

# Hifi Pig

## EXTRA

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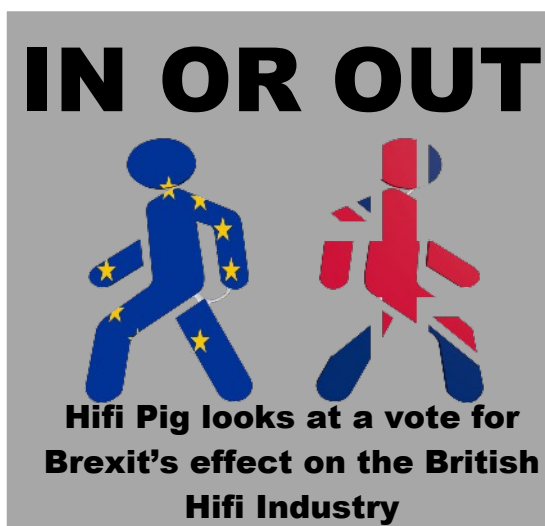
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Hifi Pig  
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man who  
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# Pre Audio GL-1102N Turntable



**With its parallel tracking arm and LED lit platter, the £4700 Pre Audio GL-1102N Turntable hailing from Poland certainly looks a little out of the ordinary. Will it prove to be just that or something extraordinary? Janine Elliot finds out for Hifi Pig.**

There are not many times in my work as a reviewer that I get excited. There are so many wannabees out there with claims to be the best at everything. I have heard it all before from manufacturers claiming that their new components or technologies make everything in the past to be...well, history.

To be sent a 60kg granite turntable whose 65mm resin platter lights up in multiple colours was not going to be a good start for me, but boy was I surprised. At £4700 including Audio Technica AT33sa MC cartridge, the Polish Pre Audio GL-1102N, distributed in the UK by GPoint Audio, is one of 6 turntables in a range starting at just over £1k to the ATM-1401 with AT ART 9 cartridge at £7900, that all but one feature parallel tracking arms. The turntable up for review here is second from top in the list of players from Daniel Predecki, a master craftsman from Nysa, Poland in his early 30's who has only been manufacturing turntables since 2009. He was quick to realise that unless you have a parallel tracking arm like The CartridgeMan or Rabco SL-8E, turntables such as Harman Kardon ST7, Revox B795 or the gorgeous B&O Beogram



# Pre Audio GL-1102N Turntable

4000 , or indeed the very first Edison, you will always get lateral tracking error, and hence some distortion. Therefore all his machines are designed this way to get an ideal geometry, and provide a more accurate reading of the record and consequently more detail.

The early versions of parallel tracking arms relied on lights or mechanics or a very noisy air pump to allow the cartridge to move slowly across the groove without rubbing against the groove as it forced its way to the centre. If you were to read my recent Retrobyte column about distortion in vinyl you would understand my sheer joy at hearing a turntable play records just the way they were recorded from the Neumann VMS-70 or 80 cutting lathe. Only the Nackamichi TX1000 self-centring turntable with a parallel tracking arm would remove all distortion and speed fluctuation caused by non-centred record pressings, but having a conventional turntable with parallel tracking arm would at least be the nearest best thing to playing a record as it was supposed to be heard.

Air is probably the best solution removing any friction on the rail carrying the arm/cartridge, and the

arm itself needs to be as light as possible to make this happen even more smoothly. On the hand-made-to-order Pre Audio GL-1102N this is certainly the case, with the 95mm arm being a very thin hollow carbon fibre. The cable is lightweight Litz and the thin diameter air cable means no hindrance in its move across the record. The rod that the arm assembly moves across is supported at both ends, unlike the cheaper models in the range, so this does make it look a little more functional than beautiful, but does make it very sturdy. The arm is lifted up and down via a rod pulling down on the rear of the arm pivot point. All very simple, but very effective. There is no damping of the cueing of the arm, so a little care is needed to do it gently, though the big size of the cueing lever on the right means this will be done slowly anyway.

This turntable and arm system ushered quality in terms of materials and design. Only trying to find a suitable stand that could take the weight of this behemoth was the problem. The granite plinth is available in varying finishes, though the grey/black version up for review has the smaller and tighter “particles” and gives the best sound. The AC motor is floating, and surprisingly just relies on a steady



# Pre Audio GL-1102N Turntable



power supply rather than some fancy speed stabilising technology. The supplied AC/DC adaptor is for the three LEDs that light up this beast, allowing you to choose the mood of lighting to suit that of the music, whether one of the 8 colours or discotheque-style fading between them, all operated via the supplied remote control.

The outer-platter belt drive turntable was very quiet in operation and got up to speed in good time. The only noise was a very quiet and well damped pump, in its own box complete with a pressure gauge, to show how much air it is putting out. The long cabling and tubing means it can be placed in another room if required, being operated via a rocker switch on the rear of the turntable itself. The turntable comes with a heavy record clamp with a spirit level built in to the centre (though I relied on

**I was there in  
the audience,  
and these being  
two of my  
favourite works I  
was crying.  
Really!!**

my own more accurate spirit level when setting up).

I was quite sceptical about the simplicity of the motor system but the lack of any audible wow from my perfect-pitch sensitivity (the turntable rated at 0.01%, and +/-0.2% speed variance) made my old 'Classics for Pleasure' Rachmaninov Piano concerto No.2 (Martino Tirimo, Philharmonica Orchestra Yoel Levi) highly emotional and exact.

I always prefer strong motors and outer-belt driven platters, and this one is a heavy triple-layer platter and ensured stable revolving of the turntable. The amount of space in this recording, both left and right and front to back was quite startling. This was just as the record had been etched onto the master. Consequently there was no distortion from the cymbals bashing away in



# Pre Audio GL-1102N Turntable

the middle of the 3rd movement, and on side two with his Variations Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini the pianist's deep breaths were highly audible. I was there in the audience, and these being two of my favourite works I was crying. Really!!

Turning to the excellent Queen Collection, via Krell/MFA/Manley and Graham Audio LS5/9s, it was like sitting in the studio in front of Freddie. "Jazz" has a wealth of international flavour, not least because it was their first album recorded outside of the UK, and that the cover design was inspired by a painting on the Berlin Wall, but also in the variety of different styles of music and instrumentation, whether Indian Sitar or American Blues. Fat Bottom Girl had smoothness but accuracy that made it like a Rodgers and Hammerstein full music score, if perhaps a little sedate. The long decay from piano and guitar at the end of 'Jealousy' was longer than I remembered it, and Bicycle Race – inspired by seeing the Tour de France whilst in Montreux – had a beautifully realistic piano showing no lack of composure. This turntable was so accurate that in a way the music became too easy. Pink Floyd "The Division Bell" had clarity and depth that made me relax and want to breath in all the notes. The AT33sa

with its Shibata stylus and boron cantilever is a dark sounding cartridge with an excellent delivery of the deepest bass, and a few times I did feel I needed better control from the arm to carry it through successfully. Many will know my love of the Townshend Rock with its trough/paddle system to control those deepest lows. But that said, this cartridge/turntable duo made the music speak with control I have only heard in top end turntables. The soft bass drum after the first minute of the first track of side two was tight and powerful, and quite simply beautiful.

