the UK, with later discs taking in a wider collection of groups.

Along with the five CDs you get a book with loads of memorabilia from the scene along with 12 000 words of notes and biographies from Neil Taylor.

It's easy to look at this kind of collection as little more than a nostalgic trip down a not too distant memory lane, and it is to an extent! However, Still In A Dream highlights that Shoegaze, Dream Pop (call it what you will) represented credible musicians, creating art that is still pertinent today. Take a listen to many of the 82 tunes on this series of discs and yes, you're transported back to a downhearted and contemplative yesteryear, but by the same token this is real and creative music that is still eminently listenable today.

Very highly recommended and a series of discs that will get a lot of play here!

Stuart Smith

## David Bowie – Blackstar



"A blackstar need not have an event horizon, and may or may not be a transitional phase between a collapsing star and a singularity."

As the world now knows, Blackstar was released two days before Bowie's death. As such it represents something a little more poignant than it ordinarily would have and it became his first US number one pretty much immediately. As far as swansongs go, Blackstar is somewhat spectacular and, knowing what we now know, it is clear that Bowie was well aware of his impending demise with the music and songs being introspective and somewhat sombre, but you know what, Blackstar also manages to be uplifting and rousing.

Blackstar pulls in bits of jazz, drum and bass, and more leftfield pop and it will challenge (didn't Bowie always challenge what was expected of him) listeners expecting radio friendly and accessible tunes, it manages to be both epic and reserved at the same time.

Blackstar is a beautiful record that really doesn't need my review or recommendation. It is going to be bought by fans and music lovers whatever, and to say more than I have said would be superfluous.  
**David Bowie - 8 January 1947 – 10 January 2016**

## MUSIC REVIEWS

### Spirits Burning – Starhawk



**S**pace Rock, I LOVE Space Rock and Spirit's Burning are a bit of a who's who of the genre. The albums are put together from a disparate group of over 45 musicians all overseen at a distance by American producer Don Falcone.

Let's have a look on who is on this record and you'll get an idea of what you are likely to be getting. Daevid Allen, Dave Anderson, Alan Davey, Paul Hayles, Jerry Richards, Nik Turner, Bridget Wishart, Robert Berry, Keith Christmas, John Ellis, Kev Ellis, Matt Malley, Nigel Mazlyn Jones, Pete Pavli, Ken Pustelnik, Billy Sherwood, Judge Smith, Steffe Sharpstrings, Cyrille Verdeaux, Steve Yorke... are all on the record and whilst it may be that some of the names there aren't immediately recognizable, the bands they are involved with will be: Gong, Hawkwind, Bowie, Counting Crows, The Groundhogs, Here and Now etc.

The album is a musical adaptation of the novel Starhawk by Mack Maloney which I've not actually read I'm sad to say, but never fear because you get a comic strip to give you the idea of what's going on.

Musically Starhawk is a varied beast and as well as the more traditional space rock themes and styles, you've got jazzy interludes (Spaceships at The

Starting Line), Bowiesque moments as in "We Move You" and it's pretty trippy prog fare overall. It's also a lengthy album with 17 tracks and 70 minutes. Personally I'd have preferred more of the head down space rock-out style to be present on this record, but the story telling element is important here and to get this across effectively I reckon that would have been a bit much, and so what we have in the main is a much more, to my mind, light-prog feel to the album with spacey undertones.

I'd like to see a Spirits Burning project where the musicians come together in one studio, but that's sort of getting away from the idea of the project and so hats off for managing to pull together a credible sounding album in a novel and innovative way.

Stuart Smith

### Introducing Darlene Love – Darlene Love (Wicked Cool Records)



**T**he title of Darlene Love's latest album is of course ironic. Darlene had her first hit in 1962 with He's A Rebel as the lead singer of The Blossoms, although the single was credited to the better-known Crystals who were out on tour and were unavailable to record the song at the time. He's A Rebel, Today I Met The Boy I'm Going To Marry and Christmas (Baby Please Come Home), all

## MUSIC REVIEWS

recorded under the direction of Phil Spector, have ensured Love's immortality in the pop firmament. With *Introducing Darlene Love*, she shows signs of perhaps actually being immortal – this is a 74 year old woman belting out songs with the vigour of someone half her age.

The album is produced by Steve Van Zandt who is steeped in Spector's Wall Of Sound production techniques, both as someone who grew up with his hits and as a member of The E Street Band where his Boss moulded Spector's signature sound round his own compositions. Springsteen contributes two songs to the album, joining a star-studded line up of admirers including Elvis Costello, Jimmy Webb, and Joan Jett who all contribute songs.

While the Spector influence is front and centre, not all the songs are in this style and the ones that are fall on the right side of the tribute/pastiche line. It's a brave woman who tackles *River Deep Mountain High* but the version here takes on a Motown sheen, nodding to the style of *Papa Was A Rolling Stone* and showing Tina Turner a clean pair of stilettos. Jimmy Webb's the-world's-going-to-hell-in-a-handcart epic *Who Under Heaven* is handled with stately majesty until it morphs into one of his galloping kitchen sink instrumental sections (that's a good thing, by the way). Love emerges unscathed from the other side and takes the song to the climax it deserves.

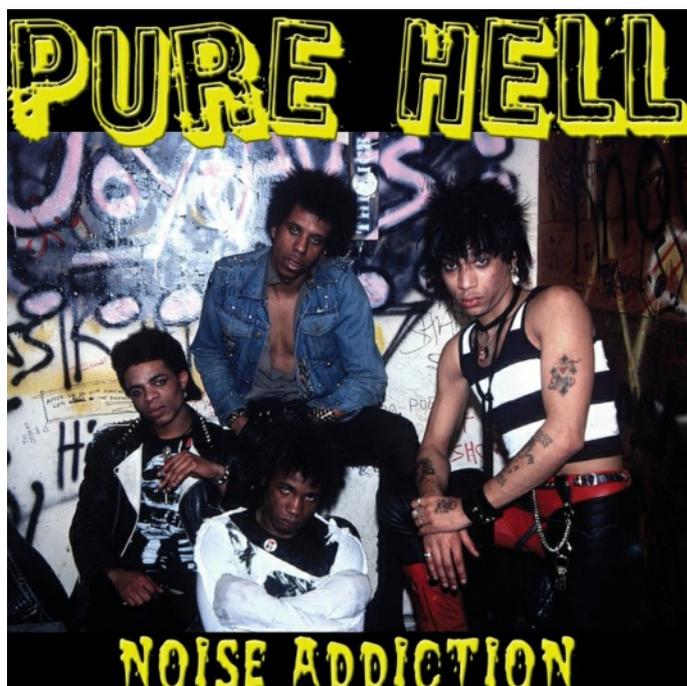
I've always thought that Elvis Costello's *Still To Soon To Know* was a rather clumsy song, seeming to fall over its own feet, hamstrung by Costello's overwrought vocal. Sung here as a duet with Bill Medley, Love improves on the original, bringing the song the bittersweet wisdom of experience. Springsteen's *Night Closing In* is an unsurprisingly full-on Spector girl group concoction, all chattering castanets, chiming bells and booming drums, fitting Love like a glove. The closing two tracks are both gospel-inspired, Van Zandt's *Jesus Is The Rock (That Keeps Me Rolling)* ending the album on a testifying high.

*Introducing Darlene Love* is a triumph, not only for Love herself but for Van Zandt as well. If you are looking for a comeback album, then they don't come better than this. Love is all you need.

Reviewed via Tidal

John Scott

### **Pure Hell – Noise Addiction: 1978 London and New York Sessions (Welfare Records)**



**P**ure Hell, very much a punk band in the original form, hail from Philadelphia and were active in New York from 74 to 78 along with the likes of New York Dolls. Their sound is inspired, as many bands of this time were, by The Stooges and The MC5.

If you're from the UK you may well remember the band's version of *These Boots Are Made For Walking* that made the alternative chart over here in 78, and it's included here too, you'll be pleased to know...it's brilliant!

