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Roksan Xerxes 20Plus, Caspian RPM Speed Control and PUG Tonearm



Janine Elliot takes a listen to Roksan's latest version of the iconic Xerxes, this time in its 20Plus guise and with the Caspian RPM Speed Control and innovative Pug tonearm. Price for this package is £5825

Vinyl has been an important part of my life and I'm pleased to say still is. From my earliest Garrard SP25/iii to my collection of almost 20 record players today, it is still my "go to" choice for high quality audio reproduction. I was never taken in by the brilliant PR from Linn Sondek, a turntable that goes all the way back to 1972, rather sticking to Garrard 301 and Thorens TD160. Interestingly these two had opposing platform topologies; one solid and the other sprung isolation. And that leads me nicely into the Roksan Xerxes 20Plus, which well, combines two methods in one amazingly complex engineering masterpiece.

When the original London manufactured' Xerxes came onto the scene in 1985, incidentally named after the Persian King, I really liked the look of it and was almost hooked, but university fees and getting married put a stop to that idea. Whilst my own marriage didn't last, I am pleased to say the Xerxes has kept on going and is now in its 31st year. And whilst the LP12 has had more facelifts than Joan Rivers, I still have never been a fan, although it

Roksan Xerxes 20Plus, Caspian RPM Speed Control and PUG Tonearm

sounds more controlled and accurate now than it did when it was a baby. The original Xerxes seemed a much better behaved child then, and now 31 years later I still wasn't disappointed. Let me stress, though, that this 20Plus is not a modified Xerxes from '85; this machine is largely based on their top of the range TMS3, only without the hefty price tag. My white Xerxes for review arrived complete with the new PUG arm and the Caspian RPM power-supply and speed selector unit, all totalling £5825.

I have wanted to review the £1375 PUG, which sits pricewise between the Nima and Artemiz tonearms, ever since first setting eyes on this overfed animal. PUG is a most apt name here. Its name sounds clumsy, and I have to say at first impressions the PUG looks like it needs to go on a

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diet pretty damn fast. But this look is part of what makes this tonearm something very special. In the dictionary PUG can mean an oversized ugly Chinese or boxer dog, or "to make soundproof by covering or packing with clay, mortar, sawdust, or felt". Whilst such materials most definitely haven't been packed inside, the carbon-fibre makes for a very rigid and lightweight arm, ideal for my very diminutive Ortofon Kontrapunkt b cartridge. Put next to my anorexic SME3s from 1980, the 22mm diameter carbon fibre arm

tube looks highly clumsy, though I quickly got to know and love this unipivot design. This was no dog, but rather a tiger, full of energy and bite, though it was very tame to set up, unlike the aged SME series 3. Roksan even provide a stylus balance with the Pug



Roksan Xerxes 20Plus, Caspian RPM Speed Control and PUG Tonearm

to assist set-up. Height adjustment from the supplied Allen key was easy and bias was set up with ease, though the fact the weight rubs against the arm when near the centre of the record (see photo) made me a little alarmed. Indeed for most of the review I removed it completely.

Of course, using Carbon fibre is not a new idea, or indeed having such large diameter tubing, though the tapered Wilson Benesch A.C.T tonearm is more petite in appearance.

Whilst the arm didn't do itself any favours in the looks department, the Caspian RPM speed controller is the same beautiful shape as the complete Caspian range. I have to admit love at first sight when I first ever met the Caspian range down Tottenham Court Road, London, in the good old days. The RPM doesn't have the iconic semi-spherical knobs, but its matt black frontage and "Roksan" etched top aluminium cover made it look more than its £1450 asking price. This unit has a mains switch craftily hidden underneath, with stop/start switch and a speed selector to change between 33.3 and 45 rpm in the centre front, all aided by an LED that changes colour depending on what speed is set. For 33rpm the light will be blue and red for 45rpm, and when not revolving is a lovely purple mixture of the two. The unit is the replacement for the discontinued DX2 and an alternative to the XPS7 power unit, and presently part of a range with the RPP phono preamplifier or the VCS/ VCS 25 which are a mixture of the RPP and RPM. The RPM employs a high quality crystal speed control system, which helps to keep a very stable playback speed; the Xerxes plays exceptionally well, showing no signs of speed fluctuation that my perfect-pitch can make out. Indeed with its digital speed control PCB it ensures



those in countries with unstable or poor voltage are able to maintain the exact and correct speed by allowing an increase or decrease in the speed by up to 6.25%. Not that the Xerxes hasn't always had a good reputation for speed accuracy.

The Xerxes 20 Plus is the latest reincarnation of the Xerxes showing the complexity of manufacture from the moment you get it out the box. With so much based on the TM3, its triple layer construction assures isolation between cartridge, motor and plinth. Using my seismometer, showed just how good this

Roksan Xerxes 20Plus, Caspian RPM Speed Control and PUG Tonearm



was at removing inherent vibrations. As mentioned earlier, this turntable is a mixture of fixed and isolated chassis, enabling the record surface to remain stationary and solid, but being in complete isolation from the rest of the deck. The lower platform connects directly to the three metal adjustable feet, and above this is placed the main (and on this occasion a shiny white) plinth isolated with three suspension mounts. There is a choice of beautiful Maple or Rosewood, or black and white. This top plinth then has an inner plinth which is kept detached from the outer to provide further isolation and needs to be adjusted with an Allen key to ensure the two are level. The inner plinth is connected to the main bearing and detachable arm-board which is made from Acetal. Each layer is therefore adjustable in all planes to get absolutely level, and therefore takes longer setting up than the PUG. The instruction booklet is very informative, explaining the design and listing of all parts as well as the assembly, but you really need to read it all first before you start assembling, as it can be a bit like assembling furniture. I suggest a cup of coffee first. The motor is detached from this inner plinth, and indeed the motor itself is sprung so that just the right amount of torque on the flat belt is provided, particularly viable as record groove modulations vary with dynamics creating different stresses on the motor.

My immediate opinion of this three- piece setup was of scale of musicality and harmony

Coming straight from the TMS3 the self-centring and self-aligning single point main bearing is of a surprisingly small diameter, with the gap between the spindle and bearing sleeve a miniscule 1/5,000"! The only contact is between the spindle tip and the captive tungsten Carbide ball bearing. The spindle is attached to the inner platter with the outer platter resting on top of this. The theme of decoupling continues with the mat sitting on top of the platter and not being attached to the spindle; when you put the record on the platter you need the spindle in situ, but then you remove it before you start to play (and remember to clean the record before you do all this!). This is an old trick going back to the beginnings

of Xerxes, but it means that you can never use a record clamp. Unlike the LP12, you cannot take a first generation Xerxes and turn it into a 20+, especially the new platter, but a few of the modifications, such as bearing and mat, can be employed to bring it somewhere near the 20+ in performance. All in all, then, one of the most carefully thought out turntable design there is.

LISTENING

My immediate opinion of this three-piece setup was of scale of musicality and harmony. There was immense dynamics, and timing and resolution.

Roksan Xerxes 20Plus, Caspian RPM Speed Control and PUG Tonearm

Sibelius 4th symphony (Karajan, Berliner Philharmoniker, Deutsche Grammophon) was as open and with as big a dynamic range as I have ever heard, and therefore more akin to CD, with the arm and turntable combination giving a very exact but musical performance. The instruments were positioned with excellent accuracy both in width and depth. Moving to Goldfrapp 'Tales of Us' this spaciousness continued further in the ethereal first track "Jo", and the bass thumps in the third track "Drew" drew me closer in to the music than I expected, with a tighter and better controlled bass. Moving to my ancient live album "Feel the Love", the audience applause was as clear and natural as I have ever heard. I wish I had been at that concert in the US, but I was pretty close now.

Bowie's 'Blackstar' title track is a complicated number, with intricate drum rhythms fighting for survival against a maze of Indian ragas and simplistic 4/4 time. Whilst each idea was battling for predominance, the Xerxes combination made it all so easy to digest. My Konstrupunkt showed just how good it was in retrieving information from the grooves. Indeed, again there was an almost CD-like quality in terms of clarity and detail, though with musicality that 16/44.1 just cannot give. Turning to Jazz showed again the ease at which this turntable played whatever style I played; Patricia Barber "Live in Paris" had intricate detail of the drumming and clarity in the vocals that vinyl does so well. After a few Queen albums I was saddened to have to pack it all up into the box to send back to London.

CONCLUSION

This might have its origins in 1985, but this is no modified 31 year old design. This is a TMS3 on the cheap, and for £3000 plus power supply represents an extremely sound investment. As a combination under £6000 the micro-detail of sound retrieval was simply wonderful and if I felt the need to have another turntable would have no qualms about opening my purse.

All I played was effortless, with nothing standing out or missing. Dynamics and soundstage were as good as I have heard, and what's more it looked so good!

Sound Quality: 8.9/10

Value for Money (Xerxes plus RPM and PUG): 8.8/10

Build Quality: 8.8/10 (cannot fault the engineering)

Overall: 8.83/10

Price at time of review: £5825

Pros:

Excellent retrieval of detail

Dynamic range

Speed stability

Triple layer of isolation

Cons:

Instruction manual could be easier to read, perhaps with photos rather than diagrams. An on-line video to show set-up could be helpful. The PUG isn't the most beautiful arm.

Janine Elliot

Technical Spec'

Main Bearing Spindle: Hardened tool steel.

Roundness and Concentricity: <5 Microns

Length to Diameter Ratio: 11:1

Main Bearing Ball: Super precision Tungsten Carbide

Roundness: <1 Micron

Diameter: 2mm

Main Bearing Housing: Solid Phosphor Bronze

Clearance: 2/1,0000"

Inner Platter: 2 piece Solid Aluminium alloy.

Interference fitted and non-resonant

Outer Platter: 2 piece Solid Aluminium alloy.

Interference fitted and non-resonant

Structure: 3Plinth Design

Isolation: 3 Level De-coupling

Motor: Custom made 24 pole synchronous

Pulley: Solid aluminium alloy

Roundness and Concentricity: <1 Micron

Drive Belt: Precision Ground Neoprene

Motor Mount: Unique synchronizing bearing

Motor Drive: External speed controller

Wow and Flutter: <0.02%

Rumble:<-80dB

Dimensions: 450 x 370 x 115

Weight: 12Kg

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Krell Digital Vanguard Integrated Amplifier



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RECOMMENDED

Janine Elliot takes a listen to the Krell Digital Vanguard, an integrated amplifier costing £5998 and boasting a whole host of features relevant to today's modern home.

Krell were one of the first manufacturers to bring out amplifiers “built like a tank”; heavy-weights full of masses of capacitors, toroidal power supplies and front panels as thick as, well, tank armoury. Indeed, makers from across the big pond, including those in Canada have always had a reputation of building big and thick and Krell’s latest integrated amplifier The Vanguard is no exception with the distinctive “I mean business” bonnet on the front and four large wheels to hold it down, though at only 10.5cm tall it is small by Krell standards.

For those who have studied Krell, this product is a typical no-expenses-spared offering with a fully discrete and balanced Class A circuit. Krell rightly believe that Class A designs are the most musically accurate circuit designs, and don’t suffer from the characteristic distortions that Class AB amplifiers create. The Vanguard is Class A through-and-through, both in the power and in the preamp section, as is employed in their top-of-the-line Illusion preamps. The amplifier also has Krell’s Current Mode technology to ensure significant signal bandwidth, vital for those PCM or DSD sources. The word Vanguard means ‘a group of people leading the way in new developments or ideas’, and this product certainly isn’t short on facilities. There are 4 analogue inputs; three RCA and one balanced

Krell Digital Vanguard Integrated Amplifier

XLR. One RCA input can be set as “Theatre”, meaning the input goes straight through to the power amplifier stage and misses out the preamp for use as part of a surround sound theatre setup. I used this setting for some of my review, using my MFA transformer passive preamp. Connection to loudspeakers is provided by high-quality WBT terminals. There is also a 3.5mm jack for IR input and 12-volt trigger input and output, as well as optional rack-mount ears, should you want to fit it onto a 19” rack. I’m not sure why you would want to do that; you really would want to show off this beautiful integrated rather than sticking it in a rack hidden away in a cupboard.

The latest version, the Digital Vanguard, has an all-encompassing digital module on board, which gives USB, 3 HDMI inputs and output, and more conventional coax and optical digital inputs. The coaxial and HDMI inputs support PCM up to 24-bit/192kHz, with optical input supporting up to 24-bit/96kHz. Moreover it also offers Ethernet music streaming controlled through dedicated iOS and Android apps; and Bluetooth wireless for convenient streaming from phones, tablets and computers. The USB and Network streaming works well with MP3, AAC, WMA, WAV (PCM), FLAC and ALAC up to 192kHz, and the Bluetooth streaming supports A2DP, AVRCP, HFP and HSP formats. The HDMI

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of Krell I think
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menace’ and
‘force’**

inputs support DSD and 4K video content. HDMI output supports Audio Return Channel (ARC). Quite some line-up then! If you don’t choose the digital option that section on the back panel is blanked over.

For this review I used my Krell KPS20i CD player and vinyl for analogue sources, and for digital inputs I used the mConnect Player app from Google to stream audio from my Xperia phone using Bluetooth, and my laptop and Fiio X5. For those who buy the basic Vanguard you can add the digital board at a later date, installed by Krell or the retailer, and you can you can

update software when required. The UK retail price for the Vanguard with digital board is £5,998, and the standard analogue Vanguard is £4,498, both highly competitive prices when you consider all you get.

Turn it to standby and above the KRELL logo in the centre of the panel it lights up a row of red. I like this. Then turn it on and the colour spread changes to blue, both of which means that at some point it matches the blue and red LEDs of my other equipment. All amplifiers in their present range have this distinctive bonnet, just as previous Krells have had a distinctive design in the centre. Also typical of Krell is the substantial power supply, in this case a 750 VA toroidal transformer and 80,000 microfarads of storage capacitance, meaning the Vanguard will



Krell Digital Vanguard Integrated Amplifier



have a very intimate relationship with your mains supply, whatever quality it is. All this adds weight, though at 17.7 kg, it is actually very light for a Krell.

SOUND

Whenever I think of Krell I think first of music like Beethoven and words like ‘gutsy, big, menace’ and ‘force’. Their amplifiers have always had that reputation and in some respects it has perhaps put people off. I have followed Krell since Dan and Rondi D'Agostino formed the company in 1980, having both a KAV250a power amp and KPS20i CD player, and KAV150 and KRC before that. I like my music to leave an impact, and Krell certainly turns that prospect into a reality. I wanted to see just how good this entry-level product compared with other Krells I know well, and of course everything else around this price point. Putting on Beethoven to start with was therefore the obvious choice, and all playing through my Wilson Benesch speakers. The Dresden Philharmonic under Herbert Kegel is an excellent performance full of energy that some amplifiers just cannot deal with. This one left nothing untouched. My speakers came alive such that

even my cat sat up and listened. Symphony number 7, complete with hitting mic stand at one minute in (never heard that on my KAV) had the dynamic range of Mahler or Bruckner. I was worried when I initially unpacked this unit that the two fans at the rear, which cool down the heatsink, would make this quite loud in operation, but ironically this 400W/4Ω beauty was as quiet as, well, silence, even with the two thermostatically controlled fans at the back. It still gets hot inside, though that was as expected, so good ventilation above is still a necessity.

The front panel is minimalist in comparison with the accompanying remote, but has all the functions you needed to operate should you lose the latter. The remote itself was typical of Krell products, putting many, many other companies to shame with the solidity of build and weight; being a slab of aluminium, machined to insert the electronics, mirroring the controls on the amplifier and with many extra buttons, and offering access to other Krell products such as my aged CD player. With its ribbed back-and-sides black finish with silver buttons, this remote was quite simply gorgeous. The Vanguard itself has a two line LCD display, below

Krell Digital Vanguard Integrated Amplifier

the USB socket which is only operable if you have the digital card attached. The LCD display stops illuminating after around 15 seconds of inaction, though the blue line above the KRELL wording stays lit, I'm pleased to say.

Using MP3 from my Xperia, Track 2 of Heathen, David Bowie, had powerful top and an amazing definition making compressed audio sound almost acceptable. Eagles 'Long Road out of Eden' Title track on disc 2 of this great double album had a depth and width that made for an exceptionally invigorating listen. If you wanted warmth and easy listening then you needed valve, however the bass from this behemoth was definitely valve inspired. This bass was so good, and the tops were pin-sharp and quick. This was like having just had my ears syringed, and my listening soon became all about power, detail and fun! Moving swiftly to CD the energetic Naim "The Ark" album playing "Mambo Jumbo" (John van der Veer), had detail and energy that really took me aback with jumbo stereo spread of the two guitars. This was good.

Turning to vinyl I went via my Manley and MFA pre, turning the Vanguard into "Theatre" mode so I missed out the on-board class-A pre. Mozart Piano Concerto No 21 in C major, something I played when I was a young piano student, sounded as musical and gentle as I would expect from the young female pianist Geza Anda (Camerata Academica of the Salzburg Mozarteum) showing this bulldog could also be tamed when needed. This music had pizzazz, sweetness and space that let every nuance of the music through. The famous slow movement was not hurried, but performed in my living room like I was there at the recording. The Krell pre-amp stage, though, is still excellent and worked well when I removed the MFA from the chain.

Turning to the Queen Studio Collection, this was now getting seriously good. The brilliantly remixed set of albums had extensive depth and detail as Freddie and the team whizzed between, as well as in

The Krell showed off with both vivacity and gentleness in equal amounts

front and behind my speakers with energy. 'A Night at the Opera' is one of the best albums from Queen, not only in its content, but also in the sound engineering. With tracks like 'Bohemian Rhapsody', 'You're My Best Friend' and 'Love of My Life' it is no wonder this album hit the number one spot in 1975. The fading in and out of the musical stabs in 'Death on Two Legs' showed just how good the original sources – and this, the remixed version – were. But equally it showed how well the Krell performed. Queen albums are not the easiest to play well, and many amps cannot cope

with such a wide degree of sounds and dynamics with such ease as the Krell. Turning to Mike Valentine's 'Big Band Spectacular' suddenly the soundstage grew by metres, with forceful sounding brass at one extreme and precise and gentle ride cymbal at the other, beautifully married together. The Krell showed off with both vivacity and gentleness in equal amounts. The 200W/8Ω integrated might be the baby of the Krell range, but this was no slouch. Everything was there, from the detail that is missing from so many amplifiers to the grunt when it needed to have it. Class-A rules A-O.K, and I really started enjoying this. The clarity was better than on my KAV250a, though the grunt wasn't quite as big; the sound was much more in control and the stereo width and speed was one of the best I have heard, resolving imagery faster and more accurately. All it lacked was a headphone socket. It could do everything else, well, perhaps except vinyl, but I guess fitting a vinyl card in as well would be a tight squeeze in this already anorexic Krell. And, to top it all, it was made in The USA, rather than China!

CONCLUSION

Those not convinced of just how good Krell can be, should give this one a go, and particularly the digital version. This one just does everything except make coffee, and allows user adjustment of settings from the comfort of your armchair, and does it all with

Krell Digital Vanguard Integrated Amplifier

both authority and tenderness. If you want a large-scale performance in your living room, especially in the speed of sound and stereo spread, you will like this one, but if you want easy listening, then go elsewhere; this Vanguard will keep your attention for as long as it's switched on.

Sound Quality: 8.90/10

Value for Money: 8.6/10

Build Quality: 8.8/10

Overall : 8.77/10

Price at time of review £5,998

Pros:

Digital features pleases everyone

Muscle where you need it

Well behaved bass

fast and accurate imagery

Petite size of amplifier will please more folk

Quiet fans keep the heat down

Love the red and blue lights

Cons:

Pretty expensive but a lot of features for the money

You might not like the bonnet

Janine Elliot

Technical Spec'

Inputs

1 pr. balanced via XLR connectors

3 pr. single-ended via RCA connectors

1 HDMI

1 USB

Outputs

1 pr. speaker outputs via WBT gold-plated binding posts

Control inputs

1 remote IR detector input via 3-conductor 3.5 mm connector

1 12 VDC trigger input via 2-conductor 3.5 mm connector

Control output

1 programmable 12 VDC trigger output (300 mA maximum current) via 2-conductor 3.5 mm connector

Input impedance

Balanced: 95 kΩ

Single-ended: 47.5 kΩ

Frequency response

20 Hz to 20 kHz +0, -0.01 dB

<2 Hz to 150 kHz +0, -3 dB

Signal-to-noise ratio

>90 dB, wideband, unweighted, at maximum gain, referred to full power output

>97 dB, "A"-weighted

Gain

48 dB

Input sensitivity

Single-ended or balanced: 160 mV RMS

Total harmonic distortion

<0.015% at 1 kHz, at 200 W, 8 Ω load

<0.13% at 20 kHz, at 200 W, 8 Ω load

Output power

200 W RMS per channel at 8 Ω

400 W RMS per channel at 4 Ω

Output current

16 A peak

Slew rate

50 V/μs

Output impedance

<0.066 Ω at 20 Hz

<0.075 Ω, 20 Hz to 20 kHz

Damping factor

>121 at 20 Hz, referred to 8 Ω

>106, 20 Hz to 20 kHz, referred to 8 Ω

Power consumption

Standby: 12 W

Idle: 70 W

Maximum: 1300 W

Heat output

Standby: 41 BTU/hr

Idle: 239 BTU/hr

Maximum: 4436 BTU/hr

Dimensions

17.1 in W x 4.15 in H x 17.5 in D

434 mm W x 105 mm H x 445 mm D

Weight

Unit only: 39 lb [17.7 kg]

As shipped: 47 lb [21.3 kg]

Digital Module Specs

Coaxial and HDMI inputs support PCM up to 24-bit/192kHz. Optical input up to 24-bit/96kHz

HDMI inputs support DSD and 4K video content.

HDMI output supports Audio Return Channel (ARC)

USB and Network streaming support MP3, AAC, WMA, WAV(PCM), FLAC, ALAC up to 192kHz

Bluetooth streaming supports A2DP, AVRCP, HFP, HSP



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Fezz Audio Silver Luna EL34 Valve Amplifier

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



The Silver Luna integrated valve amplifier from Polish company Fezz Audio uses EL34 tubes and costs £725 including European shipping, which is something of a budget price for tube amp. Dominic Marsh takes a listen.

Whoever said that turntables and valve amplifiers were strictly yesterday's technology? Far from being the dinosaurs of hifi from days gone past, there is a huge unprecedented resurgence of both and this trend shows no sign of letting up just yet either.

Enter then the Fezz Audio (A newly formed division of Toroidy.pl) Silver Luna valve amplifier sporting EL34 output valves and designed and manufactured in Poland. The most critical component in valve amplifiers is of course the transformers and who better to specify and build them than Toroidy who have been manufacture high quality transformers for many years. I have used Toroidy myself not too long ago when a CD player I owned originating from the far east decided one of its mains transformers needed a permanent holiday. This was not long after the

Fezz Audio Silver Luna EL34 Valve Amplifier

manufacturer ceased trading but a quick email to Toroidy had a custom built replacement winging its way to me a week later and at a very sensible price too I might add. My fellow reviewer Dan Worth has balanced mains units feeding his system, fitted with Toroidy transformers.

CONSTRUCTION

The entire chassis is formed of folded mild steel plate and is nothing remarkable to look at in form and shape. Fezz Audio do make at least make an attempt regarding the aesthetic aspect by giving a choice of paint colours. Black Ice gloss chassis with matte black finish transformer covers, White gloss chassis with Sky Blue gloss transformer covers, Burgundy gloss chassis with matte black transformer covers and Burning Red gloss chassis with matte black transformer covers. The colourways do at least make the amplifiers more attractive than plain black all over with no relief. To the centre of the front panel is a bright metal oval plaque proclaiming "Fezz Audio" in laser cut relief.

Instead of using the traditional laminated plate type of construction for the output transformers, Fezz Audio use Toroidy's own in-house designed and built toroidal transformers in the output stages as well as the mains transformer. Fezz Audio say there are many quality components installed like Alps volume pots and Nichicon FG Fine Gold capacitors. The review sample provided was finished in the Burning Red finish with silver lettering which I found difficult to read, especially round the back when making connections due to the contrast in tones between the red and the silver. It was less important on the front panel for me as remembering what only two controls do wasn't dependant at all on the lettering to recall. On any of the other colours

the lettering is clear and distinct with higher contrast ratios and in the case of the white chassis variant, black lettering is used.

The valves were packed separately in their original Electro Harmonix boxes, each thoughtfully numbered in the order they were to be installed into the amplifier. Nice to see good quality valves being used. It is wise to do a quick check of the valve biasing (Easy to perform, well explained in the handbook) and all was still within specification when installed.

The amplifier has three line level inputs, selectable by the right hand front panel rotary control. The left side of the front panel sports the volume level rotary control. The rear of the chassis we find three sets of single ended RCA inputs, then the loudspeaker connectors with a single pole for the negative or return connection and either

an 8 Ohm or 4 Ohm tapped connection for the corresponding impedance value of the speakers being employed. Finally, an IEC mains inlet plug with a mains on/off switch above it. This is one of my personal bugbears as it means components fitted with rear mounted power switches give you a choice of either having them sited on the top shelf of the rack for easy access, or having to contort your body and arm to reach it between the shelves lower down in the rack. With the heat from the valves to contend with during switch off or inadvertently knocking a valve and breaking it, it makes even less sense to rear mount the power switch. Yes I know, it is all to do with cost, but I have seen many amps with power switches on the side panel or underneath the front panel, which takes



Fezz Audio Silver Luna EL34 Valve Amplifier

all that stress and risk away and doesn't add THAT much to the build cost in reality.
There is no remote control facility.

SOUND QUALITY

EL34 valves and their circuits do have a reputation that precedes them and are often accused of being syrupy, warm toned, coloured and combinations thereof. It's all in the implementation of course and usually it's because designers try to wring more performance from EL34's than they are comfortable in delivering. Reputations, rumours and whispers do not interest me in the slightest and this was just another amplifier submitted for review and so I began listening with an open mind.

As is the case with most valve amplifiers, they seem to need around 20 – 30 minutes to come "on song" from switch on and I gave a comfortable 30 minutes warm up time before each listening session.

What first struck me was how light and airy it sounded, that is not to say light in power or weight, more by the transparency and delicacy it was showing me. Images were hanging in the air as if supported by near invisible gossamer threads and it was very close to being a true walk around the sound stage experience. I would expect that kind of performance from a 6550 valve and above, but not from an EL34, which shows some care has been taken with the circuit topology in the design of this amplifier. Having a rated 35 watts per channel into 8 ohms to play with, you could be forgiven for thinking this amplifier doesn't have a lot of headroom to play with, but you would be wrong.

It could go very loud without showing any signs of break up or distress and that was a test rather than saying this amplifier could belt out heavy rock music day after day, because that's not what this amplifier's true forte is by any means.

It was in its element with female vocals, acoustic, jazz and middle of the road kind of music, where the natural organic sounds of these genres shone through. It would play large scale orchestral and rock music in moderation at sensible levels, but push the volume control around past 12 o'clock and the edges started to fray a bit, albeit at a level that wasn't comfortable to listen to. A party or disco amplifier it is not, for sure. Keep the volume control below that 12 o'clock mark and it held it together really well and when I put James Newton Howard and Friends direct cut album on to play the Silver Luna gave me a fast, lithe and vivid performance that was a real pleasure to listen to.

Whenever I listen to Fink's "Wheels Beneath My Feet" live album I have certain benchmarks I pay particular attention to during my evaluations and here are just some of the key points. 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 completely 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. That is a roundabout and long winded way of saying that the



Fezz Audio Silver Luna EL34 Valve Amplifier

Fezz Audio Silver Luna amplifier passed all of those benchmark criteria.

CONCLUSION

Well, the Fezz Audio Silver Luna EL34 just about shrugged off all that I pitted against it and it didn't offend me at any point either. It is a sweet natured beast rather than a snorting bull of an amp, but it can kick like a mule when called to do so, provided you don't pair it with inefficient speakers. It wouldn't win a beauty pageant, but to me most of the budget seems to have gone into the internals rather than wearing a fancy coat designed to impress. A choice of colours deflects the mind away from that though and is a good compromise.

In the value for money stakes, costing some 950.00 Euros (GB £725.00) which includes shipping within the EU, it offers good value. At US\$1033.25 plus shipping it still looks to be good value.

As an introduction to the world of valve amplifiers, it gives an insight into that velvety "Valve sound" without busting the bank balance and you can be sure it will have both reliability and longevity too.

Build quality: 8.1/10

Sound quality: 8.7/10

Value for money: 8.5/10

Overall: 8.43/10

Price at time of review: £725

Pros:

Great sound, quality components used throughout and chassis colour choices should find many fans

Cons:

Lack of valve protection cage and rear mounted power switch (see text above)

Dominic Marsh



Technical Spec'

Maximum output power : 2 x 35W / 8Ω

Circuit type : AB class

Output impedance : 4Ω / 8Ω

Inputs : 3 x RCA

Harmonic distortions THD : < 1%

Frequency response : 15Hz-77kHz (-3dB)

Power consumption : 150W

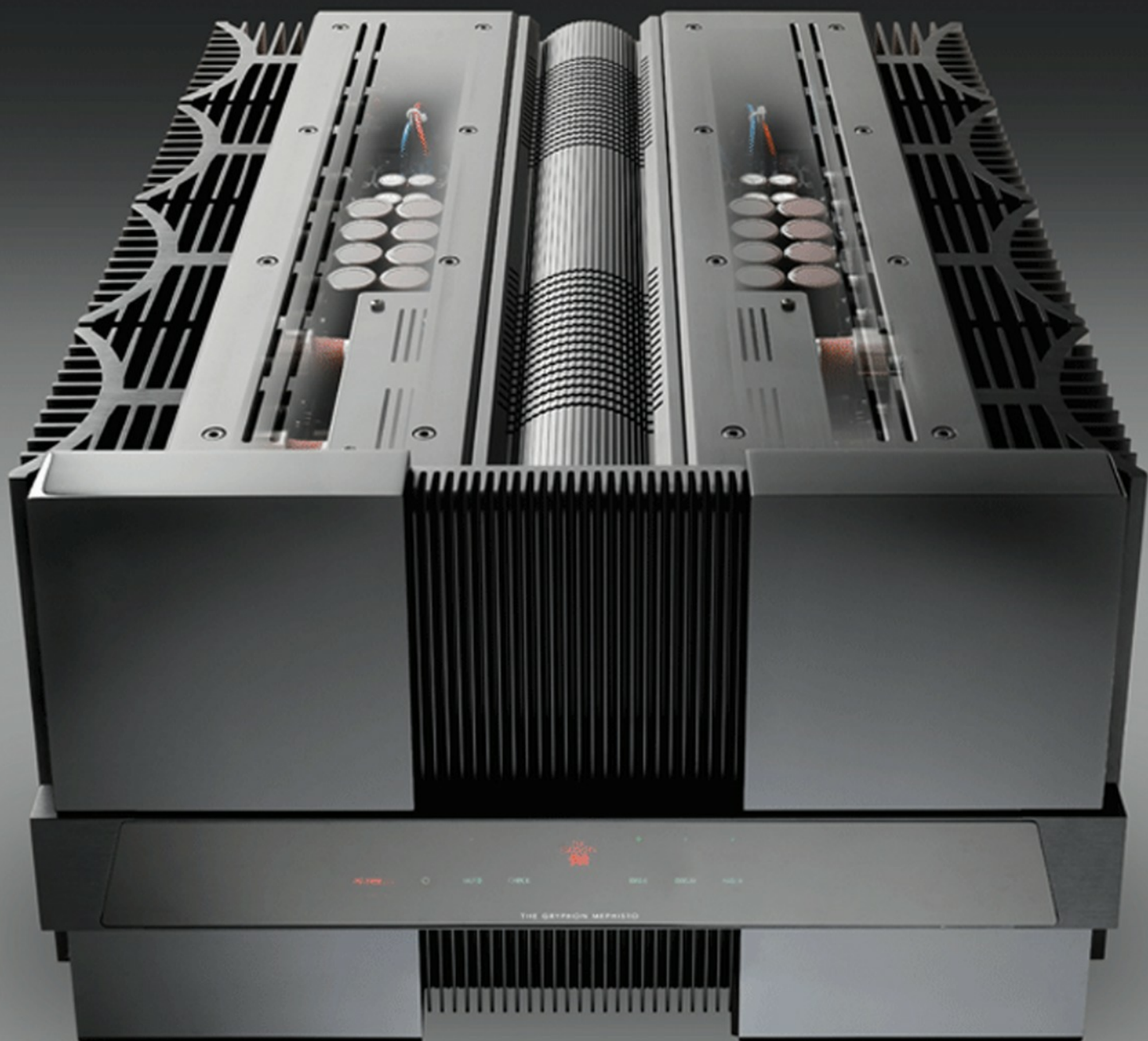
AC fuse : 3,15A T

Net weight : 15,3kg

Dimensions : 400x320x165mm

Tubes : EL34 x 4 (power output), ECC83 x 2 (pre-

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**Dominic Marsh
takes this €840
package of
amp, speakers
and speaker
cables from
TAGA Harmony
for a spin.**

TAGA Audio hail from Poland and TAGA stands for “To Achieve Glorious Acoustics”, or so their tag line says. The entire design brief is created in-house by TAGA themselves, while production is in TAGA's own factory in China, which allows TAGA considerable latitude when it comes to pricing their products. Their range is rather extensive, with no less than ten speaker ranges, spanning from 5.1 home theatre arrays to their flagship standard floor standing speakers, which doesn't end there either, as we can also add active and desktop systems to that list too. Electronic products also feature highly, with hybrid amplifiers, all-in-one music systems, DACs, power filters, the list goes on and on, then a range of interconnect and speaker cables complete their product line-up and one is simply spoilt for choice browsing through their website. They even cater for the DIYers amongst us with cables off the reel to terminate themselves.

TAGA have sent to Hifi Pig for review a selected package consisting of a Harmony HTA -700B V2

TAGA Harmony HTA – 700B V2 amplifier, Platinum B-40 Speakers and Platinum 18 Speaker Cables Package

hybrid amplifier, a pair of Platinum B-40 speakers and a pair of 2.5 metre Platinum 18 speaker cables to match. Add the source of your choice and you can be up and running in a very short time.

CONSTRUCTION

HTA – 700B V2 Amplifier

The HTA – 700B V2 amplifier is very compact measuring 14cm H x 17.7cm W x 27cm D, with the review sample supplied finished in bright alloy that has simply superb fit and finish. It is also available in a black finish. Comparatively heavy too, weighing in at 4.2kg. To the front panel we find a quarter inch standard headphone socket, a large rotary volume control, an input selector knob that switches between USB input, CD input and Bluetooth. A pair of recessed 12AX7B valves (tubes) peeps out the top plate of the chassis, half submerged as it were, surprisingly without any protection cages. Judging by the way the valves light up almost instantly to full brightness when powered on, I suspect the tube heaters are fed by a regulated DC voltage. Behind the two valves lies the mains transformer housing, again clad in bright alloy.

To the rear we find the Bluetooth antenna socket (antenna supplied), a USB socket, below these two is the RCA phono inputs for CD, then a pair of RCA pre amplifier output sockets, then a single set of four good quality speaker binding posts which will accept spades, 4mm banana plugs and bare wire. Finally, an on/off rocker power switch and a male IEC AC power inlet socket, complete the rear panel connections. TAGA supply the software via a download from their website for linking the USB connection to a personal computer running Windows.

Specifications:

Power Output: 2x45W RMS @ 4Ohm

2x35W RMS @ 6Ohm

2x26W RMS @ 8Ohm

Class A/B

Vacuum Tubes: 2 x 12AX7B

THD: Less or equal 0.1% (at rated power)

Signal/Noise ratio: =>88dB

Frequency Response: 20Hz – 28kHz

Inputs: RCA stereo CD, USB (for computer)

Outputs:

RCA Pre-Out



TAGA Harmony HTA – 700B V2 amplifier, Platinum B-40 Speakers and Platinum 18 Speaker Cables Package

Connectivity Wireless: Bluetooth® v4.0, aptX®
Bluetooth® Profiles: Advanced Audio Distribution Profile A2DP

Headphone Impedance: 32-320Ω

Headphone Output Power: 1W 160Ω

USB Supported Data: Asynchronous 24bit / 192kHz

Cirrus Logic CM6631A+CS4344 chip

Included Accessories: Bluetooth® antenna, USB cable,

Removable IEC Power cord

AC Power, Power Consumption: 230V 50Hz, 100 W

Dimensions (H x W x D): 14 x 17.7 x 27 cm

Weight (net): 4.2 kg

Platinum B-40 Speakers

The TAGA Platinum B-40 speakers are a compact stand mount design, again manufactured in China to TAGA's exacting specifications. TAGA class it as a "bookshelf" speaker, but to me its dimensions aren't really suited to that position with a depth of over 27cm. It is a reflex ported design, with the exit port mounted on the front baffle immediately below the 165mm bass driver. The bass driver cone appears to be of a sandwich type construction, the dust cap being of the same material, with a flexible rubber roll surround. There is a bright polished alloy outer surround ring engraved with the words "TAGA Harmony" and to me the speaker looked attractive, with or without the grilles present. The tweeter is a



TAGA Harmony HTA – 700B V2 amplifier, Platinum B-40 Speakers and Platinum 18 Speaker Cables Package

one inch unit with a metal dome, protected by a perforated metal mesh grille and unusually, is mounted partially above the front baffle in a domed plastic extension. To the rear we find a set of speaker binding posts in a biwire/biamp configuration with the ubiquitous gold plated brass link plates. The binding posts will accept spades, 4mm banana plugs or bare wire. I will be mentioning these again in the listening analysis below. The review sample was supplied in a vinyl Wenge wood finish with faux Walnut and black (Ash?) as alternative finish choices. The cabinet carcass has curved side panels which adds intrinsic strength but also takes away parallel walls to minimize internal cabinet reflections.