Dire Strait's Mark Knoffler "You Can't Beat the House" (Get Lucky) had an enlarged atmosphere with vocals, drums, honky-tonk piano and ride cymbals clearly placed in 3D in front of me. The cymbals were particularly clear. There was no worry about cartridge distortion due to badly set up bias compensation or wrong angle of the elliptical cartridge to the groove. Cartridge set up was as easy as pi (sic). "Cleaning my Gun" had power but immense clarity amid the powerful drumming, but nothing was rushed. No, this turntable was careful with all that it played.



# Pre Audio GL-1102N Turntable

Saint-Saen's Organ Symphony No3 (Serge Baudo London Philharmonic Orchestra) is a detailed and complicated work with strings up against brass and woodwind, and the Pre Audio gave a polished performance, with the deep pedal organ in the third movement taking off with a control only my Wilson Benesch Torus subsonic generators could pull off perfectly. This might not be a polished performance by the orchestra, but I enjoyed listening more than with any other turntable I have put it up against. This was the orchestra in my living room, and every nuance from the orchestra was picked up with control. The second movement is filled with violins conversing with cellos and violas and the organ quietly muttering in the background. This was good. Scratches in the record just didn't matter, indeed they seemed quieter.

Now you might think that I have nothing negative to say about this turntable, but this is not true. I love the idea of solid plinths (my early marble Trio and Garrard 301 homemade solid platter gave an amazingly good bass end) but what it does mean is that any noise getting past the rubber feet will make their way to the cartridge (albeit in this case not a worrying amount, since the air bearing dampens most of it), and it does mean that a sensible and strong stand is a necessity, which could mean almost another £1000 on the price. Also, the three translucent platters making up the tower are held together with inbuilt magnets and ball bearings, meaning you need to be careful when cleaning the record prior to playing so that you don't get too carried away as the 3-layered plinth might come apart. Also, when removing the record, the cork top platter can come off with the record if there is static on the record. Perhaps the cork should be glued to the top platter, though of course it does mean I can use an alternative, such as the Statmap. The cork

**For the price this  
is a quite stunning  
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turntable number  
14**

platter has a line marking across it from the spindle making that cartridge alignment even easier. The spindle for the record is only affixed to the top 'layer' of platter, reducing noise from the bearing, which only connects with the first, lowest platter. This turntable is therefore very quiet.

## CONCLUSION

I have heard many turntables in my life, indeed I already own 13, all with their plus and minus points, but this

turntable, complete with the capable AT 33Sa cartridge gave me more fun than I have had since unpacking my very first Fidelity record player at the age of 9 years. Just like me, Daniel Predecki could see there were imperfections in all of them which led him to start making his own products.

This turntable was not only a pleasure to play but it was also entertaining for all those who came to visit, having never seen an unusual looking turntable that lights up as well.

For the price this is a quite stunning offering, and being so impressed this will now be my turntable number 14.

**Pros:**  
**Sonic supremacy**  
**Parallel arm**  
**Competitive pricing**  
**Very easy set up**  
**Looks**  
**Lights up**

**Cons:**  
**At 60kg requires a strong table**  
**The top platter can become separated from below if you are not careful**  
**Price at Time of Review £4700**

**Janine Elliot**



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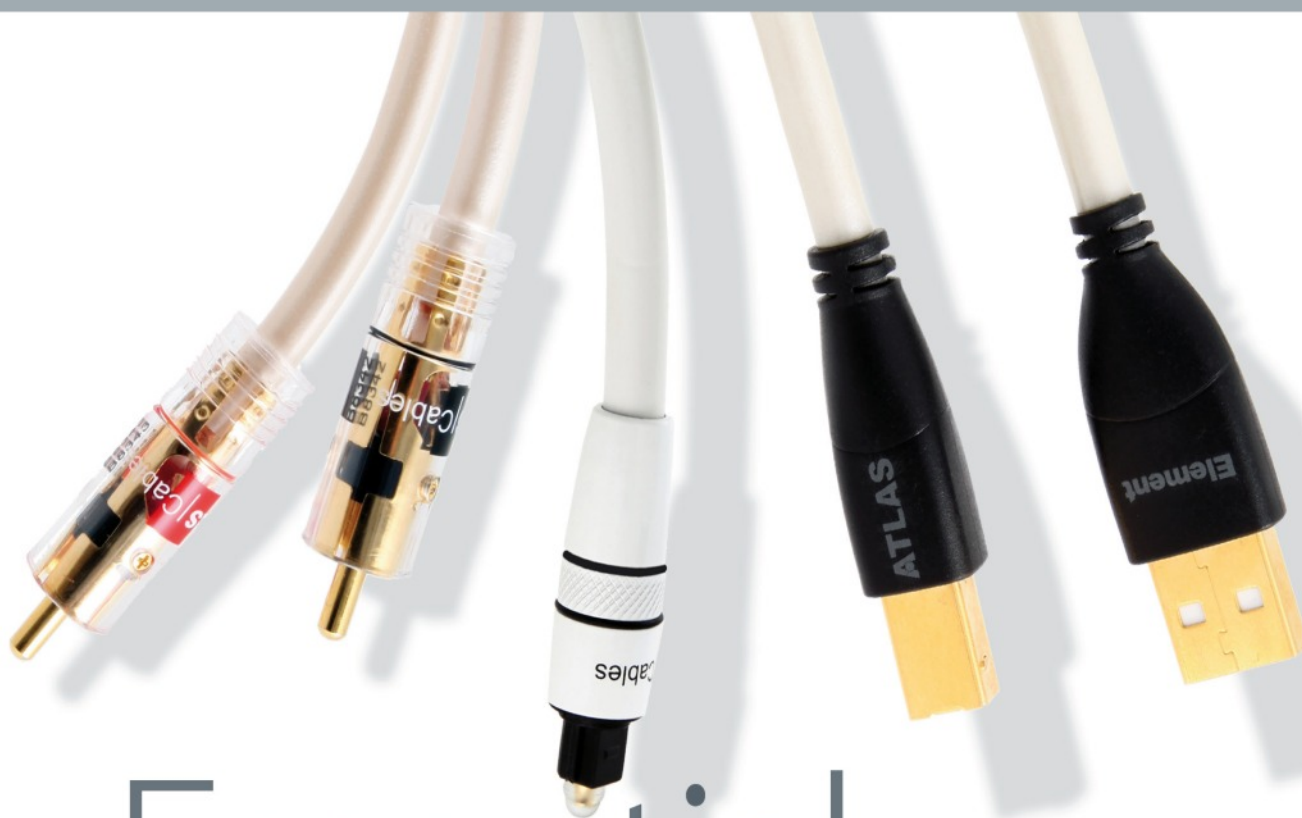
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## EAT C Sharp Turntable and Koetsu Black MC Cartridge



**The EAT C Sharp turntable certainly looks the part for £2500 including tonearm, how does it sound? Janine Elliot spins some vinyl.**

It isn't often that female entrepreneurs produce products for the mostly male hifi customer. EAT (European Audio Team) is, I'm pleased to say, one such company run by Jozefina Lichtenegger, the lady married to Heinz Lichtenegger, who many will know is the CEO of Pro-Ject. Whilst there are certainly links in the design from both; the use of carbon fibre and MDF for example, this is a completely different company and the products look to my eyes much more endearing. This is a Lexus, rather than a Datsun. The raked aluminium edged platter, carbon-fibre arm and the cute power unit which is separate from the turntable, were particularly good features for the price.