Managed by Jimi Hendrix associate Curtis Knight, Pure Hell are first generation New York punk in its finest form - raucous, belligerent and fast. This album, out the 29th January, harks back to music in its rawest and most unadulterated form and is an absolute blast. However, this is not simple three chord punk rock and the screaming lead of Preston Morris (Chip Wreck) cuts through the tunes with

## MUSIC REVIEWS

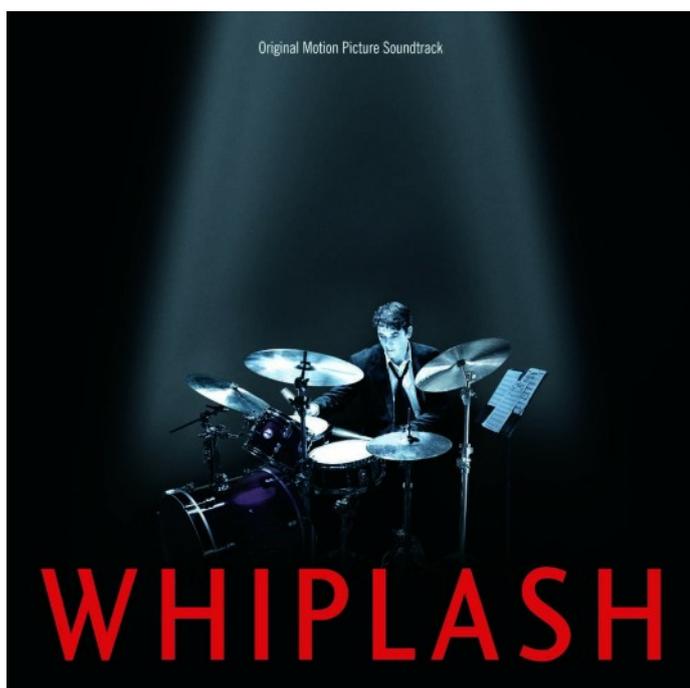
visceral ferocity, whilst the rhythm section of Kerry Boles ((Lenny Still) and Michael Sanders (Spider) provide a solid backdrop. Kenny Gordon's (Stinker) vocals are delivered in a style that is primal and ever so New York 70s early punk. This is accomplished music in any terms.

OK, Pure Hell, may not have enjoyed the success of others that came out of that scene but their influence is clear. This record lay unreleased for an almost criminal twenty seven years (it was released in 2005) after Pure Hell fell out with Curtis Knight whilst they were on tour in London and he stashed the original tapes away in a fit of spite. However, this rerelease, and the accompanying DVD of the band in the studio and sleeve notes highlight just what a great band Pure Hell were in the studio (and I imagine freakin awesome live) and this album will appeal not only to punkers of a certain age, but also to those who love fast paced, energetic, in your face music delivered with musical talent and attitude in spades.

Progsters need not apply!  
Highly, highly recommended!!!

Stuart Smith

### **Whiplash –Original Soundtrack. Jason Hurwitz and Tim Simonec**



I first became aware of the film Whiplash when Mr and Mrs Pig both raved about it on Facebook so I was delighted when my son's girlfriend arrived home one evening with the DVD. Whiplash is indeed a terrific film. I won't give away too much about the story but basically a talented young jazz drummer is driven almost to breaking point by his music college teacher. It's a bit like a jazz version of Stanley Kubrick's Full Metal Jacket. Full Metal Jazz Cat maybe. Or maybe not.

The soundtrack contains a mix of original songs and music along with jazz standards by Stan Getz and Duke Ellington. Unusually, the music on the soundtrack album does not follow the sequence in which it appears during the film, instead it has been restructured to allow it to tell its own story. I often find that when film music is divorced from its accompanying visuals that, with the exception of a couple of major themes, individual tracks don't hold up well on their own and fail to provide a satisfactory listening experience. That is definitely not the case here. I enjoyed listening to this from start to finish and as a set of individual tracks. For the film's incidental music, Tim Simonec took individual notes played by big band instruments and slowed them down to create "drones"; these were then layered against bass, drums and percussion played at normal speed. This gives a warped sound that is still recognisable as a jazz band but paints a picture of the lead character's deteriorating mental state. Combining this with Jason Hurwitz's more traditional big band scoring for the main themes and the standards creates a real sense of drama and tension.

It's probably also worth mentioning that the music on Whiplash sounds terrific as well. If you want some thing to show off or test your hifi kit then a well recorded big band or a solo drum kit will definitely do the job and the recording here is first rate. You would be doing this music a disservice to only use it as a test piece though. Whiplash deserves to be listened to in its own right. Go see the film as well, you won't regret it.

The Whiplash soundtrack is already available on CD but will be released on 180g vinyl on 19 February.  
**John Scott**

## MUSIC REVIEWS

**New Hifi Pig contributor Daniel Brown takes a look at some of the albums and EPs that he has discovered during the last year. Much of the stuff is very different to the usual audiophile fodder and there is some great stuff in here, so read on and you may well discover something new yourself!**

Following the electronic and experimental music scene through 2015 has proven to be very fruitful, as I've managed to come across some ripe and juicy albums/EP's for the plucking. Admittedly not all of my discoveries have been released in 2015, but were still fresh and exiting to my ears at the time. Below I will review 7 Album/EP releases I believe really move the electronic/avant-

garde music scene forward into new exiting directions. Reviews will generally focus on production values, originality and my personal musical enjoyment. I'll focus on the 2015 releases first.

**Culprate – Mask (EP, 2015 Release)**



With the crowd-funded success of Culprate's delightfully quirky and electronically brilliant 2014 album 'Deliverance', it seems Culprate decided to go back to his hard-hitting club/grime-electro roots with his 2015 EP 'Mask'. Now fairly seasoned in this genre, Culprate's newest release comes full of hard-hitting drops, huge synths and deep bass lines many of his fans will be accustomed to. The title track 'Mask' does not disappoint in my view; the drop totally justifies the long intro build up and will explode out of any half-decent Hifi system.

Where some fans might be slightly disappointed is in the strength of the other tracks, which do not seem as well composed or as 'grimey' as other tracks from other EP's he's released, such as "Nightmares in Reality" and '5 star EP'. The production style seems to lean slightly on the electro-sheen side, rather than anything too experimental or gritty. In other words, it feels like Culprate is playing it safe rather than creating a totally new experience for his fans. These points aside, I still enjoyed this EP for the amazing production and creativity Culprate always brings to the table.

## MUSIC REVIEWS

### Mr. Bill & Ryanosaurus (Electrocado) – Scribble (Album, 2015 Release)

ryanosaurus

mr. bill



electrocado

scribble

I've been following Mr. Bill for around 2 – 3 years now via social media, Bandcamp and his website. What becomes clear quite quickly is his amazing work ethic and output of music, as well as his close connection with his loyal fans. His 2015 collaboration album 'Scribble' released under the two artist's collaboration name 'Electrocado' is an exploration into what electronic production can do if pushed to the edge; as most Mr. Bill followers will now be accustomed to. The album is a pure electronic soundscape of glitchy beats, transient samples and silky smooth production, opening new capabilities of Digital Audio Workstations (DAW's) such as Ableton and Protools.

The niche market that Mr. Bill operates in means this album will not be to everyone's taste; even i'll admit sometimes listening to a whole Mr. Bill album can be quite demanding. That said, one has to admire the amazing creativity and effort that goes into these super funky beats and larger-than-life melodies. There are times in the album that left me speechless and wondering 'How did he create that?' much like watching a magician perform. Listening on decent headphones is a pure delight and the rhythms seem to penetrate right into your brain. I hope Mr. Bill continues to push the envelope in 2016.

### Tame Impala – Currents (Album, 2015 Release)

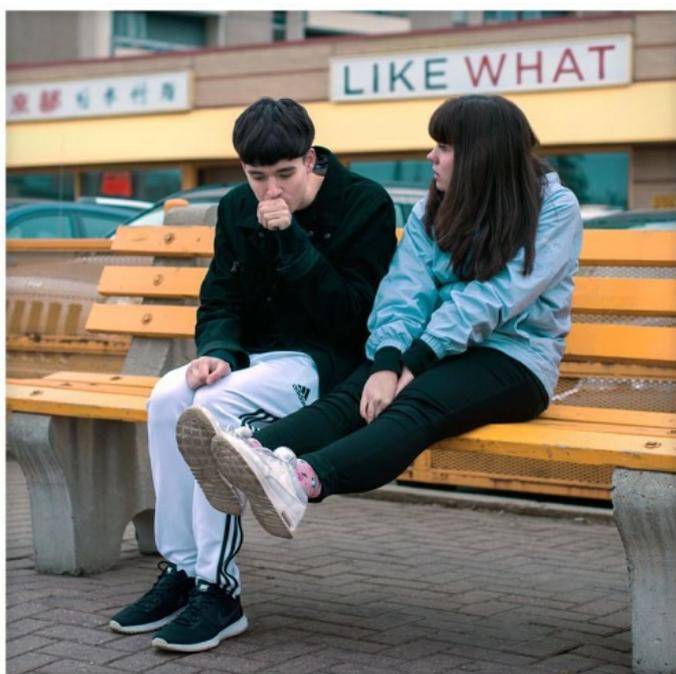


This Australian rock band seem to do no wrong in the music world. My first experience of them was the release of their 3rd album 'Currents' which seemed to be a slight departure for them into the psychedelic indie rock scene. In my opinion this has paid off greatly, the sound being comparable with psychedelic artists such as Pink Floyd or Jimi Hendrix, but keeping with a pop-orientated and accessible feel. There are stand out tracks for me, such as 'Cause i'm a man' and 'Eventually', however listening to the whole album is a thick soup of hard-hitting psychedelic enjoyment.

The production style relies heavily on guitar fuzz, gritty drums, deep bass lines and phase-shifting vocals. All of these effects however are done with great taste and the lyrics come across powerfully. There's a lyrical sense of change and awakening, which puts you in a slight reflective and open state of mind. This is twinned with the dream-like instrumental playing to great effect, making for a solid package overall. This album successfully adopts psychedelic techniques into a great modern sound, it will be interesting to see where the band takes their sound next.