Specifications:

Design: 2-way, 2 drivers, bookshelf speakers, Bi-wiring, TLIE Enclosure,

Crossover point 2.5kHz

High-Frequency Driver: 25mm (1")

Bass / Midrange Driver: 165mm (6.5")

Recommended Amplifier Power: 20-150W

Frequency Response: 38Hz-40kHz

Impedance: 6 ohm

Sensitivity: 89dB

Dimensions (H x W x D): 41 x 25 x 27.2 cm

Weight (net): 15.5kg pair

Platinum 18 Speaker Cables

Lastly, as part of this package, TAGA supply a 2.5 metre pair of their Platinum 18 speaker cables terminated with 4mm banana plugs. This cable is also available un-terminated off the reel, bought by the multiple metre lengths.

Specifications:

2-conductor, 18 AWG x 8 / conductor

Terminated with high-grade copper banana plugs

Braided multi-stranded, ultra-high purity 99.99%

Oxygen Free Copper wires

16 wires per 1 conductor

HDPE – Ultra low-loss, low capacitance high-density polyethylene dielectric insulation for conductors

It looks to be a workman-like cable, with 16 strands braided into the two main conductors of 8 strands each, bifurcated at each end to around 15 cm from each of the plugs. However, the plugs don't really match the quality of the cable itself, the "splines" are not that springy and that complicated matters by having oversized 4mm holes in the speaker's binding posts which resulted in a poor connection, although the Platinum B-40's binding posts face upwards so gravity holds the speaker cables in place. One of the plugs actually lost the 4mm splined part which

detached itself while changing cables over from the binding posts on the HTA-700B amplifier, so I had to rapidly re-terminate it with a "Z" plug and of course I will have to fit the other seven plugs to match, or return it to TAGA as is. I have mentioned my reservations about these particular banana plugs to TAGA and they say they



TAGA Harmony HTA – 700B V2 amplifier, Platinum B-40 Speakers and Platinum 18 Speaker Cables Package

will review the situation shortly and will be looking into fitting another type of plug.

The complete system package as detailed above is 840 Euros at the time of review.

SOUND QUALITY

I was pleasantly surprised when I first connected up this system just how good it sounded and none of the sound spectrum it produced annoyed or offended me, which was a great start to the proceedings. The word to best describe the sound was “balanced” in that treble and bass were in equilibrium, midband was clean and clear, so it was no effort at all just to sit back and enjoy what I was hearing while the system was warming up. Of course, it is my job then to analyse and disseminate what’s what so you the reader can assimilate and interpret how I perceived the sound produced.

For such a small unit, the HTA-700B V2 amplifier produced a bouncy gutsy sound via CD input and I don’t recall it running out of steam, with the Platinum B-40 speakers and with others too that I tried, including my resident speakers. At that time I also had a pair of Audiofilia SF-6 floor standing speakers in for evaluation and the little TAGA amp acquitted itself rather well with those too, although when pushed hard the sound became more “shouty”, which if you are the kind of person who listens with the volume control past 12 o’clock regularly you’ll

need to seek a more powerful amplifier for your needs. Pairing the Bluetooth connection was simple and straightforward, although I perceived a softer and less dynamic presentation than via the CD player input. USB input sound quality was almost on a par with the CD input.

Intrinsically, the speaker cable itself appears to be a good component, the braided weave layout should keep the capacitance at a low level, but the real let down was the quality of the plugs employed. When the splines section detached itself from the body of one plug while gently removing it from the amplifier’s binding posts it merely confirmed my fears that while they looked good, they weren’t man enough for the job. Swapping to my resident cables brought a not unexpected improvement in sound quality and I rue that I couldn’t give a fair assessment of the speaker cables’ performance in their own right with more suitable plugs fitted. You could of course

purchase the unterminated cable, or another terminated cable from their range, but that falls outside of the TAGA package deal offer and would probably add to the cost.

Then we move on to the Platinum B-40 speakers and it is by no accident I have left the best until last. Given that they are priced at circa £320.00 here in the UK, they really can and do outshine other speakers at that price level and well above. Installed into my resident system they sounded far better than their humble price suggests, with good solid bass



TAGA Harmony HTA – 700B V2 amplifier, Platinum B-40 Speakers and Platinum 18 Speaker Cables Package

free of boom and overhang, a treble that is crisp and clear, plus a midband that doesn't disappoint either. I found them a very musical speaker whatever amplifier they were paired with and of course the Harmony HTA – 700B V2 was no exception. Mounted on 60cm stands and placed around 20cm from the rear wall they gave a full bodied sound, although while the deepest bass registers were not present, there wasn't any boom or blooming either. Dynamics were fast-ish, not as lithe as the best speakers but still a credible performance nonetheless. I simply couldn't resist removing the brass jumper links and fitting a set of my own pure copper wired links and the sound improvement was considerable. Paired with the HTA – 700B V2 amplifier the sound stage was expansive, extending out just beyond the speaker boundaries, while my resident amplifier pushed that out even further still and depth acquired a deeper rendition to imaging.

In to the CD drawer goes my reference recording which is Fink's "Wheels Beneath My Feet" live album. Track one called "Biscuits For Breakfast" begins with the drummer gently striking the Ride cymbal as the intro, which has to portray the metal ringing in the cymbal to be accepted as real and any masking here shows up instantly and readily. The Platinum B-40's gave a good account of themselves with this test and surprisingly good too given that it is fitted with a metal dome tweeter. Kick drum was portrayed with good weight and solidity, a good deal better than other "budget" speakers I have listened to and the drummer's rim shots were almost life-like too. Fink's voice has a nasal quality to it with a slight rasp and the Platinum B-40's did a pretty good job of that task too.

As a contrast to that, I followed on with 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 out and clearly defined in every respect. The bass lines really are deep on this album, rather subtle in places too and can easily be muddled by the music around it. The Platinum B-40's didn't quite have full command and control of this album as my resident speakers are able, especially around the bass which wasn't as deep and tended to collide with other instruments, so once or twice got recessed into the rest of the music. For a

£1,500+ speaker that would be a slight criticism, for a £320.00 speaker that should be taken as a compliment.

CONCLUSION

If I had reviewed this package system as submitted by TAGA, then it would have been the speaker cable plugs that let the entire system down, nothing more. The oversized speaker binding post holes could have been resolved by fitting better plugs, so I can almost discount that aspect. Taking each component in isolation however creates a different point of view entirely.

The TAGA Harmony HTA – 700B V2 amplifier is a great little amplifier in its own right. It has enough features to make it flexible with regards to connections, it sounds extremely good too, more powerful than the specifications suggest and the small footprint means you can house it wherever you like so it remains unobtrusive. This little amplifier has a lot going for it.

For a cable to part company with it's connector during a review is unforgiveable. Having said that, if TAGA take on board my comments about the plugs and upgrade them, then I am prepared to happily change my opinion because I still think it's a great cable nonetheless.

The Platinum B-40 speakers belie their modest cost and are very able performers. I could easily live with these, although given that I chop and change components and cables on an almost permanent basis as part of my job, those binding posts would drive me nuts. Still, as part of the package that TAGA offer, they give tremendous bang for the buck and for me they were the star of the ensemble. Well worth seeking out for audition.

Build quality: 7.8/10

Sound quality: 8.2/10

Value for money: 8.6/10

Overall: 8.2/10

Price at time of review: 840 Euros

Pros: Terrific little amplifier and speakers which give good performances – especially at the price.

Cons: Those speaker plugs.

Dominic Marsh



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Audiobyte Black Dragon DAC



**Dan Worth
takes a listen
to this well
connected,
£1200 DAC
from Romanian
company
Audiobyte.**

When purchasing a new DAC I want a host of connections to allow the opportunity to plug and play multiple digital sources at one time, or to interchange sources for review purposes.

Despite a recent flurry in HDMI over I2S devices being produced, the format is often overlooked by some of the mainstream manufacturers; however, Audiobyte have embraced the standard and this is a positive move from the Romanian company in my opinion. As well as my own Audiobyte X+ spdif converter sporting a HDMI digital output the Black Dragon also has the latest standard as an input.

CONNECTIONS AND FEATURES

Along with BNC, RCA and optical spdif inputs, the Black Dragon also has asynchronous USB and the 110ohm AES/EBU professional standard connection type too. Outputs are via a set of either balanced XLRs or unbalanced RCAs.

Sampling rates and bit depth are as follows:

32bit - 44.1-384 KHz on USB, I2S (PCM)

DSD64, 128 on USB

24bit - 44.1-192 KHz on spdif, aes-ebu

Audiobyte Black Dragon DAC

24bit - 44.1-96 KHz on toslink

The Dual Mono Conversion, using 2 X AK4396s, offers a fully balanced implementation mode which is designed to give better analogue conversion and lower jitter rates and the onboard Femtovox Clock 300fs is an extremely accurate and precise clock from Rockna, and here is used to increase timing accuracy and to reduce jitter. The custom Minimal Phase Digital Filter aids in producing high performance up-sampling for conditioning the incoming digital signals. Of course this filter can be switched on or off.

The LNS Linear Power Supply - There are a total of 11 linear stabiliser I/Cs and 8 of them are said to be very low noise. There are a total of 50,000uF capacitors for smoothing and two separate toroidal transformers provide power to all individual pcb sections.

The Black Dragon has a preamplifier and headphone amplifier onboard, with the digital volume controller being useable for all inputs and outputs. The headphone amplifier, rated at 32ohms and outputting 800mW, should offer the flexibility of use that consumers want to see from a modern digital hub such as this.

Visually the Black Dragon is pretty nice looking, with sleek lines and a compact size. The dot matrix screen is clear, with connector layout on the rear being tidy and easily accessible. Overall build quality could be a little better in my opinion, with the lid of the unit being very thin and a little rattly... more screws and some damping would be very welcome here. However, the Black Dragon certainly does look great on either a desk or in rack.

THE SOUND

My first impressions of the sound were very positive, the unit has done the rounds already so was more than ready for action after a quick warm up when it arrived here from BD Audio.

Initial findings were that vocals are very distinguished and the top end, with the FIR filter set to off, is beautifully open and very well extended. Whilst playing a Fink live album I felt the metallic clang of cymbals to be expressed very well and the shimmering decay felt nice and true to the venue's acoustic.

With poor recordings, such as Derrin Nuendorf's live album, I felt the top end to be a little over explicit, but flicking the filter back to the 'on' position cured this exceptionally well. I used Spotify extensively



Audiobyte Black Dragon DAC

and threw a good range of genres at the Black Dragon and felt the filter offered terrific flexibility, allowing me to enjoy tracks in a much more musical manner than if it was not present. There is also some benefit to the upper midrange here.

The midrange as a whole is wonderfully analogue-like and very expressive, and I loved how the Black Dragon rendered a strong female vocalist, particularly in the higher registers and how it added grunt to males tones. I particularly enjoyed Sinéad O'Connor's 'Am I Not Your Girl' where there's a certain sweetness to her vocal when played through good equipment and The Dragon allowed her vocal to remain intimate and unrestrained.

Busier tracks had nice separation, again especially when it came to vocals, and I really like how The Dragon can take the lead singer and separate them from the haze of noise that can surround them, allowing for a clear and articulate emphasis on centre stage performance.

The soundstage produced from the DAC as a whole was very appealing. Depth is good, leaving vocalists in the foreground and width and height is what I would class as 'expected in my room' from a quality component. There is a cohesive thickness to the sound and the stage isn't overblown, but nor is it warm or oversaturated. Definition and clarity is the overall nature of the sound and when fed with good recordings this DAC sounds surprisingly natural for its price point.

Bass notes seemed to represent the actual instruments in use very well and where some DACs in this price range can be more of a one note affair, The Dragon gave me each note. For example, when listening to 'Hey Now' by London Grammar, there are actually eight bass notes being played consecutively in the track and I have had DACs here costing a fair bit more than the Black Dragon that have failed to accurately portray this. Bass is really very rhythmical and carries the flow of the music exceptionally well and I think Audiobytes certainly know how to tune equipment - which I guess is why I still use their Hydra X+ to this day from my Mac.

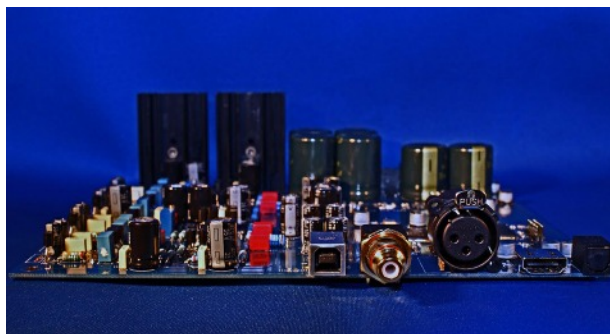
HEADPHONE AMPLIFIER

I attached my Audio Technica ATH AD2000X headphones to the Black Dragon and I felt it would

make for a great all in one, desktop headphone rig. Now I'm sure dedicated "headphone-aphiles" out there would demand more from an all in one experience, but for those who like our sound to predominantly come from in front of us rather than 'inside our heads' I really enjoyed quite a few hours listening to a great range of music from The Dragons headphone output.

Soundwise I found The Dragon to be on the slightly warmer side of neutral and I loved the fact that the top end behaved just like the headphones do, taking the treble to the edge and then leaning back a notch or so to give lots of extension and openness, without any harshness.

Again, the FIR filter works a treat when listening to headphones.



Volume control on the DAC is wonderful when wanting to make small volume adjustments, and allows for a very smooth incline or decline in decibels when pressed, although I would have liked it to be faster when changing large volume swing.

CONCLUSION

Audiobytes have once again come up with a product that offers fantastic performance for the money. The Black Dragon is a feature rich digital to analogue converter which sounds detailed, open and natural. With great extended highs, a fantastically informative midrange and a realistic bass performance, music has a rhythmic flow and engaging enthusiasm.

Build Quality: 8.2/10

Sound Quality: 9/10

Value For Money: 8.8/10

Overall: 8.66/10

Price at time of review: £1200

Pros:

Lots of inputs

Balanced and unbalanced outputs

Great vocals and cohesive sound

Nice headphone amp

Cons:

Lid is a bit flimsy

Volume can take an age to move large increments

Dan Worth



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Etalon StrEamer



The Etalon strEamer is a mini server made in Hungary and costing €550. John Scott wires it into his system for Hifi Pig.

The latest product from Hungarian manufacturer Etalon is the strEamer. I should point out at the outset that the idiosyncratic capitalisation is a feature of Etalon's branding rather than any wilful typing errors on my part.

On the face of things, a streamer doesn't have to do very much – two things really. It needs to get a digital signal from wherever it is stored and output it into your DAC and it needs to let you choose the file or files that need to be moved so that you can play them. That being the case, you might think that a streamer will have a negligible effect on the sound of your system. Closer inspection, however, reveals that streamers actually have a lot of work to do to get these signals ready for your DAC and if they fail to do this well the signal going into your DAC is going to suffer.

I've been streaming music for around five years now using a Logitech Squeezebox Touch and that has become my benchmark in terms of minimum performance from a streamer. It sounds good, is easy to set up and use and can be controlled from a smartphone or tablet by a choice of third party apps. Any streamer coming into my system is expected to

Etalon StrEamer

function at least as well as the Squeezebox Touch on all counts.

The Squeezebox Touch looks quite good too but as I can't see it from my listening position and its touchscreen functionality is, other than set up functions, rendered obsolete by its app, this isn't really important to me. Just as well really as when it comes to looks the Etalon streamer is a completely different kettle of fish. If you are looking for a flashy piece of hifi kit to show off to your mates, the strEamer definitely doesn't fit the bill, it's about as unflashy and unassuming a piece of hifi equipment as it is possible to imagine. Roughly the width of the front of a CD jewel case and half the height, the strEamer is a simple black box with a power socket, a RJ45 Ethernet connection and two USB ports on one side.

The strEamer arrived in a cardboard box alongside a small two-pin power supply. I had to run out and buy a travel adaptor so that I could plug it into the wall. Etalon assure me that units distributed for sale in the UK will come with an appropriate three-pin unit. The supplied power supply does the job but it would be interesting to see if an upgraded PSU had a beneficial effect. Etalon had emailed me an instruction manual in advance of the strEamer arriving and no instructions were supplied along with the unit but I would expect that these would be supplied with a retail model.

Before I say any more about the strEamer, it may be useful if I explain a little bit about my hifi set up. My hifi is in my living room. My audio files are on an external hard drive connected to a laptop in another sitting room. The laptop runs Logitech's LMS server and I use my Squeezebox Touch to stream my files wirelessly from one room to the other and into my DAC. This has worked well for me but has the disadvantage of tying up my laptop to the hard drive and also means that the laptop has to be on whenever I want to play music.

An immediate attraction of the Etalon strEamer is that it allows an USB hard drive to be connected directly to it and contains its own LMS sever, along with a DNLA server. This meant that my laptop could be freed up to be actually used as a laptop. Setting up the strEamer was very straightforward: I connected the hard drive to the strEamer, connected

the strEamer to my DAC and to my network via Ethernet (the strEamer does not have wireless capability) and powered up the strEamer and the hard drive. The strEamer's settings are then accessed via a weblink provided in the instruction manual. This can be opened from a browser from any computer, tablet or smartphone connected to your network. The webpage then allows you to choose whether you want to run the LMS or DNLA servers, enable AirPlay for Apple devices or update firmware. Being familiar with Logitech's LMS server, I was happy to use that; the process of setting up my library and accessing streaming services such as Tidal being identical to that of my laptop version of the server. Even if you haven't used LMS before, set up is fairly intuitive and the instructions in the manual are comprehensive. Once the server has scanned your files you need to be able to see your library so that you can choose songs/albums, build playlists and access streaming services or internet radio. You can use Logitech's free Squeezebox app for this or a paid app such as Ipeng. My preferred app is Squeezepad but this is for iPad only. Using Squeezepad, there was absolutely no difference between controlling the strEamer and controlling my Squeezebox Touch. In fact, the strEamer responded more quickly and over the period of the review was much more stable than the Touch.

So, how does the strEamer sound? I said at the beginning of this review that the Squeezebox was my benchmark of minimum quality. Initially, comparisons were favourable; the strEamer sounded as good as the Touch. Over time, I felt that the strEamer began to loosen up somewhat, the soundstage of my system opened up and instruments were more detailed. Rockin' In Rhythm from Richard Thompson's Strict Tempo is a great recording of a variety of acoustic instruments and it really came to life, getting my foot tapping within the first couple of bars. High resolution files up to 24/192 played without any stuttering or drop out. Complex pieces such as Steve Reich's Music For 18 Musicians were easily resolved, individual instruments, rhythms and harmonies being easily identifiable.

While you can connect the source of your files directly to the strEamer as described above, you don't have to do this. I reconnected my hard drive to my laptop, disabled the LMS server on the strEamer,

Etalon StrEamer



started up the server on the laptop and was able to stream the files remotely with no drop in sound quality.

I also tried the strEamer using the built in DNLA server. I guess this is a case of horses for courses; if you have experience of using a DNLA server previously then you may prefer to continue using this with the strEamer. Being used to LMS, I preferred to stick with that and found no need to change.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Etalon's strEamer will sit unobtrusively in your system doing its job without fuss. At 550 Euros, it is neither ridiculously cheap nor horrendously expensive but if you want lights, knobs and intricate displays over sound quality for your money, you will definitely need to look elsewhere.

Build Quality: 8/10
Sound Quality: 8.2/10
Value for Money: 7.7/10
Overall: 7.96/10

Price: 550 Euros including power supply.

Pros

Simple and unobtrusive

Choice of built-in servers provides versatility

Will also serve other media such as photos and video (this was not tested during review)

Cons

Power supply could be more robust

John Scott

Technical Spec'

Inputs: RJ45 for Ethernet connection and USB for external storage such as USB-stick or HDD

Output: USB

Compatible players: Logitech Media Server (squeezebox), DLNA (JRiver, Minimserver, Foobar, etc.), Airplay (iTunes)

Supported formats: PCM up to 24 bit 384 kHz standard audio formats and DSD64, 128 (DoP protocol)

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Audiofilia AF-S6 Loudspeakers

Audiofilia make a range of loudspeakers, electronics and accessories, here Dominic Marsh tries out the Italian company's AF-S6 floorstanding loudspeaker that costs € 6160.

Audiofilia are an Italian company specialising in loudspeaker and electronics manufacture, founded in 2011 by Alessio Paolizzi and Francesco Stocchi. The unique feature of this company's loudspeaker lineup is their "S System" which the company claims tackles head on the problems associated with cabinet resonances, which I have no intention of explaining, but it will be mentioned in the review body.

CONSTRUCTION

The pair of loudspeakers submitted for review were the AF-S6 model, large three and a half way floor standers. Natural wood finishes are also available, as are piano gloss black and white. I must also mention that the supplied speakers were fitted with the optional (at extra cost) Fountek ribbon tweeter rather than the standard issue dome tweeter. The remainder



of the drive units are sourced from Morel which already intimates this isn't going to be a "budget" speaker by any means, rather one that certainly has aspirations towards high end sound quality. Unusual too in this day and age is having a domed midrange driver fitted. I still don't understand why this driver isn't as popular as it once was, as it helps to avoid critical crossover points in the upper midrange.

Cabinet loading is by a front mounted reflex port. These are substantial cabinets weighing some 20-odd kilograms each and fitted with Audiofilia's own design of feet, which they say should not be replaced

Audiofilia AF-S6 Loudspeakers



by spikes, or placed on plinths. No doubt, but my listening room has thick carpets and a thick underlay beneath that and these speakers almost swayed around like a palm tree in a hurricane, so despite Audiofilia's best advice, some thick solid Oak slabs went underneath which increased stability hugely, yet still allowed a small amount of movement. At least I could relax during the listening sessions knowing that the speakers weren't going to topple over at any minute. The speakers arrived without any jumper links fitted, so I pressed into service a set of pure silver jumpers that I keep in a spares drawer for just such eventualities.

The cabinet is built with Audiofilia's "S System" which is designed to harnesses the drive unit's natural vibrations to generate a "hybrid waveguide" of a pneumatic nature, which interacts with the air flow and pressure inside the cabinet by accelerating or slowing it until a precise point, previously set in the design phase, is reached. It is akin I gather to a piano's or violin's body, whereby the strings excite the whole instrument so it is the wood itself not the strings themselves which creates the sound that we hear, hence why Stradivarius violins and Steinway pianos are not made of concrete.

One last thing to mention before I move onto how these speakers sound and that is I was told they needed around 400 (Yes, that FOUR HUNDRED) hours of running in before old Dominic's ears could even begin to assess their sound qualities. And that was on top of three other components with similar break in periods at the same time. Gulp!

SOUND QUALITY

It is not easy "ignoring" speakers for 400 hours or so and then turning your attention to them. They do however run in exponentially as most other speakers do and after around 80 hours or so the rate of change decreased so I could at least hear what they were capable of at that point without analyzing them too deeply. Even at that milestone I could formulate a good take on what they were capable of and I wouldn't say they were a "Hifi" sounding speaker full of verve and fireworks to grab your attention and I'd say they were rather grown up and sophisticated in fact, consistent from the lowest octaves right up to the highest treble, with no peaks or troughs along the way. It is that very sophistication in sound that draws you into the music, so deep that you become totally immersed in it and the listening time just seems to fly by without you even realising it. One could be forgiven then for assuming they are a rather

Audiofilia AF-S6 Loudspeakers

mild or polite kind of speaker, but trust me they can produce fireworks when you ask them nicely and my listening tests will demonstrate that, so bear with me.

They are not a power hungry speaker by any means and I drove them easily with a variety of amplifiers ranging from an EL34 valve amplifier from Fezz Audio, a compact streamer/amplifier from Cabasse, the Aaron “The Chrome One”, a diminutive little TAGA valve/hybrid amplifier, plus of course my resident amplifier and all produced a sound I could easily live with, so matching them to amplification of whatever persuasion shouldn’t prove to be difficult. As my regular readers will know, I don’t generally listen to orchestral or jazz music, but the Audiofilia speakers simply begged me to play some through them. In to the CD drawer then went my trusty old compilation CD that has around 15 or so excerpts from well known, popular orchestral recordings. I particularly enjoyed Eric Satie’s “Gymnopedie” played on a Concert Grand and the luscious tonal palette produced by that instrument had the hairs on the back of my neck bristling. PHEW! I can though now understand how orchestral aficionados get so energized by listening to this kind of music, as performed well it has a lot going for it – but still not

for me and my classical excerpts CD is plenty enough for me.

Jazz isn’t my thing either, but I will admit to liking Dave Brubeck’s “Take Five” occasionally and some while ago I transferred the direct cut recording “A Cut Above” vinyl to CD when I sold a turntable, so I could at least enjoy the dynamics of this recording for the times when a turntable didn’t grace my system (I used to change them frequently). Anyway, the drum solo in Take Five is something else and if there ever was a recording with no compression and big fast dynamics, then this was it. The Audiofilia AF-S6 speakers certainly could kick up a dust cloud when required to and however much I turned the volume up I couldn’t detect any signs of distress from them. There are some drum rolls and snare drum strikes in this recording that can certainly make speaker drivers jump around and if you, like me, revel in fast transients, this recording will no doubt please.

Down to the nitty gritty when I finally hit the four hundred hour mark in the running in process and the gloves were then off and the real evaluation process began. In to the CD player went Porcupine Tree’s



Audiofilia AF-S6 Loudspeakers

“Deadwing” album which is a raw, uncouth recording that either sounds rough and ragged, or smooth as silk and it is the kind of sound that shows up a speaker’s true characteristics. The Audiofilia’s, much to my surprise, managed to walk along the hair’s breadth sized tightrope between revealing all the harshness this album contains that makes it a real wince listen, filing off the rawer edges to make it at least tolerable to listen to. Had they rounded everything off and made it sound smooth, pleasurable and musical, I would have been concerned.

Of course, the stock reference recording had to be played and Fink’s “Wheels Beneath My Feet” live album was inserted into the CD player so I could really get to grips with the AF-S6’s sonic palette. The opening cymbal strikes in “Biscuits For Breakfast” didn’t quite muster the sheen and polish from my resident speakers (Russell K Red 100), the shimmer of the cymbal was there, but without the level of refinement I have been accustomed to. We are talking a very subtle effect, but noted nonetheless. Ambience cues from the venue were well conveyed though and the audience was heard without any “shooshing” sounds and I could pick out individuals easily. Kick drum had a firm pounding crisp beat to it and I could tell a hard beater was being used. Snare drum rims shots came across very realistically, so good marks there. Fink’s voice can sound rather nasal on this track with some speakers, but thankfully the AF-S6’s managed to avoid that, so again good marks there. Moving on to the “Sort of Revolution” track, this has some very powerful strikes to the Floor Tom on the drums and this is my test for bass control. Yes, the force and power must be relayed, but I also want to hear a good clean leading edge and no overhang, yet still be able for it to make me feel the energy being released in the pit of my stomach, like a mule kick. No problem with any of those criteria from the AF-S6’s. Throughout this album I should be able to hear the different reverb and ambience cues from each of the venues the album was recorded in and this wasn’t as easy to determine with these speakers as clearly as I can from my resident speakers. I could hear them, but I had to work at it rather than let the speakers do it for me. Contrary to that though, the sound staging was impressive, being well out beyond the speaker boundaries and with good depth too.

CONCLUSION

All in all then, a good performance from these speakers with only one exception. It seemed to me that the tweeters were reaching high up the frequency range, but at the very top end they lacked the absolute power, clarity and resolution I was expecting from the ribbon tweeter, which I felt was ever so slightly rolled off. That can be a blessing of course, depending on partnering equipment where that silkiness at the very top end could be beneficial. It didn’t offend me as such and if you asked me if I could live with these speakers full time the answer would be in the affirmative, as overall they gave a fine performance with many genres of music, especially so with acoustic, classical and jazz where the speakers gave of their best. With that small proviso, I will give them a recommendation and an audition is well advised before purchase.

Build quality: 8.3/10

Sound quality: 8.9/10

Value for money: 8.6/10

Overall: 8.6/10

Price at time of writing 6160 Euros

Pros:

A good solid all round performer with no major vices.

Cons:

A slightly rolled off upper treble – could be beneficial in some systems

Dominic Marsh

Technical Spec’

Drive units: 2x woofer 6”, 1x dome midrange 2”, 1x dome tweeter 1” (or ribbon 1,5”)

Technology: “S” system transverse channeled
Type: 3½ way Reflex

Frequency response: 16Hz – 25kHz (or 40kHz) +/- 3db

Sensitivity: 90 db SPL (1W 2.83V / 1m)

Harmonic distortion: < 0,9% 63Hz – 25kHz (or 40kHz)

Impedance: 8 Ω

Recommended amplifier power: 3W / 200W

Dimensions: H 1100 x W 200 x D 380

Finishes: Wood or Lacquered



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ATC SCM7 Loudspeakers

The ATC SCM7 is a diminutive loudspeaker of just 7 litres and costing from £810. Dan Worth takes a listen.



Hifi Pig
RECOMMENDED

On different occasions over this past year Dominic and I have had the pleasure of listening to the SCM11s and the SCM19s from British loudspeaker company ATC. Each time we'd greeted their arrival with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. This is because our experience of ATC had taught us to expect great dynamics, attack, insight and truthfulness, but also the occasional jagged edge from the older style tweeter, particularly on poorer quality recordings.

However we needn't have worried. For their new 'passive' range ATC has replaced a modified third party tweeter with its own in-house design – and it's stunning. The unit on these new SCM7s, and the 11s, 19s and 40s is at once more refined, better controlled and truthful. Its secret is a dual suspension design, which is hand-built at ATC's Stroud HQ and has taken the Company years to perfect. Coupled to a more efficient and linear underhung driver motor, the dual suspension controls the driver's movement more precisely for lower distortion, better power transfer and a smoother response. ATC has got this design just right, because both the 11s and 19s have received our highest accolades.

ATC SCM7 Loudspeakers

AT FIRST GLANCE

The dinky SCM7s have a tiny 7-litre cabinet (hence the name), measuring 300x174x215mm and housing the tweeter and a 5" linear mid/bass driver. The review sample's curved design immediately felt solid and sturdy, with a high standard finish in real cherry wood veneer. They cost £810 a pair in the standard cherry or black ash options. However a special order piano black model comes in at a hefty £1243.

I was pleasantly surprised when I lifted the SCM7 from its box. It's much heavier than I had imagined weighing-in at around the 7.4kg mark. Nearly half of this weight is due to the bass/mid driver's massive 3.5kg underhung magnet system, which includes a 45mm flat wire voice coil, milled by ATC at Stroud on a machine designed by ATC's founder and Chief Engineer Billy Woodman. Most of remaining weight is down to the heavily-braced veneered enclosure, which also sports chunky bi-wire terminals.

THE SOUND

Dom and I have had many conversations about the character and virtues of the SCM11s and 19s. We've decided that the 11s are about pure excitement and have a punchier sound whereas the 19s come across as richer, fuller and more refined. I'm writing this before Dom has had a chance to listen to the SCM7s, so I'll give you my immediate impression: these 7s are really exciting and their imaging is fantastic. Due to their size, they struggle to reproduce image height if you are sitting too close to them, but when you're sat back and even at lower volumes, they get going so easily for an 84db-

sensitive speaker, instantly disappearing into the background and placing instruments way beyond the expected width boundary.

I would suggest that they have some of the SCM11's zip and enthusiasm, which Dom and I loved so much. They punch rather than pound, but the bass is so representative of truthful playback (given their 60Hz limit at -6dB), that I only hankered for more on occasions.

Obviously the 7s are ideal for those who have limited listening space, but I would suggest they're also great for music lovers who enjoy vocals and acoustic guitar, as well as pop and electronic music – I would prefer a bass reflex design in this sized cabinet for the latter. The SCM7s can't muster the wash of deep bass you'll get from larger cabinets and drivers, for example on bass guitars and oboes, but they will keep a beat. Sparkling percussion sounds terrifically accurate from these small boxes, complete with all their natural dynamics. When replacing my active desktop Focals, I was extremely impressed with the 7's overall response, especially from the bass when enhanced by the alcove they were sitting in.



What I really enjoy about the 7s and even the 11s is that they seem to allow upper frequencies to breathe so well, allowing for more perceived accuracy in the higher frequencies and mid level notes, making for a crystal clear vocal reproduction. I suspect this is due to their tonal balance from smaller cabinet sizes and sharper bass roll off, but it got me thinking that a set of 11s or 7s with ATC's own C1 subwoofer could make for a stunning listen.

ATC SCM7 Loudspeakers



Fast forward a few days and, courtesy of ATC's PR man, I now have a C1 subwoofer and I've put together a little system comprising SCM7s, C1 sub, and a Primare I32 with MM30 multimedia board/DAC fed by my Mac.

Wow, this set-up proved to be a real treat. I suspect that ATC would frown upon the idea of passive speakers and active sub in a music application, because it wouldn't be the last word in accuracy, but what the hell, this system rocked with everything I sent it. I love the increased definition of the midrange especially, under-pinned with tremendous weight, poise and control. Even the treble sounds beefier. Dialing the sub in to around 60Hz to integrate with the 7s was magic. Not purist, but magic – and fun! Dance music had a more intense rhythm and a crystal clear top end. Rock had a grip and a leading-edge sharpness that may well have sounded overbearing from the 7s alone, but with the C1 it had more flesh

Over time their musical consistency, honesty and downright practicality are simply undeniable

on the bone and greater weight. Acoustic music and vocals seemed to be better defined in the soundstage with an in-filling of subtle undertones that demanded the attention of the listener. It just sounded richer. In each scenario the 7s worked so well. Ultimately available space and music tastes will determine your speaker choice, but if you have room for a

subwoofer I would wholeheartedly recommend one from ATC, as it adds another dimension to the sound.

CONCLUSION

I've not written a long review for a change. This one is short and sweet – just like the 7s. Combine the imaging of the old ProacTablettes, the surprising bass of a Totem One and the enthusiasm of an old AE1. Each of these speakers is renowned for having a special and memorable characteristic. The diminutive ATC SCM7 seems to possess a good

ATC SCM7 Loudspeakers

measure of each. It's one of those speakers that is so addictive and so unassuming that I think I'm going to have to buy a pair. They are like the cutest animal in the litter – the one you simply have to take home. Over time their musical consistency, honesty and downright practicality are simply undeniable. The thought of being without them has me reaching for a tissue.

Build Quality – 8.5/10

Sound Quality – 8.7/10

Value For Money – 8.75/10

Overall – 8.65/10

Price at time of review:

Cherry/black ash – £810

Piano black lacquer – £1243

Pros:

Emphatic, transparent, detailed presentation

Solid imaging and strong dynamics

Great build

Cons:

At this price, nothing

Dan Worth

Technical Spec'

Drivers: HF ATC 25mm Neodymium Soft Dome, Mid/LF ATC 125mm SC

Matched Response: $\pm 0.5\text{dB}$

Frequency Response (-6dB): 60Hz-22kHz

Dispersion: $\pm 80^\circ$ Coherent Horizontal, $\pm 10^\circ$ Coherent Vertical

Sensitivity: 84dB @ 1W @ 1metre

Max SPL: 103dB

Recommended Power Amplifier: 75 to 300 Watts

Nominal Impedance: 8 Ohm

Crossover Frequency: 2.5kHz

Connectors: Binding Posts/4mm Plugs, bi-wire

Cabinet Dimensions (HxWxD): 300x174x215mm (grill adds 28mm depth)

Weight: 7.5kg

DESIGNER'S COMMENTS

Tweeter
SH25-76

The SH25-76 is a 25mm soft dome tweeter designed and built by ATC Loudspeaker Technology and exclusively employed on ATC's SCM7, 11, 19 and 40 'passive series' speakers. The drive unit has been designed with the same no compromise philosophy as all other ATC drive units.