For my review I connected it to my Manley phono-stage, also a company run by a woman despite its manly name. This marriage was even more music to my ears when I connected Koetsu's Black MC cartridge. The C# is a recent offering from EAT, coming in at £2500 including the C-Note tonearm carbon fibre/aluminium unipivot arm. As a child I

## EAT C Sharp Turntable and Koetsu Black MC Cartridge

kept getting cards saying “Don’t B sharp, don’t B flat, just B natural” and I couldn’t quite understand it because in my eyes (and ears) B sharp was actually a C. There is a cheaper and simplified “C major” (or should that be B Sharp) just out with the same arm at an amazing £1750, but the model for review here is still very good value for such a lovely looking turntable, particularly when you consider the arm and a platter comprising carbon fibre and something called Thermoplastic Elastomer.

Many will know that EAT actually started out as a maker of high-quality audio valves and accessories. A

**At £2500 plus  
cartridge this  
turntable/arm will  
be music to the  
ears of most that  
listen, but do  
consider carefully  
the best cartridge  
for your set up**

few years back the company produced its first turntable, the Forte, which still remains today their flagship deck at £13500 with the E-Go 12” tonearm. Since then, the company has steadily introduced further models, each one interestingly more affordable than the last. The Carbon fibre in the construction means it can be an extremely low table by virtue of its strength; indeed it is quite anorexic in height and quite different from the intimidating Forte. This low profile base chassis is actually made out of highest density MDF. On this base the motor is mounted as well as 10 damping feet made from energy absorbing (and therefore





## EAT C Sharp Turntable and Koetsu Black MC Cartridge



damping) TPE (Thermoplastic Elastomers). All the rumble of the platter or bearing is therefore directed in the TPE columns where it is absorbed so that it doesn't get as far as the arm and cartridge. The cone-shape TPE columns carry the Carbon Fibre suspended plinth. Whilst motor noise didn't end up at the cartridge, the chassis was noisy if I tapped the table or plinth, so it is important to place it on a good foundation.

Unlike most turntables the bearing is actually an oversized and inverted bearing shaft with a ceramic ball atop on which is placed the sub-platter, and with the main heavy platter being placed on top of that. There is a 700 gram mass point at this bearing and, according to Lichtenegger, all the energy is sucked up and converted to heat. Whilst the platter certainly didn't change temperature, it was free to move with no resistance, though was disconcertingly close to the carbon plinth. The motor is attached to the lower chassis so that no vibrations make their way to the platter bearing and to the arm. As this top platter has angled edges it is not easy to hold, so the record

clamp is screwed into it and this is used as a handle to lower carefully on to the sub-platter. This is after, of course, you have affixed the belt to the motor and the sub-platter. The circular belt itself is made from a length of special anti-static rubber that has been glued and then polished, just as from many small turntable manufacturers. Whilst I could see the join, it was all smooth, unlike a few, I hasten to say, I have seen from manufacturers over the years. Many turntables seem to charge extra for record clamps, but this one comes gratis, and as mentioned just now, is a necessity. EAT recommend you don't screw the clamp down when playing records, but rather that it just sits on the record, and the screwing action is only required when moving the aluminium platter itself.

I did love the ease at setting up the unit, and this included affixing cartridge to the arm. The tonearm itself includes a combination of cardan and uni-pivot bearings, immersed in special damping fluid designed to damp the tonearm and cartridge resonances by more than 50%. As a fan of the