### Tennyson – Like What (EP, 2015 Release)

## MUSIC REVIEWS



I first heard of Tennyson around November 2015, and when I listened to their EP 'Like What' I was blown away. The duo obviously have a wealth of influences that comes across from listening to the EP. There are similarities in sound to the artists I've mentioned above, however there is a slight jazz twist in their music, as well as clever incorporations of recorded sounds such as cats meowing, doors slamming and alarm clocks. During listening I was even making connections to artists such as Bjork for the experimentation and synth sounds.

The whole EP flows beautifully, with crystal clear production that feels almost like a binaural experience using headphones. The intro track 'Like What' is correctly titled, as it doesn't sound like anything else. Instead it gently introduces you to the soft pallet of electronic sounds before exploding into a full jazz-electro plethora soundscape. The tracks with vocals such as 'Fault Line' are particularly strong and will hold their own on any decent Hi-Fi or headphone system. This is a duo I predict great things from in the near future. They can seamlessly integrate multiple genres and ideas into musical packages that sound totally amazing.

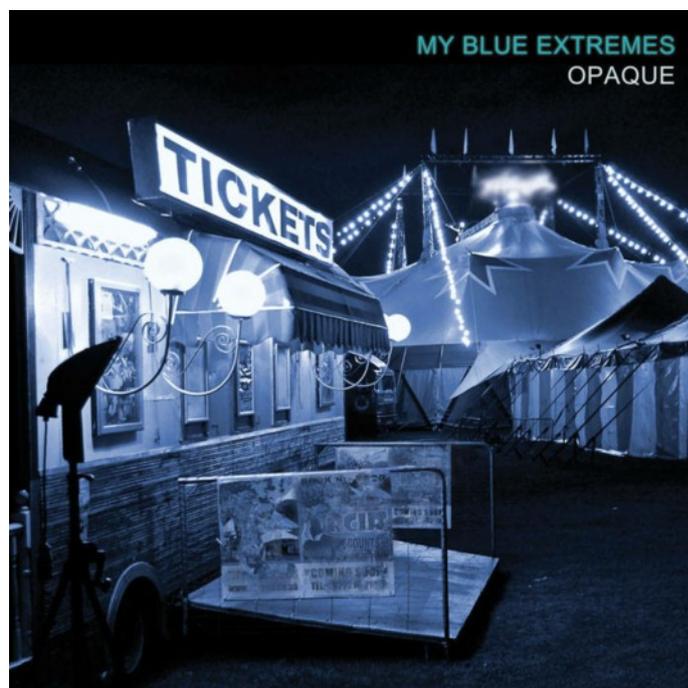
### **Darkstar – Foam Island (Album, 2015 Release)**

I discovered this album through Soundcloud and really enjoyed what I heard, which led me to buy it directly from the label 'Warp Publishing'. The whole album when listened through sets the scene of

suburban community and perhaps lost opportunities of a better life. There are intermittent moments where small monologues occur from different 'characters' giving you small insights into their thoughts or life situations. The musical style is fairly electronic, dynamic and somewhat experimental, especially on tracks such as 'Go Natural'. The vocals tend to be vocoded or edited in some way which tend to give the tracks a slightly gritty and surreal feel.

As a kind of concept album, the tracks work well together and successfully blend catchy rhythms with drone-like melodies and strange lyrics to create a kind of brooding underworld atmosphere. Some of the stand out tracks like 'Stoke the Fire' & 'Through the Motions' really punch with satisfying bass and a great overall mix. My attention did start to lapse towards the end of the album, but overall this album creates a clever blend of synthetic sounds with punchy hooks, topped off with a real insight into modern suburban youth and monotony.

### **My Blue Extremes – Opaque (EP, 2014 Release)**



As quite a small independent release, this EP is a very satisfying listen. As the artist name suggests, the EP's sound revolves around sad, empty and melancholy feelings with the use of sparse instrumentation, slow build-ups and atmospheric pads. The strength of each track is excellent with great composition and good quality production. There is clever use of distortion and electronic

## MUSIC REVIEWS

effects to induce a kind of lost or lonely feeling in the listener. The use of electronic sounds and instrumentation is done tastefully to keep the tone of the EP serious.

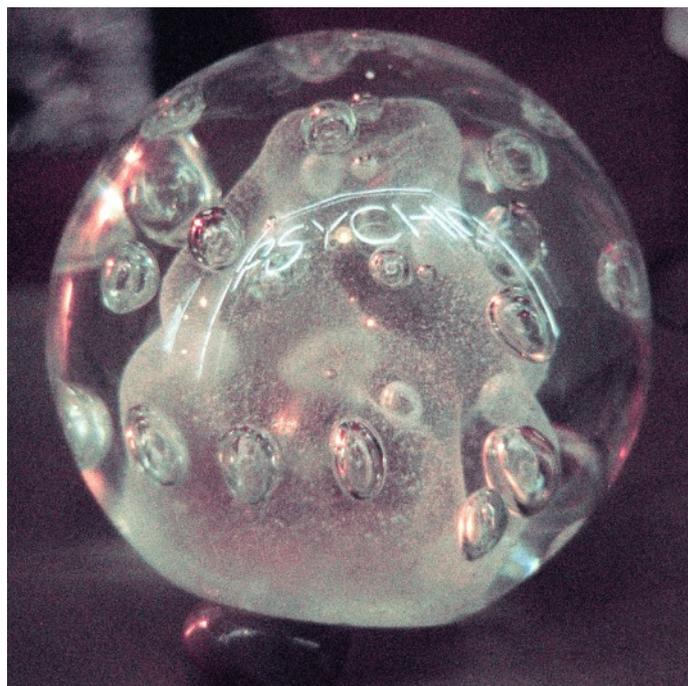
In my opinion, this is a very strong EP that does what it says on the tin. Listening through the 5 tracks takes you on an emotive journey, which can be a hard feat when relying heavily on electronic production and instrumentation. This again highlights the excellent compositional work that keeps you interested throughout. The use of piano and strings in the tracks anchors the listener into imagining a performance, whilst the electronic sounds and effects suggest deep emotions running through the composer; almost in a subconscious way. This is a great reference EP for future producers who want to successfully create a mood within their music.

### Darkside – Psychic (Album, 2013 Release)

Darkside's debut album 'Psychic' kicks the electronic duo off to a great start. As a continuous album with each track blending into the next, it completely takes you into another world of electronic obscurity and amazing soundscapes. The sound production is meticulously crafted in every track and it pays off when turning up the volume on a decent Hi-Fi. There is an excellent blend of recorded instrumentation, such as drums and guitar, with electronic accents and distorted synths to move the narrative of the audio on. All of these elements combined with a surreal psychedelic feel make for a very original experience.

I personally loved this album on first listen. What struck me was how engaged I was during the first track 'Golden Arrow' (which is 11 minutes long) after realising hardly anything happened in the first 2

**The track 'Paper Trails' has some amazing vocal work in terms of production, whilst vocals in other tracks are practically unintelligible and are almost chant-like at times.**



minutes! The track 'Paper Trails' has some amazing vocal work in terms of production, whilst vocals in other tracks are practically unintelligible and are almost chant-like at times. This does however add to the great psychedelic mystery of the album and lends itself as an experience more than anything else. A treat for the ears and a very original album in its entirety.

**Daniel Brown**

## CLASSICS

# The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars – David Bowie

**This month John Scott continues his Classic Album series and takes a look back at David Bowie's The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars. What else?**

S ometime before 7.00AM on 11 January 2016 I opened up the BBC News app on my Ipad, read the headlines and closed it again. Two minutes later my son told me that David Bowie had died. That couldn't be right, I argued: it was his birthday on Friday and he had just released a new album. Neither of these events precluded the possibility of Bowie's passing of course, but they seemed like the easiest available straws to clutch at. Anyway, I said, finding a more plausible excuse, there is nothing on the news about it. At that moment a notification popped up on my Ipad and over the next few minutes I watched as the news spread exponentially; the internet exploding with shock, grief and confusion. It was a hoax; it wasn't a hoax. It was definitely a hoax; it definitely wasn't a hoax.

It definitely wasn't a hoax.



Since his passing there has been much mention of the C word; not the cancer that took him but the word that was often used in connection with him: chameleon. Chameleons, however, change to blend

# CLASSICS

in to the background, to disappear. Bowie changed to stand out; to be outstanding. And by changing himself he changed the world around him. He may not have invented Glam Rock or New Romanticism but like a musical midwife he created an environment in which those genres could be born and would flourish. He was the man who sold the world a new version of himself with each album release; if you didn't like any particular Bowie iteration then it didn't really matter; other Bowies were available. He transformed from neo-Newley through Major Tom and Ziggy Stardust, to the Thin White Duke. When he retired these personas it seemed that we couldn't allow him to return to being simply David Bowie and so the catch-all soubriquet -The Dame- was bestowed on him with great affection and good humour. As a result of his continual evolution, Bowie meant different things to different people at different times and so his popularity spread across the generations like possibly no other pop star had done before or will do again. He told us that we could be heroes and showed us how it was done. Right to the very end.