Sharing technology with the SM75-150 mid-range, the SH25-76 employs a dual suspension design, ensuring pistonic motion and suppressing rocking modes even at high drive levels. This also enables the use of a narrow magnetic gap and negates the requirement for ferrofluid. The SH25-76 is therefore, free from the detrimental effects of ferrofluid drying out over time.

A short coil, long gap configuration ensures linearity and incredibly low distortion through its intended operating band. The soft dome diaphragm is based on a complex geometry which maximises power transfer from the former, extending the high frequency response and giving a smooth off-axis response.

The FEA optimised neodymium motor with heat treated top plate is designed to give 15,000 Gauss (1.5 Tesla) in the magnetic gap and the motor assembly also performs the secondary function of dissipating heat away from the voice coil, ensuring high power handling and low power compression. The underhung design, small coil-gap clearance and black plating ensures heat dissipation is as efficient as possible.

The geometry of the waveguide is designed for optimum dispersion and the flattest possible on-axis frequency response. It is made from a precision machined alloy so that the entire structure is extremely rigid and free from resonances.

Bass Driver

SB45-125SC

The bass driver used in the SCM7 is a proprietary design, manufactured in-house. Like the vast majority of all our larger drive units, the so called 'underhung' design uses a short coil operating in long magnetic gap for the best possible linearity. The advantages of this type of motor topology are: Less variation in the force acting on the coil vs excursion.

ATC SCM7 Loudspeakers

Less variation in coil inductance vs excursion.

The result is that distortion is greatly reduced. The music benefits from greater clarity and tonal balance and the listener benefits from reduced listening fatigue.

The voice coil technology employed greatly benefits the performance of the loudspeaker. Firstly, a large voice coil diameter is chosen for increased power handling and, as important, low power compression. Loudspeakers are quite inefficient and much of the amplifier power ends up heating the voice coil. This, in turn causes:

A rise in resistance.

A drop in efficiency.

Increase of the system low frequency 'Q' (causing a tendency for pronounced 'boomy' bass).

Modification of the crossover performance which, in turn, changes the perceived balance of the loudspeaker.

Using the largest possible voice coil diameter increases the coil surface area which reduces the rate of voice coil heating and minimises the problems associated with it.

Not only is great attention paid to the coil but also to the wire we wind the coil from. Round wire does not 'pack' (tessellate) well, leaving gaps between the windings (think pool balls racked before a break). These gaps are wasted space and fill with glue and air, slowing the escape of heat from the coil. ATC chooses to use the more complex and costly process of winding flat 'ribbon' wire voice coils. The ribbon wire, when wound on edge, results in a greater volume of copper in the magnetic gap (vs round wire) and the efficiency of the drive mechanism is improved. The air and glue filled gaps are also greatly reduced, leading to a more rapid escape of heat from the voice coil.

The cone and dust cap of the bass driver used in the SCM7 are formed into curve-linear profiles from resin impregnated fabric. The fabric chosen uses a very strong and dense weave, with high internal damping. Two different polymer coatings are then applied to the fabric surface: a PVA based coating to the rear and a proprietary coating to the front. Both of these coatings increase cone stiffness and also, very importantly, the mechanical damping of the cone structure. Materials high in damping suppress

resonances, minimising the audibility of cone break up modes and extending the useable bandwidth at the top of the bass driver's range. This in turn greatly simplifies crossover design (which I'll get to shortly). ATC believes that as a loudspeaker manufacturer, you are defined by your drive unit components and that is why every loudspeaker system we produce begins with in-house designed and built components, optimised for their application.

Crossover

By investing heavily in the drive unit engineering, ATC produces components with a well-controlled response that require only simple filters to integrate into multi-driver systems. The SCM7 employs 2nd order filters for both the low-pass and high-pass sections. The bass section also uses a R-C zobel network to correct for the rising bass driver impedance, ensuring correct operation of the bass low pass filter. The high frequency section uses a resistive 'T' attenuation network to pad the tweeter output down to match the bass. All of the inductors used are air-cored types for lowest distortion and the capacitors are 250Vdc rated metallised polypropylene parts. An area of the crossover design we pay particular attention to is that of impedance vs frequency and ensuring the loudspeaker system (drivers + crossover + wiring) present an easy load for an amplifier to drive. The loudspeaker load an amplifier 'sees' is just as important as the sensitivity of the loudspeaker, although loudspeaker load doesn't seem to be debated quite so regularly. Not only must the magnitude of the impedance be balanced with a reasonable system sensitivity, the phase angle must also be considered. Low impedance values or large phase angles will lead to large current demands from an amplifier and could lead to increased distortion and, at worst, amplifier hard clipping. The combination of both a low impedance magnitude and large phase angle is very difficult for an amplifier, especially when it occurs at a frequency where music has a great deal of energy. Through careful drive unit design which, in turn, allows simple crossover design, free from 'ringing' filters that are used to reinforce a frequency band lacking in energy, we can deliver a loudspeaker that presents an easy load to an amplifier.

Ben Lilly, ATC Technical Sales Manager



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Kralk Audio DTLPS-1 Elite



Kralk Audio are based in West Yorkshire in the UK and owned by Alan Clark. With the DTLPS-1 loudspeaker, costing £1750, Alan has taken the specially built crossover out of the loudspeaker and into separate boxes. Ian Ringstead finds out if all this effort has been worthwhile.

I recently wrote a review on [Kralk Audio's excellent baby speakers the BC30's](#) and when I first visited Alan Clark's room at the Whittlebury Show last September I spotted the Elite's straight away and was fascinated by their concept. The Elite's are a dual transmission line ported system (hence their abbreviated title) with an overly engineered external crossover in order to extract the very best from them.

Like everything else Alan does he lovingly hand builds these speakers and has developed them from his original design which he made for friends and musicians who wanted a high quality monitor stand mount speaker to use in their studios or at home. These speakers are larger than the Black Cat 30's and being dual ported means they have substantially more bass and a sub woofer is not essential to obtain great bass and power handling. The bass driver is a 165mm unit and is housed in a rigid cabinet design for reduced colouration and to provide great bass extension for such a compact stand mount design. The cone is doped paper and has a vented coil pole in the magnet assembly to produce a lifelike sound. The treble is handled by a 25mm partially horn loaded soft dome silk tweeter for smooth well defined highs.

Kralk Audio DTLPS-1 Elite

The external 24dB octave Bessel crossovers use MKP Polypropylene capacitors and high quality air cored inductors that are housed in lead lined cases. The cabinets use 18mm high density fibreboard and are multi point braced and fully lined with Pro Acoustics Sonarflex foam to filter out any unwanted frequencies from the system.

The external crossover is the part that intrigued me most when I first saw the Elites as it is a concept that, although far from new, is not used very often by manufacturers, probably for cost reasons and practicality. Being external, any chance of interaction with the drive units and cabinet (both physically and electrically) are totally eliminated. Alan has totally over engineered the crossover to see how far he could push this design on what was already a popular product and where he started his design inspirations a few years ago. The crossovers come in separate beautifully made boxes with nice metal feet. They house resin cast air-cored inductors in their lead lined cases and audiophile grade MKP capacitors. Wiring is Van Damme. The crossover has a quality silk screened printed acrylic cover so you can see and admire the components and build quality. Now for me this is the icing on the cake as I am an absolute sucker for this type of detail and whenever I go to shows or into shops I love to touch and inspect the quality of a product's build and design, rather like I would a great watch or camera.

Quality never comes cheaply, but for me it is worth it if the results are successful.

The Elites are bi-wired and use good quality gold plated 4mm multi way binding posts. Alan includes a complete set of Tenor Audio high quality 2.4 metre speaker leads (3 sets per speaker) which is a nice touch and although prospective buyers might prefer their own brand of choice, this makes set up costs minimal. I used the Tenor Audio cables throughout the review period and felt no need to change them. The Elites were placed on my resident wooden 70cm high stands and blutacked to the top plate for safety and coupling reasons.

THE SOUND

Alan had said the Elites were markedly better than the standard version which has sold so well for him in the past and boy was he right. The first thing to impress me was the bass output for such a relatively compact design was amazing and so controlled. For a living room like mine which is averaged sized (3m x 5m x 2.2m) they filled it magnificently with tight and very detailed sound. The top end was lovely and open and well highlighted without being shrill. Never once did I feel they were too bright or fatiguing and they made some other

speakers I have heard or used in the past sound dull or boring.

Listening to records or CDs of all types of music showed how

versatile these speakers are at portraying the real emotion of the sound and felt unrestrained like dog let off the leash in a park to run wild.

Compared to the standard version of the DTPLS-1, Alan states they are like chalk and cheese and I don't doubt him. Like Mel Gibson in Brave heart, at the end he cries out "freedom" just before he dies and the Elites say this to me. Separating the crossover and using the best possible components is definitely one of the main reasons theses speaker really sing. Yes, other manufacturers have done this, but at what



Kralk Audio DTLPS-1 Elite



price? The crossovers are not cheap and Alan said they constitute a good 50% of the Elites cost , but it's like hot-rodding a car with a new body kit , suspension, tyres and souped up engine to transform its performance.

Alan started experimenting with crossovers when he was a youngster and his many years of experience have certainly paid off in this new design. He experimented with many different values like any good designer would and could tailor the sound according to what values he used. Circuit designers do this all the time when making new products or improving a standard unit (Ken Ishiwata springs to mind with his KI and SE components). A nice

additional touch is that the Elites grilles can easily be removed as they are magnetic and placed on the side of the speaker for convenience. When you first see this you think they have an additional drive unit on its side and everyone who saw them thought this initially.

Finishes as standard are sapelle, walnut, black ash, cherry and light oak, but other finishes can be accommodated to special order. Frequency response is 35Hz to 22 kHz and power handling 20-150Watts with a nominal impedance of 8 ohms. Sensitivity is 89dB at 1m. So all in all a good wide sound range suitable for most rooms, easy to drive and they will go loud.

Plato

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Plato is manufactured in the UK and offers an all in one Hi-fi & Home Entertainment solution. With built-in pre amp, high performance power amp and phono input for vinyl deck, CD and cassettes, Plato offers recording during playback into Hi-Res 24bit/192kHz format and

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Kralk Audio DTLPS-1 Elite

I liked the BC30's a lot and with the PAW stands they really worked well, but with the Elites Alan has really triumphed I feel. They for me offer a complete package that I could happily live with without the need for a subwoofer. They are very well made and can be tailored to your own tastes of finish. Coupled with a good amp and source components you won't be disappointed and domestically they are easy to live with. The external crossover really is the stroke of genius and presented as it is in its own case I would want this on show, not hidden behind the speakers as they look so good in their own right and are the real stars of the show. The fact good speaker cables are included in the package as well is brilliant. £1750 is the asking price, so although not cheap, I can't think of another speaker I have heard at this price level that has impressed me so much. It's the complete sound and package that wins it for me. Again as always audition these speakers at Alan's home if you wish to hear them as he sells direct or I am sure you can trial them at home in your own system.

Alan told me he wishes to possibly try a similar idea with the BC30's and make external crossovers for them to see how far the envelope can be pushed. This

excites me, but how they will compare to the Elites remains to be seen.

Build quality: 8.8

Sound quality: 8.9

Value for money: 8.8

Overall: 8.83

Price: £1750

Pros

Fabulous open sound with a good frequency range and bass extension

Great build and excellent quality of components used

Very good speaker cables included in the package

Cons

None really, I love them

Ian Ringstead

DESIGNER'S COMMENTS



Kralk Audio DTLPS-1 Elite



sound quality and imaging. The crossover weighs in at 4.2Kg.

The speaker cabinet of the Elite now just contains the drive units and connecting terminals and the pressure port system.

The 24dB per octave Bessel designed crossover copes effortlessly with anything thrown at it from pop to classical, in fact complex music and classical is

The Elite is a high-end addition to our very popular DTLPS-1 speaker system.

DTLPS is a dual port transmission line pressure system which I developed over 5 years ago with the system ensuring excellent control over the bass and midrange frequencies giving a much larger than life sound from a diminutively small cabinet.

I took this one stage further with the addition of the Elite; I decided to massively over build the crossovers with high grade components, the main feature of these are the Lead shielded resin cast air core inductors which are totally isolated from any outside interference. These are then coupled to Audiophile quality MKP 400v dc capacitors. I kept the quality flowing by hard wiring everything onto a wooden board to avoid printed circuits.

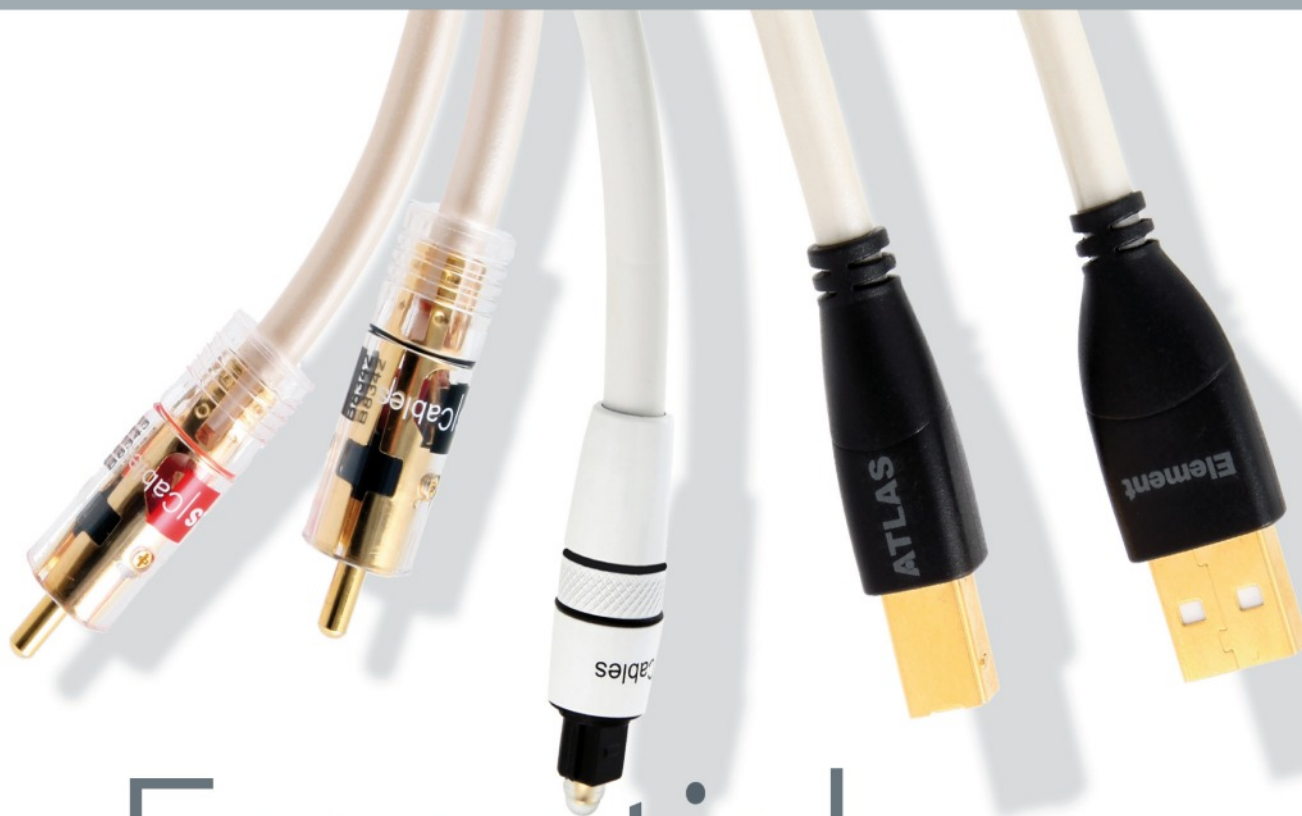
The problem with a massively over built crossover is that its so big that it wouldn't fit inside the cabinet of the DTLPS-1, so it has its own isolated enclosure fitted with high quality input and output connectors. The advantage of this is that the crossover is away from vibration and stray magnetic fields from inside the main speaker cabinet which could affect the

where the crossover excels, I believe. Due to its low distortion design it manages to pick out the subtle details from music tracks and feed them to the 2 drive units seamlessly and in perfect phase. The external crossover design gives better definition and space around individual instruments as would be the case when listening to a live band. I have demonstrated the Elites many times to customers and the room always goes quiet as though the speakers command you to listen to them whilst the music is playing so that you don't miss any of the detail they are sharing with the listener.

I have taken the DTLPS-1 Elite to a new level with this design and made an attractive value for money product which customers are very pleased with. The DTLPS-1 Elite package comes with the 2 speakers, 2 Crossovers and 6 high quality 2.4 meter cables, the matching stands come as an optional extra at £200 per pair.

The package is built to order and delivery can take up to 3 weeks depending on finish required.

Alan Clark, Kralk Audio



Essential Elements.

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.

It seems the world's hifi press agree. We've won a lot of awards for Element, including What HiFi's 'Best Analogue Interconnect' for the last 3 years.

We apply as much innovation and effort to the Element Series as our top of the range Asimi.

The 'Integra' low mass RCA connector was originally developed for the Element cable and the principles applied throughout our range.

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

Element cables are available for hi-fi, personal audio, digital & video use.

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3 Square Audio Translator Loudspeakers

3 Square is a small new company based in the UK, their first product is a floorstanding loudspeaker constructed out of Baltic pine ply wood and costing £2500. Ian Ringstead takes a listen.



When Stuart Smith asked me to review these new speakers he said I would enjoy meeting the designer as he had a lot in common with myself in that he used to be in hifi retailing for many years, so we would have a lot to talk about. He was right. Stuart Dunn like myself worked for a couple of retail outlets well known back in the eighties and nineties. Now he is working elsewhere out of the industry like myself, but has a strong passion for music and how it is reproduced. Stuart had always been fascinated by speakers and their design so he wanted to pursue a design that gave him everything he loved for a sensible price. Has he achieved this? Let's see.

Stuart (Dunn) has based his design on a very simple first order crossover that uses high quality components and he has experimented with the values of the capacitors and inductors, just using his ears to voice the design. Now some might criticise him for not using software analysis tools like Audiomatica Clio and laser interferometry like the big boys use. Well scientific measurements are all well and good but as we know nothing is as powerful or adept at analysing sound as the human brain and ear.

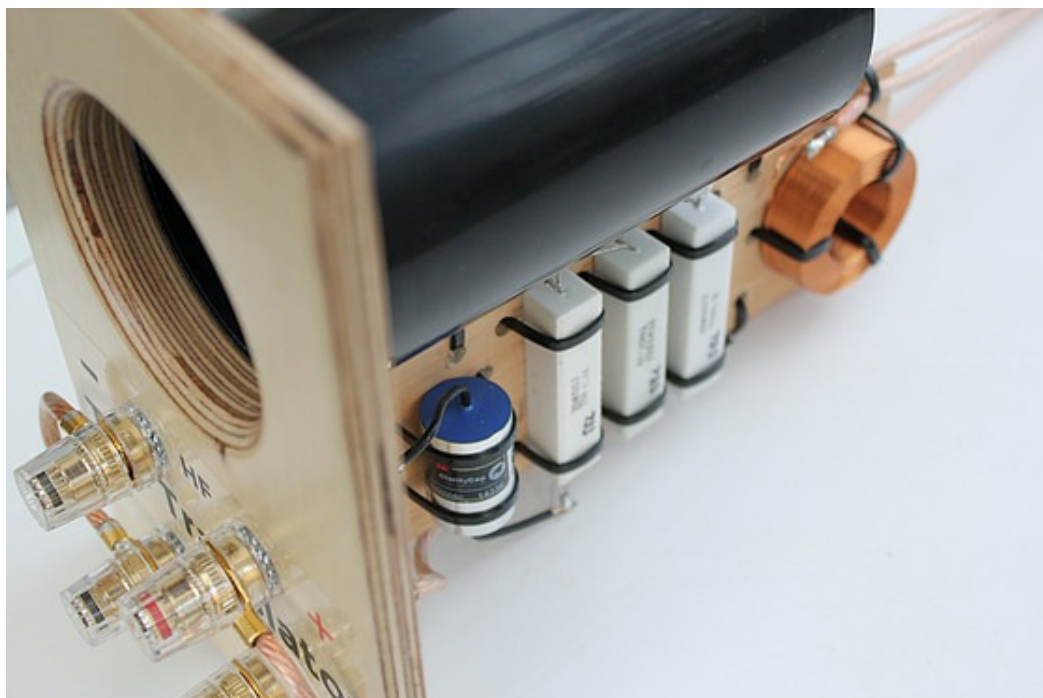
Designers of course have to use their ears, as ultimately that is what we use to listen with and make the final judgement, but I bet a lot rely on scientific testing first and foremost to justify the results. There is value in both approaches and I won't commit to either approach as being the best. It

3 Square Audio Translator Loudspeakers

all boils down to what the sonic results are like. I'll get onto that later.

The Translator is a classic looking floorstander. Using Prestige SEAS drive units filtered by HF and LF First Order Crossovers. The cabinets use the best quality Baltic birch plywood which is expensive and a no compromise product. Pro audio manufacturers use the same birch ply as it is so tough and rigid which is an absolute must in that tough environment, not only for longevity and

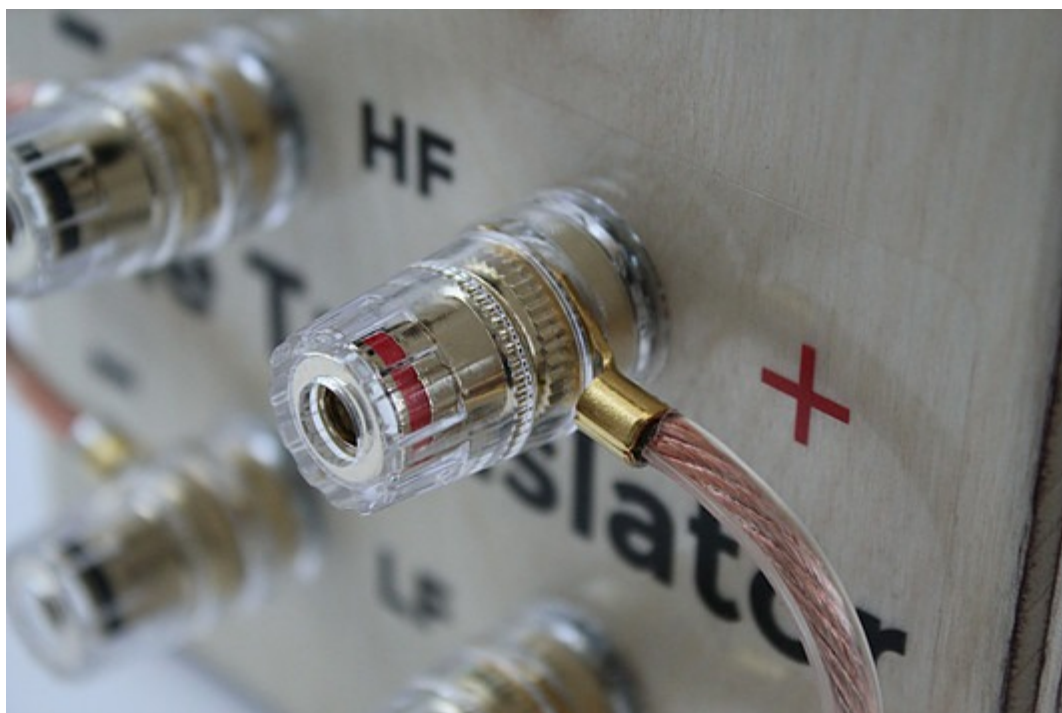
reliability, but also because it sounds good. The cabinet is mass loaded using steel and cement to give it a good low centre of gravity and allow the speaker to sit confidently on the floor. Bespoke M10 spikes are supplied to allow levelling for precise rigid placement. The spikes are custom made and were chosen for their solidity and ease of set up beneath the heavy cabinet. They are cleverly mounted onto steel threaded studs on the base of the cabinet and are easily adjusted. Interestingly there are five studs in total, one per corner and a central one so purists can just use three if they so wish, but I tried them on four



mounted in a heavy rigid cabinet and choosing high quality inductors and capacitors with close tolerances made for an interesting result. The cabinet's rigidity is further aided by two cross braces internally. At the rear are the bi wired good quality binding posts which come with jumpers if you only have single speaker wiring and a port to allow the speaker to breathe. The port is tuned so as to not cause any air turbulence (chuffing) and allow the drivers to work with the optimal air resistance. Stuart assured me they are an easy load and power wise I didn't hold back during listening sessions and had no concerns

with level issues, handling.

that a fairly large average size living room with overblown bass that tame. Well to my delight the bass was remarkably balanced nicely with the anything it was the treble lacking and was letting listened to a lot of the preceding months, speakers sound. Getting your living room can and it was a few hours treble started to make to my ears. I contacted of the initial dullness and



3 Square Audio Translator Loudspeakers

he advised to just give it time for the sound to gel to my ears. His concern had been that the bass might overpower my room but it all worked out in the end.

THE SOUND

In my many years of listening to hifi I have learnt to be wary of initial impressions and make quick assumptions. Sometimes a product or system can instantly grab you and retain that magical quality, but on the flipside an initial impressive sound can soon become wearing on the ears and make me want to switch the system off. The Translator's never made me want to switch them off; it just took a bit of time to acclimatise. From the off these speakers show a great ability to reveal detail in a recording extremely well and vocals in particular were always very clear and coherent. This is a quality you appreciate when listening to densely mixed performances and I feel can make or break your enjoyment if you can't tell what is being sung or played. If you have to work hard at listening to a performance your brain will switch off as your concentration wanes. This phenomenon isn't just with hifi systems but live musical events. I go to a fair amount of concerts both classical and contemporary and if the venue or sound system affects the sound badly I come away very disappointed.

The evening before I wrote this review I went to see The Hallé Orchestra in Sheffield and one of the pieces they performed was Grieg's piano concerto. The orchestra and pianist were great, but due to the position where I was sitting in the concert hall this affected the sound and the piano sounded muted in level to my ears. My aunt was sat elsewhere in the auditorium and said it sounded fine to her. Like a poorly designed speaker or system the venue adversely affected my listening pleasure.

The Translator's won't spoil your listening pleasure. I found they liked to be pushed hard and came on song when given some current behind them. The sound opened up and the performers were easily identified and located in the soundstage. Vocals, whether male or female excelled. Jack Savoretti's new album *Written in scars* impressed with his distinctive style of the gruffness in his voice and Eva Cassidy sounded sublime (she always does on a good system), especially her album *Live at Blues Alley* which sounded so natural, and the recording and engineering is superb. Ricki Lee Jones was also tried for her distinctive style and I listened to her album *Balm in Gilead* all the way through without wanting to try something else. On my last listening to that cd I hadn't been very impressed, so the Translator's

must have been doing a good job. To test the bass and dynamic range capability of the speakers I put the soundtrack to *Gladiator* on. A great film in its own right you don't appreciate how good the soundtrack is until you hear it on a good system. It is a great recording done at Air Studios in London with Lisa Gerrard on vocals (she helped arrange it with Hans Zimmer). The



3 Square Audio Translator Loudspeakers



not veneered) with the end grain of the laminated birch ply which forms the top and side panels on show making for a very neat contrast to the surface finish of the ply on all the other faces of the ply's lamination which are at right angles. It's easier to see this in the pictures than try to describe. The decision was made to leave the finish like this as veneering wasn't needed and makes for what I think is a pleasant change to the usual veneered

Lyndhurst Orchestra perform magnificently along with the soloists and the dynamic range is awesome. This recording will test any system and it certainly tested mine. The bass was incredible in places and fair shook my room, but it was never out of control. Testament to the very well controlled design and the solidity of the cabinets. I could have played louder but my wife and

neighbours wouldn't have appreciated that. There was no distortion or signs of the cones breaking up so heavy rockers would love this speaker if they wanted depth and clarity of bass. Obviously other types of music were equally catered for and I didn't find a genre I listened to that I didn't enjoy.

The Translator's are extremely well made and finished with all credit going to the craftsmanship of Doug the third member of the team whose joinery skills are exemplary. The fit and finish is excellent. At £2500 they should be well made but this hasn't always been the case in my experience of products in the past. The cabinets are left in their raw state (i.e.

Given the quality of materials used, the build quality and excellent sound they deserve to do well and are competitively priced

or painted cabinets. A very durable waxed based finish is applied to the cabinet as it doesn't finger mark and looks very smart in my opinion. My wife didn't like the finish as she thought it looked unfinished, but she is hard to please and beauty is in the eye of the beholder as they say. It's all personal preference and I congratulate the team at 3 Square Audio for choosing

this option. This is not to say they won't supply other options in the future, but as a new company it's best to start slowly and see what develops. Custom paint finishes or exotic veneers are all well and good, but you as the customer will have to pay quite a bit more if that's what you want.

CONCLUSION

So there we have it. What was a slow start came good in the end. Persistence is the key here, as the speakers grew on me. Stuart and the 3 Square Audio team have worked hard for several years to bring this dream to fruition and have combined their expertise

3 Square Audio Translator Loudspeakers

to produce what I feel is a worthy new addition to the speaker market. Given the quality of materials used, the build quality and excellent sound they deserve to do well and are competitively priced. The website <http://3squareaudio.com/> is well worth checking out and has some lovely pictures showing the speaker details and crossover for those interested.

Sound Quality: 8.9/10

Build Quality: 8.8/10

Value for money: 8.8/10

Overall: 8.83/10

Price at time of review: £2500

Pros:

High quality low colouration design

Good value

Extended and well controlled bass

Cons:

I like the looks but it may polarise views

Heavy design, so solid floors recommended to get the best out of them

Ian Ringstead

Technical Spec'

2 way floorstanding loudspeaker using a ported enclosure tuned to 38 Hz

Height 950 mm Width 198 mm Depth 360 mm

Weight 28.5 Kg each

HF driver is a SEAS 27mm Sonolex precoated fabric dome from the Prestige series.

LF driver is a SEAS 6,5 inch coated paper cone from the Prestige series.

Crossover filter is 1st order on both HF and LF circuits. Bi – amping is supported.

Inductor is Jantzen air core, Capacitor is 1% Clarity Cap.

Crossover point 2.6 KHz

Speaker terminals support bi-wire and bi-amping using bare wire, spade or 4mm plugs

In-room response typically 35Hz to 20 KHz

Recommended amplifier power 30 W – 150 W

DESIGNER'S COMMENTS

As hifi users it has been a long standing complaint of ours that most equipment comes with an inadequate spike adjustment system . It is either poorly designed or badly executed or in many cases both . We were determined to get this right . Before we had designed the Translator speaker we had designed the spike system it incorporates.

This consists of a large M10 threaded stainless steel bolt fixed to a 10mm steel plate with an aluminium coned foot of our own design mounted to it. The coned foot has a small hole through it which, with the use of the supplied allen key , makes micro adjustment easy. Due to the mass of the plate, the quality and size of the threaded parts , there is no need for a locking nut thus removing the wobble and difficulty of adjustment associated with M6 and M8 spikes.

We have also taken the opportunity to install a fifth stud on the speakers to allow the purist to stand them on only 3 spikes. We have found, however, that with our system on 4 spikes micro rocking, so common in some spike systems, is all but eliminated .

We have a passion for Baltic birch plywood . For the uninitiated this is not the sort of plywood you buy from your local DIY store or builders merchants. This is a very high quality material supplied only by specialist suppliers. Baltic birch plywood is made from veneers of very slow grown birch, no other species unlike ordinary plywood, grown in the cold Baltic regions of Finland and the once Baltic states of Russia. As it is slow grown it is a very dense timber which when veneered together, grain at right angles in alternate layers approximately 1mm thick, forms an incredibly rigid and consistent material from which we can build our products. Baltic birch is an attractive light coloured wood which has varying grain patterns on it. We use the plywood in sheet form but also by laminating it together to form the striped pattern you see on top of The Translator. We have perfected this technique over some time to form an attractive but very strong timber. Finally we use oil and wax based finish which we have developed over a few years to provide a smooth gloss finish which is hardwearing and will not chip like a lacquer or paint.

3 Square Audio

Some Follow

others

Leedh!



The Sound of Science

The Leedh E2 loudspeaker system and its dedicated subwoofer are the culmination of years of intensive research into the fundamental principles into the way the human ear perceives sound, the way that sound is generated and how the inherent problems with conventional drivers can be overcome.

We believe that Leedh E2 offers music lovers looking for the very best in sound quality the ultimate listening experience, offering a level of fidelity previously unattainable and unimaginable with conventional driver technology, which has changed little in decades.

LEEDH designers have developed a new type of electrodynamic loudspeaker, the Acoustical Beauty Speaker. This technology does not contain a soft iron pole in the motor, a foam edge, or a spider in the suspension, because these three components produce the majority of sonic imperfections found in all traditional speakers.

The purity of each wave of sound reaching the listener is the zenith of the unique and innovative way the drivers in the loudspeakers are designed, bringing the concert hall into your living room.

Leedh - The Sound of Science

For more information on this exceptional loudspeaker technology [CLICK HERE](#) to visit our website

www.leedh-acoustic.com or email Gilles.Milot@Acoustical-Beauty.com

KBL Sound Red Eye Ultimate

**Janine Elliot
plumbs in these
£1750
interconnects
from Polish
company KBL
into her system
to see what she
will find.**



Hifi Pig
RECOMMENDED

Any cable manufacturer with the abbreviation 'KBL' deserves a listen. This Polish outfit have been making a big name for themselves over the last year or so, just as the rise of Poland itself is becoming a major contender for cars (Fiat Poland) and more latterly for the Hifi collectors' pennies too. More and more products are emerging that have a decidedly premium quality and yet are still competitively priced, making them a serious choice for audiophiles.

KBL Sound have certainly been receiving review accolades and getting the attention of serious Hifi addicts over the last few years. Like many manufacturers, the company is a result of working in recording studios and having a passion for creating something that does not hinder the source material it intends to carry. Through many years of research, experimentation and improvements they have managed to complete their mission with this, the Red Eye Ultimate Interconnect. For them, the

important bits are creating openness and the "ability to play back down to the bottom whatever has been preserved on the tape". Tape? They certainly have my attention now.

This is a no-expense spared product, with highest purity mono crystal OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) silver conductor with Mundorf NextGen WBT 0110 Silver/Gold alloy connectors which contain 1% gold (the same highly purified silver-gold alloy used for the metallization of their Supreme SilverGold capacitors), and air and foamed Teflon dielectric. Quite some specification for £1750, but does that mean it is the best sounding cable at the price? I mean, you could mix caviar and champagne together, but does that mean it still tastes nice? I remember recording a certain world champion snooker player at the BBC who told me he had all this wonderful expensive Hifi, costing an arm, leg and snooker cue, but that the sound just wasn't right. I told him he would have been better buying an Amstrad Hifi. The interview went downhill from that point.

**The detail in
terms of
pitch, focus
and depth of
sound,
especially in
the upper
mid-range
was
excellent**

KBL Sound Red Eye Ultimate

This cable is, as expected, really well made, though the box it comes in is decidedly home made with sellotape holding down the brown velvet “De Natura Sonorum” inscribed cloth covering a foam platform to bed the cable in the cardboard box. However, the personal touch makes it that much more of interest to me and so serious listening with it firstly between source and transformer preamp, and later between preamp and power amp was on the agenda.

Mundorf connectors, like those from Nakamichi and a few others, enable you to screw the sheath once mated to get a tighter fit. I love them and they make the cable less of a component in an already busy circuit. The only problem is some RCA sockets need you to almost take off the sheath in order to fit them; both my Krell and MFA found it impossible to connect at first. The Mundorf connectors rely on the reduced-contact surface philosophy, whereby only one point of the return/negative is connected to the socket. This is done to eliminate eddy currents and mass storage effects.

Also its design prevents the sleeve of the plug itself acting as a conductor, which can influence sound. These plugs are exceptionally expensive, and I can see why.

SOUND

Silver usually gives a brighter and tighter sound than copper in my experience. That is not a bad thing; I have silver cables to my tweeters and copper to my woofers. This cable was certainly OK in the top, and the mid and upper mid frequencies had exceptionally good detail. David Bowie’s (RIP) new album “Blackstar” hadn’t been released at the point of this review, but ‘The Next Day’ album’s title track was ready to spin on my player. This came across as clear as you can hear. I have never been fond of the sound engineering on his albums, but the music itself more than makes up. With “How Does the Grass Grow” the horrible compression and limiting in the recording becomes clearer to me with these cables.

The slight mid-band emphasis in these cables emphasized it just that little bit.