# EAT C Sharp Turntable and Koetsu Black MC Cartridge

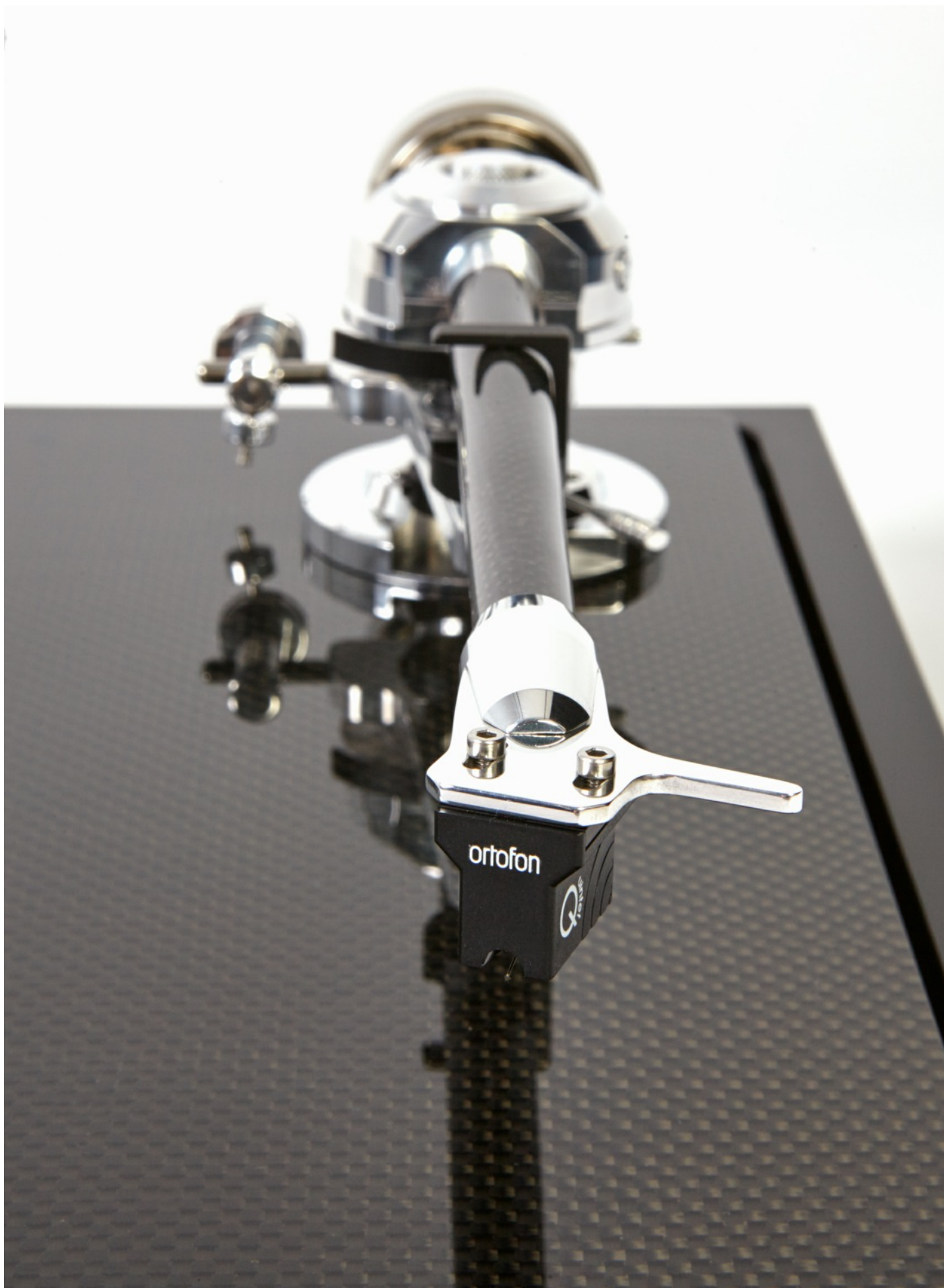


Townshend trough and paddle system I can understand the benefits of damping, though I feel it is more effective at the cartridge-end. The cardan or universal joint was coined by Gerolamo Cardano, an Italian, and this tonearm, by combining both friction-free pivot simplicity and cardan flexibility makes it very steady and robust, unlike the Hadcock Unipivot arm which put me off for many years until Roksan and others convinced me otherwise. This arm is actually quite complex in design, with cardan joint for the horizontal and two ball race ABEC7 bearings for vertical and unipivot damping pin to complete the setup. The whole isn't perhaps as beautiful as some tonearms, but it is very practical and a doddle to set up; Only the clever bias compensation caused me a few moments brain searching whilst I assembled the anti-skate weight to the sliding mechanism. A plastic cable is affixed under the tonearm base along a groove and down to the weight, a little fiddly for my old fingers. After which within a few minutes of adjusting arm height to get correct VTA I was ready to start listening.

For the review I was lucky to have a Koetsu Black K, the Japanese company's entry-level cartridge which retails for £1788. Koetsu's cartridges go all the way up to £7400 with bodies in the Platinum range fashioned from semi-precious stones such as Burma Jade, Blue Onyx and Blood Stone. The Black might not be quite so beautiful, but to the many followers world-wide it is equally as desirable. Handmade by Fumihiko Sugano, the son of Koetsu's founder the late Yoshiaki Sugano who named the company after his ancestor and role model, the 16th-century artisan Honami Koetsu, you could see the passion for quality from this master craftsman from the moment you open up the wooden box it came in. This particular cartridge has seen many years of faithful playing, being their first ever cartridge, and is still hard to beat, even at its not so entry-level price of £1788. With samarium cobalt magnet, a solid boron rod cantilever and hyper-elliptical diamond this is a well thought out cartridge. The end result of the engineering is a cartridge with a smooth and classy sound. This is for those who will listen with a glass of Chateaux Mouton Rothschild Pauillac rather than



## EAT C Sharp Turntable and Koetsu Black MC Cartridge



# EAT C Sharp Turntable and Koetsu Black MC Cartridge

a litre of Tesco Cider. Music was what this cartridge was all about, and combined with the C#, at a collective price of £4288, the duo worked together like newlyweds. Whether the detailed contra-rhythms in Bowie Blackstar or the minimalist simplicity in my aged EMI Debussy

L'Après-midi d'un Faune (CBSO, Louis Frem aux),

everything was there, and all with a very musical 'ease'. The Queen Collection album "The Miracle" track 1 'The Party' is a powerful foray of Freddie vocal harmonisation made so simple by the cartridge's lower-mid frequency excellence. The combination makes the music sound so in control, quite forgiving but not lethargic. The electric guitar keeps you on your toes. 'Khashoggi's Ship' was as rigid in control as the arm is made, with plenty of decay on cymbals when appropriate. Not bad for £2500 including arm.

Speed selection and control is via a tasty looking black box connected to the rear of the turntable, which flashes the speed you have selected until it has reached stable velocity. Sitting next to the turntable, the combination exudes class. Whilst the turntable might not have the twin-turbo power of the twin-motor Forte, it still gets up to speed quite quickly and with  $\pm 0.01\%$  wow and speed accuracy of  $0.08\%$  is all very good. Only the motor noise at -40dB is disappointing, though being kept away from the cartridge meant little interruption in my enjoyment of the music at the important end at -70dB. The Koetsu Black is not a clinical cartridge. If you want something open and neutral then look somewhere else. These cartridges have a personality of their own. In some way their name fits the sound; albeit grey rather than black. These are not bright sounding cartridges, but neither are they dull. Mike

Valentine's Vivaldi Four Season's had rich and strong strings but equally lively harpsichord provided by Paolo Cognolato. The sound pairing works well, and I could see why Absolute Sounds, who supplied the combination for review, put them

together. The more I played the more I liked. The sound, whilst not the most detailed presentation from vinyl was quite addictive.

## CONCLUSION

This is a really good pairing, both in terms of audio and looks. In contrast to the butch looking Forte, this is an item of jewellery and something you will either love or hate aesthetically. And you can choose between fluorescent blue, pink or red covers to hide it all under when not in use, if you so wish.

At £2500 plus cartridge this turntable/arm will be music to the ears of most that listen, but do consider carefully the best cartridge for your set up. For those shy of spending money on the Koetsu Black, then the Ortofon Quintet Black might be an option at a third of the cost. Both have good midrange frequencies working well with the arm. But rest assured that even a £2000 cartridge is not beyond this deck.

### Pros:

**Competitive pricing**

**Easy set up**

**Looks**

**Arm can handle top cartridges such as the Koetsu Black**

**Complete with record clamp**

### Cons:

**Not quite so quiet as some turntables**

**You might not like the aerodynamic look**

**Price at time of review £2500 without cartridge and £4288 with Koetsu Black Cartridge**

**Janine Elliot**





# Remton 383 Mk 2 Phonostage



**The Remton 383 Mk 2 Phonostage is made in Prague, uses a trio of ECC83s valves and costs a smidgen over £1000, Janine Elliot tries it in her system for Hifi Pig.**

There are an assortment of different phono stages entering the market at the circa-£1000 price point, in all shapes and sizes. Lots offer specifications and looks that would have cost much more some years ago, with many coming now from East European countries. Remton Audio, a company owned by Alexander Remmer, is a product of the Czech Republic and based in Prague, and whilst might well be a new name to many (indeed their first exhibit was only in 2013) they have already created a portfolio of phono stages that would put some established companies to shame.