It was inevitable that this month's classic album would be by Bowie, but which one to choose. If we disregard Pinups purely on it being an album of cover versions, then arguable any of the other albums he released during the Seventies, from *Hunky Dory* to "Heroes", might have a decent case made for its inclusion. Even as I write this, I'm struggling to narrow it down from three strong contenders. Which one will it be? Only one way to find out; start writing. (you, of course, already know having read the title).

The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars (The other contenders were *Station To Station* and *Low* by the way) arrived in 1972 as if it were from another planet. Bowie had to some extent paved the way for Ziggy with *The Man Who Sold The World* in 1970. Filled with hard rock, proto-glam songs about madness and monomania, the album featured nascent Spiders Mick Ronson and Woody Woodmansey and its controversial cover of an androgynous Bowie in a dress gave us our first

real glimpse of his propensity for change and capacity to shock. The Ziggy Stardust album would have seemed like a natural progression but Bowie had another bunch of songs to get out of the way first and in any case the world was not yet ready, Ziggy's time had not yet come. 1971's *Hunky Dory* was, in the main, a slightly softer, more mainstream collection of pop songs. Bowie's individualism as a songwriter shines through and there



# CLASSICS

are hints of what is to come in songs like Changes, Oh You Pretty Things and the darker Bewley Brothers. Hunky Dory also saw the arrival of third Spider Trevor Bolder on bass.

**For more than forty years he would blaze his way through rock music with his unique sound and vision. We simply will not see anyone like him again.**

Where Bowie had previously played with characters and with his image, Ziggy Stardust was his first full-blown persona. To all intents and purposes, The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust and The Spiders From Mars is Ziggy Stardust album and Bowie would become Ziggy for the tour that followed. The album tells the story of a dying Earth and a god-like alien pop star who brings a message of hope but is destroyed by his own success. Bowie's talent for tapping into the zeitgeist – Space Oddity had been released days before the Apollo 11 moon landing – was once again bang on the money. Pop music was in need of another phenomenon, something to shock and excite and Ziggy had it in spades. The look of disbelief on our parents' faces as Bowie/Ziggy appeared on our television screens said it all. The Generation gap had just got a whole lot wider.

Five Years' dry as dust drums (these would be quoted on You Feel So Lonely You Could Die from 2013's album The Next Day) take us to a place where market squares and milk floats coexist with Cadillacs and Chevrolets; where the alien Ziggy comes to save the alienated earthlings. In the real world, many of Bowie's fans felt he was doing the same for them. Often considered to be a concept album, The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And

The Spiders From Mars is really just a loosely-themed collection of songs that allow us to create a story for ourselves and the themes: Love (Soul Love), fame (Star), betrayal (Ziggy Stardust), salvation (Starman) and death (Rock 'n' Roll Suicide) resonated with both young pop fans and older rockers, rocketing Bowie to a whole new level of stardom. Bowie, Ronson, Woodmansey and Boulder fused retro rock with sci-fi futurism and the world went wild but on 3 July 1973, Bowie/Ziggy announced his retirement. Ziggy burned out but, thankfully, Bowie was far from finished. For more than forty years he would blaze his way through rock music with his unique sound and vision. We simply will not see anyone like him again.

John Scott

## AT A GLANCE

Released – 16 June 1972

Recorded – Trident Studios, London

Genre – Glam Rock

Length – 38' 37"

Label – RCA

Producer – David Bowie, Ken Scott

### TRACK LISTING

#### Side One

1. Five Years
2. Soul Love
3. Moonage Daydream
4. Starman
5. It Ain't easy

#### Side Two

1. Lady Stardust
2. Star
3. Hang On To Yourself
4. Ziggy Stardust
5. Suffragette City
6. Rock 'n Roll Suicide

# BenQ BL2420Z Monitor

**The BenQ BL2420Z monitor should not be confused with the BenQ XL2420Z gaming screen whose larger sibling, the XL2720Z, I reviewed back in October. The BL in the name shows that it is part of BenQ's Business Line.**



**T**he BenQ BL2420Z gets a 23.8-inch AMVA panel, a thinner bezel and smaller stand foot-print than previous models, and a brushed metal effect texture on the base.

So, is this business machine fit for purpose or should it be given its P45 and told look for another job? BenQ BL2420Z monitor design The BenQ BL2420 screen surround is coated in a nice matte black finish and the stand features the cable management oval hole

we've seen in other BenQ monitors. The BL is carrying a rather fetching blue colour instead of the red featured on the more gaming-oriented machines. The front of the monitor features proximity and light sensors as well as a range of touch sensitive, backlit, control buttons.

The base is square and takes up much less desk space than the previous models the BL2420Z replaces.

As the BL is intended for use in the workplace it's great to see that it has a full range of adjustments. Not only do you get height and tilt adjustment, there's swivel and the ability to rotate the display through 90-degrees for portrait viewing.

Around the rear you'll find VGA, DVI, Display Port 1.2, 3.5mm headphone jack, 3.5mm line-in and 2 USB 2.0 ports (plus upstream). 100 x 100mm VESA holes are included if you wish to use an alternative VESA 100 stand or mounting solution.

The BenQ BL2420Z monitor is fitted with 2 x 1W stereo speakers which will do the job of email notifications and calendar reminders but I wouldn't be expected high fidelity audio here. The BL2420Z is basically wearing a business suit and not some garish designer outfit. It appears to have covered everything required for the job in its CV.

## Performance

The BL2420Z's AMVA (Advanced Multi-domain Vertical Alignment) panel offers a 1920 x 1080 (Full HD) resolution with a 7ms grey to grey (G2G) response time. The W-LED backlight is flicker free and covers a normal sRGB gamut. You also get a 60Hz refresh rate and 8-bit colour depth. BenQ BL2420 gives you 100% native rendering sRGB spectrum, where most IPS non-pro monitors offer 97% rendering. BenQ has used technology to help the AMVA in the BL2420Z in order for it to achieve professional results.

As workers are expected to be stuck in front of their monitors,

# BenQ BL2420Z Monitor

concentrating for long periods, the BenQ BL2420 offers two very important functions to protect consumers' eyes: Blue Flicker-free and Low Light, Eye-Sense. BenQ's Flicker-free technology controls the LEDs lighting intensity and frequency so that the refresh rate doesn't stress your eyes out.

The low blue-light mode is here too. This helps reduce the sleep-blocking effects of staring at a screen. This has four settings: Multimedia (30% light blue), Web surfing (50% reduction in light blue), Office (60% reduction in light blue) and Reading (70% reduction in light blue).

As you have no doubt also noticed, there are settings for sRGB, CAD/CAM, Animation, Standard, Movie, Photo and ECO. These should cover any business use.

Naturally, I ignored all this business chat and tried it with a few games. Not being able to adjust that 60 Hz refresh rate was the first stumbling block and although the 5ms latency is quite respectable, there were a few occasions where I there was noticeable ghosting but this generally only showed itself in racing sims and the like. First person shooters seem mostly fine. I realise that the Business Line isn't built for gaming, I am sure hooking up a gaming console or slinging on a game during break-time would be fine. But if gaming

is your main thing, best stick with the XL range my gadgety friends. Back to business though. As you

information accordingly when dealing with images.

The matte anti-glare screen also helped in my little home office and I can expect it would be even more effective in a large open-planned office.

As expected, the speakers prove what headphones are for. Either that or some external speakers.



can a lot of my spent away these

imagine, time is tapping tech-

#JustSayin.

## Conclusion

As I think I have pointed out. The BenQ BL2420Z is a display dedicated professionals, not gamers – but it can handle them if needed.

There are plenty of connectivity options: D-sub, DL-DVI, DisplayPort 1.2, USB, audio in and audio out – but no HDMI. Being equipped with sRGB points at the screen's primary uses and the range of adjustments available, including portrait/landscape options shows the BenQ BL2420Z monitor's flexibility.

I think this monitor is ideal for any professional office set up. BenQ BL2420Z monitor price and availability

You can buy the BenQ BL2420Z now from Amazon.co.uk for £155.

**Jay Garrett**

based missives and working in front of the BL for hours was quite comfortable.

The range of adjustment options also helps get in a nice comfy position thereby mitigating neck and back strain. BenQ quotes viewing angles of 178-degrees/178-degrees, I couldn't find my protractor so all I can say is that the viewing angles are pretty darned good.

The colours appear to be very natural and so great for editing photos and videos. The sRGB setting is helpful, particularly for web design, as this is the world's default colour space. Most consumer applications, devices, printers, and web browsers default to sRGB and read colour

# Gibson Trainer Wireless Headphones

**It has been a fair while since I've been anything even resembling being sporty but, as it is the month where resolutions are bravely made, I have the athletically named Gibson Trainer headphones to review.**

These are no ordinary Bluetooth headphones. Oh, no. These on-ear sports headphones are endorsed by the fastest man on the planet. I have to admit that I have never seen Usain Bolt wear a pair, although I have seen Mo Farah eat plenty of Quorn.