KBL Sound’s activities are not confined to just the research and production of fine cables, but also the tuning and re-creating vintage valve amplifiers, like Leak and Dynaco. So what better than plugging in my modified Leak Stereo 20. These cables gave Harold’s best amp a more open and laid-back rendition, allowing the music to take over from any electronics that would otherwise be in the way. This really sounded musical, waking up to

my 1958 baby sound as good as I have ever heard it. Carlos Franzetti “The Jazz Kamerata” had a depth of sound I really got hooked on; the full colour from the piano, string warmth, flute and saxophone were all placed where I expected, with excellent decays on piano and a husky saxophone opened up as real as I would hear

them live, like seeing the pixels on the screen, every ounce of colour was there for me to hear in all its glory. The sound had more atmosphere than I had got used to before on this regularly played recording. Not just was the soundstage detailed but it had a depth to it that was quite addictive. “Allison’s Dance” showed a move across and backwards in the soundstage at a particular point I hadn’t detected before.

Chasing the Dragon, Vivaldi Concerto for 11 Mandolins was full of emotion and breaths from musicians and also background atmosphere. Atmosphere was something really noticeable in these cables. Track 3, Bach Cello Suite No 1 was full of his bow ‘grinding away’ as Austin Pearson got engrossed in the notes.

Patricia Barber “What a Shame” (Café Blue) was equally engaging. These cables really brought out



KBL Sound Red Eye Ultimate

clarity of ride cymbals and Mark Walker's percussion was as crisp as my own cables of choice. The guitar in track 4 "Romanesque" had a 'bite' and atmosphere that took me aback. Indeed the reverb and space in this recording using these cables was exceptional. Patricia's voice was noticeably more atmospheric than other instruments as this cable took apart the music strands into their individual components. I felt much more involved in the music as it played, and all seemed that much more relaxed and intimate. This was a good marriage of wire and valve, though the music perhaps a little slower than I would like.

CONCLUSION

The detail in terms of pitch, focus and depth of sound, especially in the upper mid-range was excellent. These are excellent cables and should certainly be auditioned if you are spending this sort of cash (£1750). Indeed, I always say you should listen to cables in your own system as they play an important, ne, essential part in formulating the overall sound. If you need more mid frequency warmth these cables are an excellent choice. Only wish they'd change the box it came in. I'm good at sewing...

Sound Quality: 8.55/10

Value for Money: 8.3/10

Build Quality: 8.6/10 (The 'box' is not relevant)

Overall: 8.48/10

Price at time of review £1750

Pros:

Good upper-mid warmth

Excellent clarity in the top frequencies

Detail

Power

Excellent components

Cons:

Upper mid frequencies might not work with amplifiers with upper mid emphasis

That box

Janine Elliott

DESIGNER'S COMMENTS

The Red Eye Ultimate interconnects had been designed with one goal in mind: to reveal system possibilities to the latest extent. With feedback from the previous reviewers and private customers of Red Eye IC's, they emphasize such features as accurate presentation, resolution, saturated colours and realistic sense of space.

Red Eye Ultimate interconnects are manufactured with ultra-pure silver wire with each single crystal length reaching even a few hundred meters (the result of a unique Ohno Continuous Casting process). Then, the silver is technologically aged to obtain an even better molecular order within each wire. These advanced conductors achieve such a high level of homogeneity that signal flow is practically lossless. Foamed PTFE is used as the best dielectric for practical application. The cable is internally multi-screened against EMI/RFI. Red Eye interconnects form a perfect synergy with WBT Nextgen 0110Ag type connectors fabricated to Mundorf's specification. This German company has comprehensively changed the metallurgical composition for all internal parts responsible for electrical contact inside the connector. They contain 1% of gold in their composition when compared to the pure silver WBT concept.

Technical Spec'

Conductors: highest purity mono crystal OCC silver

Termination: Mundorf/WBT 0110 Ag sliver/gold alloy, other connectors upon request

Shielding: multi-shield

Standard length available: 1 m, 1.5m, 2m

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Robert Szczerbowski (KBL)



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MCRU Limited Edition Silver Plated 6 Way Mains Block



Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

Dominic Marsh takes a look at the £180, silver plated power block from MCRU.

Mains Cables R Us (MCRU for short) have been specialising in mains cable products for a good number of years now and in addition to selling products from manufacturers such as Furutech, Black Rhodium and Tellurium Q, they also sell products under their own brand name and this mains block is one of these MCRU branded products.

CONSTRUCTION

At first glance this looks just like any other mains block, that is until you look much closer in detail. The 3 pin mains plug appears to be a standard UK mains plug from MK, but the MCRU motif on the cap says otherwise and when you turn it over you are greeted by silver plating to all three pins, carried out by MCRU. The entry lead is built using silver plated copper conductors, approximately 9mm wide, is extremely flexible and covered in black expandable

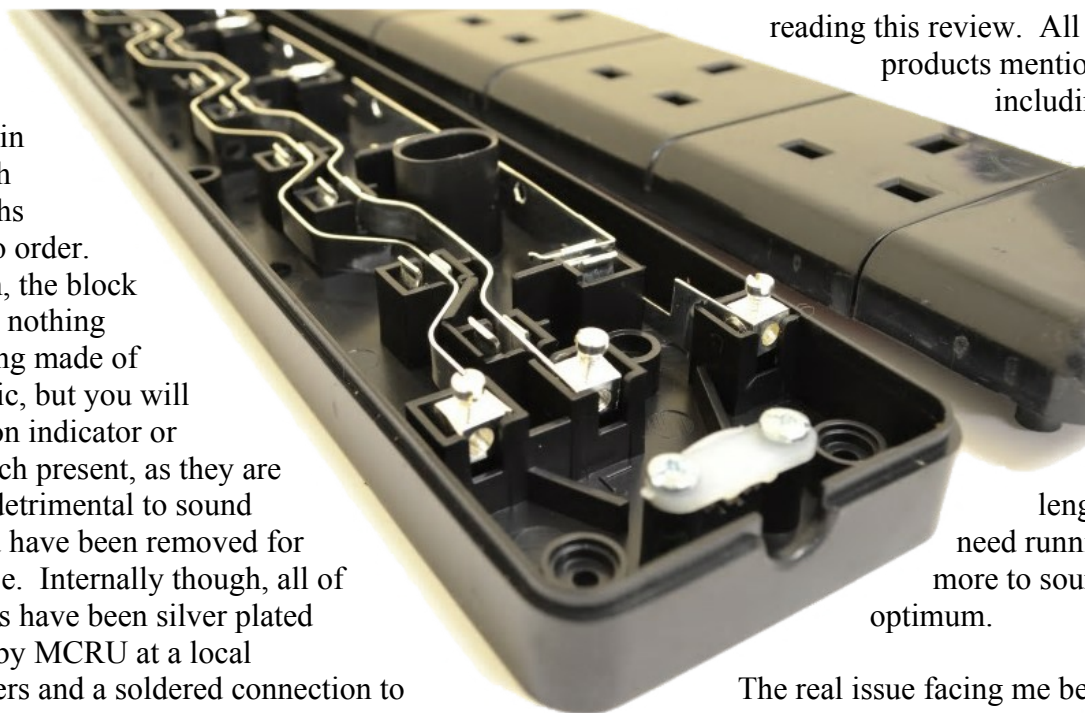
MCRU Limited Edition Silver Plated 6 Way Mains Block

braiding, measuring a standard 1.5 metres in length, with other lengths available to order. Once again, the block itself looks nothing special being made of black plastic, but you will find no neon indicator or on/off switch present, as they are said to be detrimental to sound quality and have been removed for that purpose. Internally though, all of the bus bars have been silver plated especially by MCRU at a local electroplaters and a soldered connection to the entry lead by using Audio Note 6% silver solder, again with conductivity in mind.

SOUND QUALITY

Or rather a lack of sound quality, as a mains block should never impose any of its own sonic imprint on to a hifi system, especially any form of compression and limiting of dynamics. Remember too, you are not putting something “wonderful” in, you are taking out a component that has inadequacies and replacing it with a component that has less faults – none of them are in actual fact perfect anyway no matter how much money you pay. It is those progressive steps up the hierarchy in sound quality terms that also has a commensurate rise in price as well, because removing those ‘imperfections’ in the products does not come cheap either.

My regular readership will also know that I do not do direct comparisons between competing components in the marketplace, because each has their own merits and so giving and taking away of points doesn’t always mean the ‘best’ product with the highest wins the battle or shootout. However, with this particular review I felt I had to use some comparisons with other products to put into perspective and context what this product’s capabilities were, because there are so many of these blocks available to buy, so I hope you will bear with me just this once. This is not to say either that the MCRU mains block occupies a particular place in the market and that should be borne in mind when



reading this review. All of the products mentioned below including the MCRU block were run in for approximately 50 hours as I am aware that cables not used for any length of time need running in once more to sound at their optimum.

The real issue facing me before I even started the evaluation was comparable products to pit the MCRU block against. My resident MS Audio block costs at least twice as much and so that was no equally matched contender, so I had to venture into the dark and gloomy spares cupboard to upset all the spiders in there to find what I was looking for. Amazing what can be found when you look hard enough and I found a generic 6 way mains block from a well known DIY store, a Brennenstuhl aluminium bodied 6 way block and a Russ Andrews Yellow 6 way block. That should do nicely for comparisons and closed the cupboard door to let the spiders get back to doing what spiders do best – whatever that is.

First up then was the DIY store block for the princely sum of £5.99. No on/off switch, but there is a neon indicator lamp, a thin captive mains lead and a generic UK 3 pin plug. Slow timed boomy bass, clouded midrange, indistinct treble, goodness me I had forgotten what one of these was like to be truthful. If this is what you currently run your system on, then do yourself a huge favour and use it in the shed for your power tools instead.

Next to try was the Brennenstuhl 6 way aluminium bodied block with a captive mains lead of decent thickness already fitted. This one has a mains switch, a neon indicator lamp and the mains lead almost 2.5 metres in length, neatly storable (is that a valid word?) by winding the cable around the block’s length with a channel at each end to hold it, a rather

MCRU Limited Edition Silver Plated 6 Way Mains Block

neat solution if you ask me. The aluminium casing gives the perception that it is robust and long lasting, although I wouldn't use it as an axle stand when repairing the car. Cannot remember what it cost when it was new, but the number "45" sticks in the mind somewhere. For all the robust build and attractive looks, this didn't fare much better in sonic terms than the generic DIY one, except the bass was just a bit firmer and tauter, still lacking in weight and power, plus the top end had slightly better resolution.

Although long since obsolete, the Russ Andrews Yellow 6 way block did at one time power my entire system. It wasn't a superb performer by any stretch of the imagination, but I did get a huge improvement in sound quality switching to one after a generic cheap £5 block bought from a supermarket as I recall and for that I was grateful at the time of course. I cannot recall how much I paid for it. No neon lamp, no switch either and no details about construction were ever given. For the purpose of this test, I now heard a leap forward in sound from the previous two candidates, as bass was now much fuller bodied and the midrange cloudiness was lifted. Treble too acquired some air and space.

Finally we come to the MCRU 6 way block and there was some anticipation that given how much attention MCRU has paid to silver plating all the metal conducting components, that there would be some benefits to be heard from it. Indeed there was, as the treble acquired more clarity and a much better focus, while dynamics was raised a notch or two, the leading edges of notes having a sweet taut crispness. Bass extension didn't increase further down into the lower registers, but there was a lush warmth to the sound with less overhang and more articulation. I also noticed a big improvement in sound staging and the noise floor seemed lower too.

It easily saw off the contenders I pitted it against in sound terms and came close on the heels of my resident mains block that's more than double the price

Naturally, at the end of the evaluation I re-installed my MS Audio mains block and I know I said clearly at the very beginning of this review that it wasn't a good comparison because it was more than twice the price, but the MCRU block fared very well against the MS Audio block, much to my surprise.

CONCLUSION

As the old saying goes "Never judge a book by its cover" then that wise set of words applies equally so to the MCRU Limited Edition 6 way mains block. It looks superficially plain and uninteresting (most no doubt will be installed out of sight anyway), but MCRU have placed more emphasis on what goes on

inside the device than what has gone into its outward appearance. On that basis then it could be a viable candidate if you are looking to buy a better mains block to improve the sound of your system, especially so if you currently use a generic block of indeterminate parentage like the one that was found in my spares cupboard. It easily saw off the contenders I pitted it against in sound terms and came close on the heels of my resident mains block that's more than double the price, so for that reason I will give it a recommendation.

Build quality:8.1/10

Sound quality:8.8/10

Value for money:8.6/10

Overall:8.5/10

Price at time of review: £180

Pros: Good sound quality owing to that custom silver plating of all the conductor surfaces.

Cons: Mains block body is not the best quality to look at.

Dominic Marsh

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RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY
JANINE ELLIOT



There are two age-old problems with playing vinyl, as those who set up their arms and cartridges will know well. The first concerns the angle of the cartridge to the groove. In most turntables a pivoted arm will track the groove in an arc, which is not how the analogue master is cut. A Neumann VMS 80 lathe will cut the analogue master with a head that travels in a straight line across the groove, just as a parallel tracking turntable. The result of a pivoted arm tracking the groove is that for most of the time a distortion is produced when the stylus is at a slight angle to the groove. Parallel tracking arms, or clever arms such as the Thales tangential-tracking pivoted tonearm, or even the clever Garrard Zero 100 tonearm, have solved that problem. The second problem is that because the arm is at an angle it tends to pull the arm towards the centre of the disc, and therefore this needs to be resisted by an “anti-skate” mechanism; weights to pull the stylus away from one side of the groove which in effect would otherwise give

In this month's instalment of Retro Bites where we focus on classic and vintage audio, Janine Elliot takes a look at the Nakamichi TX 1000 Turntable

uneven wear on the record as well as more distortion.

We have known about all these problems since the beginnings of vinyl, but there is one other problem that many won't be aware of, and many won't notice. I have perfect pitch, which means I know the exact pitch of a “C” or any other note without the need of a reference point. I could go for years without ever hearing a note, and my brain will still pick it out exactly when asked. A well respected voice on this matter suggests an average person can

hear as little as 2 cents difference in pitch. Due to the logarithmic state of frequency measurement that means that there are 1200 cents per octave, which therefore means a semitone is 100 cents (there are 12 semitones in an octave). Ordinary people can hear changes in pitch of around 10 cents. I can hear as little as 2 cents, which means I am consistently phased by wow in turntables, and whilst the motor drives have improved over the last 100 years, they are still not perfect. But, what concerned Nakamichi was not so much the wow from the motor, but

the wow induced from the spindle and the record itself.

You see, no matter whether your vinyl is 160g or 220g, the chances are that it is not exactly centred, meaning that every rotation cause fluctuations in speed. A change of 0.5mm is enough to make a difference in pitch. Remember that if a record is shorter on one half of the rotation it will mean that it is longer on the other side, so by simple maths that means a 0.5mm accuracy one side will mean a difference of 1mm side – to – side. Now, that can cause significant wow, and extremely noticeable in long piano notes. Also, if the hole in the centre is not placed perfect, or indeed if the hole is so large that the record isn't accurately seated centrally, then this wow will be even larger. Records have larger holes than the diameter of the spindle, otherwise it would be problematic getting the records on or off the platter. Indeed if your hole is 0.1mm larger than the spindle you will notice wow. Also, as a result of the discrepancies the wow would be more noticeable at the centre of the record than the start. Now, if your stylus is moving in and out with the irregularity of each rotation then the stereo image or EQ of the music will change as well. And finally, if your turntable already has a motor wow and flutter of, say, 0.05% and the record is 0.25mm off centre, then after maths the total speed fluctuation would be in the order of 0.38%. That is certainly not a figure you would accept from a turntable. Interestingly, the more we listen to this effect the less we will notice it unless our ears have been trained to pick it up.

Nakamichi's beautiful looking TX 1000 turntable was one of the four turntables I have always wanted to own, and over the next few editions you will realise two of my other favourites. My fourth is the Transcriptors Hydraulic Reference, which I already own, and talked about a few months ago. The Nakamichi is designed to counteract any irregularity of rotation, working up to a maximum 0.5mm. This beautiful Dragon of a turntable is a very rare beast, and if not more desirable than the Dragon cassette machine, is as equally brilliantly engineered. It appeared between 1983 and 1987, unfortunately killed off by the CD. Only between 200 and 500 of these machines were probably built, though a similar Dragon CT (Computing Turntable) amassed up to around 5000 sales.

The TX1000 has a hidden arm left of the platter that pops up at the start of turning on the motor and moves over towards the centre of the record which tests the accuracy of the rotation by measuring the change in movement in the centre lead-out groove on the record; a perfect circle and therefore ideal for measuring. In the Dragon CT the measuring arm is already exposed at the back of the turntable and doesn't need to pop up. That turntable has two platters on top of each other; once the computer has worked out and indicated the amount of inaccuracy of centring in the display, it then mechanically 'nudges' the edge of the independent top glass platter in relation to the bottom platter until the centre circle is absolutely correct. In the TX1000 there is only a single platter and the nudging is done through the

employment of two motors underneath which move it out of alignment and then keeps testing and nudging, after which the arm retracts and hides again below the deck from whence it originally appeared. Spooky. This machine therefore has provision for two arms, with the second at the back of the plinth (the same place as the measuring arm was in the CT). This process could take from a few seconds to near a minute until it is satisfied with reducing the errors. Of course in both cases the non-centralisation of the platter means an amount of weight difference side to side. The motor unit itself was a direct drive Quartz PLL design and achieved 0.003% wow and flutter before self-centring and then rising to 0.02% after. This increase is actually a small price to pay when you consider the maths I calculated earlier. The unit, by virtue of its size needed four air-suspension feet each corner of the unit, and the metal framed unit, at 40kg, was a heavy beast. Both Nak turntables have provision for two arms, and I'm pleased to see their website included the SME3 as one of them, which like the Nakamichi, had an equally short life span. Shame, as both were over engineered beauties.

Janine Elliot

**Scan this QR Code to see
the TX 1000 in action**



THE VOICE OF DOM!



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

Dominic Marsh has a bit of a revelation regarding system hierarchy and later pokes the hornets nest a bit and discusses system hierarchy and gets entangled with folk over cable wars.

Here for your delectation is my musings on subjects that have been rumbling on for more years than I can care to remember, so it covers more than one topic this month. It is the thorny issues of whether we should build a hifi system from the speakers' end then matching amplifiers etc to suit, or concentrate on the source first. Then I will drag you into an insight into a recent debate I had on a hifi forum and how that ended.

This "source first" topic came to the fore quite recently for me when I decided to have a complete system change around, prompted by the purchase of a new set of speakers. I found that the speakers weren't sounding as good as I had hoped, so I decided to upgrade the CD player and the amplification to suit, thinking this would resolve the problem, but in actual fact something happened that was quite unexpected.

**Dominic Marsh has a
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My original resident CD player was none too shabby anyway, but one thing I didn't like about it was not having the ability to simply press a button and stop playing –

how silly is that? I could of course eject the CD or pause it as many times as I liked, but I was always nagged by the thought of the laser being live while I had a

lengthy phone conversation or while I put the kettle on for a cup of coffee with the player in pause mode. I didn't need too much of a prompt therefore to buy another CD player and I chose one that not only had a STOP button (Hooray!), it also had a plethora of digital filters to play with to get the sound just right for reviewing purposes. My original resident amplifier wasn't exactly shabby either and did sterling work as a reviewing tool, but while being capable of clearly showing differences between components attached to it, it lacked the outright power and grunt that I craved for, so some more watts was high on my wish list. What's the point of this I hear you thinking? I will tell all.

Having acquired the aforesaid CD player and amplifier replacements, I then eagerly connected them up in my rack, but not to my resident speakers. As you can imagine, a reviewer may have all sorts of components on the premises so to speak and I connected up a pair of budget speakers I had recently evaluated rather than my own, not by design I hasten to add. I was blown away by the sounds produced by the speakers and they sounded considerably better than the amplifier I reviewed them with. Being the curious person that I am, I had to find out why there was such a big difference in sound quality, so out came the 'new' amplifier and in went the original amplifier I reviewed the speakers with and that wasn't responsible, so I went back to my old CD player and there was the answer – the source made more difference than the amplification.

This took place immediately before the Bristol Show and I thought no more of it until I walked into Origin Live's room at the show. On demonstration was their top of the range turntable, feeding a Sugden integrated amplifier, culminating in a pair of tiny Q Acoustics speakers on stands. If ever there was a "source first" system then this was it folks. I stayed for a quite while listening to this sound (probably the longest I spent in any room) and apart from a couple of patches where those tiny speakers couldn't quite fill a crowded room full of people with undistorted sound they sounded very good. It seemed most of the visitors to the room were duly impressed too.

So I have come to the conclusion that a top class front end and amplifier can actually bully a pair of budget speakers into sounding very special, whereas a top class pair of speakers being driven by an inferior front end and amplifier will never ever sound at their best. What say you?

I do need to expand on this some more with various combinations of CD/amp/speakers to see if it still holds true at all levels.

And now for my second go with the stick...

Are you the kind of person who festers over comments made by other people that have annoyed you? You are reading about such a person and if someone upsets me I will churn and boil over about it for sometimes days at a time, so this next item is rather cathartic for me in letting the pressure out.

Last week I got entangled with some people on a hifi forum who were being less than kind to the subject of cables. The usual accusations of "placebo", "expectation bias", "ABX testing", "delusional" were being rolled out by the antagonists who didn't actually stop and think about what they were actually saying, rather they were reeling out the same old irrelevant clichés as a counter to any meaningful discussions. Irrelevant clichés? How dare you say that Dominic!

Well yes they are and I will (attempt) to explain why. Firstly, I can find no logical connection between "placebo" and hearing real not imagined differences between cables. I am actually listening to cables, not having sugar pills or drugs thrust down me to cure any real or imaginary illness. Secondly, I put it to these people how many times has it been proven scientifically that a placebo can be efficacious in many multiple instances? I can see someone being fooled once, maybe twice, but many hundreds of times?

For example, I have read of a patient being operated on to cure a knee condition, but the surgeon made only an incision in the skin layer and made no attempt to incise the knee itself, so the patient was 'cured' of his knee problem. Others are taking sugar pills for what is very likely symptom somatic illnesses rather than any genuine affliction. Hallelujah!! A miracle! But, how many other patients have been similarly treated, how many times can that same procedure be repeated on that same patient with placebo continuing to be efficacious and

THE VOICE OF DOM!

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

let's be quite candid about this, the medical trade are very quick to point out their "successes", but oh so slow at pointing out their failures I must also add. None of the protagonists in this debate had any answers to these questions and I wish they would do that before making any statements like that which are patently inaccurate.

Next, I will debunk the "expectation bias" accusation. If you dragged anyone off the street, plonked them in front of a hifi system and told them they would be listening to a cable swap and one would sound better than the other, then that would be a good candidate to experience some "expectation bias" that one cable would sound better than the other because they have already been told it will happen. The enthusiastic person who has just spent left arm and right leg kind of money on an expensive cable plugging it into their system to replace a cheap cable might, with good reason, be expected to have some form of "expectation bias" that the money they have just spent would elicit some sort of sound improvement. The trouble with those two scenarios is that they are being looked at both in isolation and worse still, in microcosm. They are one off events and I dare say if you cared to repeat those situations many times over with the same participants the expectation bias would very quickly evaporate into

I will bet that some people who read this blog will be fuming at what they are reading and I am glad they are

nothingness. So anyone who levels that same accusation at ME will get short shrift I'm afraid. This is the person who has handled many THOUSANDS of cables over a period longer than 40 years so I probably have more chance of swimming the Atlantic than being subject to any "expectation bias" over cables.

I have participated in and read about countless ABX routines for cable tests and have yet to find any that gave a definitive answer - either way. Why? It is because they are all using a subjective methodology in pursuit of an objective outcome, using people with major variances in hearing acuity, which to me isn't the correct solution to the problem. The fact that confidence levels are then being used to attempt to define an outcome simply points to just how inadequate it is. Just like the people being dragged off the street to test for expectation bias, the participants in these ABX tests no matter how qualified they appear to be, are all similarly pre-

conditioned to fail because they are participating in a "test" which dooms it to fail from the word go, as people's stress levels and anxieties are affected by that word and the very environment it is being used in. I know of many intelligent people that turn to rubber in any "test" situation and it has always been of annoyance that our working life careers

are dominated by how well we do in a brief test which only lasts a short while when in our youth. I really wish an award and certification could be created for COMMON SENSE and that would be worth more than a university degree many times over. Boy, we would be living in a different world today if that were to happen.

I will bet that some people who read this blog will be fuming at what they are reading and I am glad they are. Not that I enjoy winding people up or provoking them into rages, but it might, just might, get people to THINK rather than accept at face value whatever is being told to them by the scientific community. Can we really trust people that for the last 30 years have said we should all avoid butter like the plague, to then suddenly without warning say they got it utterly wrong we should now eat it regularly? Nor me.

Dominic Marsh

FIDELITY MATTERS

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



The little boy in me has always been curious as to how things work, which inevitably meant I would take things apart and then try to put them back together again, not always successfully I might add. Mechanical and electronic objects still fascinate me, and whenever I go into a DIY store the tools section immediately attracts me, much to my wife's annoyance, (she likes shoes and handbags!). Anyway what has this got to do with hifi? A lot actually.

Tales of an inveterate modifier

Tentative Tinkerings

My first attempt at taking a piece of hifi apart was my parents Pye Black Box stereogram to look at the valve amp when I was in my early teens. Although I didn't know how it worked then it still had me enthralled and I later on rewired the speakers with better quality wire. I don't think it really made much of a difference but I enjoyed using a soldering iron. The first serious item I decided to modify was my Thorens TD165 turntable which had the original arm on it. Being an avid enthusiast

by the age of sixteen, when I left home at eighteen to go to university in Leicester, as soon as I got there I couldn't wait to hunt out the hifi shops and back in the seventies a decent hifi shop was common in most cities and towns. I remember walking into the shop on London Road near the station in Leicester and seeing an SME 3009 tonearm. Well my eyes couldn't stop looking at it. Of course I had read about this now legendary product and immediately wondered how I could buy one to put on my Thorens.

Being a student I had a grant then and worked out if I scrimped and scraped for the rest of the term living on beans on toast I could afford it. The arm cost £35 if memory serves me, which back in 1974 was a lot of money, especially for a student when a week's wages might only be £10-£15 in the holidays. Determined to have it I took a deep breath and took the plunge as they say. I proudly carried the box back to my student digs and unboxed the SME to stroke it and marvel at the build quality. The next step was a

FIDELITY MATTERS

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

bit harder. How to mount the SME onto my Thorens? I had limited access to tools at university, so firstly I took the base board off and examined the inside of the deck and its workings. Taking the old arm off wasn't hard, but the issue came when I got the SME arm board supplied by Thorens to mount an SME. This board was designed for use on the TD160 which came without an arm anyway and allowed dealers or owners to mount an SME arm. (Remember the Rega RB300 didn't come along until the early eighties, and has since then dominated the market as the go to arm for upgrades or tight budgets). The problem was, that although the board screwed onto the sub chassis easily, the hole drilled into the sub chassis for the Thorens arm was a different shape and so didn't have the correct clearances. This meant laboriously filing the sub chassis until the SME arm pillar fitted.

Several hours later and somewhat fed up with filing the metal sub chassis I had achieved the required shaped hole and voila, I could mount the arm. I fitted the SME and put my Shure M75ED type 2 cartridge in the head shell, aligned it and set the tracking weight and bias. Was the result worth all the effort? Yes. The SME was definitely a better sounding arm and I could now improve my cartridge when funds permitted

Most recently I took on a far more ambitious project, upgrading the Quad 33 pre amp and 303 power amplifier

knowing the outlay would be good value. Later I used a JVC X1 cartridge that had originally been designed for quadrasonic records but was also a great stereo cartridge.

Moving On

I have had many turntables since, but I didn't go to so much trouble modifying them again, choosing to buy a turntable with the best arm I could afford. In my days of retailing I worked on hundreds of Linn Sondeks, Rega Planer 3s etc. so fitting arms or servicing them became second nature and I turned my attention to speakers and electronics. The first really good speakers I owned were a pair of Allison Three's that were an

American design and I bought them before I got involved in retailing. I'd heard them in the shop I ended up working for and was gob smacked the first time I heard them. The stereo imaging and depth of the sound field was amazing and my wife adored them too. After a few years of owning them I got to thinking what difference changing the internal wiring and binding posts would make. Like most designs back then in the eighties, manufacturers didn't use the quality of components and wiring we see nowadays. I decided to use Naim cable for the wiring as it was

much thicker and in my mind sounded a lot better than the thin and weedy wire in the Allison's. The trouble was this required a good soldering iron as the Naim cable was quite thick, so a lot of heat was needed to melt the solder and make a good joint. This was easier said than done, so a moment of Deja Vu came over me again remembering the Thorens and the time it took to modify it. After some cursing and burnt finger tips I managed to do both speakers. They were a true three way design, so I had six drive units to solder to. I can't say the results were night and day but I felt justified in the upgrade.

More Tinkering

Most recently I took on a far more ambitious project, upgrading the components in a Quad 33 pre amp and 303 power amplifier. Purists would say why bother when the design was so good back in the late sixties. Well the trouble back then was that components weren't as good electrically, or deteriorated badly over time. After doing a lot of research on the internet where there are numerous sites dedicated to the topic and where you can purchase the relevant parts from, I proceeded to buy the Quad second hand on ebay. The first Quad 33 pre amp I got was in a sorry state when it arrived and although it worked, it had been tinkered with and showed its age, being filthy inside... and the case was in poor condition too. The various forums and general advice were don't bother rewiring, just replace any aged capacitors, transistors and resistors. The power supply was the key area to upgrade and this was straight forward. The Quad has multiple daughter boards mounted onto the main mother board, so servicing is made a lot easier... in theory. The trouble I had was that because the pre amp was in such a poor and dirty state I had to strip the pre amp down completely, which meant desoldering many awkward components and wiring looms. After many hours of frustration and eventually only getting a bad hum from the pre amp, I decided to not bother wasting any more

On the other hand if things go wrong you can lose money and in a worse case scenario have a useless piece of electronics

time on it. I sold it for spares...at a loss of course.

Undeterred I saw another Quad 33 a few weeks later that looked in far better condition and was being sold cheap as the owner wasn't sure what was up with it. I bought it and when it arrived it was immaculate looking as if it had just come out of the factory. I went ahead replacing the relevant parts as recommended and when tested, it worked fine. I also got a Quad 303 power amp and upgraded the output capacitors and selected components on the amp boards and power supply. It worked fine after testing and checking with a meter, but I had seen some companies who had also upgraded the front panel where the connections are. I tried to get hold of a newly fabricated front panel but had no joy. I then proceeded to

make one as the modifications were too radical to use the existing original panel and involved a new power socket, speaker and input terminals and a power switch. This worked fine but the perfectionist in me wasn't happy with the end results and sold it. The 33 pre amp was sold at a decent profit and the new owner was over the moon with its condition and performance, so a result there.

Know Your Limits!

In conclusion then, what have I learned? Well modifying equipment can be enjoyable and result in worthwhile gains. On the other hand if things go

wrong you can lose money and in a worse case scenario have a useless piece of electronics. Experience tells me that you need to know when to quit wasting time and money. Even very experienced electronics engineers don't always succeed in repairing or resurrecting an older piece of equipment for various reasons. Like classic old motor cars, if you have the skill and means to bring it back to life and restore it to original condition regardless of cost, then fair enough. Modifying can reap great rewards, but know your limitations and be sensible.

Finally please do not make any modifications or repairs unless you know precisely what you are doing or get expert advice. Remember electricity can kill.

Ian Ringstead

THE VIEWS OF STU!

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



In Association With



I saw a meme on the internet recently that said "I hope the next big trend in music is talent" and this got me thinking about how we form and develop our tastes in music and how that shapes the music we listen to in later life.

I, like most folk reading this article I suspect, formed my first serious and committed connection with music in my early teens when I started listening to the likes of The Jam, The Beat and The Specials. This was around the time of the mod revival in the UK and it was what pretty much everyone I knew was listening to. I happened along a bit late for the first wave of punk sadly, but I assume that had I been a couple of years older than ten, as I was in 1977, then punk is where I would have no doubt gravitated towards.

Naturally as human beings we like to form ourselves into little tribes

Not The B Bomb !

and music can be the bonding factor that glues these clans together. Being in a group makes us feel safe, makes us feel we fit in and so we tend to go with the collective consciousness and follow what the majority in our group of friends are doing. This manifests itself in the kind of clothes we wear and, importantly seeing as I'm banging on about music, the kind of bands we listen to and go see. I remember my first gig and going to see The Beat at the Wakefield Theatre and feeling a huge rush of feeling that this was

where I belonged and this was what I wanted to be a part of. So, as well as saving my money and buying all the seven inch singles my pocket money could procure, I also started wearing a uniform of sorts...Harrington jacket, Fred Perry tee-shirt...you know the drill. The gig had the effect of reinforcing the tribal bond and I suppose has imprinted on my brain in some way.

As I moved through senior school the trends my fellow classmates followed changed, and obviously

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so did mine...it's that fitting in thing again. Metal came and went and so did other genres, but all the time I was listening to the music I loved I was distinctly aware that my taste in music was right. I suppose this made me a musical snob! Fast forward thirty or so years and I think I'm pretty broad in my tastes. I dabble in a bit of jazz, I don't mind a bit of prog, I still enjoy punk and I even try with classical from time to time, because I seem to think I really ought to get it... but I don't. However, I look at the charts and

think "How in Bod's name can they call that music" and I say it as though I'm the first person to experience this.

First of all this "looking down" on the likes of Justin Beiber and his ilk is clearly musical snobbery of the highest order, but I just can't help myself I'm afraid. That kind of manufactured, synthetic drivel really gets my goat and makes me want to rip the heads off... (at this point nurse arrived and gave me a small tablet and now, a

few hours later, I'm feeling nice and calm again).

OK, I've had a lovely nap now, nursey has had a good talk with me and the gentleman in the white coat has given me back my pencils and some other sharp objects and says that so long as I don't mention the B word again, I should be fine.

Earlier I mentioned moaning about the music that is in the charts and how to my mind the majority of it is pretty poor, and I also seem to

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recall saying that I say this as if I'm the first adult to utter this kind of sentiment. But, I don't have to delve that far back in the dusty recesses of my noggin to recall the words of my

Father/Mother/Grandparents declaring that the stuff I was listening to was horrendous crap that didn't deserve to be given airspace...and I'm sure their parents before them said the same. In fact I know they did as my Mum tells me her Father said the Beatles wouldn't last five minutes. Thing is I genuinely do believe that the music industry has become so much a money making, payola-merry-go-round that the only acts that get any attention from the main stream media are the ones that conform to the bland, formulaic pap model so that the money men can rake it in. Where are the movements like punk, like the Mods, like New Romanticism? You know what, they are still there and people are still making fabulously creative new music that is completely different from what went before and new movements are springing up around the music. It's just, you know exactly what it is! I'm morphing, some may say I've gone full morph, into a boring old fart that has lost touch with the creative new music scenes that are out there and kids are taking to their hearts and minds. And this is a natural progression. I've broadened my horizons in some

...after all no one wants a gibbering loon that looks like one of them fellas in the box off the Muppets getting in the way of them creating and exploring new music, new life and new ways of expressing themselves

ways musically, but this 'broadening' seems to be a sort of searching out music from the past that I can appreciate...this is where the Jazz thing comes in of course, but there's tons more out there to explore. For example, during the nineties I was in full-on mask-hysteria rave-mode and I listened to very little else...perhaps a bit of reggae and the ever present stalwarts of Hawkwind and Neil Young, but my knowledge of the music of that period, other than house and techno is negligible.

So how do I find these new forms of musical movements that are happening on my very doorstep? Well, you see, I don't and I can't. This is the music of youth and so it should be. Yes I may well happen across the odd snippet of a new style, but I'm never going to be hip to the avant-garde forms of musical expression that teenagers are making in their bedrooms and home studios, after all no one wants a gibbering loon that looks like one of them fellas in the box off the Muppets getting in the way of them creating and exploring

new music, new life and new ways of expressing themselves.

This has turned into a bit of a rant, but I initially started out thinking about how the music of our youth helped shape the musical beings that we become in later life and it has suddenly


dawned on me that our musical tastes are formed by a journey just as our lives are. Throughout our lives we flirt with new styles and new movements in music, just as we find and lose friends as we grow older. Some of this music sticks to us and becomes part of our makeup, others we shed and move on as it no longer seems so relevant to us. We have the opportunity from time to time to meet old musical friends and perhaps, if we are lucky, friends of our friends. The truth of the matter is we are forever exploring new music, it may be just that it's not new in the sense that it is of the here and now. In any one day I could listen to Crass, Hawkwind, Neil Young, Daft Punk, Disco, Detroit Techno, Acid Techno...the list is endless, just don't make me listen to that Justin B...and that's where...oh no...