Alexander has an obvious yearning for creating the best reproduction from your records. With a motto of “Real Vinyl Sound” and using proven traditional concepts and components Remton Audio are already creating products of good build and sonic clarity, and without a hefty price tag to match. Alexander favours moving magnet designs and only adds moving coil in “Mk2” versions as an “extra” facility using Sowter step-up transformers. The Mk1 version of the 383 reviewed here comes in at £550 and in two boxes; one for the power supply and one for the ECC83s/12AX7 tube based design. The Mk2 is now all in a single traditional black or silver fronted design of box, and with separate divided compartments to stop influences from the toroidal power supply, nothing exotic or wood, and even the valves are hidden inside rather than sticking through the top as in the Mk 1 incarnation. This model also has added Sowter step-up transformers for the MC cartridges, common to all Mk2 versions, and dip switches to allow you to fine tune to your cartridge of choice. With input impedance from 36 Ohm to 100k Ohm, and input capacitance choice of 0, 47 pF, 100 pF, 147 pF, 220 pF, 267 pF, and 367 pF, depending on permutation of the dip switches I could tailor my Kontrapunkt b to the optimum setting of 80Ohm load impedance via the 47k and 100K ohm switches and with the ‘MC-low’ switch, and 100pF capacitance. Their higher priced models use LCR RIAA design, whereas this £1050 offering, whilst having a similar appearance, uses a passive RIAA equalisation, zero negative feedback and excellent low noise output.

It is labelled as the ‘383’ because of the three matched JJ Electronic ECC83s tubes. Their cheaper 8382 model therefore has matched JJ ECC83S and JJ

# Remton 383 Mk 2 Phonostage

ECC82S tubes. My initial awareness was of a surprisingly efficient output and quiet noise level allowing the music to come through both loud and clear and all with a great depth; Saint-Saens Piano Concerto's (EMI Aldo Ciccolini) had full power and weight with superb midrange, a propensity that ECC83's in output stages give so well. It reminded me of the

sound from my ECC83/EL84 Leak Stereo 20. A high level of three-dimensionality of sound was also observed, particularly in the depth of sound front-to-back. Everything was smooth, relaxed, unfettered. At no time did I find this phono-stage needy nor was it limited. Saint-Saens Organ Symphony (EMI London Philharmonic Orchestra, Serge Baudo) had bite in the bass that filled my listening room with music, showing how well the bass-to-low midrange frequencies were looked after by this phono-stage. Patricia Barber 'Live in Paris' had an amazingly energetic and forward bass line, and ride cymbals with a clarity that made for an involved listening session. David Gilmour 'Rattle that Lock' first track is called 5am, and the quietness of the amp during this relaxing start wouldn't wake up anyone. Once David himself woke up I was compelled to listen and

felt very close to the music and hence the spirit of what this latest album was all about. As a contrast Tangerine Dream 'Rubicon' gave me a chance to match the ECC83's with VCO's, VCF's and VCA's of the 1970's. This was fun. A sound of delicacy and depth matched only by my treacle pudding that I heated up for tea. Unlike my pudding I never got sick of listening to the 383. No, this product had immense character. Only when reconnecting my choice \$8,000 Manley did I notice the speed – particularly at the start of bass sounds – wasn't quite as crisp and resolute, though there was more of it. Indeed, it was the bass/mid that got me engrossed in this design. The Tangerine Dream 180g album was less inviting through my own phono-stage, making me wonder whether the whole point of listening to music is technicality or to get involved inside the notes. The





## Remton 383 Mk 2 Phonostage

383 certainly captured my mind with curiosity and intrigue, placing me closely involved in the music that at points during my review made me wonder if I should actually buy one for my own listening room. This was a product very much worth trying out, and if you should actually want a MM-only version, then of course one is available at a cheaper price. Their LCR RIAA phono stages at £2750 and £3250 would however be my next point of call.



Excellent retrieval of detail for the price

### CONCLUSION

There are many phono-stages at this price point, but very few have the musicality, richness and warmth that this design brings to bear. This product is well worth an audition and it got me hooked right from the start, and whilst detail in delivery is not quite on par with top-end and top priced amplifiers, at £1050 it was extremely good fun to listen to.

#### Pros:

Warmth of sound

#### Cons:

The speed of sound not quite as good as some  
Slight upper bass – lower mid emphasis  
Basiclooks

Price at time of Review £1050

Janine Elliot

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# Roksan TR-5 S2 Loudspeakers

**The £995 TR-5 S2 loudspeaker has already been extensively reviewed by other hifi magazines over the years since its introduction, so why is Hifi Pig reviewing them now I hear you ask? Dominic Marsh will explain.**

**Hifi Pig**
**RECOMMENDED**


**R**oksan recently threw open their product catalogue for Hifi Pig to choose any component we wanted to review and other Pig reviewers plumped for their latest products, but I jumped at the chance of hearing these speakers and I did that as at one point a few years ago I was contemplating buying a pair (which didn't even get as far as an audition) because I am a great fan of ribbon tweeters which drew my attention back then to these particular speakers.

However, I found myself with some spare time on my hands before they arrived, so I did something which otherwise I would never do and that is to read some of the online reviews of this particular speaker. They all praised the tweeter's capabilities, but then comments about being a touch light in the bass registers, plus an "uneven frequency response" were noted. One reviewer's snapshot opinion is one thing of course, but when more than one are saying roughly the same thing then that is beyond

coincidence. Has the TR-5 speaker been unfairly blighted by the reviewers? Let's see shall we.

## CONSTRUCTION

Retailing at circa £995 it is very unusual to find a ribbon tweeter included in this price bracket... and at considerably higher prices too I might add. However, a ribbon tweeter also presents problems in selecting a suitable bass driver to pair with it, as the crossover point is usually at a higher frequency than using a conventional domed/coned tweeter which can reach lower frequencies. Roksan have overcome this by keeping the bass driver (relatively) small at 130mm with a 100mm cone made from doped paper to keep it light in weight for it to be agile enough to reach further up the frequency range and the crossover designed accordingly.

Cabinet dimensions are 370 x 190 x 280 (HxWxD in MM) and is reflex ported, the port itself is rear facing. Connections are via good quality binding



# Roksan TR-5 S2 Loudspeakers

posts which will accept bare wire, 4mm banana plugs or spades and configured for biwire or biamping, with jumper plates fitted for single wire operation. Cabinet construction details have not been provided by Roksan. The review pair submitted were finished in piano gloss white and fitted with white protective grilles attached by secreted magnets in the cabinet carcass.

Frequency response is quoted at 39Hz to 20 kHz for in room response. Rated at 88db sensitivity, 8 ohms nominal impedance.