Who wears or eats what aside, the Gibson Trainer headphones look sleek and, judging by what the press release says, have really been designed with the avid runner and gym-botherer in mind. Gibson Trainer design

If the fastest man in the world tells you that the Gibson Trainer headphones are well-designed for running you've got to take them seriously.

The new Trainer headphones from Gibson Innovations are dedicated sports headphones, targeting a healthier lifestyle over performance. They've been inspired by Usain Bolt and created in partnership with the speedy fellow to be the ideal fit for active people.

It's tough to find a pair of on-ears that will remain in place and are comfortable to wear for long periods when you're working out. This is where the natty Aeroflex headband comes in.

Just press a button marked with Bolt's silhouette on the inside of the headband and a spring-loaded second band pops out of the

main one. This allows for a tighter, more secure fit on the head, without them feeling too much like a clamp.

Gibson has also used some space-age materials in the design of the new Trainer headphones. The 'Outlast' fabric coating the washable and removable ear cushions was developed by NASA and is

designed to help dissipate heat, something that's going to be seriously useful for the sweaty sports type.

And because they're going to be dealing with hot, sweaty heads – as well as often adverse British weather conditions – the Trainers are also weatherproof. The drivers themselves are covered in a hydroscopic mesh which is transparent to sound but repels water.

The Trainers are available in black or white, with Gibson shunning the bright colours usually associated with sports headphones. However, you needn't worry about whether or not you'll be seen if you're out running as the light fades as these sporty headphones are packing a handy 'NightNav' light feature; an LED which sits

on the rear of the left ear cup and flashes so that the late night/early morning runner can be easily spotted. It's a neat little safety feature for these Bluetooth headphones, and when they've also got an eleven hour battery life, that LED isn't going to be a huge drain on resources.

The NightNav light is activated by pressing the power button twice and the bright white light will then flash merrily away until you hit the power button again.

Safety is going to be an important concern when you're making on-the-go headphones like the Trainer, and they also come with a 'SafeSound' feature. At the touch of a button the headphone alters the sound curve by changing the EQ settings, allowing more ambient noise in.



# Gibson Trainer Wireless Headphones

So if you're running up to a busy road crossing, or even running through some dodgy area of town, and want a little more awareness of your surroundings, you can let more of the outside world in. The headphones have a number of buttons, most of which are situated around the ear pad on the right. On the outside you'll find a skip forward, play and a on/off button. Bizarrely, there's no dedicated button to skip back a track. So you need to double tap the skip forward button if you want to listen to 'Eye of the Tiger' one more time.

The volume up and down buttons are tucked quite tightly behind the ear pad, and since they're so close together, using them on the move becomes a very fiddly process. Lastly, you'll find two more buttons up front to turn the headphones on and to sync them with your phone over Bluetooth. The only other thing of note is the micro USB charging port situated at the base of the right hand arm and the NFC sensor on the left arm.

## Sound Quality and Performance

The Gibson Trainer headphones do feel like a quality bit of kit but how do they sound? Well, the Trainers haven't been built with sound isolation at the forefront of the design. I

understand the need for the wearer to be aware of their surroundings and I can confirm that they certainly achieve that. The thing is, this will also mean that you will be sharing your motivational audio with your fellow gym-goers. These are not the headphones of choice for commuting or wearing in the office either.

The 40mm drivers power the mids and high-end very well and there is a positive warmth in the bass too but there wasn't enough to get me really excited about. The sound is precise and clear but I was expecting more from headphones in this price range. Saying that though, I dare say that

a lot of the money has gone in to the design, as well as the high-tech materials and coating.

Pumping up your favourite 150bpm running track of choice you'll be glad to know that these headphones will happily oblige without any distortion or harshness at high volume. I have quite a bit of hair as well as quite a thin head so headphones sliding off my noggin isn't uncommon. The earpads on the Trainer felt awkward on my ears

but they generally stayed put. Bringing the Aeroflex in to play kept the headphones in place better as the rubber gripped my shiny locks. I almost want to suggest that there should be a second Aeroflex band to grip the font as well.

Good news too if you get a phone call during your personal best as there's a built-in microphone situated near to the micro-USB charging port for hands free calling. Voices are good and clear at both end of the call. Gibson Trainer conclusion The Trainer headphones find themselves in quite a good position as there's not really that much competition in the sports headphones arena right now. They are comfortable, sit securely

on your head and are both weather-resistant and easy to de-sweat as well as allowing ample air-flow.

If you were looking for the best sounding headphones for under £200 then I think there are other places you could look but if you are one of those keep-fit types, then I don't think that these will disappoint you.



Decent headphones specially designed for sportswear. Gibson Trainer headphones price and availability

The Gibson Trainer sports headphones are available now in black or white for £199.99 from Amazon.co.uk and Argos.

**Jay Garrett**

# Huawei Mate S Phone



**This has certainly been a good year for Chinese phone cobblers. OnePlus and Xiaomi have been grabbing headlines but Huawei has been doing remarkable things. Their sister-brand, Honor, wowed me at its launch of the Honor 7. My latest favourite phone, the Nexus 6P was designed and built by Huawei and now I have the Mate S to review.**

**S**ony and HTC have been reporting problems with their market share, and

we've seen Nokia become part of Microsoft but Huawei has had its sights fixed on becoming a main

player in the smartphone arena. So, with the Mate S, has Huawei finally made a phone that will lure the usually brand-loyal buyers away from the safety of the known?

## Design

The Huawei Mate S is a very stylish offering.

It is equipped with a 5.5-inch AMOLED display wrapped up in a slender metal body.

It also ticks the box for zero-gap construction. It certainly looks like it's up there with the likes of HTC and Apple, and for a brand that is traditionally more affordable, that has to be another feather in Huawei's cap.

In the hand the Huawei Mate S feels as much as a quality item as it looks. The anodised metal body gives it some friction so you won't scare yourself with the bar-of-soap-juggle that some more slippery metal-bodied phones tend to put you through.

# Huawei Mate S Phone

I still love my HTC One M9 and having the Mate S and Nexus 6P all together the Mate S isn't overshadowed by its company in the quality or looks department.

The Mate S measures 149.8 x 75.3 x 7.2mm and weighs only 156g.

The volume and power buttons are on the right-hand side, falling conveniently under your fingers when gripping the phone and there's the addition of the fingerprint scanner on the rear, which I have now become totally accustomed to through using the 6P as my daily driver.

The cut-outs for the speakers at the bottom are flanked by what looks like small screws. These are all nice and clean and, on the silver model I have, the inserts for the radio antenna breaks across the back are in a grey that fits with the design. The edges of the fingerprint scanner and around the camera lens are finished in a silver metallic.

The whole design scheme pulls together with a classy, cohesive look.

The version I have comes with 32GB of internal storage and is available in this silver grey or champagne colour. There is also a premium version that has 64GB internal storage and comes in gold and coral (pinkish).

Oddly, with the silver grey model I have here there is a gold smart case bundled in with the usual earbuds and charging cables. Gold may have not been my first, second or third choice of colour to pair with a grey phone but, the case is a welcomed addition any way.

Under the hood there's a HiSilicon Kirin 935, which is an octa-core



64-bit chipset that's paired with 3GB of RAM.

HiSilicon is Huawei's own silicon manufacturer and while it lacks a bigger brand name it doesn't seem to stop it performing like one of those more recognisable players.

You can expand the storage space in the Mate S thanks to a microSD that sits on the same tray as the SIM. This is pretty neat as, if you don't need the extra space you could actually sling in a second SIM card instead.

Everything is kept going by a 2,700mAh battery and it will happily get you through a day of fairly constant usage and, when needed, charging is via a microUSB – I was expecting a USB-C though.

Aiding battery life is some nifty battery management software. When an app appears to be eating battery in the background, the phone will give you a nudge to remind you that the app is still running and ask you if you want to close it. Most of the time you will indeed do just that, which raises the question – would you get more out of the battery on your other phones if they had the same clever notification system?

## Display

The Huawei Mate S may have a 5.5-inch AMOLED display but they have kept it at 1920 x 1080 pixels with a 401ppi density. It's an edge-to-edge 2.5D display, and so is curved towards those lovely chamfered edges, and then topped with scratch-resistant Gorilla Glass 4.

You might be turning your nose up at those numbers and be thinking "*But, the Nexus 6P has a resolution of 1440 x 2560 and pixel density of 518ppi*". Where that may be true, I could also point out that the Sony Xperia Z5 Premium rocks a cray cray 3840 x 2160 pixels (4K). But remember, the OnePlus 2 and the iPhone 6S Plus, like the Huawei Mate S, sticks to Full HD as, perhaps arguably, that's all you actually need at 5.5-inches.