Anyway, my cocoa has arrived and nurse has said that I've been so good she's going to let me have a Werthers Original and a listen to some Conflict tomorrow.

Stuart Smith

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THE VIEWS OF STU!

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TANTRUM...BY STUART SMITH



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Earlier this week we were saying goodbye to my Father and over the days that followed it really struck me how much of a force for bringing people together music is. Read on...it's not as maudlin as you might think!

Now my Dad was a larger than life character in lots of ways and having managed and owned pubs for over forty years he knew a lot of people, so naturally the crematorium was full...ok, it was standing room only AND they opened a second room where folk could watch proceedings on a live video and audio feed...who knew they did that? So, there we all were gathered to shed a few tears and reflect a little on this man's life, but also to celebrate his life too... and for both emotional opposites it was music that guided us.

Music, perhaps like nothing else, has an ability to bring people together

On walking into the crematorium Dad had chosen to have Ronan Keating's "If Tomorrow Never Comes"

I must confess to never having heard this particular tune, but listening to the lyric it was clear that my Father was addressing my

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Mother and trying to say the things he perhaps never could whilst he was alive (There'd been that British thing from a bygone age of being emotionally suppressed going on here of course) but Dad was also speaking through the lyric of the tune to the rest of the people gathered and urging them to tell their loved ones what they think of them before it is too late.

The service continued and the speaker reflected on a life lived to the full and then the final song played as the curtains closed on the coffin for the ultimate time. I'll need to backtrack here a little and say that whenever one of his pubs had a singer, or as we call them in Yorkshire "a turn", Dad would wait 'til the end of the evening, put on the backing track, grab the mic and belt out Roy Orbison's "Penny Arcade"

He wasn't a singer as such and never played an instrument, but he loved to belt this particular tune out and everyone would clap along to the chorus. No one really knew why he sang this song, even Mum, but when it played at the funeral there was a ripple of laughter that spread through the people gathered. Again this was Dad's

I'm not a fan of either pieces of music, as I'm sure many in the audience that day weren't, but music has this power to speak to us, bring us together and unite us emotionally in a way that little else, if anything, can

way of bringing people together, uniting them as one and swinging the emotional pendulum right over to the positive side of things. I'm not a fan of either pieces of music, as I'm sure many in the audience that day weren't, but music has this power to speak to us, bring us together and unite us emotionally in a way that little else, if anything, can.

On the way home after the funeral and taking the ferry back to France we camped out in the bar which had a stage, a small dance-floor and a couple of 'turns' on. I'm not a huge fan of these kind of acts, but credit where it is due, the first act, a duo going by the name of The Black And White Stripes were really very good indeed and very accomplished –

certainly a good step up from the usual. So, they played their set and I watched the audience from the sidelines and it was a wonderful thing to behold. On the dance-floor were an older couple dancing to all the older tunes that they knew and thoroughly getting lost in the music. Of course these two weren't being brought together in the same way as the rest of the audience, but it was the music and their dancing that bonded them. However, what really caught my eye were two toddlers with their parents. The first

child, a young lad, sat in his chair, bopping to the rhythm and pretending to play the guitar...perhaps he'll be the next Hendrix when he gets older. The second was a young girl who insisted on breaking away from her Mother and heading towards the stage to be nearer the music and again this was a wonderful thing to see. There was sheer joy in both these young people's faces and it was only after a short while that I noticed the young girl was wearing hearing devices in both ears. Looking round the room everyone was singing to the tunes they knew, or just nodding their heads to the tunes they didn't...again the whole room being brought together by music. The next act came on, played his

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set and finished with...
yep, the Ronan Keating
tune played at Dad's
funeral!

So we're back at Hifi Pig
Towers now and I've
been quite contemplative
over the last couple of
days, but there have been
four images that have
come to the fore time and
time again and that has
been the two tunes
played at the funeral, the
joy on the faces of the
two young people on the
ferry and of course the
couple lost in their own
little world whilst they
danced.



Many people of course love to go
see live music and the feeling of
being in an audience full of people
being moved in the same way by
the music they are hearing is a
magnificent thing to behold and be
part of. But it doesn't have to be
live music to have this effect! If
you were part of the rave
generation you'll know the feeling
of collective consciousness and the
crowd moving as one as the DJ
takes you and your fellow ravers
on a journey...again a truly
glorious thing to behold and take
part in. In our home town of
Gourin here in North Western
France, we have an annual event
that celebrates the crêpe (pancakes
to you and me) called "Fête De La
Crêpe" and of course there is live
Breton music throughout the day
and night. Sitting on the sidelines

and watching the crowd (from
toddlers to OAPs) perform their
traditional dances is a spectacle
that, when I first saw it, moved me
a great deal. These people are
being brought together by music
and dance and this coming
together strengthens their Breton
identity and in turn helps protect
and maintain their culture...and I
think this is hugely important and
perhaps something other
communities who are more
removed from "community" in its
broader sense could learn a lot
from.

So there you have it, again I've
been more than a bit
"ramblesome" (as is my wont) but
I think the point I'm getting across
is that music, and particularly the
coming together of people to listen
to music (and perhaps dance), is a

hugely important factor in
maintaining strong social bonds
between individuals, families,
groups and communities and it is
at our peril if we forget this and
allow ourselves to become
musically isolated. Whilst of
course Hifi Pig is essentially a
platform for us to spout on about
hifi (which can be a solitary pass-
time), I urge you to take
yourselves (if able) out into the
real world and experience music
as it was meant to be heard... and
that is amongst friends, loved ones
and family, or alternatively why
not invite some friends and
neighbours round for the evening,
open a bottle or two, clear the
floor, crank the volume up and
have a little dance...you know you
want to!

Stuart Smith

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BIRD'S EYE VIEW

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

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Show season is well under way and we will be making our way to Bristol for the 2016 Sound and Vision show very soon. You meet all kinds of people at shows and there are some definite groups that tend to crop up at most shows....lets have a look under the lid.

Classic Audiophiles

They've been supporting this industry for many years. Most likely an 'older' gentleman, they are in their idea of heaven, they've been let out for the day (perhaps the weekend) to do nothing but wander the rooms of the show, run into others of their ilk that they only ever see at shows and generally have a great time. Will probably be found at some point in the bar with a pint, a pie and a very happy look on their face as they reminisce on the last hour spent listening to Pink Floyd on a

Written just before the Bristol Show, Linette looks at the folk who make up the gathered throng at a typical Hifi show.

cracking system and at the kind of volume that 'her in doors' would never tolerate.

Hifi Journalists

The Journos are easy to spot, they always have cameras and can always be found anywhere where there is free booze. The PR People want as many, paper and virtual, column inches to be written about their super new product as possible...and they

know the best way to ensure this is to keep those Journos fed and watered. The Journos will have been invited to many product launches at a show and will carefully select the ones to attend based on the quality of the drinks and nibbles as much as the sneaky peak at new gear. The Hifi Journo has a big appetite for delicious canapés and press freebies...they haven't bought a T-shirt or USB stick in many years. They brandish their press passes like a



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weapon and use them to get anywhere and everywhere.

PR Peeps

They will be incredibly busy, the PR Peeps are the gods of multitasking, their time split between organising press events and helping the Exhibitors set up and, of course, working the room in the bar. If you ever need to find a Hifi PR person at a hifi show, the bar is probably the best place to start...if you ever need to find a Hifi PR person anywhere, the bar is probably the best place to start.

Bored Spouses

These are not happy people when at a hifi show, they are trying to show an interest in their loved one's hobby but they just don't get it. They can be spotted by their fixed look of complete boredom when dragged into yet another demo. They've got a bit of headache and need a drink but they trail wearily behind their beloved for the sake of marital harmony.

Happy Couples

The complete opposite to the Bored Spouse and their other half, the Happy Couple are young and bright and shiny. They have embraced the new technologies and are looking for a cool new multi room system to go in their impossibly tidy and interior

They've got a bit of headache and need a drink but they trail wearily behind their beloved for the sake of marital harmony

designery house. They are highly likely to make a purchase at the show of hifi that is as bright and shiny as they are.

The Lone Female

The Lone Female goes quietly about her business. She's planning on auditioning several sets of speakers that she has on her wish list. She's a regular at Hifi shows and used to be looked at like she had dropped in from another planet, thankfully there are more women at shows these days and she feels less out of place. She particularly dislikes condescending guys running rooms at shows that speak to her like she doesn't know what a cartridge is, little do they know she's been stripping down and rebuilding vintage turntables since she was at university.

AV Roomsters

An Audio Visual or Home Cinema room can usually be felt before it is seen or even heard. A deep sub bass, strong enough to shake the pits of hell rumbles from the room

which will be dominated by the biggest screen ever seen. A large amount of speakers will be playing the soundtrack of various super-hero antics, explosions and crashes. The guys in charge of the AV room show no pity for the poor person valiantly trying to play refined classical music in the next room....the bass

is so strong it's making their records skip and they could really do with a lie down and some ibuprofen.

The Hipster

Now hifi is becoming cool again, the Hipsters have caught on to it. They can be easily spotted by their skinny jeans and manly beards and will always be near to anywhere selling or playing vinyl. The only problem that they have with their vinyl collection is that the black stuff is becoming far too mainstream these days, they are selling it in Tesco's for gods sake, so they are checking out Reel 2 Reel in the hope that they can catch the next wave of hipness before any of their mates.

Head-Fi Kids

Very easy to spot as they will always have a pair of headphones either on their heads or around their necks. They wear their brands like a badge of honour and will be found, glued to the headphone stands playing with



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expensive little gadgets and wondering if spending their student loan on a new DAP would be such a bad thing to do.

Mr (or Mrs) I Know Everything About Everything (IKEAE)

One to avoid at all costs. If they corner you then you will be lectured at about how they know so much more than anyone else here and have a hifi that is infinitely superior to anything you could ever dream of. They quite often try this on the Exhibitors, who at first think they may have an interested potential customer, but soon realise they have been drawn into a 'my homemade bell wire speaker cables are so much better than what you are selling' hole and they will be stuck in for at least an hour. If you do get caught by Mr IKEAE the best defence is to let them rattle on for a bit and then tell them about your system, making sure that you list the highest end brands that you know, their brain will fizz a bit as they try to tot up the value of your fictional system, at which point you can make good your escape.

The Toddler Wrangler

Bringing small children, who are well behaved, to a hifi show can



be a wonderful experience for the child. However, a crowded, noisy and hot hotel does not, generally, a happy well behaved child make. The Toddler Wrangler (Parent) thought it seemed like a good idea at the time but they have already been asked to leave one demo because of a tantrum and had to creep out of another room because some little fingers have poked several tweeters...they are now in the bar filling the monsters full of pop and crisps whilst casting looks of unbridled jealousy at the contented Classic Audiophile at the next table.

The Exhibitors

They have been in the hotel all the previous day and since about 6 am today setting up their room. Tempers did become a little frayed after carrying several tons of hifi

up the stairs because the lift packed up. The system that was behaving itself perfectly back at the showroom has now decided to chuck a hissy fit and their PR guy, who is supposed to be helping them get things set up for the press conference, has disappeared to the bar. However, the show must go on and of course it will. After a lot of tinkering things have improved and the system is singing, everyone breathes a sigh of relief and prepares themselves for three days of hifi show. They will enthusiastically share their product knowledge with the visiting hordes, play tunes and generally have a great time...some of which may have to be done with a bit of a hangover after the inevitable night out following press and trade day.

Linette Smith



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BIRD'S EYE VIEW

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



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We ran the story earlier about the UK supermarket, Sainsbury's, starting to sell vinyl. We had experience of this ourselves while back in England as we came across Tesco's vinyl 'selection'. We did actually pick up a replacement copy of Bowie's 'Ziggy Stardust' (because it was there) but the overall impression was that these supermarkets, purveyors of everything, are selling a ready-made record collection. It's a kind of homogenised ready-to-play selection featuring classics that you 'should' own like Nirvana, Bowie, Fleetwood Mac, ACDC, Foo-Fighters etc with new music being represented by a token Adele album. Not bad music by any stretch but it just seems to take the fun out of discovering what you like and don't like, just picking up a record collection with your ready meal. Who is

Linette discusses why we need specialist shops for both music and Hifi purchases

there to advise you about the latest release from a favourite artist, or a classic that you missed first time round? Nobody, that's who. The checkout guy or girl doesn't care, the vinyl display came in a pop up stand and was probably pre-selected by the supplier's computer rather than an enthusiast.

That's what is missed by selling music in a supermarket, the enthusiasm and expertise which a punter gets from a specialist music or hifi shop. As a teenager in the Midlands I was a bit of a rock chick and then a bit of a goth before I discovered my true love

of dance music. Favourite haunts were Selectadisc, Virgin and HMV in Nottingham and The Left Legged Pineapple in Loughborough. My waitressing and baby-sitting money was spent on carefully considered purchases, there was a great selection and always someone to ask if I needed help or advice, even in the bigger chain stores as well as the independents. I worked in a couple of Our Price shops myself, again a chain rather than an independent but there was still a passion for music among the staff. Everyone had their own taste so we always had an 'expert' in any genre that the public came



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in to enquire about. I particularly enjoyed recommending something to a punter based on what they had been buying for them to come in the next week loving their new purchase and looking for more. Stuart and I even owned a specialist dance music record shop back in the mid nineties which became a Mecca for the dance music addicts of the North East, while it lasted.

With hifi becoming a more mainstream purchase, the same is starting to happen with equipment. We were recently in a large E. Leclerc in France (the French equivalent to Tesco's) They have a separate section with everything from washing machines to computers and mobile phones, and this time we noticed some proper hifi had crept in. It was decent gear, Klipsch and PSB speakers with NAD electronics, but just crammed into shelf space where you couldn't have got a decent listening position if you were a contortionist...just given the same kind of treatment as if it were a vacuum cleaner or a deep fat fryer. No care about how it was set up so that the customer could decide what they thought of it.

In a specialist hifi shop, hours are put into choosing the right components and system set up. Customers want a sense of

Let's value and support our specialist music and hifi shops whether online or on the high street, for their knowledge, passion and service and let's keep music and hifi special!

occasion, to be shown new products by someone that takes pride in what they are doing. It's a day out, a treat to come and audition new hifi. Shopping at a specialist retailer allows the customer to build a relationship with the retailer, the retailer learns their client's likes and dislikes and can offer them something rare or out of the ordinary. Friendships are formed between music and hifi specialists and their clients, there is history and understanding.

Visiting a specialist is special, there is much more of a connection than buying from a faceless store that sells everything under the sun. Much in the way that, before the supermarkets took over, everyone did their shopping at the local greengrocer, butcher and baker's shops. Online specialist shops can still offer this level of service and client connection even though they are

not 'bricks and mortar'. They still know their stuff and want the customer to have the best experience, whether they are buying music or hifi. A real, enthusiastic human being is usually just an email or a phone call away and many online only specialists now have pop-up shops at events and hifi shows to connect with the public in person. Online

retailers still have to compete with the 'sell everything' giants like Amazon. Whether online or bricks and mortar shops, specialist hifi and music sellers have to offer more to compete with the faceless giants. The customer experience and customer care is paramount and if the specialists can offer the best then the customers will keep coming back.

When it comes down to it, music is about pleasure and emotion so buying it and the gear we play it on should be a pleasurable experience, not a soulless act like picking up the weekly groceries from the out of town mega-store. Let's value and support our specialist music and hifi shops whether online or on the high street, for their knowledge, passion and service and let's keep music and hifi special!

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INTERVIEW

Mike Twomey speaks to Marshall Carrier of Lenbrook America

Lenbrook America is located just south of Boston in Sharon, Massachusetts and manages the US distribution of the group's brands from this location. Brands included are NAD, PSB and Bluesound. Each brand has its own sales direction and promotes its own independent identity. Lenbrook America utilises independent sales representatives throughout the US, many of whom represent all the company's brands due to their complementary nature.

Mike: Marshall thank you joining me today. Help yourself to something to drink and get some food from our buffet. My bosses Linette and Stuart Smith give us a generous expense account. I recently wrote an article on the [Art of Customer Service](#) and I

maintain that customer service is an endangered art form. How important is customer service in your view, both customer service from the dealer to the customer and manufacturer to the dealer?



Marshall: Thanks for having me Mike. While the fruit punch is spectacular—is this not from concentrate?—I can't stay for long; got customers to take care of. In order to position someone, within a manufacture's organization, with the proper mindset for providing great customer service, all you have to do is reverse the words; serve... [the] customer. Then, you must put the emphasis on serve. Having a servant's mindset is paramount. Only then can someone be in the right place mentally to come into a conversation and be prepared for anything.

On the other hand, the way an organization should position themselves for great customer

INTERVIEW

service is to think of it like a product category unto itself. I position it that way as to procure R&D money (internal training), productization (the necessary resources like remote client computer access and a reliable product archive database), and the ability to “ship” the product (deploying phone numbers and support email campaigns for service).

Mike: One of the items we often struggle with as a dealer is when to call technical support of the manufacturer and when to try to do things ourselves locally. The customer is usually concerned and wants everything fixed immediately and is usually standing in front of you. This is understandable but sometimes it’s not helpful to getting things solved. Any sage wisdom for my fellow retailers?

Marshall: Good question Mike. Obviously, if you have a great relationship with someone on a quality technical support team, fast and direct access is possible. But if you don’t have such a relationship, many customer support teams still offer email support, social media support (like Twitter) as well as phone support. It’s important to engage customer support personnel if you or one of your technicians is slightly out of their depth. Although there are some key things you should try before contacting a customer service team. A quick Google Search of their website may show you a firmware update or service outage

But most importantly, showing the customer that you’re empathetic and willing to drop something and serve them as quickly as possible is fundamental

with a streaming service. I like using Google’s site specific search or even Down For Everyone Or Just Me. But most importantly, showing the customer that you’re empathetic and willing to drop something and serve them as quickly as possible is fundamental. It’s like you’d imagine working in an Emergency Room would be. The first few seconds or minutes are critical. Simply showing the customer that you care can be the difference between future business and a Return Authorization request.

Mike: Has technical support changed with the embedding of software in the products themselves. I’m thinking particularly of the Bluesound line

of products that Lenbrook has introduced. Are there any special challenges in fielding questions on these software based products?

Marshall: Ah, software. This is a subject near and dear to my heart. The unique thing about software is that it’s evolving at a blistering pace as compared to hardware. Additionally, the user base is evolving as well. People are learning what this button (sometimes) means and discovering that there’s a difference between Wi-Fi and cellular data consumption. But having software based products doesn’t mean it’s all roses and unicorns. Some users

aren’t as familiar with certain applications and others won’t leave a platform once they’ve learned how to use a piece of software.

From the support side of things, having a desktop app and remote access to someone’s computer is a godsend and nothing short of astonishing for end-user support. It’s just easier looking over someone’s shoulder (at their discretion of course) and coaching them along the way. So software definitely has its upsides.

Mike: It’s been our experience at the dealer level that over 50% of the items customers bring to us claiming to be defective are usually cured with a reboot of the

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unit. Should customers attempt to do this rebooting themselves?

Marshall: While it's easy to say 'yes' to such a question, I'd take this a step further. I'd put the onus on dealers and their system design. There are lots of products out there, which allow for remote rebooting and software pinging (with rebooting) so that customers don't have to worry about such issues. Should customers reboot their widget before they pick up the phone and complain to a dealer? Sure. But if you (as dealers) want to be a rock star in front of your customers, implement products like BakPak, ihiji, BlueBOLT, or even iBootBar and use that as an upsell service.

Mike: Streaming products are becoming of significant interest in audio. Can you give us an overview of Bluesound and why it's important?

Marshall: You're making it too easy on me Mike. Yes, streaming is king whether you're talking about UltraHD home video or audio, but what makes Bluesound different is that it marries High Resolution Audio (for the HiFi geeks out there) with common streaming services such as Spotify and TuneIn for the "everyday" customer. Bluesound also has borrowed some incredible Digital-to-Analogue converter (DAC) technologies from NAD and

But if you (as dealers) want to be a rock star in front of your customers, implement products like BakPak, ihiji, BlueBOLT, or even iBootBar and use that as an upsell service

acoustical designs from PSB to build a super high performance platform for streaming music. Particularly the Bluesound VAULT 2 features the ability to rip your CD collection or drag-and-drop your iTunes collection into the Bluesound ecosystem for the ultimate "free" streaming service...the music you already own. Bluesound's latest generation 2 platform also features things from aptX Bluetooth, to software & hardware presets, as well as alarm clock functions to take the "I-have-to-pull-my-phone-out-to-do-anything" pain out of controlling something from your phone.

Mike: Can you tell us about the inclusion of MQA in the Bluesound suite of products?

Marshall: Wow, here's a fun one. Many thousands of words have been writing about MQA.

First off, if you haven't heard about it, I'll describe to you my

first experience with MQA: Hearing MQA for the first time sounded not only like analogue, but as if it were inarguably high-resolution audio! Since some older high-resolution audio (HRA) albums were taken from red book (compact disc) masters, some HRA tracks just didn't sound enough like high-res! MQA on the other hand, was unquestionably high resolution.

MQA stands for Master Quality Authenticated, and as such, the

authentication process involves the studios. So yes, there are going to be completely newly mastered albums that are MQA, but they're also backward compatible with FLAC decoders. MQA not only provides a new approach to digital compression (folding the content over onto itself so you can get a 24/192 track into the same streaming bandwidth as a CD) but MQA also contains metadata from the equipment used in the studio itself. So MQA decoders can be tailored to adjust their internal settings for "studio-quality playback."

MQA is very exciting and is just one of many chapters in the early life of Bluesound and BluOS (the system behind Bluesound).

Thanks for the time and considering Mike! It's been a blast working with you on this project!

Mike Twomey is the owner of [Big Kids Toys](#)

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Hawkwind – The Machine Stops (Cherry Red)



It's with a good degree of anticipation and trepidation that I pressed play when the promo for this new album by space rock stalwarts Hawkwind arrived on my desk this damp and miserable Friday afternoon. I'm a huge Hawkwind fan, seen them loads of times and have a shelf dedicated just to their CDs on the rack...and a good few of their albums on vinyl too... and I so didn't want this to be a rehash or a remix of old tunes. I needn't have worried as this is Hawkwind as I like them best.

The Machine Stops is a concept album, and soon to be live show, based on E.M Forster's story of the same name where every need of humankind is provided for by the machine. The album opens with, machine noises, sequenced synth sound and unsettling spoken word of All Hail The Machine and it's clear from the outset that this is going to be a record that is right up my street and this tune is a bit reminiscent of the likes of Ten Seconds Of Forever..this is a good thing...a very good thing.

This disconcerting opening morphs seamlessly into The Machine that is heads down space rock that Hawkwind fans will adore. There's bits of Hawklords in this tune somewhere I can't quite place, heavy repetitive guitar riffs and soaring lead

The Machine Stops is a concept album, and soon to be live show, based on E.M Forster's story of the same name where every need of humankind is provided for by the machine

guitar and synth and a great narrative vocal to boot...it's good stuff...no it's better than good it's absolutely perfect!!!!

Katie is a short segue piece of tripped out pads and tinkling synth sounds which makes me think of coming out of the dark into the light and then King Of The World opens with more heads down riffing, a fabulously distorted bassline and mental drumming. Again this is classic Hawkwind that will be a sure fire crowd pleaser.

In My Room is next, opening with more tripped out pads before the soaring synth, guitars and drums take over for a short while and then the next half of the track is atmospheric rain and thunder sounds with a ominously modulating synth noise over the top. The track fades and there's the first proper break in the sonic onslaught before the down-tempo Thursday takes over. This track has a majestic bass line, more soaring synths and guitar, passionate drum lines and a half spoken vocal. Again this track cuts halfway

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through to more atmospheric and ultrasonic mindfuckery that is trademark Hawkwind.

Synchronised Blue is more mid-tempo space rock with the tripped out Hexagone coming next and taking things decidedly more down tempo, melodic and pared-down. Hexagone is perhaps the least Hawkwind tune on here and feels much more in the experimental electronica vein...I enjoyed it! Living On Earth sounds, in parts, like a blue-grass band found a load of electronic instruments, dropped acid and bugged out...mental and rather pleasing... as for the rest of the track it's more heads down, "let's mess with their heads" Hawkwind we all know and love.

The Harmonic Hall has an Arabian feel to it, more sequenced synths, weird trippy noises and messed up backward drums and again it's a cool tune that will appeal.

Yum Yum is short segue track that leads in A Solitary Man, another heads down tune that could only be from The Hawks.

Tube begins with a film-score-like feel to it, builds and fades to the final track of the album that is Lost In Science which brings us back down with more classic Hawkwind.

Hawkwind have their loyal fans that will buy whatever comes out with their name on the cover, but The Machine Stops is perhaps the most coherently "Hawkwind" record that's been released from the band in a while and, whilst I put myself in the former fanatic category, this is an album that will have wider appeal. I've tried to plan to go see the accompanying tour but it's just not going to be feasible and I am gutted as this is the band back to their very best. If you get a chance to go see them on this tour then take it as I reckon the stage show is gonna be an absolute belter.

Thoroughly recommended!

Not for Bieber fans...oh no, but not just for the Hawknerds either! Out 15th April.

Stuart Smith (Hawknerd)

LNZNDRF – LNZNDRF (4AD Records)



That's correct, the band is actually called LNZNDRF. That's kind of because it comprises of three members – Ben Lanz (from Beirut), Scott Devendorf and Bryan Devendorf (both from The National), i.e. Lanz 'n' Dorf, geddit? Okay, it's not as snappy a title as, say, CHVRCHES or ALVVAYS – but at least they stood a good chance of registering an internet domain name!

As side-projects go, they can often be interesting and arty; sometimes they're disjointed and slightly puzzling. This album sits kind of somewhere in the middle. It kicks off with the instrumental track "Future You", which commences sounding something like an outtake of "Baby Milk Snatcher" from A. R. Kane's magical album '69'. We're introduced to layers of distorted guitars, sound effects and dynamics before the drums crash in after some two minutes. Suddenly, the track becomes Joy Division-esque and very dark indeed.

"Beneath The Black Sea" initially sounds more Death Cab For Cutie than The National. Add Benjamin Gibbard's voice and you have the makings of a track from 'Transatlanticism'. However, it's not to be – because the song develops into something

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else altogether. As you'd anticipate from two guys who play bass & drums in The National, there's some great bass & drum work on offer here. It's a standout track. Fast-forward to three minutes in and you're reminded of just how good the rhythm section for The National is. The urgency, the dynamics, they're all contained here within this track.

And so to "Mt. Storm". When I first head this track, thoughts of the early-4AD band Dif Juz just wouldn't go away. Though the track starts with some very Dif Juz ethereal-sounding guitars, it quickly develops as we hit the chorus, though like a shy girl at a party, it never fully allows itself to let go completely.

I think that fans of The National are likely to be split when it comes to this album. My overriding feeling is certainly more favourable than not – but the album definitely feels more 'work-in-progress side-project' than 'polished'. Take "Hypno-Skate", for instance; the same riff is repeated for some six minutes – and though there's certainly enough of interest here to hold people's interest, the lack of vocals and variation on the track would cause even a seriously hardened fan to struggle to admit that it's up there with either "Start A War" or "England".

"Samarra" finishes the album and comes across sounding like what The National would sound like if they were to set up shop inside of Doctor Who's tardis. There are some pretty whacky sounds on offer – and it wouldn't surprise me if they'd admitted to raiding the BBC's sound archive library for some of these noises. Imagine taking some serious brain-muddling drugs and wandering into a nightclub in just your underpants – that's what this track sounds like some four minutes in. Seriously weird.

Albums such as this are always interesting as they offer a glimpse of what makes the musicians tick and why their main band is so special. There are definite glimpses here – particularly during "Beneath The Black Sea" and "Mt. Storm", but whether there's enough content and variation of ideas is perhaps another discussion.

~Released on Feb 19th. Initial copies of the vinyl release are available as a clear vinyl limited-edition

Paul Lockett

Steven Wilson - 4 1/2 (KScope)



The genre is a kind of melancholy post-rock, with additional string and synth effects thrown in there. It's clear that Steven Wilson takes care in creating a High Fidelity experience in his recordings, rivaling bands such as 'God Speed You Black Emperor' or 'Pink Floyd'. This is a very dynamic album with beautiful, surreal, quiet moments balanced with impacting choruses and drums, making for a really engaging listen. Listen to this album all the way through with the volume up high for maximum enjoyment.

There are some stand out tracks for me, one of them being the hauntingly beautiful 'Year of the Plague'. The track is very sparse with only a soft keyboard sound, distant strings and a guitar melody played on top, however the combined effect gives off an amazingly sad feel that seems to grab your attention without doing much at all. It is a great example of a track that keeps you gripped without the sound levels being high at all. Another great track is 'Happiness III' which contains lyrics about the effect of happiness living in a town full of noise and pollution. The intro drums and guitar almost made me jump out of my seat on first listen, and from then on the track really rocks and has a catchy chorus, making for a

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really enjoyable listen. The track 'Vermillioncore' is an instrumental that really shows off the band's talent and has a more distorted rock sound at times. All the tracks however bring either a strong emotional or instrumental angle at top notch production levels. This album is a great introduction to Steven Wilson's music and is also a testament to what modern day recording and production can produce for today's Hifi enthusiast. My only criticism would be that the album can feel slightly disjointed between tracks due to them being quite different, however each track in its entirety is a work of art. This mini album makes me very excited for Steven Wilson's 5th album.

Daniel Brown

Aphex Twin - Syro (WARP)



Released in 2014 Syro is certainly not a new album and it came 11 years after the previous Aphex Twin record, which is a long time to wait for any die-hard fan or follower. I remember his previous album entitled 'Drukqs' received mixed reviews, mainly due to the inconsistency of decent full length tracks. As a strange run-through concept album however, I thought the album was strong and that it felt like a glitchy-beat journey interspersed with fragments and recordings of his life.

'Syro' seems to adopt a more conventional album composition, with fairly lengthy and meaty tracks throughout. A quick listen to some of the tracks and you hear that he's taking it back to his old school sound of melancholy synths and repeating hooks, rather than the frantic drum & bass beats that featured so heavily on 'Drukqs'. This is a more chilled out album therefore that's more subtle and accessible than 'Drukqs'.

The album starts off strong with its intro track 'minipops 67' which is a delightfully entertaining composition made up of bouncy synths, deep bass and a slightly funky rhythm backbeat. It was released as a single and did well to catch people's attention again. Aphex twin also keeps to his signature production style which is a kind of gritty, lo-fi sound whilst adding ingenious well-timed sound effects or production techniques that change and morph in satisfying ways. Admittedly this album will not be for everyone (especially those who are not familiar to his previous work) however there's a lot to admire when given a second chance or a deeper listen. I took a while to warm to this album, however after a gap and another 2 - 3 listens I began to hear the nuances and appreciate it more. The thing that Aphex Twin always does well is create a soundscape and a mood in his music. Often it is the repeating rhythms or droning melodies that you eventually succumb to and enter Aphex Twin's world. A couple of tracks on this album such as 'CIRCLONT14' and 'syrou473t8+e' are examples of this, but done in a mature way as if the 10+ year album gap has given him more finesse in his music. The melodies are also fast paced, varying yet subtle and intricate, making your brain pay attention due to the sheer detail going on.

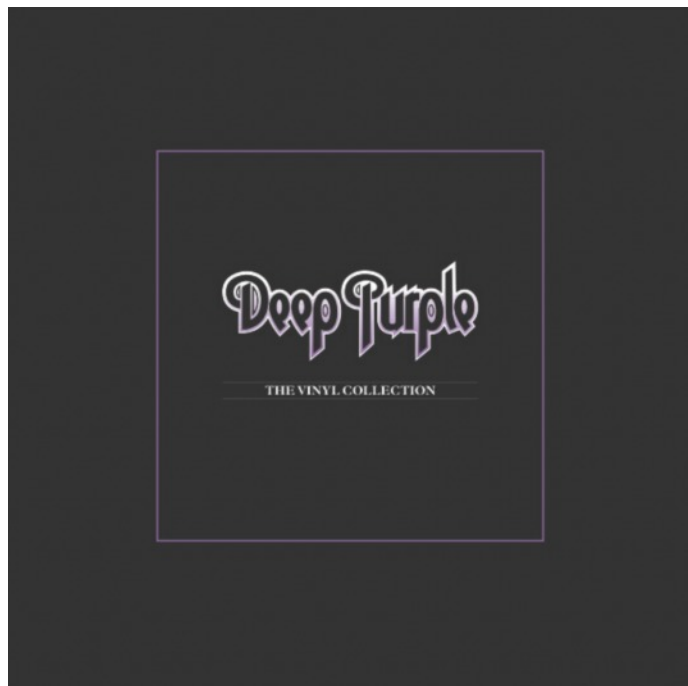
The album ends on a tranquil piano track named 'aisatsana' with background garden & bird tweeting sounds. It's a calming way to end that acts as a kind of reset track after hearing all the rhythmic and heavily textured tracks beforehand. Most previous Aphex Twin albums have a disturbing element to them, however this album doesn't at all. It seems to concentrate only on the music and technicality of the production, rather than throwing in any disturbing samples, hooks or soundscapes. This may disappoint certain fans, however it does show off just how talented Aphex Twin is by creating a full album with nothing but hardware skills, music knowledge and imagination. A strong album as a whole; worth

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checking out the first and last tracks of this album even if you're not such an Aphex Twin fan.

Daniel Brown

Deep Purple The Vinyl Collection



The Vinyl Collection brings together seven studio albums recorded by Deep Purple between 1972 and 1987, these albums being: Machine Head, Who Do We Think We Are, Burn, Stormbringer, Come Taste The Band, Perfect Strangers and The House Of Blue Light.

The 1972 to 1987 time period saw the band go through a number of changes and it is interesting to have these transitional albums collected together, but if you are a real Deep Purple fan you are also going to want to have the earlier Deep Purple In Rock and Fireball albums.

The live Made In Japan album is my go-to Deep Purple album. It captures the band at the peak of their powers doing what they do best. Machine Head dates from just before Made In Japan was recorded and introduces us to those live staples Highway Star, Smoke On The Water, Lazy and Space Truckin. Machine Head was the third album to feature Ian

Gillan as lead vocalist; the next album, Who Do We Think We Are, would be the last. At least for a while. Tensions between Gillan and guitarist Richie Blackmore saw Gillan leave the band to be replaced by David Coverdale. The subsequent album, Burn, saw the band retain their winning formula of Blackmore's catchy guitar riffs over powerhouse drums from Ian Paice, melodic, driving bass from Glenn Hughes and Jon Lord's baroque and roll organ. If the album didn't bring very much new to the party, neither did it mess with a winning formula. There were signs, however in the sinuous bass lines of Might Just Take Your Life and in Coverdale's vocals, that a certain degree of funk – at least funk as defined by white English lads in 1974 – was being reached for.

The same year's Stormbringer brings out these funk/soul elements further with synthesiser and clavinet underpinning the bass lines. Love Don't Mean A Thing and Hold On see a lot more subtlety being brought to the band's songwriting; they still rock out but they know how to rein things in as well. The overall direction of the band did not suit Richie Blackmore however; he left to form Ritchie Blackmore's Rainbow after the Stormbringer tour.

Blackmore's replacement, Tommy Bolin, joined for Come Taste The Band. The opening track Comin' Home is a Purple-by-numbers rocker. Lady Luck introduces an almost disco hi hat pattern and the album is generally more commercial sounding than previous efforts. Funk metal probably seemed the way to go in 1975 and Come Taste The Band is not a bad album, it's just a long way from Made In Japan. Bolin's drug problems – he would die from a heroin overdose in December 1976 – meant that this incarnation of Deep Purple was a short-lived one and the band did not record again until 1984's Perfect Strangers saw Blackmore and Gillan return to the fold.