## SOUND QUALITY

When I first connected them up to my resident system, I was somewhat taken aback by the amount of bass these speakers produced. They were anything but “bass light”, in fact they were positively prodigious in the bass registers – a bit too much so. I would say it was a comfortable 200 hours before I did any critical listening at all and to my perception the prodigious bass had settled down to a more evenly balanced sound. I dashed off an email to Roksan asking if the pair they had sent me had any running hours on them or were they hot off the production line? They confirmed that they were a factory fresh

pair and would need some time for running in. I also mentioned that the reviews I had read stated that the bass wasn't as full as some and he said to be truthful he didn't read reviews, but intimated that the pair I had been given for review had been upgraded with some trickle down benefits from the Darius speaker



# Roksan TR-5 S2 Loudspeakers



and hence we now have the “Series Two” designation for the latest production models.

Back to the sound then and I commenced a decent running in period before making any notes about the listening sessions. As an aside, when as a reviewer you have four sets of factory fresh speakers delivered to you to evaluate at the same time (give or take a week) and each of them need around 200 – 400 hours of running time to bed them in before the listening sessions begin, then spinning a dozen plates is a somewhat less daunting task, trust me. Interspersed with the speakers were also two amplifiers and a DAC as well, that all needed running in times of equal measure. Sheesh!

The real star of this show is without doubt the ribbon tweeter that Roksan have incorporated into the design and sets it well above the herd. Ribbon tweeters are not cheap and I would imagine specifying these for a sub-£1,000 speaker was not a decision taken lightly by Roksan, nor was having a piano gloss finish as standard either, but that is not within the remit of my review to ponder over and I set to task myself how it sounded as a package. As you

design for the crossover components and they had also re-calculated the amount of wadding that went in to the cabinets to improve the overall sound of the TR-5 S2's. Dan Worth has already reviewed the Roksan Darius speakers for Hifi Pig and a gather he was rather enamoured with them, so some transfer of that design into the TR-5 S2 model can be no bad thing. Now that says to me that I was not dealing with the exact same speaker that had been reviewed before over the years and buyers should be made aware of that, so wouldn't it be wise therefore to differentiate the latest production version from the earlier ones? Tufan, owner of roksan, readily agreed

would expect then, the treble registers were very well extended and clean sounding with just a mere touch of silkiness to keep any harshness at bay from poorer quality recordings, which to me is very welcome. It's all well and good aiming to achieve the highest fidelity levels of sound, but recently I've had some components in for review where the design brief was exactly that (aiming for the highest fidelity possible) resulting in products that were so relentless in presenting exactly what is in the recording it became very fatiguing within a very short space of time, so this reviewer is not in the least averse to a touch of beneficial colouration for a more musical and less



# Roksan TR-5 S2 Loudspeakers

fatiguing presentation and if we were to be brutally honest about this, then so too are the majority of audiophiles in the same camp and it then becomes my prime job to express where those colorations lie and which kind of audience it may appeal to the most.

Where was I? Oh yes, the sound quality. First job then was to place them on suitable stands, as I would certainly not class the TR-5s as a bookshelf speaker. I have a pair of Partington Dreadnought 60cm stands and they were pressed into service for the speakers to sit on. Being rear ported, they benefit from accurate positioning away from the side and rear walls and I found 25 – 30cm in each plane to be about the right balance for bass output. Sticking with the subject of bass balance, there is some real heft and weight in the bass registers, kick drum in particular having a real pounding clout behind it. The leading edge is a tad rounded off however, but not too much so by any means because my benchmark is set very high in this respect. Moving up the frequency range to the upper bass/lower mids, there was a cloaking type of warmth to the sound which will find many admirers no doubt, especially the loyal Roksan fans with K2 amplification which have their own set of unique sonic parameters and presumably this is what the TR-5's have been voiced to pair with, even so they should sound fine with other systems.

OK then, what if you don't own Roksan amplification, what suits the TR-5 S2's? In for

evaluation at this time was an Aaron "Chrome One" integrated amplifier (Also reviewed for Hifi Pig) which I admire greatly for its superb sound attributes, but the TR-5 S2's didn't sound at their best with this particular amplifier, nor with my resident amplifier for that matter either. Being the opportunist that I am and pressing all available

resources into action, I connected up the Roksan's to a Fezz Audio EL34 valve amplifier rated at 35 watts per channel which was also in for review. Now the TR-5 S2s sounded at home and more in harmony with this amplifier, producing a more fluid sound that was more pleasurable to listen to and remained there for the entire evaluation. The upper bass warmth was diminished by a small amount but still perceived by me and intruding into my listening pleasure which did perturb me somewhat. A glance round the back of the speakers and there they were, my nemesis – jumper plates on the speaker terminals. Plated brass do not make an audiophile connector so off they came, replaced by pure silver jumper wires I keep especially for dealing with this particular fiend. The midrange fog vanished, the treble seemed extend even further up the range now and the bass acquired a tauter more reassuring firmness, with that leading edge sharpened up a good tad too. Talk about a ha'porth of tar spoiling the ship as the old saying goes and why manufacturers spend inordinate amounts of time and money developing their products to sound at their best and then fit this cheap trash is beyond my understanding. Rant over, back to the subject matter in progress.

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"



# Roksan TR-5 S2 Loudspeakers

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. As expected, the ribbon tweeter fitted to the TR-5 S2's gave a faithful and accurate representation of those cymbal strikes and the venue ambience too. Bass kick drum had real impact and almost dominated proceedings, so any prior accusations of being "bass light" by others were disregarded by me from then on. Fink's voice had a real throaty rasp to it and for a short while I wasn't sure if this was an inaccurate representation given by other speakers without this trait, or the TR-5 S2's were coloured in this area, as my resident system does not show it up at all. Bit of both I would imagine. Imaging and soundstaging was excellent with plenty of width and depth to the sound. Not quite up to a holographic 'walk around' level, but very good nonetheless. Anyway good people, I played this album from stem to stern and the TR-5 S2's met all my listening benchmarks without issue.

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 TR-5 S2's didn't quite have full command and control of this album as my resident speakers are able, especially around the bass which tended to collide with other instruments and once or twice got recessed into the rest of the music. Top end detail was well defined and concise, that silkiness from the ribbon tweeter clawed back the losses arising from the bass and outdid my resident speakers with cone treble drivers so the score ended as a balanced draw.

I also played some classical music to round off the evaluation and I have several "Best Of" kind of CD's as this genre of music doesn't really thrill me to be truthful and as for enduring a full concerto my blood runs cold at the very thought, but readers like to know how components fare with this type of music and here then is how the TR-5 S2's conveyed orchestral music. As reflected in the paragraphs above, the bass was similarly fulsome and weighty,

string instruments came across as powerful and solid, bass and cello in particular had a rich sonorous quality that was rather pleasing and violins had a distinct absence of squeal or shriek. The woodwind section was similarly blessed and brass had a mellow sheen rather than a coarse attack as some speakers can demonstrate. Grand piano sounded like a Grand Piano, so what more could one wish for from a pair of speakers? Big pat on the back Dominic, you survived that well.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up the Roksan TR-5 S2 speakers then, the sound overall was warm and mellow rather than clinical, fast and sharp, bass was full, powerful and rounded, while the midrange still showed signs of colouration despite swapping out the jumper bars, which furthers adds to that perception of warmth. The upper registers were a delight, with that ribbon tweeter certainly releasing top end detail with clarity and a light touch of silkiness.