The Mate S's AMOLED screen definitely displays all the characteristics you've come to expect from AMOLED. You get rich, vibrant colours and deep inky blacks. All-in-all the balance is good but can, on occasion, lean to being a little oversaturated. Not hideously garishly so but, especially on skin tones, could

# Huawei Mate S Phone

give you a more than healthy glow – not great for goths

On the whole the Mate S delivers a slick visual experience. Those chasing bragging rights to owning the phone with the highest resolution or pixel density might be tempted to drift off elsewhere, but here you're getting good quality from a Full HD display without breaking the bank, or murdering that comparatively low-capacity battery.

## Performance

The Mate S is loaded with a rear-mounted fingerprint scanner and, where this positioning may seem curious, actually makes plenty of sense.

This is where the scanner is on the LG as well as the Huawei-built Nexus 6P and, with the latter, unlocking the phone becomes seamless as your finger instinctively slips over the scanner.

In fact, this is so slick, and probably shares the same tech behind the Nexus, that the Mate S is faster to unlock than my friend's Galaxy S6 and Note Edge.

But this scanner can do more than let you in to your phone. Huawei has added some clever control options into the scanner, rolling out what it is calling Fingerprint 2.0.

The Honor 7 has similar skills and these are reflected in the Mate S too. You can swipe down the notification area with a swipe down on the scanner, or you can clear notifications with a double-tap. This lends the smartphone more single-handed use to those out there with less lanky digits than I.

The scanner can also be used to swipe through images in the gallery or trigger selfies, both of which benefit from not having your greasy finger in the way of the screen.

Fingers are good but knuckles also have their use on Huawei's smartphone.

Knuckle Control (hidden in the Motion Control settings menu) enables you can trace letters on the display to launch apps such as the camera. The handy thing (pun intended) about Knuckle Control is that you can knuckle your phone from wherever you are in the user interface. So, short-cutting to the camera to capture your mate falling off their chair when you're in the middle of a Tweet becomes a swift thing. Also, knocking on the screen twice to wake your phone up is a nice touch.

## Software

I like HTC's Sense. I am OK with Samsung's TouchWiz. Vanilla Android is lovely. However, Huawei's EMUI... Hmmm... this is a tricky one.

It's not that EMUI (Emotion User Interface) is clunky or unsophisticated, I just find it a little... awkward in the looks department.

During the review EMUI got updated to iron out some of the camera issues and also there were occasions when using the fingerprint unlock would randomly open some apps.

EMUI could be pretty cool but, if Huawei is intent on tackling the established brands then I think a lighter touch around the Android OS would match the classiness of the hardware a little more than it does at the moment.

You also lose the apps tray in favour of just swiping through pages of apps. Something I am not keen on, I prefer having an apps tray, but I have seen other skins do this.

It's not all doom and gloom with the Mate S software bundle though. As already mentioned, there's that quirky knuckle control, clever power consumption notifications, and there are many other options that add to Android 5.1.1 Lollipop.

For a start, you can manage the individual default apps, you can manage two types of notifications for each app, you can turn off the network name, or you can show the data speed you're getting.

Perhaps the things I don't feel comfortable with are the kind of things I'd get used to in time. I don't know. It would be a shame to dismiss EMUI just because of those little niggles because it does a lot of stuff really well. Let's face it, if it troubles you too much you could always sling on the Google Now Launcher.

It is smooth, lag-free and it seemed to behave itself through the many tasks I threw at it. There are also some fairly neat looking themes pre-loaded.

## Camera

I was suitably impressed by the Huawei's camera and the app is pretty slick.

There are a lot of options and settings on top of the usual major shooting modes. Mentionables include Car Light Trails' in the Light Painting Mode and 'All Focus' which allows you to change the focal point of the photo after it has been taken.

# Huawei Mate S Phone

The rear mounted 13-megapixel camera has f/2.0 aperture, offering optical image stabilisation and a dual-tone twin LED flash. It's a great camera, fast to focus and the results are good.

Low-light performance is not bad at all either as you can see above. There is a little noise but I have seen a lot worse from much more expensive phones.

The front-facing 8-megapixel camera is again very capable and thanks to the options for a front illuminator to aid with pictures in low-light, 'beauty' and 'perfect selfie' modes there should be everything a keen social updater will need.

If you are using the selfie camera be warned that everything is reversed! Fortunately, the image editor will let you flip the image, just a shame that there isn't such an option in the camera app to set it before shooting.

One thing that's missing from the Mate S which may have upped its standing even more is 4K video capture. It does offer Full HD capture, which will cater for most users, but for whatever reason this handset doesn't embrace UHD video yet like an increasing number of flagships – it isn't even an option on the top of the range 128GB model.

**It is definitely worthy of consideration for those looking for top-notch quality without the cost.**

Warehouse SIM free too!

Is a saving of £110+ enough for some to move away from a brand such as Samsung or HTC? It's really down to how much stock they put in to brand names I guess and, with seeing how well OnePlus and Huawei seem to be doing, I'd be worried if I was Sammy or HTC.

## Conclusion

As you have probably gathered, there's a lot to like about the Huawei Mate S.

The fit and finish of the metal body and the slimness that Huawei has achieved is certainly up there with the best of them. The display, although not being the highest resolution out there, is good enough to please even the most critical of peepers.

The fingerprint scanner, as expected, is excellent too. It's very doubtful that you'd be disappointed by the cameras either.

Battery life is pretty darned fine and all the software moves along effectively and smoothly.

Add that to the likes of the HTC One M9 still costing £580 direct from HTC SIM free, the £470 asking price from Huawei and Honor's V-Mall isn't looking too bad. You can actually get the Mate S even cheaper from Carphone

User-interface-wise the 'Emotion UI' or EMUI doesn't feel quite there yet. It doesn't undo Google's work totally but there are still things that need to be ironed out, such as parts of menus overlapping other UI elements.

Also, having skinned Android means that you have to rely on how quickly Huawei can tweak EMUI to take Marshmallow as to when you will receive the updated Google operating system.

The Huawei Mate S is a very capable smartphone and no doubt a very welcome addition to the company's range.

It is definitely worthy of consideration for those looking for top-notch quality without the cost.

The thing is, the Nexus 6P, which is also made by Huawei and has prices starting at just £449, I think that's where the better deal is right now if you can put up with an even larger phone.

**Jay Garrett**

# Sengled Pulse JBL Speaker & Bluetooth Lightbulb



**Looking at the Sengled Pulse put me in to two minds, which is quite apt as this device is slightly schizophrenic.**

**A**udiophiles might cringe at the thought of shoving a JBL Bluetooth speaker inside an LED light bulb but for ‘normal’ folks this solution may be a slice of genius. Well, that’s what Sengled is hoping.

## Design

The first thing that will strike you is the sheer size of these bulbs. As a gigging musician these look more like a par can light usually seen hung above stages than something for a domestic application.

These things measure 8.8 x 6.6 x 4.3-inches.

You have to bear in mind that their oversized form factor is needed to accommodate the presence of the speaker, which includes an amp and the Bluetooth gubbins. This could also limit where you can install the Pulse.

The Sengled Pulse kit comes with a pair of bulbs, one marked as the master and the other a satellite.

These are straight Bluetooth products, so your audio source will need to be fairly close to the master bulb to operate. The master

bulb also relays music to the satellite via Bluetooth, so they will also need to be in range of each other.

They are quite good looking once you’ve got over their size and the white pearlescent finish will fit in most decors and the cut outs at the lamp end not only distributes the audio but makes a pretty pattern on the floor/wall depending where you’ve fitted them in to.

The bulbs come in bayonet or threaded connection – I asked for the bayonet as I had a feeling that I’d be shoving these in the ceiling fittings.

Each Pulse bulb provides 600 lumens of brightness and contains a 1.75-inch JBL loudspeaker driven by a 13-watt amplifier.

## Performance

Installation is ultra-simple as long as you have lamps large enough to take a Pulse.

That said, I had no issue in hooking them up in to the ceiling fittings. I have one in the bedroom and one in the hallway so, with the

# Sengled Pulse JBL Speaker & Bluetooth Lightbulb

door open, there is a hint of stereo imaging if I'm stood in the right place.

You can add additional satellites to the mix as needed, but given the range limitations, I can't see a typical home supporting more than three or four bulbs total.

The quality of the sound is surprisingly good, with good clarity and a modest bass response.

You can use the audio features on the Sengled Pulse without a mobile app by purely pairing your Bluetooth source with the Master bulb.

If you fancy a little more control, including the brightness of the lights then downloading the free Sengled Pulse app is the way forward.

The app is simple and lets you turn the speakers on and off as well as control their volume. You are also able to control the brightness of the bulbs. You'll find no colour changing skills here, as we had with the [PlayBulb Rainbow](#), but then the Rainbow isn't equipped with a JBL speaker.