Out goes the funk and back comes the hard rocking riffs with a hint of eighties production. Knocking On Your Back Door with its tale of cunning linguists is exactly the double entendre-strewn thing that you think it is. Still, no one goes to hard rock albums looking for Leonard's Cohen's lyrical genius, do they? 1987's The House Of Blue Light ups the production values and, musically at least, the

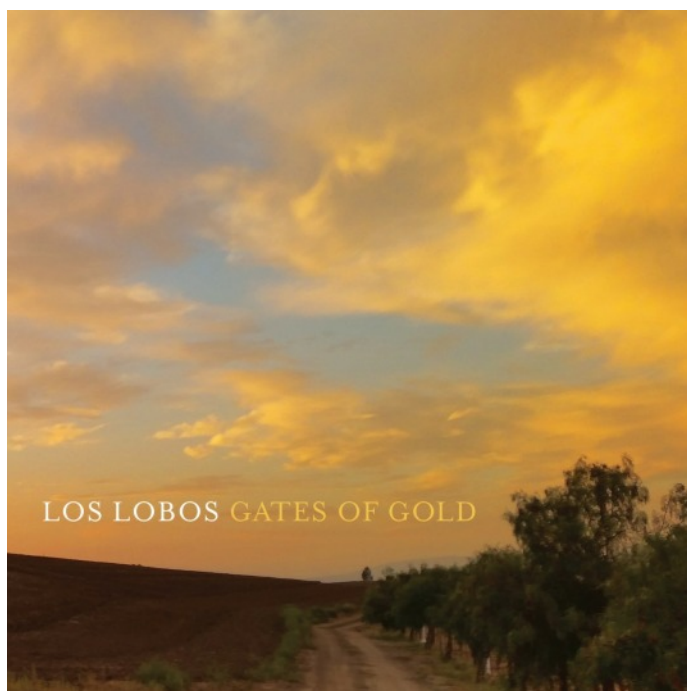
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songwriting is stronger, although the lyrics still leave much room for improvement.

Overall, the set has a lot to offer but I would have preferred to have seen a chronological set that started with 1968's *Shades Of Deep Purple* and worked forward. I'd also loved to have been able to tell you that the albums all sounded terrific on 180g vinyl but the PR company sent me CDs to review. When all is said and done, Deep Purple remain one of the most highly regarded hard rock bands and the reasons why are here in abundance.

John Scott

Los Lobos – Gates Of Gold (Proper Records)



Way back in 1984 – was it really 31 years ago? – Los Lobos' album *How Will The Wolf Survive?* quickly became one of my favourites and has remained so over the years. Despite that, although I have a smattering of other records by the band in my collection, I'm guilty of not having paid close attention to all of the band's output over the years.

Extraordinarily, the band have been together since 1973 after founder members, David Hidalgo and

Louis Pérez met at high school. Recruiting fellow members Cesar Rosas and Conrad Lozano, the band recorded its first album in 1977 and have continued to release new albums and tour regularly – they are an astounding live act – ever since.

Gates Of Gold is a lesson in how to do it right

Surely one of the challenges of being in a band with a long term career must be trying to keep things fresh and interesting for themselves as well as their fans. Los Lobos have an advantage in this respect in that along with rock and blues influences they can also call on the music of their Mexican heritage – they are as happy playing acoustic Mexican ballads as they are hard driven rock songs and can also combine the two to great effect.

Gates Of Gold is their 21st album, not counting compilations, and it has all the drive and energy that *How Will The Wolf Survive* had 31 years ago – it sounds better too.

Opening track *Made To Break Your Heart* opens as a mid-paced rocker with Hidalgo's Steve Winwood-like vocals still sounding clear as a bell, halfway through though it takes a sudden lurch into a squally guitar solo that Neil Young would be proud to call his own. Following track, *When We Were Free* has a terrific live ambience about it; the band sounding like they are really in the room. If *Poquito para Aqui* and *La Tumba Serra el Final* pay homage to the band's Mexican heritage, then title track *Gates Of Gold* present the hopes and dreams of a couple moving to a new land of opportunity and hope. The lyric as are ambiguous enough to allow you to question whether that new land still exists.

Few bands stick together for more than forty years. Fewer still avoid falling into self-parody and stagnancy. *Gates Of Gold* is a lesson in how to do it right.

John Scott

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Ray Lamontagne – Ouroboros



Ray Lamontagne first came to my attention with his 2004 *Trouble* album which was rooted in the Americana movement and was influenced by Tupelo Honey-era Van Morrison. It was a very enjoyable album as was its follow up *Till The Sun Turns Black*. After that though, Lamontagne disappeared from my radar and I failed to keep up with his music.

Last year, however, I came across his 2014 album *Supernova* and sat down to listen to it, pretty certain of what to expect. I was astonished to find that the album was heavily referencing the kind of blissed-out summer pop that early Pink Floyd used to excel at. Think *Remember A Day*, *Fat Old Sun*, *Cirrus Minor* and *Fearless*. *Ouroboros* continues in this vein.

Opening track *Homecoming* leads with woozy piano tightly thrummed bass, gently strummed acoustic guitar and whispered vocals to bring sunshine streaming through your speakers. Lamontagne sings about “birdsong tugging at my slumber” and the track is immersed in that half-awake dream state feeling.

Get out the deckchair, pour a glass of something long and cold and just drift away

Hey, *No Pressure* rocks things up a bit with a nice crunchy guitar riff and some understated lead work that sounds like it was recorded in a dustbin. The grungy guitars continue on *The Changing Man* (not the Paul Weller song) which segues into *While It Still Beats*, the descending chord pattern of which reminds me of the closing section of Floyd’s *Saucerful Of Secrets*. *Ouroboros* is divided into two parts and part one ends here.

Part two resumes the sleepy summer vibe with *In My Own Way* whose hazy, drifting melody is like floating in a warm bath. *Another Day* turns up that summer feeling but hints that autumn is around the corner. *A Murmuration Of Starlings* offers Gilmouresque guitar without launching off into the self-indulgent soloing that Floyd Albums often suffer from. *Wouldn’t It Make A Lovely Photograph* sends us home too soon with more breathy vocals and chiming piano.

Ray Lamontagne has shown that it is possible to be influenced by something without becoming derivative. *Ouroboros* is a perfect album for a hot summer day or a warm summer evening. Get out the deckchair, pour a glass of something long and cold and just drift away.

John Scott

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Something Old, Something New... More Album Reviews by Daniel Brown

From my musical perspective, i've been noticing artists coming back into their music stride after many years of being quiet, or some new artists putting their musical twist on old classics.

The internet has got a lot to do with this, as well as the close interaction we have between artist and fan. Twinned with the resurgence of vinyl, some artists seem to be borrowing musical styles or bringing 'album etiquette' from the past back into their work. Below i've reviewed 4 different artists who either bring something new to the table, or have re-packaged old songs/albums in an interesting way.

Hiatus Kaiyote - Choose Your Weapon (Released 2015)



As a fairly new band on the scene, Hiatus Kaiyote seem to have made an impact with their 2nd album 'Choose Your Weapon'. Falling under such genres as Jazz, Funk & Neo-Soul, the 18 track album

expresses the band's creativity and excellent musicianship between members. Tracks such as 'Shaolin Monk Mother funk' and 'Breathing Underwater' are particularly enjoyable tracks, combining excellent vocal harmonies, precision drumming and deep synth keys. There are many strong tracks on the album however that incorporate some really unique sounds which startle you in a good way, as if to wake you up to the excellent music. A great sense of enjoyment comes across through the recordings, like the band were not bound by conventional rules when making this album. For jazz/funk fans this album is worth a good listen, you're bound to find something you like within the great range of tracks.

I enjoyed my first listen, making connections to artists like 'The Heritage Orchestra' and 'Chrome Hoof' with regards to the melodies, vocal style and drum sections. The production style is generally clear and punchy, with many subtle vocal effects thrown in with the main lyrics that work really well. Each track sounds full and warm, but delicate enough to hear the nuances of the different instruments. I was impressed with the band's intricate staccato-like playing, keeping really tight between melody, rhythm and vocals whilst sounding loose and having a very 'Live Jazz Lounge' sound. I was also making comparisons to Bjork's newest album 'Vulnicura' throughout. It's almost as if Hiatus Kaiyote made a re-vamped version of Bjork's album, with a breath of youthful life incorporated in. It's a more accessible and pleasing album that's sure to win some people over into that line of music. A strong 2nd album.

Giorgio Moroder - Deja Vu (Released 2015)

I started listening to Giorgio Moroder about 3 years ago when I realised how many movie scores he produced, such as for 'Scarface' and 'The Midnight

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Express'. It was interesting for me to hear that he would be producing an album for 2015, mainly due to the collaborative success he had with Daft Punk in 2013. This would be his first solo album in over 20 years, so there was a sort of 'comeback hype' going around on social media; it's worth noting that Giorgio Moroder is in his 70's now! Before hearing anything I was aware of the disco, funk, electro past he had. He was somewhat regarded as a disco/electronica genius in the 70's with his collaborations with Donna Summer. I was interested where he was going to take his new album, and wondered if at 70+ years old he could still push the envelope for new music and production.



I have mixed feelings about the album 'Deja Vu'. Taken at face value, the album delivers some great foot-stomping tracks and is certainly club friendly. Being aware of Giorgio Moroder's experimental background however, I wanted to hear more of Giorgio's style come through rather than the more generic club/pop sound we're presented with. It's clear that Giorgio Moroder had a lot of other young musical influences involved in the making of this album, most of the tracks are collaborations with other artists such as Sia, Brittany Spears, Kylie Minogue etc...

Some of these tracks pay off really well like the remake of 'Tom's Diner' and the title track 'Deja Vu' with Sia, however I personally wanted to

hear more tracks like '74 is the new 24' where Giorgio's style comes through more, rather than being too generic. This is an enjoyable pop album but is probably best taken at face value rather than anything deeper.

London Orion Orchestra - Pink Floyd's Wish You Were Here Symphonic (Released 2016)

It's worth stating before anything else that Pink Floyd's album 'Wish you were here' is one of my favourite albums to date, so a symphonic version being released was music to my ears. The orchestral remake was performed by The London Orion Orchestra, which seems to be their first remake album. The track listing isn't exactly the same as the original album, with two versions of 'Wish you were here' on the album and the addition of 'Eclipse' at the end from Dark Side of the Moon. Much of Pink Floyd's longer tracks lend themselves well to orchestral interpretation, so this album was a great choice. The recording quality sounded vast and open, with enough headroom for some satisfying crescendos. This is without a doubt an album for good Hi-Fi systems, preferably with a fair amount of power, decent floor-standing speakers and a controlled low-end.



If I had to choose between this and the original album, I'd still pick Pink Floyd's version. That said, this was

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a great listen which incorporated swelling strings, great guitar playing and deep rumbles you only get from a full orchestra. The first rendition of the track 'Wish you were here' on the album includes Alice Cooper on vocals, who does a great job capturing the melancholy feel. The guitar and piano also sound brilliant and accompany each other well. One thing that makes a Pink Floyd track is their choice of instrument sound, such as impacting drums and psychedelic synths, which you don't get from the orchestral version. To me, this is where some of the magic is lost as the choice of instrumentation plays as much a part to the music as the arrangement. If you want to hear a different representation of the album however, I recommend checking this out.

Jacob Collier (Cover tracks, an honourable mention, 2013+)

Although this artist has not released a full album yet, he stated on social media he is working on his first original album to be released either 2016 or 2017. My first listen of Jacob Collier was actually through Quincy Jones' Facebook page where he had shared a Youtube clip of Jacob Collier doing a cover of Michael Jackson's 'PYT'. I was left with my jaw partially hanging from the sheer talent this one person has; he even included Quincey Jones in his cover!

Due to his pairing with such a musical legend, I decided to check out his other work. Turns out he had some more covers for sale on Bandcamp including some Stevie Wonder tunes. Jacob Collier is a one man band that can seemingly do everything, from having a huge vocal range to playing bass, guitar, drums, percussion, keys...and most likely more.

The most impressive thing about watching Jacob Collier's covers on Youtube is how easy he makes it look, when in reality what he's doing is musically and technically mesmerising. He seems to effortlessly shuffle with the structure of the (already well known) tracks and pump life back into it using some perfectly placed percussion, jazzy keys and real funky bass. This does not even cover how amazing his voice is, spanning octaves and layered up to create a sort of super barber shop quartet sound. His sound is comparable to artists like 'Naturally 7' who are a group that create tracks using only their voices, including filling in for instruments. However, due to his immense musical talent that seems to span multiple instruments, I would go further and compare him to artists like 'Prince' as a kind of young musical prodigy. There's definitely a bright future for Jacob Collier.

Daniel Brown



LIVE MUSIC

Rumours of Fleetwood Mac – The Queen’s Hall, Edinburgh

It is not unusual for a band to start off as one thing and end up being an entirely different beast. The Beatles went from lovable mop tops to hairy psychedelicists, and don't we love them for it. When Steve Hackett left Genesis, it seemed unlikely that massive queues of people would line up to urinate in their direction should they spontaneously combust. They went on, however, to become world-straddling pop chart toppers. I'm pretty sure that happened although maybe it was just a bad dream I had after eating too much stilton.

For all the changes that bands may go through, I can't think of one, other than Fleetwood Mac, who not only had had three distinct periods during their heyday but also had one of those periods subsequently airbrushed from history. We all know the story of how the blues-based, Peter Green-led Mac were reborn as the Lindsay Buckingham/Stevie Nicks-fronted band after an acid-fried Green fled the band, right? That's what popular history would have us believe; in fact it is possible to assume from at least one Fleetwood Mac Greatest Hits compilation that the band didn't even exist before Buckingham and Nicks arrived on the scene. The truth is rather different: Between Green's departure in 1970 and Buckingham and Nick recruitment on the last day of 1974, the band



released 6 studio albums with a shifting line up that included guitarists Bob Welch and Bob Weston. Several of the albums from this period, notably Future Games, Bare Trees and Mystery

To Me are worthy of your attention.

Rumours of Fleetwood Mac are a tribute band that feature songs from both the Green - era Mac and

LIVE MUSIC

the Buckingham/Nicks version. Do they even allude to the 1970-1974 era? I'll let you guess; let's just say that I was mildly disappointed but not even slightly surprised. I was not, however, disappointed by Rumours Of Fleetwood Mac's performance; close your eyes and it could well have been the real thing. The show opens with a videoed introduction and endorsement from Mick Fleetwood so expectations are raised from the off. The band are excellent musicians and vocalists and whether they are performing tracks from 1997 or 1968 they are bang on the money.

The first half of the set focusses quire heavily on Rumours –Second Hand News, Rumours out-take Silver Springs and Songbird all feature. Both Louise Rogan as Stevie Nicks and Amanda Kostadinov as Christine McVie have ample opportunity to impress with their authentic vocals; Kostadinov's keyboards and accordion also adding to the mix. Alan Hughes delivers Lindsay Buckingham's distinctive guitar work effortlessly and James Harrison as John McVie does exactly what he should do – stand quietly at the back wearing a flat cap

and supporting Allan Cosgrove's thundering drum parts with some understated but surprisingly intricate bass lines.

Rick Vito played with Fleetwood Mac from 1987 to 1991 and he is on stage tonight for the second half of the show where, along with Dave Goldberg who has spent the first half of the show behind a bank of keyboards but now comes front of stage on guitar, he nails the Peter Green period of the band. Oh Well, Black Magic Woman, Need Your Love So Bad and, of course, Albatross are all spot on.

The girls return for the final part of the show which delivers the big hitters: The Chain, Big Love, Go

You Own Way, Don't Stop and Tusk, ensuring that the audience go home happy with some great tunes swirling round their heads. A final thank you speech to the audience from drummer Allan Cosgrove makes it obvious, if it were not already so, how seriously the band take the job of recreating the Fleetwood Mac sound as faithfully as they can and how deep their love for the music is.

The real Fleetwood Mac toured recently but who knows if they will do again. If you are a fan of the band, Rumours Of Fleetwood Mac make a great substitute. Go see them.

John Scott



CLASSICS

Hawkwind - Space Ritual

For this month's Classic Album, John Scott engages warp drive and blasts off into space in the company of Hawkwind and their epic Space Ritual album.



CLASSICS

Hawkwind's Space Ritual – or The Space Ritual Alive In Liverpool And London to give it its full title – was recorded live in December 1972 at two shows at the Liverpool Stadium and London's Brixton Sundown. The band were touring to promote their third studio album Doremi Fasol Latido which had been recorded in September and October that year. Space Ritual pull heavily on tracks from that album but mixes them with unrecorded songs and Master Of The Universe from their In Search Of Space album to provide a loose narrative arc.

Doremi Fasol Latido was the first album to feature new members Simon King on drums and Lemmy (Ian Kilmister) on bass. Both King and Lemmy had brought a harder rock approach to the band and their driving style was put to good use on Space Ritual's extended workouts.

Intended to be a full-on immersive audio visual experience, the show featured a stage set by designer Barney Bubbles, a Liquid Len Light show, dancers Stacia, Miss Renee, Jonathan Carney and Tony Carrera and spoken word recitations by vocalist Robert Calvert. The audience were given a tour programme featuring a short sci-fi story by Barney Bubbles telling the story of the Starfarers and their journey back to Earth and the songs and recitations on the album roughly follow that story.

Earth Calling opens the album with a haze of electronics and indistinct vocals leading into Born To Go's thundering bass and drum powered drone. From this point on, the album hardly stops for breath as it lurches headlong into hyperspace. Lemmy once

described himself as a failed guitarist and his determination to treat his bass as if it were a rhythm guitar provides a rock solid bass base for Dave Brock's guitar, Nik Turner's sax and flute and the electronics of Dik Mik and Del Dettmar to spread out, Simon King's relentless drumming driving the band on like the booster jets of an interstellar space craft.

Space Ritual is best listened to as a whole piece, picking out individual tracks diminishes the overall experience but highlights certainly include Lord Of Light, the cosmic boogie of Orgone Accumulator, the proto-Motörhead thrash of Brainstorm and the mighty Master Of The Universe. Special mention must of course go to the quite mad Sonic Attack, written by science fiction author Michael Moorcock who had performed occasionally with the band.

In a sense, Space a Ritual is the only Hawkwind album you need, it is the perfect distillation of

In a sense, Space a Ritual is the only Hawkwind album you need, it is the perfect distillation of everything that the band was, and still is, about

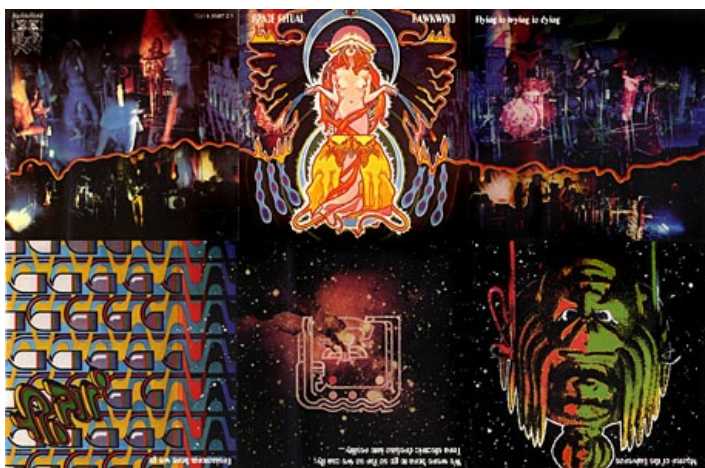
everything that the band was, and still is, about. But to only own Space Ritual is to deny yourself some Astounding Sounds and Amazing Music (to name one of their albums. The band have recorded 27 studio albums, with another due shortly – look out for our esteemed editor's review – and 10 live albums. You might not need them all (oh, yes you do – Ed.) but the seven albums recorded between 1970 and 1977, plus Space Ritual of course, are all worth

your time.

Lemmy would stay with the band until 1975 when he was sacked from the band for excessive drug use – quite an achievement as the rest of the band were hardly abstemious. He went on to form Motörhead – named after a song he wrote for Hawkwind – and carved his place in rock history with a live fast die

CLASSICS

young dedication that somehow managed to avoid the die young part. When he passed, aged 70, two days after receiving a cancer diagnosis we lost a unique figure in rock and roll but he left us two of rock's greatest live albums – Motörhead's No Sleep Till Hammersmith and Hawkwind's Space Ritual.



If you are looking for intricate story telling and subtle musical light and shade then you should probably look elsewhere, Space Ritual might not be

AT A GLANCE

Released: 11 May 1973

Recorded: December 22, 1972 at

Liverpool Stadium and December 30, 1972 at

Brixton Sundown, London

Label: United Artists – UAD60037/8

for you. If, however, you want to be thrilled for the best part of an hour and a half, then turn off the lights, turn up the hifi and let Space Ritual take you on an astral journey. You might want to pack some sandwiches - it's one hell of a trip. And remember the advice in Sonic Attack: Do Not Panic – Think only of yourself.

John Scott

North West Audio Show

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Two Fabulous Venues**

Sunday 26th June 2016

Free Entry, Free Shuttle, Free Parking

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BEHIND THE BRANDS

Hifi Pig goes Behind The Brands with Brian Morris and Trevor Liddle of House of Linn and Brian and Trevors, audio retailers in the North West of England.



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

Brian Morris

My first hifi job was as a teenager with a part time holiday job at a co-op in Manchester City Centre, alternating between selling “hifi systems” in the electrical department and menswear! My first job in the hifi sector though was with Linn Products. Employed by Linn in the UK from 1990-2007, initially as Marketing Manager working with MD Ivor Tiefenbrun, and later managing and developing Linn PR and installing Linn systems for press reviews and hifi shows in the

UK, USA, and Europe from the mid 1990's through to 2007. I left Linn in 2007 to establish House of Linn, expanding with other brands through brianandtrevors soon after with Trevor.

Trevor Liddle

I was a regional sales manager with Linn, working with retailers throughout UK, Europe, Scandinavia and the Middle East. This included training Linn dealers in proper LP12 set up of Linn systems and components and running LP12 Klinniks and product launches, and from the mid 1990's, running LP12 retraining courses for Linn dealers in the UK and for some dealers in other countries.

Before joining Linn, worked in audio and hifi retailing selling Linn and other quality brands and played drums in a number of local bands in and around my Oxford

hometown. Employed by Linn from 1989 - 2007 in the UK sales team as Sales Account Manager working with UK retailers and also overseas retailers and distributors. I supported Linn systems with music events for passengers on board the QE2 from Hawaii to Auckland, in addition to regularly supporting Linn distributors in Europe, Scandinavia and the Middle East. Responsible for maintaining Linn's standards across the retail network as Linn expanded its product range from the mid 1990s. Took time off from Linn during this period to obtain a recording engineering qualification and re-joined the company in 2004. Left Linn in 2007 to set-up House of Linn with Brian.

You and your business?

We always remember our first experiences as hifi enthusiasts - comparing different audio components and systems and listening to our favourite recordings through hifi

BEHIND THE BRANDS

systems that promised to deliver alive, realistic and truly moving performances. Installing a proper *music* system takes time and often the traditional shop dem rooms are simply not good enough to evaluate a substantial investment in hifi. To us, it was vital to provide the best demonstration environment for any system to deliver its potential.

We run brianandtrevors from a substantial, well-equipped and comfortable late Victorian house, offering individual appointments for hifi demonstrations, advice, and sales. We provide full installation, service and aftercare for all of our clients. Situated just north of Manchester City Centre and close to the motorway network, we have become an audio destination

for out of town and overseas visitors in addition to our local clients. We began business in 2007 establishing House of Linn, an appointment-only Linn audio consultancy and Linn Service Centre for Linn turntables and electronics. Having first equipped the house with the Linn range, we later expanded and adopted other brands and products we listened to and like, that work extremely well together. With our music dem rooms and a large screen HD home cinema room, we offer straightforward and professional expertise to help improve the way you, your partners, families and friends feel at home with better sound for music and movies.

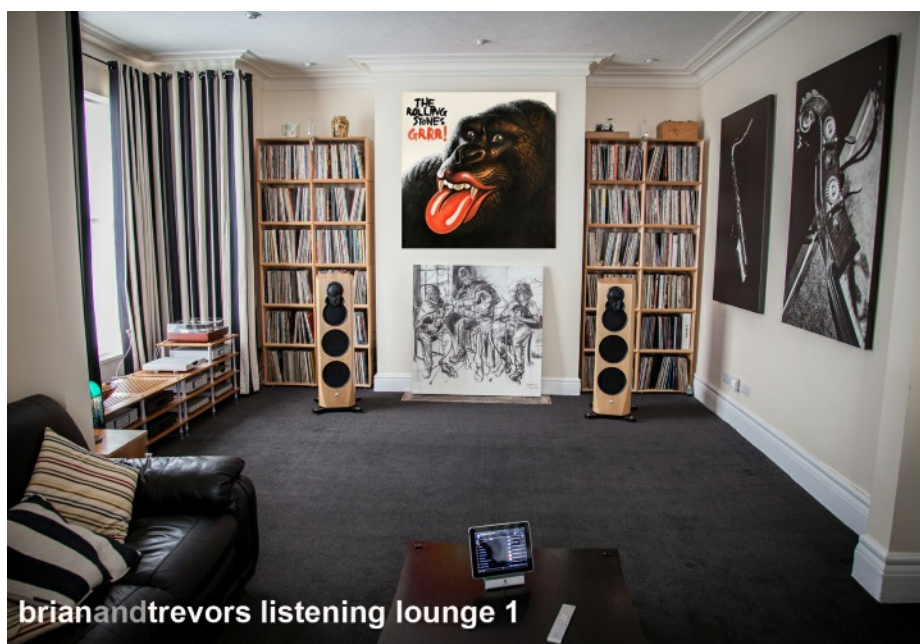
We offer bespoke system solutions and upgrades focussing always on

a source-first approach to system building, making sure our clients always receive the best value for money from demonstration to purchase to aftercare. From single systems for music and movies to network music throughout the home and whole home audio - the listening experience at brianandtrevors is so good that demonstrations can last for hours – and we are happy that they do!

In addition to the House of Linn range, our broader portfolio of brands include Arcam (AV), ATC Loudspeakers, Audio Technica, Dynaudio, Booplinth, Entreq, Focal, Graham Audio BBC Monitor Loudspeakers, KEF (AV), Keith Monks, Melco, Musical Fidelity Nu Vista, PS Audio, REL, Stamford Audio, The Chord Cable



BEHIND THE BRANDS



brianandtrevors listening lounge 1

Company, Quadraspire and Trin-nov Audio. A new brianandtrevors website is underway to represent our evolution and should hopefully be live in the late spring.

We are nuts about system set-up and improving component and system performance even from the best products and we are fanatical about isolating audio components from signal pollution caused by mains power, home networks and vibration. A good example of this is our passion for Vinyl, and as we are LP12 specialists, the Linn Sondek LP12, and our booplith plinth performance upgrade for the Linn Sondek LP12. We have had a fantastic reaction from all customers demonstrating and upgrading their LP12s with booplith at brianandtrevors and at other Linn LP12 specialists who dem and sell booplith. We established The Booplith Company so that other LP12 specialists can offer booplith to their customers, the first ever plinth performance upgrade

for the LP12. Booplith delivers even greater performance from any LP12. A booplith dem with like for like LP12s quickly demonstrates the superiority of the one-piece booplith upgrade's ability to reveal the hidden recorded detail that standard wooden plinth constructions simply cannot deliver!

We are passionate about pure sound quality and specialise in best demonstration, sales and best-practice installation of turntables, analogue and digital music components, stereo music systems, multi-channel music and home cinema systems and networked multi room music systems.

Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?

Being a customer focussed audio consultancy with appreciative clients

Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?

Proudest moments: (Brian) seeing each of my sons perform in their respective bands – Brandon, keyboards and guitar and Daniel, singing opera and playing trumpet, though not at the same time! In addition Brandon's first album: Travail by A Sense of Gravity

Proudest product: Booplith LP12 plinth upgrade

You and your system?

What was your very first system?

Brian:

At the beginning of my hifi journey in the 70s, I bought from Comet!; Garrard Turntable/Ferrograph integrated amplifier and Leak 600 loudspeakers paid for with my first term university grant! Later bought pioneer PL12D Turntable, Akai Reel to Reel from Laskys and a Tuner from a local supplier made by Eagle!

Trevor:

Bought from Laskys in 1982: Pioneer PL12D, Sansui AU222 integrated amplifier, Wharfedale Denton loudspeakers

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

We have different system solutions throughout the house, each of which we enjoy and appreciate.

How often do you listen to music?

Music is always playing here - Every day and evening.

BEHIND THE BRANDS

Best system (or single component) you have ever heard?

Linn Sondek LP12 with booplinth of course.

The state of the industry

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

There is a place for every technology in our industry, especially now with even better product design for valve pre and power amplification as well as hybrid designs.

Low power valve amplification with highly efficient loudspeakers has long been a popular choice and will probably remain so. I (Brian) remember my first introduction to valves in a system, in the mid/ late 1990s, listening to Tannoy Westminster loudspeakers driven by a 4 watt Futterman OTL valve amplifier as demonstrated to me by the late Harvey Rosenberg (aka Gizmo) in his small Connecticut apartment. Such a massive sound, the bass hit you right in the chest! and from so little power and very musical too! You do not forget hi-fi music moments like that!

Vinyl resurgence... what are your thoughts?

We love vinyl above all other formats. We have a large library of around 3000 albums available to dem. Original recordings that go back to the golden age of music; pure analogue recordings, and to the present day of course. We are forever buying vinyl, new and used. Some of the newer digital recordings pressed on vinyl sound



superb, others can sound compressed, where more care could have been taken in the recording process. Pure analogue recordings of course sound best.

Is CD a dying format? Digital downloads, what do you think their impact has been on the way people listen to music?

Shrinking not dying, not yet! Streaming CD quality and 24bit streaming will replace download as more people adopt and subscribe to streaming services like Tidal and Qubuz etc for accessing digitally available music. The downside to great digital sound via streaming, is never owning a music collection, only owning playlists. CDs will probably always be available just as vinyl never disappeared. There is room for all physical music media – owning vinyl and CD collections is an important aspect of engaging with artists, their music and performance.

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

Go see your specialist! There will always be a polarisation of products from the cheapest to the best, from single brands solutions to bespoke multi-brand solutions. The specialist is in the middle of all of this, listening and understanding what works best within their range of experience and knowledge. You can't get this advice on eBay or reliably from the forums. The only way to know is to just listen and judge for yourself. This way, customers receives better value and avoid expensive mistakes!

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

BEHIND THE BRANDS

By giving them their first listening experience in front of a well set up hi-fi system they can aspire to own.

Online shopping's effect on the retail industry?

Can be a fool's errand and not VFM in the long term. There is no substitute for a proper dem and a good dealer relationship.

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

Hifi forums drowning in their own snake oil when used as a substitute for dealer advice, demonstration and support. We get the calls from disappointed folk who took the short cut and lost by buying used hifi online.

Music

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

Linn Sondek LP12 with a boop-linth

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

All are room dependent, for example, in a small room, two mini monitor or "bookshelf" loudspeakers with one or two small subs, will likely sound far better than full-range floorstanding loudspeakers. On the other hand, full-range floorstanding loudspeakers in an appropriate size room can also benefit from the addition of sub-bass reinforcement with one

or two subs, while two mini monitors with one or two subs can also sound spectacular in larger rooms. In our large main room, we are currently listening with a pair of Graham Audio LS5/9 BBC Monitors on open floorstands with one REL Serie S3 per channel, augmenting the lowest frequencies with true Sub-Bass.



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

What is your favourite recording?

We have many favourites, some our clients introduce music to us to as well, and many with different musical tastes. Too many favourites to list in full, however our cur-

rent listening includes albums by A Sense of Gravity, King Curtis, Field Music, Joe Bonamassa, Lucinda Williams, Megadeth, Malo, Miles Davis, Steven Wilson, The Beatles In Mono, Traffic.

Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings.

Brian: For sheer funk drumming and rhythmic bass playing and a superbly clean recording: The Reddings; just one track in particular: The Awakening Part 1. For some of the best contemporary electric blues: Al Kooper, Mike Bloomfield and Stephen Stills: Supersession: One of my favourite reggae albums featuring the velvet voice of Cedric Myton, The Congos: Congo Ashanti. **Trevor:** Whatever I'm listening to at the time!

What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures.

Brian: Anything by Abba

Trevor: Slade's third album Slayed.

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

Brian: Talking Heads, Stop Making Sense – Burning Down The House!

Trevor: My dog!

Many thanks to you both for taking the time to talk to Hifi Pig

Gadgets News Round-up

GADGETYNEWS

The beginning of the New Year is always a busy time for gadget lovers. No sooner has the dust settled from the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas and Headroom in Chiswick, London, it's then time for Mobile World Congress (MWC) in Barcelona and then Sound and Vision, aka The Bristol Show.

I have not quite reached the jet-set level of show coverage just yet so all my CES coverage is by way of me trawling endless press releases and RSS feed updates. MWC is the same, although I did have a man on the ground who attended a meeting on my behalf – item to follow soon.

That's not to say I haven't been busy with travelling about though. I was at Headroom and Sound and Vision once again and the fruits of my labour can be seen in the HiFi Pig and GadgetsNews Headroom and Bristol Show specials.

I have also been at a range of launches, such as Netgear's launch of their new Arlo Q networked camera and just this week I was at the huge launch of Huawei's P9 smartphone which is loaded with Leica camera tech and will soon have a review up of that. Arguably the most important show in February for general gadgety goodness is MWC.

Over the last couple of years it started to become a little run-of-the-mill but this year things looked to be getting interesting again. Samsung now appear to be listening to their customers. After doing away with microSD expansion along with swappable batteries and water resistance they have brought back two-thirds of those skills to their latest line of Galaxy flagships – the S7 and S7 Edge. Not only that, the S7 is water-cooled too by way of a new thermal spreader!

For me though it was LG who brought the innovation thanks to their new G5 smartphone. The LG G5 comes with friends. No, not Joey, Chandler, Ross, Rachel, Monica and Phoebe but new modular upgrades. At present there are only a pair of friends – one adds physical camera controls to your mobile whilst the other improves audio thanks to a B&O DAC. As with any innovation, it is now down to which other third party manufacturers get on board to increase the amount of friends the G5 will have.

HTC has started teasing people on its social networks on the lead up to the release of the HTC One M10 – if that is indeed what it will be called. There have been rumours aplenty surrounding whether or not HTC will stick with its current naming convention or

break away to something new. The teaser features the tag #PowerofTen – does this confirm the HTC One M10 name or simply suggests that the new phone, whatever its name is, has the power of what we all expect the M10 to have?

March has seen the announcement of a brand new high-end Hi-Fi and luxury goods show that is set to come to London in October. The Indulgence Show, as you might have already guessed, promises to be packed with all the Head-Fi of Headroom, plenty of top range home audio, as well as leisure vehicles, top-end cars and bikes, and plenty of other things to keep foodies and fashionistas happy.

In other tech news, Sky has released their Q box which has an all new interface as well as 4K powers and the Riversimple Rasa car has been gaining plenty of interest thanks to its ability to be one of the greenest automobiles out there, pumping out nothing other than water.

The coming weeks have plenty in store for me as I will be covering launches of new products from Skullcandy and Garmin as well as having an office full of review devices from hammer drills to home studio equipment. Until next time.

Jay

Adam Elements CASA USB-C Cable and Adaptors

Adam Elements CASA USB-C

From £20

9.1

Build quality

9/10

Design

9/10

Ease of use

9.5/10

Value

9/10

Pros

- - Well made
- - Looks great
- - Attention to detail
- - Matches Apple's design brief

Cons

- - There are cheaper options

Adam Elements CASA is a range of rather nice-looking USB Type-C cables and adaptors which were announced at the end of last year. I'm a sucker for braided, quality cables so I asked if I could review them as my Android Nexus 6P is fitted with that latest of USB ports.

The CASA range is a premium range of third-party cables aimed at Apple MacBook owners predominately, but that is not to say that owners of other devices that happen to tout the latest USB-C connectivity can't take advantage of what it promised to be a high performing cable.

Adam Elements CASA cables design



The Adam Elements CASA range features a HDMI and VGA adapter for display output, USB-A adapters for use with thousands of existing USB peripherals and a USB-C cable for charging phones, tablets and notebook's internal battery or connecting other USB-C devices.

The charging cable is a rather fetching gold colour and terminates at both ends with a USB-C connector.

The HDMI to USB-C and VGA to USB-C also feature the same thickness of cable but in shorter lengths and coated in a sturdy plastic jacket.

The cable feels sturdy and after living in and out of my work bag for the last few weeks has not discoloured or frayed.

The Adam Elements logo features tastefully across the range of cables and connectors.

Adam Elements CASA cables performance

I realise that cables to many of you are just simply that. Cables. If they work, then all is good. When they break, you can easily replace them

with something from the pound shop.

Adam Elements CASA USB-C charging cable

I know that there can be performance differences but as for charging, I didn't think that there could be a huge discrepancy between the cable that came bundled with my Nexus 6P and the Adam Elements CASA cable.

Charging the phone with the Google-supplied lead was rated at a maximum of 2500 mA and a minimum of 1820 mA.

After using my phone for a day-or-so, it was time to charge again. This time using the Adam Elements CASA cable

This time, according to the app, I was getting 2370 mA to 2670 mA – that's quite a leap.

Granted, the max USB current is 1800 mA but the increased performance is still there. I haven't been able to find an app that measures data transfer speeds but I can verify that it works and is at least as fast as the Google-supplied lead.

Adam Elements CASA USB-C Cable and Adaptors

Naturally, being USB-C means that it doesn't matter which way round you plug the cable in as they are totally reversible.