The real conundrum with the TR-5 S2's is whether or not they would fit in well with your own system. If you are already in the Roksan fan club then they should I would hazard a guess pair rather well with Roksan amplification, if you have a bright or bass light system they could fit in well there too. I got excellent results from the Fezz Audio EL34 tube amp, so don't rule out a pairing with a valve amp either.

The best attribute about them is that price tag.

### Pros:

**A ribbon tweeter in a sub £1k speaker is a rarity and elevates this speaker above the herd.**

### Cons:

**Midband coloration leans the sound towards the warm and mellow, so makes system synergy matching a little harder but rewarding when finally achieved.**

**Spend a few extra Pounds, Dollars, Euros or whatever to buy good quality jumper links for sonic benefits.**

**Price at time of review: £995**


**Dominic Marsh**



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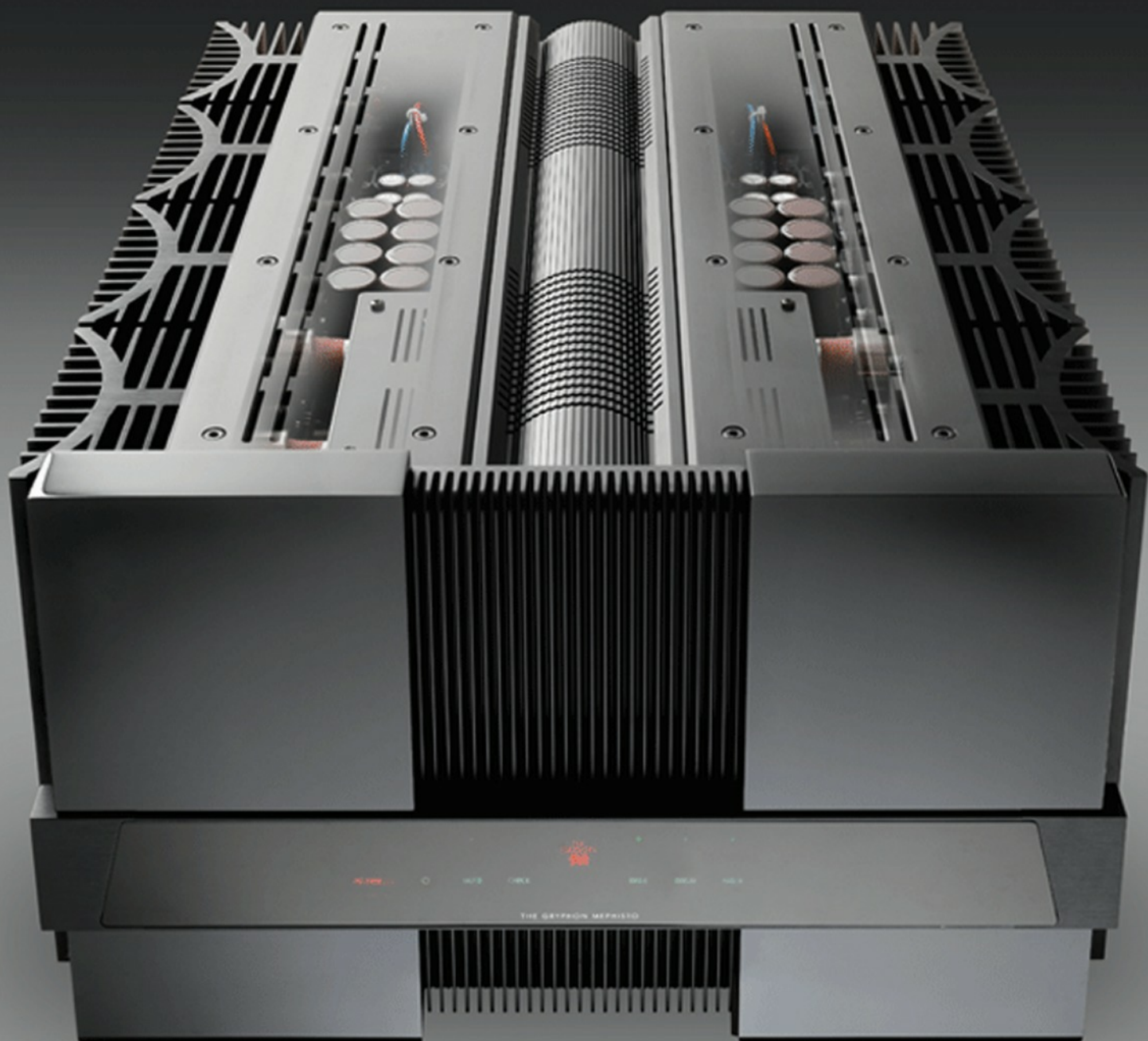
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# Fostex PM0.5d Active Loudspeakers

**Hifi Pig**
**RECOMMENDED**


**The Fostex PM0.5d Active Loudspeakers costing around £250 a pair are intended for small studio, nearfield monitoring, but Stuart Smith has had them on his desk as his daily desktop listen for a few months now...what does he think of these for home use?**

I do a lot of my day to day listening sat at my desk with the laptop as the source running JRiver and using a little Schiit DAC. It's not massively high-end of course but then I'm not listening critically at all. Basically what I require in a desktop system is something that sounds good enough not to offend and to be mostly out of the way as my desk is in a corner of the open plan living daytime living area. The only bit of kit that is actually on show at any point is the speakers with all the electronics and wires being hidden (mostly) by the desks cable management system (read a small shelf underneath the desk hidden by a drawer). Previously I'd been using a pair of KEF X300A which were very good and had an inbuilt DAC, but a move around to accommodate the newly appointed listening space, racks and speakers has meant that the desk has had to

# Fostex PM0.5d Active Loudspeakers

be downsized (and accordingly the speakers) with Linette commandeering the KEFs for her own daily use in her work space elsewhere in the house. So, I needed a new pair of desktops that would allow me to listen to tunes whilst I worked and through which to review promos and the like.

Enter the Fostex PM0.5d loudspeakers from SCV Distribution. The speakers are clearly aimed at desktop users and are really meant to be studio monitors aimed at those with smaller project studios. They are available in white or black (I went for black to match the desk) and cost just shy of £125 each...so £250 a pair. Round the back you've got TS phone and RCA input, a volume control, the power switch and the figure of eight power inlet. There's also a small oval port. The speakers are Chinese made but feel solid and well made, weighing in at 4.5kg each.