The app also gives you more fine-grained control over audio than you'll get from simply using your phone's media player. If you have two speaker-lights, for example, you can set one as the left and one as the right channel,



or you can have both speakers play both left and right channels. A rudimentary equaliser is also included if you want to fine-tune your music. These pre-set tonal scoops does change the character of the audio but I'm not overly convinced if it's for the best.

I found that having the bulb speakers on the 'Normal' flat EQ provided decent audio for both video playback and slinging some tunes through.

The range of the Bluetooth seemed as much as required. I tended to use the Sengled Pulse speakers when I was in the bedroom and, as the other speaker bulb was hanging in the hallway, if I had to nip to the loo I could still hear my tunes.

I could see this set up working at our next house party, with the main party tunes happening downstairs but, when people came upstairs, we could have something more chilled out on.

Audio quality is OK. As I said at the start of the review, the Sengled Pulse isn't going to worry a serious Hi-Fi installation but it may well be an option for those contemplating ceiling speakers but don't want to go hacking in to their plaster work just yet.

The fact that I could fit these in to a couple of lamps is an interesting idea too. Throw in the bonus that

these are LED lights and therefore a heck more efficient than regular bulbs and I think you may have a winner.

## Conclusion

This is a great way of sneaking speakers in to a room where some driver-equipped boxes would spoil the look – the Kitchen, for example.

Granted, you're not going to taunt the output of a Hi-Fi or even a Bluetooth set-up such as the [Damson Vulcan](#) but the Sengled Pulse is also illuminating a room a two, something that neither a Hi-Fi or the Vulcan can achieve.

The Sengled Pulse is a neat way to add in-wall/in-ceiling audio to your home by letting your light fixtures do double duty as speakers.

The Sengled Pulse kit is available now from [Amazon.co.uk](#) in [red](#) or [white](#) for £94.90.

**Jay Garrett**

# Intempo Bluetooth Jukebox

**The Intempo Bluetooth Jukebox is a new twist on a 1950's throwback. A modern nod back to when fashion started to shake off the constraints of post-war rationing and less conservative styles started to appear.**



**T**he 50s brought tighter skirts and leather biker jackets, as well as the now timeless Jukebox.

Whenever the word 'Jukebox' crops up in conversation it's not the modern, networked, video playing version that appears in my

head – rather the colourful arched numbers found in the 50s Malt Shops, Cafes and eateries.

Think Jukebox – Think The Fonz!

The Intempo Bluetooth Jukebox obviously takes its inspiration from this 'Golden Age' and brings it up to date – but just how well does it do it?

## Design

The Intempo Bluetooth Jukebox stands at around 2.7ft tall (39.51 x 21w x 82.5h cm) and has quite a substantial weight to it (about 9kg).

Obviously, an original 1950s jukebox would have good ol' vinyl records stored away ready for the careful button-push selection, but this Intempo version is updated and has FM radio and Bluetooth connectivity so that you can hook up your smartphone or tablet and run your playlists through the Jukebox.

There's a pocket located on the back which is great for storing an audio device rather than having leads dangling around the edge or balancing your device on top.

The Jukebox sports 2 auxiliary ports on the rear where you can plug in your MP3 player or other device; Aux 1 is for an RCA cable (red and white connections, cable not supplied) while Aux 2 is for a 3.5mm cable (supplied).

You get a remote control for long range tweaking. The Jukebox also features flashing LED disco lights and 4x 6w speakers all wrapped up in that dark brown housing with white tubing and chrome looking adornments!

I do have to say that it really does look the part sat in the corner of the room. It might not do too well

# Intempo Bluetooth Jukebox

upon closer inspection from an enthusiast but it is guaranteed to provide an excellent talking point at any party.

## Performance

Using the Intempo Bluetooth Jukebox couldn't be easier thanks to the clearly set out buttons on both the side wall of the unit and on the remote.

Main audio input comes courtesy of a wireless Bluetooth connection which is achieved through syncing any Bluetooth enabled device. This took a matter of seconds and pairing afterwards was swift and painless.

The alternative is to go in using an AUX cable allowing any audio device to be used as an input. Additionally FM Radio can be tuned in to get you access to your favourite shows on the wireless.

I was pretty impressed by the the sound quality and the radio is a neat touch. The jukebox comes with a wire aerial but I've not had to use that as the signal seems plenty strong enough. The tuning is controlled on the side by the tuning up/down buttons or on the remote. The only downside is that there is no display to let you know what station number you are on which is a slight niggle.

The range of the Bluetooth is approx. 10m (33ft) so should be more than enough for most rooms depending on where you are positioning your phone/tablet. With this option it gives you total control over your music as you can select, skip, stop or repeat tracks from your phone or tablet.

Now, time to get your disco on!

I thought the final part of the Intempo Bluetooth Jukebox was going to be a bit of a cheese-fest but the lights are a actually pretty nifty party addition.

The lightshow comes by way of a piece of white tubing on the front of the jukebox that contains different coloured LED lights.

**Whether you want to just add some fun in to your home or are looking for a great present, the Intempo Bluetooth Jukebox might be well worth a look.**

These, as you would expect flash on and off, change colour and give that great disco effect. It would have been cool if you could select a light setting – flashing, chasing, fade in and out, etc though. As it is, the lights cycle through a variety of colours and effects.

Now while great for parties you might not want these on all of the time so this jukebox has the option of switching the lights on or off by the mode button on the side or the lights on/off button on the remote control.

The supplied remote control is smaller than a credit card and controls power on/off, lights on/off, mute, volume up/down, tuning up/down, mode, reset and pair.

## Conclusion

I wasn't sure whether I'd like this thing or not, if I am totally honest. I wanted it to be fun, and it is, and I wanted it to sound decent enough to power a party, which it can.

My main reservation was how would it look installed in the home.

Granted, it's not going to take the place of an original Rock-ola or Wurlitzer as a piece of furniture, but it is going to show your fun side.

The sound is great from its 4 x 6w speakers and is more than loud enough and thanks to its variety of connection options it is very versatile.

The flashing LED lights gets you somewhere close to that old jukebox vibe – albeit with a bit of wedding DJ disco thrown in to the mix.

If I was going to add one thing to the Intempo Bluetooth Jukebox it would be a display to let you know which radio station you are tuned to – whether that's on the main unit or on the remote control, that's up to Intempo. The only other thing would be to have more control over the lighting effects, but I am just getting picky now.

Whether you want to just add some fun in to your home or are looking for a great present, the Intempo Bluetooth Jukebox might be well worth a look.

The Intempo Bluetooth Jukebox is available now for £150 direct from Intempo's website.

**Jay Garrett**

# Oppo F1 First Impressions



**The Oppo F1 smartphone was brought to a gathering of Oppo fans aboard a boat on the Thames. Whilst the F Series phones are aimed at the mid-range market, this new smartphone may well have ideas above its station, but manages to keep the price remarkably affordable.**

**O**ppo has created quite a name for itself amongst the smartphone community for not only being able

to release decent hardware at a very reasonable price point but for producing some great camera phones.

## **First Impressions**

The Oppo F1 is wrapped up in a sleek aluminum body that is polished to give it a finish you just want to hold and move around in your hand caress. It is more than a little reminiscent of the iPhone – quite the feat as the Oppo costs around a third of the price of an iPhone.

The face of the F1 is protected by 2.5D Gorilla Glass, while the edges have been chamfered to a 60-degree angle. It may sound like the usual press release fluff and nonsense but all of that goes towards making this a nice phone to hold. And it's light. Crazy light.

It's 7.3mm thin and is a feather-light 134g. The rounded edges and sides have a plastic-like quality to

# Oppo F1 First Impressions

them and I am guessing they'll act like bumpers.

The 5-inch screen did look a little small after I have been using a Nexus 6P as my daily driver but the Oppo F1 looks and feels right and, if I am honest, 5-inches is all you really need (no sniggering at the back there!).

Everything was looking and sounding good until I discovered where Oppo managed to save some money – the display on the F1 clocks in at 720p resolution. Yes, it's fine for browsing the Web and navigating around the phone but it isn't so great when it comes to checking out your recently taken pictures or playing videos back.

## Camera

Oppo has kept up with the camera tech though and seems to have paid special attention to the front-facing selfie cam.

According to Oppo's research, the front cams are used more often than rear cams these days – I am guessing that depends on which country they conducted the research, and what

**With the F1 available to pre-order now, you've got until launch day at the end of February to decide if £170 for the Oppo F1 is an offer just too good to miss.**

their target age group is. With those results I can at least guess the latter is a darned sight younger than I.

Anyhow, the front snapper is equipped with an f/2.0 aperture and 8-megapixel sensor which work really well together. Taking a few test selfies in the chilly London evening air produced impressive results – especially

given the test subject.