Adam Elements CASA USB-C to HDMI / VGA adaptors

Moving on the HDMI to USB-C adapter – I was kind of hoping that this would allow me to squirt video from my phone to my telly (yes, I know I can Cast it) but that's a no for the 6P. It was good to see that the adapter has a full-sized HDMI port instead of the mini or micro varieties.

Plugging in the lead to a USB-C 3.1 enabled MacBook the adapter happily supports Full HD 1080P, 2K and Ultra HD 4k displays.

Adam Elements says that the aluminium casing of the adapter cuts down on electromagnetic interference. I can't really comment about that but, what I can say is that it does the job without any artifacts appearing on the screen due to signal dropping out.

The same can be said for the VGA version. It performs exactly as expected when plugged in to a



monitor, enabling multi-screen joy from your Apple laptop.

Adam Elements CASA review conclusion

The realm of third-party cables can be a dark and foreboding place with a range of prices almost as wide as the list of names providing them.

What you do have to keep in mind when looking for replacement or additional cables and adapters is that you might well be able to find cheaper ones at your pound store, but you might also be putting your kit at risk.

Let's face it, even some cables and adapters bundled in with your shiny new MacBook could be cause for concern as shown by [Apple's latest recall notice](#).

the web team exclaimed, "they're so pretty!"

The HDMI and VGA adapters even come with their own little carry bags.

Obviously, I have only had these for a few weeks and only time will tell just how resilient this range is but, for now, I have no problem in recommending Adam Elements CASA range to anyone looking to add to their range of USB-C fittings.

Adam Elements CASA price and availability

The CASA range is available right now direct from [Adam Elements](#).

- USB-C to VGA adapter (CASA V01, space grey/gold): £32.99
- USB C to HDMI adapter (CASA H01, space grey/gold): £34.99
- USB-C to USB-A adapter (CASA F13, space grey/gold): £14.99
- USB-C to USB-C cable (CASA B200, space grey/gold/red): £18.99
- USB-C to USB-A cable (CASA M100, space grey/gold/red): £17.99



The Adam Elements CASA cables and adapters all appear to be well made, sturdy and fit for purpose. Not only that, as one of my colleagues in

AOC G2460PG Gaming Monitor

AOC G2460PG Gaming Monitor Review

£290

Overall score 9.2

Build quality

9/10

Design

9/10

Image quality

9.5/10

Performance

9.5/10

Value

9/10

Pros

- Ready out of the box
- G-Sync at a good price
- Easy to adjust settings
- Range of physical adjustments
- Vibrant colours

Cons

- Some might want advanced menus
- Chunky bezels may hinder multi-display use

The AOC G2460PG monitor is targeted at gamers who are looking for speedy response times and superfast refresh rates.

Monitors are not the most exciting thing you'll buy, generally speaking. For most users they are there to do quite a straightforward task. To show images of a reasonable quality to allow them to update socials, perform work tasks and watch cat videos.

It's not until gamers, video and photo editors, designers, and other people come on to the scene where the specifications of that box of light starts to become important.

If you are a gamer or video editor, the response time and refresh rates will be of interest as you're looking for the smallest amount of

lag. Images will have to be as realistic as possible too with special consideration given to contrast ratio, brightness and available colours.

With this in mind, I am taking a look at the gaming orientated AOC G2460PG G-Sync enabled monitor.

As a quick over-view the AOC G2460PG appears to be one of the least expensive G-Sync monitors out there and is available for under £290. Granted, there will be cheaper monitors out there but you won't be getting the benefit of G-Sync.

Looking down the spec sheet of this TN panel you also get a 1ms response time, 144Hz and a whacking great 80m:1 contrast



ratio at 1920 x 1080 full HD resolution.

AOC G2460PG design

As seems to be the way with most gaming monitors, the front of the unit is pretty plain as to cut down on distractions.

The only noticeable flourishes are the AOC and Nvidia G-Sync logos, the monitor model number and the Nvidia green stripe that runs along the bottom of the monitor.

The bezel has a brushed metal effect finish which I've also seen on other monitors. I like this finish, it's quite subdued but it is better than just flat plastic.

The circular stand is nothing really to write home about. It has a fairly

AOC G2460PG Gaming Monitor

small footprint which is always good though.

The back of the unit follows on with the G-Sync logo and the brush metal style bracing. I quite like the two different finishes, even though you're not going to see the rear that often.

Looking at the front bottom right of the panel we can see the main controls. The front panel seems to only want to highlight two of these, Dialpoint and ULMB (Ultra Low Motion Blur).

Looking from underneath (where the buttons actually are) we can see the button on the far left is the main power button. Then there's the main menu button followed by the two menu up/down buttons followed by the Dialpoint button. That Dialpoint is a rather strange feature that allows a Crosshair to be centred on the screen.

There's a variety of designs to choose from too. Thing is, I am still unsure what this feature is actually for to be honest.

Ports are just enough for most people I would imagine. You get USB 3.0 (upstream) and a pair of USB 3.0 (downstream), DisplayPort and then the power which comes way of a thin lead attached to a power brick. You may notice a distinct lack of HDMI in that list. AOC haven't bothered with that as, I assume, you can't use G-Sync through HDMI, only DisplayPort.

On the side of the monitor are a couple more USB ports one of which is a red fast charge type.

AOC G2460PG adjustments

I was pleasantly surprised to find that the stand for this LED monitor allows the screen to pivot, as well as offering height and viewing angle adjustments without much effort.

Entering the on-screen menu is by way of the familiar single button click. Navigation is of a liner style using the two labelled arrow buttons which are also used to change values of the settings. The menu button is used to enter the menu and the opposite button to



exit.

The menus are fairly easy to navigate although I do find the BenQ ones easier and they also seemed to offer more advanced options. The G2460PG menu does, however, offer what most people will need.

This monitor features Ultra Low Motion Blur (ULMB), which reduces the blur on screen which can occur in some fast paced games such as racing sims. In order to choose this option you will have to switch G-Sync off. OK, so I've mentioned G-Sync a few times already but some of you might not know what this is.

So, what is G-Sync?

G-Sync synchronises the display refresh rates of the suitably equipped monitor with the render rate of the GPU (graphics processing unit) in a computer that is equipped with an Nvidia GeForce graphics card which supports the same technology.

The feature caps the FPS (frames per second) to the monitor refresh rate. However, when the FPS drops, G-Sync then lowers the refresh rate of the monitor to match the FPS. In most cases this happens instantly, but there are instances where you might experience a very small stutter. My PC is running a Zotac GTX 780 AMP! edition GPU which will be powering my review. I have been asked about my PC set-up before and have never thought to mention it in any of my monitor reviews. So, just for those of you that are interested...

Other specs on my machine includes 16GB of Corsair Vengeance RAM, a Corsair CX600 PSU and H80i water cooling keeping my overclocked i5 4670K which is running at 4.4Ghz.

I have had it up to 4.9GHz and stable but wound it back just for reliability. This is all hooked up to a Gigabyte GA-Z8ZX-UD3H motherboard and loaded in to a CM Storm Trooper case.

AOC G2460PG performance

Sharpness and clarity of the 1920x1080 TN panel to me seems spot on. I had a good check for dead/stuck pixels and all were to be found good.

AOC G2460PG Gaming Monitor

The colours, for me, seemed a bit over the top but, after some mild tweaking, it was to my liking. OK, so the AOC G2460PG isn't touting a top-tier Adobe sRGB but, for gaming, I really liked what it was doing.

Having all the settings on Ultra on Project Cars, grass detail and the rest pushed up to max, everything whizzed past both quickly and smoothly, with extremely game-friendly refresh rates and a complete lack of tearing and stutter.

This is mostly down to that Nvidia G-Sync module in the back of the monitor I believe.

Those photos above are not screenshots, as most of you have already worked out, but photos taken whilst my virtual Ford Escort shows my attempts at racing. I thought that this would be a better example of how good it looks to the best I can replicate the human eye.

I think I am sold on this G-Sync business. Up until now, even though I have a half-decent GPU, I still accept a little bit of tearing and stutter here and there. But with the G-Sync tech this is all done away with. Matched with a 144Hz refresh rate you get all of those frames synced with your monitor 144 times a second. It is a beautiful thing.

Now, add to the G-Sync and a 144Hz panel, there's also that super speedy 1ms response time too. All of this combines for silky smooth images with no sign of ghosting or lag.

AOC G2460PG review conclusion

I



am loving G-Sync. The AOC G2460PG has really sold this tech to me as this is the first monitor I have had the opportunity to test at home loaded with the Nvidia witchcraft.

If the BenQ monitor I had came with G-Sync and not the AMD Free-Sync things may have been different but, as it stands on sheer performance, the G2460PG has been my favourite gaming monitor to test thus far.

It might not be the most expensive or flashiest to look at. It may lack a few of the other bells and whistles that other 24-inch gaming monitors might boast about. The AOC G2460PG might even be a little chunky around the bezel, but for gaming, which is its purpose after all, I find it very hard to fault. Especially at this price.

This is a great G-Sync panel with a 144Hz Refresh Rate and its 1ms Response Time. Full HD (1920×1080) might not get your mates envious but I think they'd be hard pushed to find another monitor under £300 that would put it to shame.

AOC G2460PG specs at a glance

Panel Type: TN

Panel Size: 24" / 61 cm

Aspect Ratio: 16:9

Brightness: 350 cd/m²

Contrast Ratio Dynamic: 80M:1

Pixel Pitch: (H) (V) 0.276

Display Area: (H x V) 531.36 x 298.89

Viewing Angle: (CR >= 10) 170/160

Response time: 1ms

Scanning Frequency:

H=30~160KHz, V=50~146Hz

Pixel Frequency: 330MHz

Maximum Resolution:

1920x1080@144Hz

Colours: 16.7 Million

Atlas Cables Zeno

Atlas Cables Zeno headphone lead
£175

Overall score 9

Build quality

9.5/10

Sound quality

9/10

Design

9.5/10

Comfort

8.5/10

Value

8.5/10

Pros

- High quality
- Sound improvement
- Feels like it will last
- Premium looks
- Choice of termination and length

Cons

- Heavy for single-sided use
- Not the cheapest replacement

Atlas Cables Zeno is the recently launched new range of high-performance replacement headphone cables. I managed to get a set sent to me ahead of seeing the full range at the Headroom Show the other week.



Atlas says that they Zeno cables have been designed to be light, compliant yet durable.

The Atlas Cables Zeno combines the company's cable technology with a new range of dedicated solder-free connectivity options called Metik. The promised result is that you get a replacement cable that can work across a broad range of headphones.

Atlas Cables Zeno design

The Zeno cable I received is a 3 metre lead designed to replace the skinny single-sided chord of the Oppo PM-3 headphones.

The cables are available in a wide range of formats – 2.5mm, 3.5mm, 6.3mm and 4-pin XLR mini for the headphone end and 3.5mm, 6.3mm and 4-pin XLR for the amplifier end, Metik plugs provide a direct, airtight metal to metal contact.

For brand-specific headphone connections, a wealth of options are available – Sennheiser, OPPO, Sure, AKG, Audeze, AudioQuest, HiFiMan, Ultrasone are all catered for and Atlas is able to source the correct connections for the majority of headphones available. Hand-built in Scotland the Zeno's use Ohno Continuous Cast (OCC) copper conductors which are covered in FEP (Fluorinated ethylene propylene) low temperature deposition dielectric to protect the integrity of the OCC material.

All of that is wrapped inside a protective soft PVC inner liner and finished with a tangle-free fabric



Atlas Cables Zeno

outer jacket. All of that should make the Zeno leads extremely durable.

Atlas' Metik non-solder crimp plugs promises to provide signal consistency from socket to socket.

The Atlas Zeno does look to be a well-built cable.

Atlas Cables Zeno performance

Plugging the Zeno in to my PM-3s the promise of a lightweight cable seemed slightly skewed.

I realise that this fine Atlas Cables replacement is considerably more substantial than the thin ones Oppo bundles in with these portable cans but, as the cable plugs in on the left-side only, this creates an imbalanced headset. This had a knock-on effect of my adjusting my posture to compensate when working at my computer. I am sure the added bulk of the cable would hardly be noticeable on the ones designed for, let's say, the PM-1 where each can has its own input.

Unfortunately, my neck noticed the difference with this one. It was less of a hassle when used on the move as you find yourself constantly moving your head around when navigating the streets and crossing roads. Atlas Cables Zeno sound quality I am sure it will be a relief for Atlas Cables to hear that there is a



definite improvement over the 3.5mm cable on my portable set-up.

I've not had any real complaints about the standard cable but I do find the sound fuller and more relaxed in my ears, and I am happy about this.

There also seems to be an improvement in response as I am able to turn the volume of my HA-2 amplifier down a few notches. Plugging in to my little Musical Fidelity V-HPA in my main system (Pro-Ject 1Xpression TT, Oppo disc player, Arcam irDAC, MF M6si amp) backs up my portable findings that this a real improvement, uncovering more detail and a fuller sound when compared to the original lead.

Atlas Cables Zeno review conclusion

I cannot confess to hearing a night and day difference through my computer set-up but there are certainly noticeable improvements over the cable provided by Oppo through the HA-2 and V-HPA. To be honest, this always seems to be

the way with cables in my experience.

I dare say that the better the gear you have the cable connecting, the more you're going to notice. If you are looking at improving the sound through your headphones or simply need to replace the cable to your PM-3s for whatever reason, then the Atlas Cables Zeno is really worth checking out if you have the budget.

Atlas Cables Zeno price and availability

Atlas Zeno 1:1 (standard termination – stereo cable 3.5mm)
 1.50m £145.00
 2.00m £155.00
 2.50m £165.00
 3.00m £175.00
 3.50m £185.00
 4.00m £195.00
 Atlas Zeno 1:2 (standard termination)
 1.50m £215.00
 2.00m £225.00
 2.50m £235.00
 3.00m £245.00
 3.50m £255.00
 4.00m £265.00
 For more information, visit the [Atlas Cables website](#).

Dali Rubicon 5 Loudspeakers

DALI Rubicon 5 floorstanding speakers review

DALI Rubicon 5

£2,400

Overall Score 8.8

Build quality

9/10

Design

9/10

Sound quality

8.8/10

Looks

9/10

Value

8.5/10

Pros

- Looks great
- Good weight and presence
- Engaging
- Easy to drive
- Quality build and feel

Cons

- Bass sometimes tries to run away
- Plenty of choice at this price

The DALI Rubicon 5 are slender and good-looking floor-standing speakers, but how do they sound? DALI have been designing and manufacturing loudspeakers since 1983 and are located in Denmark – hence their name: Danish Audiophile Loudspeaker Industries.

DALI's current Hi-Fi speaker range spans more than 50 models spread over 11 product lines ranging from Soundbars and wall/ceiling mounted speakers right up to the Epicon flagship speakers – and that's not including their additional offerings such as stands, cables and other accessories.

I have been kindly loaned the Rubicon 5 speakers you see here. These are well-placed for me to be

able to give you a good idea of what to expect from DALI in your own home as they're not the most expensive, even from within the Rubicon range, but also not the cheapest set you can get from the Danish speaker builders.

DALI Rubicon 5 design

Anyone familiar with the brand will already know that DALI tends to do things a little differently to most other speaker makers. With the Rubicon 5 this certainly remains true as you get the main driver and not one, but two tweeters working together to cover the high end.

The driver array consists of a 16.5cm bass/mid driver – manufactured in-house by DALI in Denmark – with a wood fibre cone. Paper pulp cones are used as

they are extremely neutral sounding, yet light and strong. The wood fibres improve the strength of the cone and add self-damping qualities due to the erratic placement of the fibres themselves. Energy is quickly dissipated before it becomes acoustic. Which is a good thing!

Just as important is the use of SMC (Soft Magnetic Compound) in the magnet system. A patented, trickle-down technology from the flagship Epicon series, SMC has a high magnetic conductivity and a very low electrical conductivity, characteristics that result in a significant lowering of the colouration of reproduced sound.

Complementing the mid-bass are those high frequency drivers The one just above the bass/mid driver is a 29mm soft textile dome



Dali Rubicon 5 Loudspeakers

tweeter similar to those you see on most speakers but here you get the bonus of a 17mm x 45mm ribbon tweeter at the top.

The ribbon tweeter takes over from the conventional soft-dome unit at around 14kHz, with the dual aims of maintaining dispersion at the highest frequencies and improving resolution.

The pair of Rubicon 5 speakers I have here are in a rather luxurious white high gloss finish which perfectly matches my living room style (not that this is of any interest to you, good reader) and are not overly huge at just 890mm (h) x 195mm (w) x 339mm (d).

Those dimensions are what I would describe as 'London friendly'. I remember when I was first heading to the capital and one of the things I had to downsize when I got here was my Acoustic Energy speakers. The DALI Rubicon 5 slipped in to my lounge so easily that my other half didn't even notice them for a good while.

Connections are via a set of good quality 4mm binding posts with which I am using banana plugs but they will also take spade terminals, or bare wire. This end of things is also biwireable.

The base of the speaker has 8mm inserts for spikes or rubber feet. In the supplied accessory box my sample came with spikes which I stood on solid brass shoes so as not to annoy my landlady.

The speakers do come with grilles which consist of a plastic frame supporting acoustically transparent fabric. These are attached to the

cases via a plastic peg which slots into a hole above the ribbon tweeter. They look slick with them on but I really love how they look grille-less and that's how they've been sat. This allows for the sheen of the gloss white, the matte silver finish around the tweeter and the rich autumnal tones of the mid/bass driver to create the overall look of the Rubicon 5s.

The Rubicon 5 speakers are well built and, at almost 16Kg each, are no lightweights but perhaps not as heavy as you might think they were going to be. Looking around the speakers the fit and quality of finish is spot on. My review set displayed a few little war-wounds, no doubt from being shipped around the country or further afield, but I am sure a pristine set is a sight to behold.

If white isn't your thing you can choose from gloss-black, rosso-veneer or walnut.

DALI Rubicon 5 sound quality

I played around with the positioning of the Rubicon 5s and they seemed pretty happy in most situations. I found that they easily filled the room having them at either end (approx 12 foot apart) with a slight toe-in, although they did a great job at 7 foot apart and firing straight forward which again proves they are 'London friendly'.

What really grabbed me was how engaging these speakers are. I was kind of expecting something almost clinically truthful from these, along the lines of the PMC twotwo 5s I've had the pleasure of reviewing before, but this was a whole different experience.



These are dynamic and energetic and really enjoy driving a tune. Before I dived in to my rock catalogue though my first stop was more to see what this double tweeter thing would bring to the table.

First track was Rodrigo y Gabriela's 'Juan Loco' with all the high staccato Spanish guitar noodling it was great to hear all the nuances of the piece clearly with a huge presence when the lower ranges were brought in. At no time did the highs sound harsh or clipped.

Tracy Chapman's 'Behind The Wall' left me with chills. Her unaccompanied, plaintive vocal was rich and emotive.

'Never Let Me Go' by Florence and the Machine sounds huge with all the layers spreading out across the soundstage and filling the room but the acoustics are still presented with great clarity.

The bass seemed to get a little bit carried away from time-to-time, especially on tracks such as 'Schism' by Tool and 'The Hand That Feeds' by Nine Inch Nails. Not that it ever gets clumsy but I did find that, on occasion, it seemed to be a little overeager – this was tempered by more

Dali Rubicon 5 Loudspeakers

positioning adjustment and I am sure having some room treatment would sort that – but I am in a rental and am limited to what I am allowed to do with the space.

The Rubicon 5 do seem to enjoy being driven, which is quite easily done. ‘Skin of my Teeth’ by Megadeth was surprisingly great as was ‘Ratamahatta’ from Sepultura. I really enjoyed the percussion from the latter and could have just had that on repeat for ages as the midrange and bass just made me content in a very primal way.

From the energy and excitement of Sepultura, the Rubicon 5 speakers can also throw the doors open on wet reverb’ed blues such as Gary Moore’s ‘Preacher Man Blues’ and the laid back sounds of ‘Blue Jeans Blues’ by ZZ Top.

These speakers also handle female vocals and strings remarkably well, Diana Krall singing ‘Temptation’ was one treat that springs to mind. Here you get the realism and live sensation without any discernible colouration.

My overall impression of the DALI Rubicon 5 speakers were that they produced an enjoyable depth of image and soundstage to the point where the speakers ‘disappear’. Before you roll your eyes, I simply mean that the sound I was hearing didn’t seem to be coming from the white boxes in the corners of the room. I was getting a room filled by instruments and artists spread across the space whilst the bass seemed to flow liquid-like about 18-inches from the back wall before enveloping the scene.

Panning from left-to-right, as Pink Floyd does so well, just magnified the width that these speakers create, making my living room feel even larger. Playing Roger Waters: The Wall on Blu-ray sounded immense.

Dali Rubicon 5 review conclusion

Whether playing tracks from CD and Blu-Ray through my Oppo disc spinner, records from my Pro-Ject 1 Xpression or streaming TIDAL playlists from my Nvidia Shield tablet via a Musical Fidelity V90 Blu, these all go to a Musical Fidelity M6si before hitting the DALI Rubicon 5 speakers and this seemed plenty to keep these speakers happy.

These are pretty compact floorstanders in comparison to others on the market but the sound they produce is much larger than their physical size would suggest. You get plenty of rich, warm bass presence and those twin tweeters certainly level things up with the midrange coming in accurately and focused.

The finish looks great and, as a friend pointed out, managed to camouflage the speakers somewhat against my white walls. Not that these are speakers to be hidden but if you didn’t want them to be a feature of your room, well, there you go.

The main area that gets me shifting uncomfortably in my chair is the asking price. £2,400 to me still feels like quite an investment but I have been to enough Hi-Fi shows to realise that this is quite a



pedestrian sum to spend for those serious about their passion.

The thing is that, at this price bracket, there’s also plenty of competition from the likes of PMC’s 20 range and Spendor’s A6R, to name but a couple. Dare I say that you could possibly pocket a grand and grab the Tannoy XT8Fs and still be happy?

All that I will say is, from what I have experienced in my own home over the past few weeks, that the DALI Rubicon 5 have never failed to leave me smiling no matter what I’ve played through them and at any volume. If it was my money, I would definitely want someone to have told me to test these before making my mind up – and there would be a huge chance that I would end up buying them. I really don’t want to part with these.

Intempo Retro Blaster

Intempo Retro Blaster review

Intempo Retro Blaster

£40

Overall score 8.9

Build quality

8.5/10

Sound quality

8.5/10

Design

9/10

Ease of use

9.5/10

Value

9/10

Pros

- Lightweight
- Compact
- Decent sound quality
- Good volume
- Nice chunky controls

Cons

- Not sure how many knocks it can take

The Intempo Retro Blaster continues the company's fascination with past decades. Not so long ago I reviewed their 50s-style [jukebox](#) and today I take a look at their modern take on a 70s/80s classic – the ghetto blaster.

For those of you too young to remember when portable audio meant a small, mono, transistor radio the arrival of the Walkman and the mighty ghetto blaster was the dawning of a new age. No longer were you at the mercy of radio DJs when you wanted music on the move. Now you could pack a few C90 cassettes (ask your parents) with your favourite tunes on and then annoy anyone within earshot in the park, on the bus, or on the train.



Ghetto blasters became synonymous with the Hip-hop movement and breakdancers. The Intempo Retro Blaster has a definite nod to the shape of those battery guzzling tape decks from back when tracksuits, leg warmers and big hair were de rigueur but with the advantages that modern technology brings to the table.

Intempo Retro Blaster design

I have been sent the Retro Blaster in a very 80s colourway of black and red and I reckon it certainly suits it.

The first thing I noticed, apart from its colour, was that it is a great deal smaller than the blasters of yesteryear at 34.5cm long x 9.7cm wide x 17 tall.

This is no doubt helped by the fact that cassette players are no longer a requirement thanks to Bluetooth connectivity. Instead of the front

of the blaster being taken over by equalisers and tape decks, the front of the Intempo Retro Blaster is handed over to a pair of 10cm speakers dishing out 10watts.

Along the top is where you'll find the controls with a big bass dial at one end of the panel and the volume dial at the other. In between these sits the play and mode buttons. Below those are the indicator lights showing Bluetooth status and whether you are using the line-in option.

At the rear of the panel are the on/off switch, auxiliary port and microUSB charging port. USB and aux cable are handily bundled in with the Retro Blaster.

Around the back of the Intempo Retro Blaster is a bass port. The finish of the main box is a slightly gloss leather-look but it feels almost wooden. The red plastic parts of the handle, control

Intempo Retro Blaster

panel and speaker surrounds are matte.

Intempo Retro Blaster performance

Syncing your smart device with the Retro Blaster is simplicity itself. Once that's done then you are good to go.

I was expected a little hollowness to the sound from the Retro Blaster but dialling in a little more bass from the big red dial and the sound quality isn't really that bad.

I have had it on the chair next to me in the office and have found it really listenable. I currently have Jack White's Lazeretto blasting through the Blaster. The volume dial is at the 10 o'clock position

and, at this distance, it is loud enough.

Cranked up to 12 o'clock it's pumping. Wound up to 5 o'clock is its full range and whilst it is loud there isn't any terrible distortion, the only thing I had to do is turn up the bass a bit more as the treble was getting a bit splashy and harsh for me.

3 hours on a single charge so plenty to accompany your afternoon in the park.

Intempo Retro Blaster review conclusion

The Retro Blaster is small enough to pack away when heading off for a picnic or festival but has the power to share your playlists with plenty of people – whether they want to or not.

The Intempo Retro Blaster is available in black, black and silver or black and red, so choosing one to suit should be simple.

I would recommend this neat Bluetooth speaker to anyone looking for a present for their kids especially.

Intempo Retro Blaster price and availability

The Intempo Retro Blaster is available now for £39.99

If it was warmer out I would like to hear how it handles the parks but I am sure that the Intempo Retro Blaster has the power and presence to accompany any picnic or festival environment.

The USB-rechargeable battery lasts about



Lindy BNX Bluetooth Headphones

Lindy BNX-60 Bluetooth ANC headphones review

Lindy BNX-60 headphones
£89.99

Overall score 8.5

Build quality
9/10

Sound quality
7.5/10

Design
8.5/10

Ease of use
9/10

Value
8.5/10

Pros

- Look good
- Feel good
- Carrying case and extra bits
- Good price for ANC cans
- Volume dial

Cons

- EQ needs tweaking

The Lindy BNX-60 are the latest wireless headphones from Lindy and were announced at last month's CES 2016.

You may recall that I have previously reviewed Lindy's larger noise cancellers, the Cromo NCX-100. These proved to be pretty darned good for the money. Can Lindy do the same with the wireless BNX-60?

Well, let's have a look shall we?

Lindy BNX-60 design

The Lindy BNX-60 headphones are very compact and finished in a neat matte black finish. Most of the headphones appear to be made of a good quality plastic with a slightly rubberised feel to it. This leads me to believe that they will be able to handle being caught



in a rain shower and should be slightly rugged.

As is the way with Bluetooth cans, the controls are located on the ear cups.

On the right ear cup is where you'll find the active noise cancelling (ANC) on/ off switch. Next to that is what I think is a really quaint touch, in a good way. The volume control is a wheel rather than simple up and down buttons as you would normally expect to find.

Over on the left side is the usual assortment of forward, back, play/pause and call answering functions dealt out between three raised buttons.

As well as these controls there's a covered micro USB port for charging.

Naturally, you get lights to indicate that the ANC is on and Bluetooth status.

Another nice touch is the inclusion of a single headphone cable port so, should your BNX-60 run out of charge, you can continue listening to music using a wired connection.

Also packaged in the bundle is a decent hard case. In the hard case is a detachable, velcro fixed, zipped pouch which houses the 3.5mm audio cable, micro USB lead for recharging and the airplane and 6.3mm adapters.

Lindy BNX-60 performance

The Lindy BNX-60 have a reasonable output from their 40mm neodymium drivers and without the ANC switched on the aptX Bluetooth 4.1 does a decent enough job.

Once you switch on the active noise cancelling, however, there appears to be a significant boost. This not only affects the the

Lindy BNX Bluetooth Headphones

volume but also seems to bring the entire soundstage forward.

Also, when you flick off the ANC you suddenly become aware of all the ambient noise from within the cans. It's an odd sensation.

Operating the headphones when being worn is simple enough. It is made easier due to the central play button having a little raised nipple. Again, my love for the volume dial is hugely down to its intuitive and simple control.

Lindy BNX-60 sound quality
Let me just kick off by saying that the noise cancelling on these Bluetooth cans works. Lindy states that it banishes around 85% of noise and I would estimate that's correct.

Watching Arrow (I am a late-comer to this series) on my lunch breaks through the BNX-60s in the office makes the whole thing a lot more engaging. Thanks to the isolation from those padded cups as well as the ANC, people have to



punch me in order to disturb my hour away from doing worky work (I tend to write things for GadgetsNews in this time).

The sound is pretty good without being thrilling. Everything seems to be dialled in with a preference to mids and low mids when the noise cancelling is off. The highs and bass do seem to be rolled off a tad.

Flicking that ANC switch to the on position is almost like coming from listening to a gig from the bar to being in the main room. It is that different. This leads me to suspect that there's more to this on/off button than just removing outside noise.

With the ANC on you get a more punchy low-mid range, sparky highs and a good defined mid. The bass can get a little muddy depending on what you're listening too though.

Listening to music is a mixed bag with these to be honest. Pop and well mixed, radio friendly rock was fine. The BNX-60 seemed to love old school Hip Hop too.

80s/90s mixes seemed to fair best – think Scary Monsters/Let's Dance era Bowie, Soft Cell, The Smiths, and most modern electronica as they also seem to like the late 80s EQ curve.

Turning to more piano and voice lead tunes, however, things started



Lindy BNX Bluetooth Headphones

to go missing. Orchestral pieces didn't fare that well either with some of the lower strings losing themselves amongst the percussion and lower woods and brass.

What I did find was that films and box set series came

over really well with dialogue being rich and effects punchy.

Hands-free calls were clear with the ANC making hearing the other person no problem at all.

Lindy BNX-60 comfort

The well padded headband and earcups makes these headphones really comfortable to wear over long periods.

Also, the articulations on the band and at the cups makes finding the perfect fit really easy. There was just enough tension to keep them on my head too.

Lindy BNX-60 battery life

It takes three hours to charge the BNX-60 from empty to full battery.

For that you get 30 hours using the wired connection and ANC, or 15 hours just using Bluetooth without ANC.

Using the cans wireless and with the ANC switched on you're

looking at getting 12 hours of tunes which should see you through a few commutes before needing to hook up the micro USB to charge them again.

Lindy BNX-60 review conclusion

These are really good looking compact Bluetooth headphones with the added benefit of active noise cancelling and the option to have them wired.

I found the sound of these ok without ANC, pretty good with the noise cancelling and then really noisy when I switched the cancelling off again, when walking around.

I do think there's some EQ/Amp as well as the noise cancelling kicking in when you flick that switch but it does serve to keep the noise out.

If you watch movies or box sets on your mobile device or laptop then

these highly portable noise cancelling Bluetooth cans will suit you.

If you're looking to play anything from Jazz to Prog, there's probably better options out there but you might have to dig deeper in to your pockets too.

Lindy BNX-60 specifications at a glance

10m Wireless Range (depending on environment)
40mm high output drivers with neodymium magnets
Impedance: 32Ohm passive mode / 100Ohm Active Noise Cancelling mode
Sensitivity (1mW@1KHz ±3dB): Passive 93dB ANC 103dB Bass 104dB
Nominal THD: Passive <0.1%@ 1KHz / Active <0.5% @ 1KHz
Frequency response: 20Hz – 20KHz
3.5mm Stereo Jack Socket for detachable 3.5mm audio cable



Linksys EA7500 Mu-Mimo Router

Linksys EA7500 MU-MIMO router review

Linksys EA7500 router
£150

Overall Score 8.7

Build quality
9/10

Design
8.5/10

Ease of use
8.5/10

Performance
8.5/10

Value
9/10

Pros

- Not ugly
- Great antennas
- Easy to set up
- Dual networks
- Ports aplenty

Cons

- There are better looking routers
- There are more powerful routers

The Linksys EA7500 Max-Stream router has recently hit the shelves so it seems only right that it gets the GadgetsNews once-over.

When was the last time you thought about your router? I am also guilty of switching on my computer, turning on my telly and heading to Netflix, watching cat videos on my phone and streaming tunes from Tidal to my Hi-Fi all without a moment's thought about the little thing in the corner dishing out all this interwebs. Until, that is, something goes wrong – or slow.

What once was considered to be magical and amazing (hey, I remember getting dial up when you had to put your phone on the modem!) but now we not only take broadband internet for



granted, but also Wi-Fi in our homes. Not just Wi-Fi though, this wireless connection to our social networks has to reach every corner of the household – and at full strength.

These days we need 4K streaming in to the kitchen and Hi Res audio in the bathroom, all whilst folks are watching catch-up TV in the living-room and PC gaming is happening in a bedroom with everything ramped up to ultra settings.

Our demands on that little box in the corner have become much more, well, demanding. Is the Linksys EA7500 up to the task? Well, looking at its spec sheet it should be.

The Linksys EA7500 is powered by a 1.4 GHz dual-core processor, offering up to 1.9Gbps of bandwidth you can use across multiple devices. That should be enough bandwidth to handle a home full of streamers and gamers. Let's have a look.

Linksys EA7500 design

The first thing that struck me about the EA7500 is the strong link to its predecessor that I am still using, the EA6900.

The shape, size and overall look is very familiar if you have ever owned a Linksys EA-series router. The EA7500 is definitely the updated version, and it looks like it has been working out. The EA7500 is a chunky little bugger.

The router measures 10-inches wide, 7-inches deep, and 2-inches tall so it's not what I'd call compact and, when you take in to consideration the three 7-inch adjustable antennas coming out the back, you do need to hand over some real estate to it.

The router features a curved top which should prevent anyone using it as a beer mat or plant stand. Remember folks, wireless routers work best when left out in the open.

The back of the EA7500 has five Gigabyte Ethernet ports. One is a WAN port for connecting to your modem, and the others are LAN ports for connecting other wired devices. There's also USB ports — one USB 3.0, the other is USB

Linksys EA7500 Mu-Mimo Router



2.0 — for plugging in a lovely NAS (network attached storage) filled with lossless digital audio, for instance.

So, wired connections are covered but what about wireless? Well, the Linksys EA7500 looks handy here too. This 802.11ac device offers 1.9Gbps speeds on two simultaneous bands, a 2.4GHz band offering up to 600Mbps and a 5GHz band offering up to 1300Mbps.

Linksys EA7500 set up

You can have the EA7500 plugged in and ready to go in a matter of seconds if you're ok using the supplied network names and passwords. If you are swapping out your old router and want the same settings on your new one, this saves on having to enter new passwords on everything, then you'll need to head to '192.168.1.1' or 'myrouter.local' via your browser.

As I already have a Linksys Smart Wi-Fi account, I went for the latter.

You will see two different Wi-Fi networks, one on the 2.4GHz channel, the other on 5GHz. The split spectrum allows users to consider who and what uses which band in order to best utilise what's available.

The 5GHz channel should be used for bandwidth-hungry devices,

such as 4K streaming media boxes, that are near the router and will benefit from the 1300mps speed.

This leaves the 2.4GHz channel, with its still darned respectable 600Mbps, freed up for day-to-day computing and web browsing shenanigans.

This configuration, just one of many, means the connection on your phone or laptop isn't slowed when you're watching Netflix on your smart TV. Alternatively, if you're in a house with lots of rabid Wi-Fi users, you could simply switch from one network to the other when things slow down. Cheekily, I have the networks set up with different names and passwords as I am the main culprit for slurping up bandwidth, I have my laptop, tablet, as well as the telly, set up for the 5 GHz Wi-Fi.

The Linksys EA7500 is pretty clever as it will specifically direct its signals to connected devices using MU-MIMO (multi-user,

multiple input, multiple output), or beamforming.

A normal router actually broadcasts its signal in every direction, which is effective, but results in poorer signal strength. MU-MIMO beams the signal towards the target device, instead. This feature is usually only found on routers near the upper end of the market. Granted, you need to have devices that support this standard but they are gradually increasing, including handsets, tablets and laptops.

Of course, you can tell the EA7500 which devices you want to prioritise.

If you've a bunch of devices simultaneously using a lot of bandwidth, this router should be able to handle it and, assuming every device is within range, your connection speed is more likely to be the bottleneck for speed than your Wi-Fi signal. I know that's true for me having to survive on ADSL as I can't get fibre – yes, even in London there are parts



Linksys EA7500 Mu-Mimo Router

where a fibre connection is still but a dream!

If you're a parent and want the Wi-Fi to cut off at a certain time on certain devices – why should not be able to continue to use Wi-Fi just because your precious little darlings can't be trusted?