The amount of light allowed in to the sensor makes shooting yourself (so to speak) in poor light a possibility. There's no front flash but the screen will light up in order to

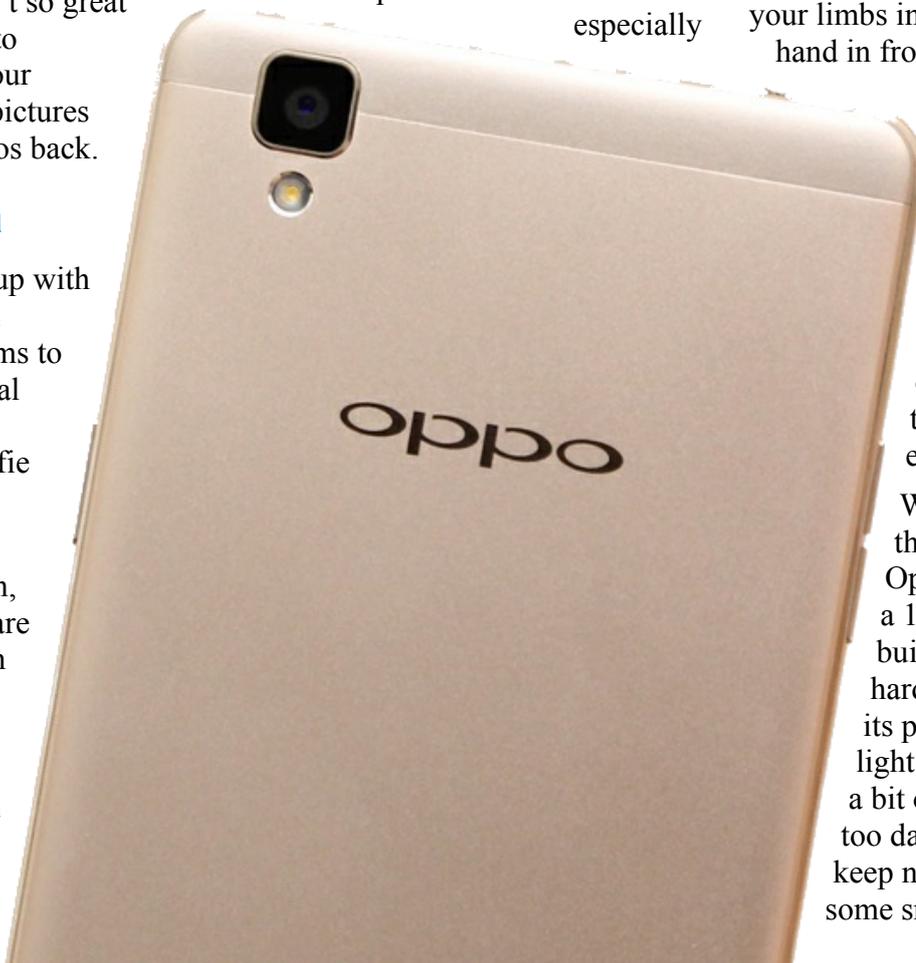
illuminate your visage.

The now expected beauty mode isn't that invasive either, and has three different settings, ranging from natural to... extreme makeover.

The LG-esque selfie gesture control works really well. Rather than contort your hand to tap the shutter release without getting your limbs in shot, you raise your hand in front of the camera. The

Oppo way differs in that, instead of making a fist like on an LG phone, the Oppo simply activates a timer when it sees your open palm. Even in challenging lighting, this method worked each time.

What I would class as the main camera (sorry Oppo) is kitted out with a 13-megapixel sensor built by Samsung. It was hard to get a true idea of its performance as the light inside the room was a bit odd and it was getting too darned cold for me to keep nipping out to take some snaps. Not only that,



# Oppo F1 First Impressions



there's the small matter of that 720p screen.

What I did notice is the Slow Shutter mode. This would need a tripod or at least a hand that isn't shaking due to the cold but I can imagine that this would be able to capture some great shots – especially of the lights of London from the river.

The Ultra HD mode promises to combine several images to come up with a single 50-megapixel photo but trying to discern any improvement using that 720p screen was a bit of a lost cause. Perhaps if you slung them up on your big telly you'd see the benefit.

Oppo appears to use its own take on digital stabilisation. Oppo's way is to take six stills each time the shutter is activated, from which the Oppo F1 chooses what it thinks is the best for you. The idea is, one of those six will be the

most in-focus, or steadiest, and that's the only one you'll want to see. It's a feature that runs in the background, so you'll have to trust the software is making the right decision.

## Under The Hood

The F1 is running Android 5.1 which is skinned with Oppo's ColorOS user interface.

Like the Huawei EMUI also reviewed in this month's e-mag, you lose the app tray and the notification draw has been modified but I am pleased to report that there's almost no bloatware or useless pre-installed apps. I was impressed by just how smooth and fast this thing flicks along.

Qualcomm's Snapdragon 616 processor and 3GB of RAM lurks within that skinny shell which seems to work perfectly for the mid-range F1.

There's a MicroSD card slot to increase its internal 16GB storage to 128GB which is always a nice touch.

## Conclusion

The Oppo F1 feels like a phone at least twice its price.

With a metal build and gold finish that makes a statement, the F1 doesn't feel like a budget phone. The hardware might not be as fast as others out there, but the cameras could make up for that – especially if you're a selfie junkie.

With the F1 available to pre-order now, you've got until launch day at the end of February to decide if £170 for the Oppo F1 is an offer just too good to miss.

I'd definitely be interested in taking the Oppo F1 for a full test.

**Jay Garrett**

# Vodafone Findxone Tracker



**You may recall that I visited Vodafone's HQ recently and while I was there my hosts mentioned xone, a fairly unpromoted division of Vodafone that specialises in testing new products and services on early adopters. I have taken the opportunity to test a couple of items, so here's my Vodafone Findxone tracker review to start with.**

The idea behind xone is pretty much the same as beta testing games. The

benefit for Vodafone for having xone is that regular folks can feedback and help iron out any

issues before the company commits to producing and promoting the product. For the testers and early adopters, they get early access to exciting new products, and pay less in the process.

Vodafone xone has a relatively small portfolio of products and services at the moment, but is looking to expand all the time. On my recent trip to Vodafone I met up with Paddy Harrison Harvey, head of Vodafone xone, who explained the thinking behind it all and also talked about some new products in the works.

Everything is sold and marketed via the Vodafone website, but products are despatched from Amazon which means you get free next day delivery.

## Design

The Findxone tracker is not flashy, but rather sturdy and functional. Saying that though, the Findxone only costs £15 and then £24 per year.

# Vodafone Findxone Tracker

Inside the box you get a charging cable, a USB-A to micro-USB lead, the tracking device, and rubbery case for the tracker. The rubber jacket features a handy hook so you can slip it on a keychain or carabiner should you feel the urge to do so.

Shoving the Findxone into its protective sleeve is fairly straight forward but once it was in there one thing became apparent. You have to take it out to charge it.

Now, if the case endowed the device with waterproof or water resistant skills, then I could understand the lack of a hole for the charging port but, as the back of the rubber outer is open, it is a bit of an oversight in my opinion.

## In Use

This was the bit that I had to keep reminding myself that this is a beta device.

I downloaded the Findxone app but registered using a different email address than the one I used to order the device. When it came to logging the tracker's serial number and other digits, they would not take.

The simple steps above on the Findxone website was mocking me!

I uninstalled the app. Reinstalled it, and tried again. Finally it dawned on me that it might be a clash of email addresses. So, uninstalled the app, reinstalled it and then, using the order email,

managed to get the device up and running.

Well, so I thought. The app kept

**You can also add extra devices to the same account so you can keep tabs on your pets, kids, as well as your luggage.**

crashing. A lot. What made this even more irksome was the fact that the error message was misspelt.

When it does work though, it seems to do what it promises to do. You can see the current (and previous) locations of the device.

You can also add extra devices to the same account so you can keep tabs on your pets, kids, as well as your luggage.

The Findxone app also allows you to manage the alerts you get and, to a certain extent, tweak the battery management a bit.

Creating zones (or should that be xones?) is a bit tricky but doable, these will get the Findxone device to let you know if it has been taken out of a particular zone – handy if you've left a bag in the car as your partner is driving it away.

Thankfully tinkering with the Findxone tracker settings is pretty simple.

You can also share where your Findxone is or has been, should you feel like it.

## Conclusion

Vodafone's xone is a test bed, and that has to be kept in mind. Also, I was using a Google Nexus 6P smartphone for the testing and, as it gets the very latest Android version sent to it as soon as it is ready, this may have caused some of the hiccups. I tried it

with the Huawei Mate S and on that attempt all seemed well.

The Findxone is obviously not as slick as the Thingsee, but then it is a heck of a lot cheaper. The issue for me is that if you are using something to keep tabs on your valuables, you want it to work every time and all of the time.

Battery life was a bit slim. I had the device only activate when moving in order to save juice but it was still thirsty by the end of the day, and that's with me spending most of my time in an office.

The Findxone has promise and I'll certainly be keeping an eye on the Vodafone xone in the future.

Can I recommend the Findxone? Yes, if you fancy trying out devices that might be a bit buggy and get involved in the developer forums. Not so much if you are just wanting to buy a device that works right from the get go.

Findxone is available now and costs £15 plus a £2 per month subscription

**Jay Garrett**