So, as well as being able to select which device will be de-Wi-Fi'd you can easily map what times you want that device to go dark too, using a simple graph.

Here you just colour in the times you want to block Wi-Fi to that device. As you can see, I am not being totally heartless with my fictional offspring. Yes they'll get no connection after 8pm Sunday to Thursday but, on Fridays and Saturdays, they get a full extra two hours. I know, I'm a great fictional dad.

Linksys EA7500 performance
Spotty Wi-Fi connection can be caused by many things. Position of the router is a top one – are you trying to hide it in a cupboard, in the corner of the home or under the stairs? Yes, this happens. It's time to embrace the fact that your router needs to be able to 'see'.

Even though I have placed the EA7500 in the same spot as my EA6900 usually sits, the signal is stronger from the new guy. I'm lucky in so much as I live on the



end of a row so there's only one neighbour whose signal might really cross over at any strength at the 2.4 GHz band.

2.4 GHz is great for distances whereas 5 GHz is the one for speed and chunky files – kinda like 3G phone signals will be there when your 4G drops out, and then when 3G drops out, good ol' 2G will be there.

5 GHz just about reached my back bedroom with the EA6900 but the EA7500 is a sure fire improvement. The 2.4 GHz has also improved to the point where repeaters/boosters are no longer required.

Linksys EA7500 review conclusion

The Linksys EA7500 might not be the flashiest looking, most powerful or smartest router out there right now, but I think it is definitely up there.

I reckon that anyone with a basic understanding about what does what in the settings menu will have things tweaked satisfactorily in no time. For people with a bit more knowledge, getting knees deep in the advanced settings is just as easy.

To get more powerful and still have the amount of ports on offer you're going to need a lot more than the Linksys EA7500's £150 asking price.

If you are in a data-hungry household with Wi-Fi not spots then upgrading your router could solve many of your issues. Add in to that the parental controls and simple set-up then the Linksys EA7500 makes sense.

If you are looking for a high-end router but not necessarily the budget to back that up, you need to try this one.

Netgear Arlo Q Camera

Netgear Arlo Q camera review

Netgear Arlo Q camera
£170

Overall Score 8.8

Build quality

9/10

Design

9/10

Ease of use

9/10

Performance

8.5/10

Value

8.5/10

Pros

- Looks good
- Well made
- Day/Night 1080p video capture
- Easy to set-up
- Free cloud video storage

Cons

- Still waiting for ITTT integration
- Some might expect more at this price

The Netgear Arlo Q security camera was launched just over a month ago and I've finally had the chance to sit down and write up my thoughts about this HD security cam.

Following on from the wireless and weatherproof Arlo HD camera, Netgear are now offering a full-featured indoor camera which is not limited by the compromises needed to implement the wireless Arlo.

Will the Arlo Q prove to be simple to set-up and, more importantly, be able to conduct its important duties without infuriating the owner? Let's have a look, shall we?

Netgear Arlo Q design



The Arlo Q comes packed in a good quality box and you get everything you need to get up and running in no time.

I like the look of the diamond-headed Arlo Q and, where it might be easier to spot than the MyDlink camera I reviewed around this time last year, the Netgear is packing more tech.

It comes in a no-nonsense white finish with a splash of chrome introduced by a thin band around the face of the device.

The 2.75 x 2.80 x 4.50-inch camera feels sturdy and well built and comes attached to a stand by way of a ball joint that allows it to

be freely positioned. The foot of the stand has an integral cable clip. In the box you also get a mounting plate which allows you to attach the camera to a wall.

The lens is surrounded by 850 nm LEDs which gives the Netgear Arlo Q night-sight chops. Beneath this is the mic and status LED. There's a speaker on one side which, along with the aforementioned mic, allows 2-way audio communication – great for spooking your partner, confusing your pets or for shouting at intruders.

On the other side, you'll find Sync and Reset buttons. It looks good and there's about as much style as you can inject in to

Netgear Arlo Q Camera

something that really needs to blend in to the background and remain purposeful.

Netgear Arlo Q set up

As already pointed out, the Arlo Q is AC powered so you have to be a little bit mindful of this before deciding where this camera is going to live.

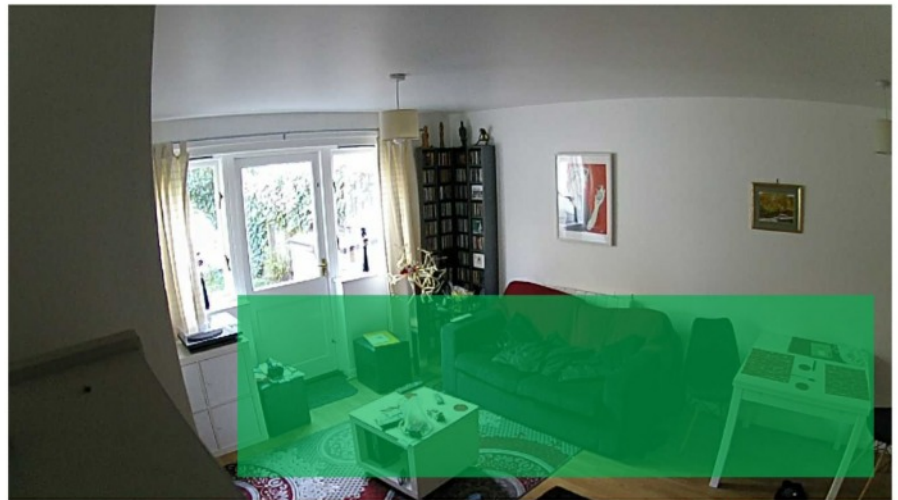
Thankfully, Netgear supplies a good length of USB to micro USB cable that sends the juice from socket to camera. The USB power adapter is quite tall so squeezing this plug behind a unit will probably require a trailing socket or similar.

The plug-and-play promise of most IP cameras is frequently proved to be a bit of creative writing as the setup will involve pressing buttons on devices in different rooms at the same time, scanning QR codes that won't scan or manually tapping in barely legible serial numbers. Arlo Q is refreshingly easy to get up and running.

All it takes is to download the Arlo app on your Android or iOS device of choice and follow the step-by-step instructions to connect the camera to your Wi-Fi network and you'll have a live view of your newly monitored room in less than five minutes. Yes, it does involve a couple of QR codes, (one to get the app which you can do just by navigating to the app store and searching for Arlo and the other pops up on your mobile for the Arlo to see), but this all went smoothly at the first time of asking.

Activity Zones

Create motion detection activity zones or adjust camera image by zooming or inverting.



As well as the mobile app the Arlo Q has a web-based control centre which you log in to via the main [website](#).

Here you are able to adjust camera settings, such as the resolution, and turn the night vision, microphone and speaker on or off. Naturally, you also get access to the Modes and Library sections as you do in the mobile app.

Netgear Arlo Q performance

The camera offers a 130-degree viewing angle which is plenty enough to see into the corners of any room, infrared night vision up to 25 feet, and motion and sound alerts. The camera's streaming feed can be accessed through either the Arlo app or the web portal.

Where Netgear has managed to raise the bar is by offering seven days of free cloud storage. This means that when sound or motion triggers a recording, the video is

stored for you to review for a full week. This free plan is available for up to five Arlo cameras for up to a maximum of 1GB of data. You can increase this with paid options should you feel it necessary.

The Arlo app, which can be used with both the Arlo Q and the original Arlo, offers everything we've come to expect from home security camera software. You can even rename the cameras to something more meaningful, for example; Living room, Bedroom 1, Garage, etc.

Beneath the live feed window are controls for managing the camera's audio, taking a screenshot of the feed, and manually starting a recording. From the menu at the bottom of the home screen, you can toggle between multiple cameras, view a library of your video clips, and access camera controls. Images from the 1080p camera are clear and sharp, which is always a

Netgear Arlo Q Camera

bonus if you do have the misfortune to be burgled, with only a little lag when watching live.

I really like the fact that the Netgear Arlo Q stores video when it has been triggered by motion or audio incidents. The app shows what triggered the camera and when and then allows you to play back the clip.

This is a lot more friendly than the basic D-Link offering.

One thing that gets annoying with IP security cameras is the amount of false notifications. These can be triggered by incidental sound and motion events, such as fluttering curtains or a pet passing in the camera's view – I used to have a house fitted with passive infra red eyes in the rooms which were forever being triggered by spiders. The Arlo Q offers a few common solutions for minimising these false alarms.

Arlo Q Activity Zones

This is a feature that lets you define sound and motion detection areas by drawing a square with your finger over the camera image.

This reduces false alarms by focusing the camera's sensor on, say, just an entry point to your home. Even if the family cat passes in the camera's field of view, it will be ignored if it's not within that activity zone.

In the picture above I have avoided the windows so that the camera ignores birds and any cats and foxes who might decide to sit on my garden storage locker that's just on the other side of one of the windows.

Arlo Q Modes

These are sets of rules that tell your camera how to respond when it detects sound and/or motion. Arlo Q comes with three default

Modes: armed, disarmed, and schedule.

The first two allow you to turn sound and motion detection on and off.

The third lets you schedule it for specific days and times.

You can also create custom Modes. If you're running multiple cameras, for example, you can set your Arlo system to record

videos when the motion is detected by one specific camera and send you an email alert.

Custom Modes give you the greatest control as they let you incorporate activity zones and adjust the camera's motion and audio sensitivity. Other definable settings include the Arlo Q's response (record video, take a snapshot, or do nothing), the length of the recording, and the type of alert you receive (push notification or email).

Netgear Arlo Q review conclusion

As an extremely short summary of the Arlo Q's performance, it does everything that Netgear promises – Live streaming and video playback were crisp in both day and night mode, and alerts came in timely and accurately.

The flexibility of the camera's customisable features will allow users to set the monitoring to almost anyone's needs.

Add in to that Netgear's generous basic free cloud storage plan then the Arlo Q becomes even more enticing.

Granted, there may be not enough options for the more tech-savvy out there but the Arlo Q does tick the boxes for the majority of people who are looking for a straightforward security camera that is really simple to set-up. The Netgear Arlo Q packs 1080p high-definition live streaming in both day- and night-vision mode, two-way talk, video playback, has Arm/Disarm functions and scheduling which all worked very well which makes it really hard to knock.



Olive ONE Home Digital Audio Player

Olive ONE home digital audio player review

Olive ONE
£660

Overall score 8.9

Build quality
9/10

Sound quality
9/10

Design
9.5/10

Ease of use
8.5/10

Value
8.5/10

Pros

- Looks great
- Sounds great
- Compact
- Firmware updates will make it even better
- Can be used alone or in system

Cons

- OS can be clunky
- Touchscreen could be better

Olive ONE might be a curious name for a home digital audio player but this good-looking bit of kit certainly has a spec sheet to keep those with tunes trapped in their computers who care about quality interested.

The Olive ONE is here to emancipate your digital music library from your computer so that it can be freely enjoyed through your main Hi-Fi system. This is a good thing if, like me, you did follow the trends from vinyl to cassette, from CD to MP3, from MP3 to FLAC. I never threw out my records, or cassettes but I did go through a period of a few years where everything I bought was virtual. Mostly because I moved to London and have been fairly

transient due to renting flats wherever I could afford to live.

I originally met the Olive ONE at the [National Audio Show](#) last year but had been following its progress from the device's crowdfunded beginnings through to the Olive ONE becoming a real, buyable device.

Olive ONE design

Olive ONE was originally announced through an [Indiegogo campaign](#). Way back in April 2013 the campaign raised over half a million dollars from around 1,500 backers so it appears obvious that there is a market for such a device.

What was produced certainly seemed to match the promises made to the pledgers – a lovely-looking glass and aluminium product packed with audiophile gadgety goodness.



The Olive ONE has a 7-inch LCD touchscreen panel that dominates the gently sloping front.

The Olive ONE includes a built in Burr-Brown PCM5142 DAC and dual 32 watt per channel amps – this means you could just hook this bad boy up to some speakers and run it like that.

Alternatively you can make use of its coaxial, RCA and Ethernet (if you don't want to go the wifi route) connections. It also has Bluetooth and DLNA/UPnP input if you fancy squirting tunes from your mobile devices.

The Olive ONE comes without a hard drive to be used with your NAS (network attached storage) as well as coming loaded with a 1TB or 2 TB hard drive. The player will fit in to most systems thanks to its 9.0-inch (22.9 cm) diameter and measuring only 1.61-inch (4.1 cm) at its highest point from which it slopes down to 0.82-inch (2.1 cm) at lowest point. It weighs in at a

Olive ONE Home Digital Audio Player

healthy 6 lb. (2.7 kg) without HDD.

Olive ONE set up and specs

The ONE promises to make enjoying music even easier. First thing I do when I get to the living-room on a morning is to put some music on. Pre-coffee me likes things to be as easy as possible and some mornings even putting a CD on can be a task.

Thankfully, with the Olive ONE, getting some tunes on the go is simply a case of turning the ONE on, turning the amp on, select an album, play.

To get o that point there's some setting up to do though.

Olive ONE first impressions

The first thing I noticed was that the touchscreen isn't as sensitive as the latest mobile phones. It does work as expected for the most part and, once you know where and how to prod it in to obedience, all is well.

If you can't be bothered getting up off the sofa to control the Olive ONE you'll be glad to know that there is, of course, an app downloadable for both iOS and Android devices which allows you perform all the usual selection and volume adjustment tasks.

The Music OS interface is clear and built for the job, rather than being a skinned version of Android or similar. There are many elements still being developed, such as integration to social networks, but it manages the immediate task at hand without many grumbles.



Olive ONE setting up

Hooking up the Olive ONE to your network is done either through wired Ethernet cable or over Wi-Fi. Both worked for me but, as a gamer, I always prefer a wired connection where available. Saying that, I didn't get any drop-out when purely relying on the Wi-Fi connection through the unit's detachable aerial.

That aerial can also be folded away out of sight. That's how I had it and it still picked up my Wi-Fi network, which is great as it doesn't ruin the clean lines of the ONE then.

Once you're on the network it's then just a matter of following the easy-to-follow instructions in the little quick-start guide booklet. As a PC owner this involved getting the device's IP address by tapping the network status icon in the top left corner.

After writing that down, nip over to your computer and hit the Windows+R keys to Run and sling

in that IP address you diligently wrote down. Sorted.

Mac owners have it slightly easier – but that's how they like it. Once you get the little folder on your desktop you can simply drag and drop your WAV, AIFF, FLAC, MP3, AAC, Apple Lossless, and Ogg Vorbis audio files in to the Olive ONE.

Remember though, WAV and AIFF formats don't carry metadata tags and will therefore not display any artist, track or album information leaving it stranded as Unknown in all fields.

The Olive ONE comes bundled with an analogue audio cable from Monster and this is what I used to plug it directly in to my Musical Fidelity M6si amp.

You navigate through Music OS via a song selection screen which is divided into three sections: one column for the artist, another for the album and then once an album is selected, it will show you a list of songs. It's pretty intuitive.

Olive ONE Home Digital Audio Player



Olive ONE specifications

Under the hood is a pair of 32W/channel into 8 Ohm, high-efficiency (92%) amps using 1 amp per channel. This is being fed by the Burr-Brown PCM5142 digital analogue converter (DAC). The DAC handles 32-bit/384kHz with 8X oversampling and sports a Signal-to-Noise ratio of 112dB and an ultra-low jitter master clock which should all add up to pretty decent sound quality – and it does.

Olive ONE performance

The user interface is fairly flexible and allows you to arrange the song, artist, and album in the cascading, left-to-right order of your choice.

There are two main buttons which can be found slightly encroaching

on the touchscreen. One gets you in to the settings menu and the other is for searching. Below those is a circular control area that anyone who has ever used an iPod Classic will no doubt feel comfortable with.

The centre point of the control disc deals with on/stand by functions whilst its perimeter controls volume up and down.

It is perhaps a shame that sometimes the software feels a bit clumsy and periodically hangs and pauses. I have had instances when I have resorted to tapping the screen continually for something to happen – as a tech guy, I know this is wrong but there's no clue as to whether the ONE is working on something or just ignoring me.

For the most part, this is why I tend to use my tablet (screenshot above) or phone to control the player as I know that I've pressed something and that this should be replied with action.

Setting up the app, again, requires the ONE's IP address – thankfully I have written it on a Post-It which is attached to the guide booklet. Once you open the app, the ONE is rendered dumb with a on-screen message informing you that control has been handed over to your mobile device. Ah, the power!

Olive ONE sound quality

The Olive ONE doesn't seem to colour the playback and is what I'd describe as being honest. I let the ONE rely on its own DAC rather than putting it through my

Olive ONE Home Digital Audio Player

Arcam irDAC or the one in my MF amp and it really does do a credible job.

I could not detect any harshness, clipping or nasty artifacts. Ramping up the volume on the Olive ONE and my amp didn't create any untoward distortion either.

What I did get was precise bass with good weight and a slightly forward midrange when compared to my Oppo disc spinner. I put the difference down to the Oppo going through the Arcam DAC.

Now it was time to bite the bullet and hook up my speakers directly to this techno hubcap to see what it can do standing on its own.

I wasn't expecting it to sound bad per se but I was also not expecting wonders from the pair of little amp chips.

I have to say that the Olive ONE is more than capable of acting as a stand alone digital audio set-up. This makes it ideal for those who either don't have any physical

media or who are looking for an office/bedroom system that's not going to take up much room. The ONE will definitely be able to do that, and look really good whilst doing it.

So, the Olive ONE can become part of your main system or be an all-in-one lifestyle music player. That's pretty neat – but there's more.

As multi-room systems have made their way in to many users' hearts then it would be an oversight on Olive's part not to include that functionality in their ONE. So, let's say you have a ONE loaded with a 2TB drive, that means you can have other ONEs dotted about your home without their own storage slurping up audio goodness from that master ONE.

To that end, Olive has a deal on a variety of bundles.

Olive ONE review conclusion

If you're looking for a digital music storage and playing device to integrate in to your main system, the Olive ONE can deliver.

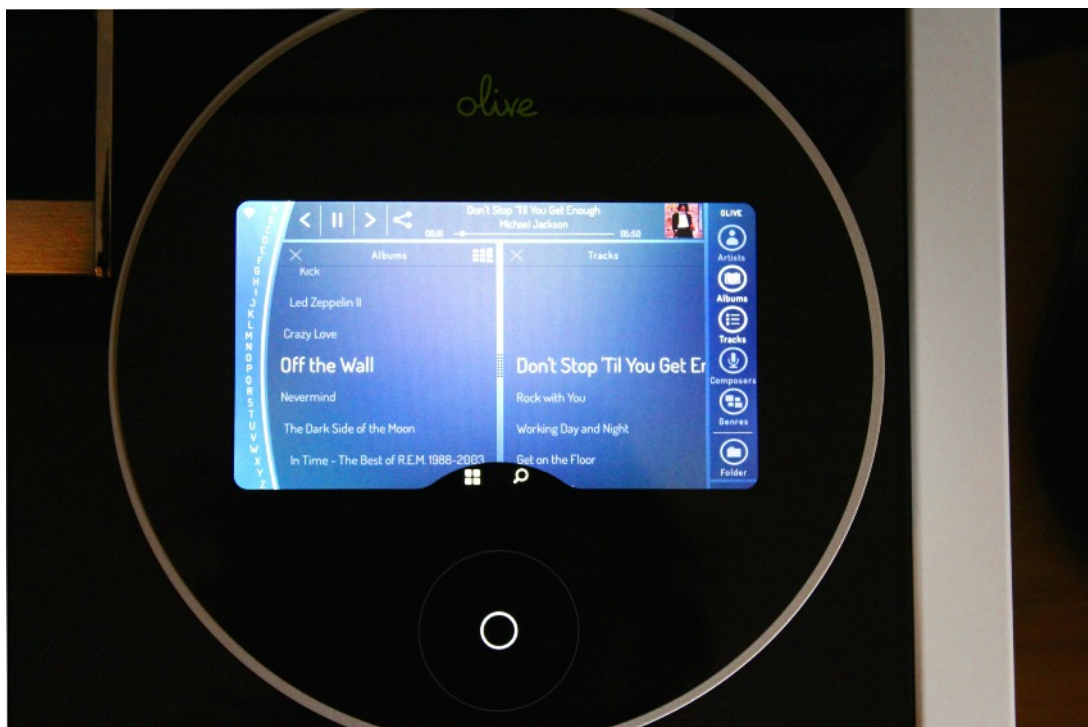
If you're looking for an all-in-one lifestyle system for the living-room, or a compact stand-alone system for the office or bedroom, the Olive ONE can do that to. How about a multi-room networked player? Yup, there's ONE for that to!

I liked the Bluesound Vault and Node offerings but, for me, the Olive ONE is a more attractive proposition. I love how it looks and, once you have your PC and ONE connection set up, it's easy to fling your FLACs over to it. The user interface is intuitive and whilst the operating system can sometimes leave you hanging, it is worth remembering that it is still a work in progress. I did deduct some points for this though. I am not aware of anything that has this level of flexibility wrapped up in something that

looks this good for the price. I am honestly considering adding this on to my shopping list.

Olive ONE availability and price

The Olive ONE is available in the UK from Audiobility for the following prices, that include VAT.
£660 without storage
£750 1Tb
£860 2Tb



STM Drifter Laptop Backpack

STM Drifter laptop backpack review
£80

Overall score 8.9

Build quality

9/10

Design

9/10

Comfort

8.5/10

Use of space

9/10

Value

9/10

Pros

- Looks great
- Soft areas for gadgets
- Many, many pockets
- Rain cover
- Back padding

Cons

- Temptation to overload
- Straps could be a bit more padded

The STM Drifter backpack has joined the new [Annex Collection](#) which has been devised as some of the most stylish, comfortable and organised bags the company has to offer.

After testing the [Trust laptop messenger bag](#) and the backpack by [C6](#) I wondered if STM had anything that would combine the plus points of both.

I'd love the multi-pocketed [Trust](#) with the twin shoulder-strapped comfort of the C6.

Could the Drifter accomplish this or will it prove to be nothing more than style over substance?

STM Drifter design

I knew to expect quality after using the STM Trust and I was not



disappointed when the STM Drifter arrived and I quickly tore in to the packaging.

I have been lucky enough to be sent the Drifter in this awesome camouflage design. I am loving the way this has been mated with the bright orange zip pulls. OK, so not great if you were intending to be wearing the Drifter whilst stalking but, for the urban jungle, I think this looks great.

On the practical side of things the back of the rucksack is stiffened, which is one thing it has over the soft-backed C6. The Drifter also has a 3D foam mesh back panel with air flow channels which should cut down on those sweaty back days when we eventually get warmer weather once again.

As I have come to expect from STM there are plenty of zippered pockets and compartments which means there's no end of the ways to which you can organise your stuff.

You're able to keep things in the multitude of outside pockets for quick access and your larger, more fragile kit inside.

The STM Drifter also has some neat additions that you might not notice at first too. There's reflective loops for night time safety, luggage pass-through which enables the Drifter to slide over the handles of your wheeled luggage and a little pocket that holds an included and attached rain cover.

Areas such as the laptop and tablet compartments and the top exterior zipped pocket are all coated in that nice, soft, yellow, gadget-friendly padded felt material.

Water resistant 320D brushed poly is used all around with the exception of the bottom which is an even more hardcore 640D reinforced fabric – the STM Drifter should last a while and is reasonably water proof even before you slip on its extra rain coat.

STM Drifter Laptop Backpack

Again attention to detail comes to mind. First, not only does the backpack have an open pouch on one side, it also has a zipped side pouch on the other. That's brilliant because with the open end, you can easily put in a water bottle or compact umbrella and in the open, elasticated pocket and hold it in place with the compression strap. Whilst, on the other side, you can place your mobile phone, cigs, Swiss Army knife, or amulet of healing in the zipped side for easy access. Best of both worlds there, then.

The Drifter has three good sized exterior pockets, four if you include the aforementioned side pouch.

The bottom, front pocket has your customary pen holder slots and a key strap. The middle pouch can store random gear, at the moment it houses my gloves. As I have touched upon earlier, the topmost pocket is lined with that gear protecting felt padding, perhaps for your phone or sunglasses, and

strap to stabilise the backpack. One thing I'll point out here is that they didn't cheap out with the buckle. You won't find a cheap plastic one. Instead STM Bags opted for a nice shiny metallic one. Another nice touch.

What really separates this bag from others is the raised foam pieces that forms 4 zones to provide incredible support and more back comfort. In addition to that, because the support is raised it naturally forms venting channels so you won't be a victim of unrelenting sweat in the summer.

Going across the padded back panel is the luggage pass-through strap that allows your wheeled luggage handle through so you can give your back a rest.

Diving inside the Drifter, the top flap, whose zip opening slices the top at an angle which helps with access, has a zippered mesh pouch which is perfect for your laptop accessories or headphones.

The main open part of the bag is

Bags and RewardTag. It is basically a little keychain that has a unique ID. If you register the bag with RewardTag and you lose your bag, whoever finds it can easily return it. Why should they? Well, apart from being the right thing to do, there is also an incentive to return it because there's an award attached to it.

This program is entirely free! Granted, there's no guarantee that all your gear will still be in the bag, but it's a nice idea.

Saying that though, you don't necessarily have to register your bag – you could attach the fob to your keychain, camera bag, or your kid if you so wish!

STM Drifter performance

I have been using the Drifter as my work bag on the daily commute and it easily takes my breakfast and lunch as well as tablet, laptop and a variety of charging cables – that's my daily carry. There have been days when it has carried back a Wi-Fi router, powerline adapters, and an LED light panel, for instance. Such is the mail I get delivered to my day job.

I have only used it to one press event so far but it carried my camera and other associated stuff without a problem. It has performed faultlessly thus far.

I decided to load it up with what I reckon I'll be taking to the Sound and Vision Show in Bristol at the end of the week. This amounts to: my camera in its bag, assorted cables and chargers, umbrella, laptop, tablet, headphones and



STM Drifter Laptop Backpack

other bits of gadgety stuff that I'll need to do my job. This all packs away without issue and there's still room for some clean clothes as I'll be stopping over night.

Not only that, any small equipment, such as chargers, spare batteries, spare business cards, etc all have room in one of the many organiser slots, pockets, or hoops.

According to the spec sheet, the STM Drifter is rated at 18L.

The straps are comfortable and, should I feel the need to jog or cycle (HA!) the

chest straps would keep the Drifter from drifting and the reflective bits should help avoid me getting squished.

I am not the most fashionable guy out there, in fact I think the last time I was in fashion was the 80s, but I do like how this pack looks. There have been a few inquiries made about it by my colleagues too and some of those actually appear to know about trends and such like.

STM Drifter review conclusion



I think that STM Bags has a sure-fire winner with the Drifter. It is compact enough to use on the commute (remembering to take it off when boarding public transport) but has the capacity to satisfy its use as carry-on luggage or overnight bag.

The STM Drifter will keep your laptop, tablet and any other gadgety kit safe and sound and all those other little bits organised. On the subject of organisation, between the pen slots and key chord in the front pocket and more slots, hoops and sections in the

main bag, your main problem will be finding stuff to stow away.

Nice touches such as the rain cover, reflective sections and myriad pockets should not be overlooked. Add in to all that the fact that it is a well made, good looking backpack. I think it's a must have in what ever colour you prefer.

STM Drifter price and availability

The STM Drifter is available in camo, graphite or navy and retails at £80 on [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk).

View-Master VR Starter Kit

View-Master VR starter kit review

View-Master VR
£23

Overall score 8.7

Build quality

9/10

Design

9/10

Comfort

9/10

Experience apps

8/10

Value

8.5/10

Pros

- Nostalgia for us that remember the original
 - Well made
 - Educational Experience packs
 - Good price for headset
 - Best Cardboard device I've used
- Cons
- Experience packs could be more interactive
 - Experience packs could be more immersive

Mattel's View-Master VR (virtual reality) headset might look very familiar to people of a certain age, but this classic optical toy has been given a 21st Century make-over.

The View-Master has been a classic childhood toy since the 1940s. Me and my brother had one with its low-tech, drop in a photo disc, look through the lenses, and marvel at the static 3D image, click the lever and move on to the next. This might not sound like amazing stuff but we had a Spiderman one which we practically wore out. You could, of course, get more educational sets that would have cities of the world, or dinosaurs.



View-Master has now taken on a new guise and now utilises smartphones to display interactive educational VR experiences on topics like space, wildlife, and destinations.

View-Master VR design

The View-Master VR definitely takes its aesthetic cues from the classic reel-viewing toy. The strong-feeling plastic is playfully coated in glossy red, white, and black, and looks exactly how a toy should.

It measures 9.5 x 3.2 x 5.5 inches so is quite chunky, but I like that and it will still be perfect for smaller, perhaps less dexterous, hands.

You even get an orange lever which is used as the input button and the latch has been designed to mimic those original disks too! The biggest difference is that this View-Master is hinged and, as the front swings down, there's a huge space inside to accommodate your smartphone.

The eye-pieces have a nice, black, comfortable rubberised coating as well as performing the duty of keeping out any unwanted light. View-Master VR performance

View-Master VR set-up

The View-Master VT uses Google Cardboard 2.0 and can therefore play nice with a wide array of devices (including iPhones), and supports up to 6-inch screens. Your handset snaps into a very snug plastic grip which will adjust to take that range of handsets. There is an adapter for the smaller-screened iPhones.

It happily took my Nexus 6P, HTC One M9 and the Huawei Mate S. I had no worries about locking any of those phones away inside the sturdy body of the View-Master. Before shoving your phone in to the View-Master use a QR code reader (I use QR Scanner) and scan the code inside the View-Master. That will take you to the app store for your mobile so that you can download Google Cardboard.

View-Master VR Starter Kit

Once that has been installed you will need to find the View-Master app you want to try out first. So, off the Google Play Store once more to download and install View-Master Space.

The Starter pack includes one viewer, one preview reel, one adaptor for your smartphone and a user guide.

You can, of course, use Google Cardboard apps with the headset too.

View-Master VR experience

If you have used any of the other Google Cardboard viewers out there then you will know what to expect, although having the View-Master against my face felt like a

higher quality than the card and plastic versions I have tried before.

What was fun is the reactions this gets from people who haven't tried VR out before. For me, this is

worth the £30 alone, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

In yet another nod to the classic toy, the View-Master VR still uses reels and, once more, these have

taken on a new modern role. These now have augmented reality markings, so you'll stare at a plastic disc via the phone's camera and see a little digital diorama appear. It's a neat effect, and it leads to further virtual reality experiences within which will probably amaze kids more than adults but it's still a neat thing.

Mattel currently offers three Experience packs: Destinations, Space, and Wildlife. These each come with three reels and an associated Android and iOS app. View a Wildlife reel, for example, and you'll be transported to the



View-Master VR Starter Kit

Amazon rainforest. Pick one from the Space pack and you can examine and explore a 3D space shuttle. I think the Space one is the best personally.

You can explore the demo versions of each of the Experience apps but, to get to the extra bits, you need to either pay for the in app expansion or buy one of the 'hard copy' packs. Each one of these comes with an "access card" that you have to hold against your phone screen the first time you use it in order to activate the app.

I could imagine the younger end liking this as it is a little bit like using an ID swipe card to access a secret something. That's what I thought – purely in my role as a reviewer, obviously.

The experience packs feature interactive content. In the space pack, for example, the viewer can not only tour the solar system, but go from planet to planet, manipulate planets, pull up facts, and even play a mini-game that demonstrates the varying gravitational pull of different celestial bodies. You can also explore the ISS and the Space Shuttle as well as constellations and the Solar System.

The Space pack garnered the most Oooooos and ahhhhs it must be said. The control is quite intuitive as I only had to give the broadest outline of how to navigate around to complete novices and they were away. I am sure anyone of 7 years old and over will take to this even quicker.



The accompanying audio comes through some slots in the headset so this really depends on your phone and where its speakers are. Thankfully, the HTC and Nexus have front firing speakers so they weren't too bad. The Mate S, not so well. I should imagine iPhones will also fall in to the latter category. This is where the option of a headphone port might work. I slightly cheated and used Bluetooth cans and that works like a charm.

View-Master VR review conclusion

The View-Master is a little bit larger and certainly brighter than the Cardboard viewers I've come across so far. It has definitely been built to withstand the drops and general mistreatment by little darlings.

I dare say that it is also more comfortable to use than many I've used too.

It is a shame that there is no headphone jack but at under £30 to get kids (and adults) their first experience of virtual reality, I think the View-Master is a sound option.

The fact that, as this uses Google Cardboard, if your kids aren't using it to learn about Space or animals, you can use it for any of the other Cardboard apps available.

View-Master VR price and availability

The View-Master VR Starter Pack has a RRP of £23 and each experience pack should be around £8. Available now.

Wraps Bracelet Earphones

Wraps bracelet earphones review

Wraps wristband earphones
£20

Overall score 8.4

Build quality

8/10

Design

8.5/10

Sound quality

8/10

Looks

8.5/10

Value

9/10

Pros

- Neat idea
- Sound good
- Look good
- No need for pockets
- Affordable

Cons

- Earbuds could get damaged
- Earphones could pick up dirt

Wraps earphones, if remember my article announcing their release at the end of last year, you will recall that these earbuds wrap around your wrist.

Wraps are an intriguing offering. You may already be aware that I am more a fan of over-ear type headphones than shoving something in my lug-holes. The thing is, when the weather gets warmer (it will happen, promise) and there is no longer a need for jackets, where do you put your cans?

For me, heading to a watch a gig, the last thing I want to be doing is carrying a bag for the sake of my headphones. This is where I fall back on earphones.

Earphones can be slipped in to jeans or other item of pocketed clothing.



That's all well and good but T-shirts generally don't have pockets and some jeans are decidedly skinny. What happens if you're rocking up poolside in your Speedos or bikini?

This is where Wraps might have the answer. You see, these buds literally wrap around your wrist to become a funky bracelet. I have spent a week-or-so living with the Denim blue variety of this earphone/jewellery hybrid. So, have they won me over, or are they just another gimmick to lure teens away from their money?

Wraps design

The Wraps earphones at one end are pretty much like any other set of earbuds.

The business end consists of a light, spherical alloy housing that encases a large 10MM driver.

These drivers have been tuned by world renowned British Audio sound engineers.

The set I have been kindly sent to review are the Talk: Denim variety and so are in a rather nice pale blue colour and so will go with almost anything.

The cables run from the buds in to a single braided cloth sheath which terminates in an angled gold 3.5mm jack.

There is a single button in-line control which also contains a hands free mic, and a sliding divider. The latter is extremely important on these earphones. Not only does this manage how much split cable you have running free but it has another duty. Wrapping the Wraps around your wrist, or bottle, hip flask, etc works by pulling up the divider that splits the earphone cable wires

Wraps Bracelet Earphones

right to the top so that it abuts them. You then can proceed to wrap them around your body part or drinks receptacle.

Once wrapped, the 3.5mm male jack goes into the centre of the divider which secures it. I have to say, it is a good fit and withstood a couple of band rehearsals and more than one session in the pub. Wraps performance Wearing the Wraps they are very comfortable, to the point that you almost forget that you are wearing a pair of headphones on your wrist.

As a bracelet they actually look good, apart from the fact that the earbuds do look a bit weird on one's wrist – not weird enough to draw any unwanted attraction though as I found myself pointing out that the denim blue wristwear were also my noise-bringers for the day.

I also liked the nice braided texture to them and, should you not like the blue colour, there's many other colours, materials and even beaded ones.

Now this is all well and good, but what we really care about with earphones is the sound quality.

Wraps sound quality

I wasn't expecting much from these to be honest but they actually delivered a far more impressive sound than I could have hoped for. You get a selection of tips so that getting a good fit for your ears isn't a problem. The treble is sweet rather than the harsh hiss that you get from the more budget realms of earpleasers. Even ramping up the volume



didn't cause the 10mm drivers to distort or muddy up the low-end.

Talking about the bass range, these aren't going to make your pants rattle but there is enough low presence to kick through your playlist. Mids are focused and perhaps lean more towards the high mids a touch.

They are also pretty loud and your ears will probably give out before these will.

Wraps review conclusion

I am so pleased that there is still room for innovation, even in the tried and tested waters of sub-£30 earbuds.

I for one would be happy to wear these, as I have done, when hanging out with my mates. The earbuds aren't really noticeable if you have them on the underside of your wrist but a neat cover might have been a cool addition.

Sound quality is pretty good too considering that these only cost

around the £20 with the premium braided leather versions just adding a few more quid.

So, if you're in the market for some inexpensive earphones that can be stored about your person, even when you have no pockets or a bag, then you should really check out the Wraps. These are actually useful bits of geek chic.

Wraps price and availability You can get Wraps now direct from the MyWraps website: Classic Wraps – £15 Talk Wraps – £20 Natural Wraps (leather) – £30