Importantly for me they are 181w x 280h x 260d (mm) which fit pretty much perfectly where I need them to. OK, for an audiophile audience this may not seem a huge consideration and many will make room for bigger speakers, but this is not an option on this occasion I'm afraid. The speakers I have on my desk need to fit the space and sound good...end of!

So what do you get for your dosh? You get a two way bass-reflex arrangement with a 20mm soft domed tweeter and a 130mm "Aromatic Polyamide" bass unit. The online bumpf tells me that the cone uses a mixture of cut and milled fibres that are made from aromatic polyamide that is then impregnated with resins for damping and rigidity. On top of this

the driver also has an "olefin" film thermally adhered to the surface which is there to control frequency response. The tweeter uses Fostex's UFLC technology (Poly Urethane Film Laminated Cloth). Driving the bass is a 35W class D amp whilst the tweeter uses a 23W amp with quoted frequency response being 55Hz – 30kHz. The amps are magnetically shielded should this be of importance to you.

The speakers are good looking little things with a rounded off baffle, no visible screws or fixings on the front, a Fostex logo and a blue LED to indicate they are switched on and receiving the source, they



switch off and the LED turns red when they aren't receiving a signal which is a useful feature. Set up is as simple as plugging them into the mains with the

supplied leads, attaching your source (I used RCAs) and putting them on the desktop...all very easy and a matter of a couple of minutes effort.

## SOUND

I've bought these for desktop use and I imagine domestic users who buy them are likely to be doing likewise. For nearfield listening they go plenty loud enough and only start to break up and distort at levels that would be uncomfortable for long periods. As you'd expect for a speaker that is primarily aimed at the home studio market the speaker is pretty flat with nothing jumping out of the frequency range to



# Fostex PM0.5d Active Loudspeakers

leap forward and take over. Bass can get a teeny bit woolly at higher volumes but that's to be expected really given their positioning and rear port, but what I really did enjoy about these speakers was the soundstage they present; everything is separated very nicely in the mix and whilst position dictates

the tweeters aren't at ear level, you get the impression of looking down on the stage with everything well positioned...given that I spend a lot of time typing with my head down I found this sensation rather pleasing (sort of being like at the front of the balcony at a concert). SCV sell a product called the IsoAperta which I have here at the moment that will raise the speakers to a more normal height and damp them but more on these at a later date. Mids are nice with female vocals being really well produced for a speaker at this price point and on jazz (Miles Davies "Kind Of Blue") you get to hear good detail in the instruments. Techno is relatively tight and full of detail with no complaints at all from this technohead.

## CONCLUSION

I don't think there's a great deal of need to go into a load of detail and bang on about these speakers at great length as there's little to whine about at the pricepoint. The little Fostex's are not fussy about your source material and play everything I throw at them perfectly well. Of course they are not perfect with my main minor gripe being the bass at high volume being a bit rounded off or woolly at the edges, but then at close quarters you're not going to want to push them I'd suggest. They don't plumb the



absolute depths with regards bass but what desktop speaker system is going to?

In a big room they are going to get a bit lost to be fair, but that's not what these are designed for. They are nearfield monitors and so the desktop environment is ideal for them. You would get away with using them in a smaller room such as bedroom for non-critical listening too i'd guess and I am tempted to get a second pair just for this purpose.

For the asking price and used as I am using them, they are well made and represent really good value for money. They look good on the desktop and pop them on the end of a decent little DAC like the Schiit Modi and you'll have very little to moan about for an every day, desktop listen that is packed with detail and with great soundstaging and imaging.

### Pros:

**Good price given you don't need external amps**  
**Compact and attractive**  
**Communicative and detailed**

### Cons:

**Bass overhang at loud volumes**  
**Price at time of review**

**Stuart Smith**

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## Questyle QP1r DAP

**Hifi Pig**

**RECOMMENDED**



I have always been fascinated by personal stereo, right from my early (and still working) Sony Walkman. Travelling on trains daily necessitated some means of entertainment. Things have gone a long way since cassettes. Whilst mp3 is still very much unfortunately the ‘hifi’ for the majority, a few of us are lucky to realise just how bad that all is and 24/96 and 24/192 are just the starting points for decent sound quality.

In the last few years we have had a steady introduction of hi-end players from Sony, iBasso, Cowon, Fiio and Astell & Kern, to name but five, but recently new comers and old hifi favourites such as AR and Pioneer have joined in the party. Questyle is the latest, with two stunning looking personal players, beautifully carved from aluminium playing FLAC, ALAP and DSD as well as older favourites. You will want to show off these beauties, rather than hiding them inside a leather or rubber case. This company is not a new name, making a series of DACs and headphone amplifiers.

There are two models in the range, the silver QP1 and the gold QP1r, which uses higher quality components, as well as a more critical approach to

the audio circuit. This produces lower distortion and superior sound quality. The QP1r also employs a different PCBA, larger internal storage chip (32GB) and a different software version. The QP1 is actually not being released outside of the Eastern market, so you won’t see this one in the UK.

The QP1 and the QP1r, which is reviewed here, use “Current Mode Amplification”. What led to these form an interesting story. Wang Fengshuo (Jason Wang), founder and CEO of Questyle Audio, was studying sound and not happy with what he heard, finding that use of the old tried and tested technique of negative feedback amplification brought transient intermodulation distortion (TIMD). Companies such as Gryphon, PASS and MOON, have been aware of this problem for years and have adopted the approach of little negative feedback or no negative feedback at all to avoid TIMD. In the spring of 2004, whilst at University, during the summer holidays Wang and three friends discovered that current mode circuits produced little TIMD. Krell, of course, had for a while been using CAST (Current Audio Signal Transmission) technology for audio transmission, and non-negative feedback design. To cut a long story short Wang and his fellow students designed



## Questyle QP1r DAP

their own current based amps which were at first unsuccessful, but later the results were high-performance with a massive bandwidth (1MHz) and a level of distortion only just measurable.

After graduating at University, Wang worked for a United States' IC design company. At this time he wasn't satisfied with headphone amplifiers for his Sennheiser HD800 so started working on building current based headphone amps, which led in 2007 to the CMA800, the world's first Current Mode headphone amplifier. By 2012 it was clear that he needed to develop his ideas professionally so he left his comfortable working environment, and started up Questyle Audio. The QP1 DAPs finally arrived after nearly 100 pre-production versions to get the components just right. Both versions of the DAP on review are highly spec'd both visually and component wise. Both are aluminium with Gorilla glass front and rear, Nichicon F95 professional Audio tantalum capacitors, power inductors from German company Würth, and Alps pots. With a 3300Mah battery life of 10 hours, this all reads and sounds good, working well for ALAC, APE, FLAC, AIFF, WAV, WMA Lossless up to 24bit/192kHz and high-Res audio files such as DSD128 and

DSD64. The low distortion levels mean that the QP1r produces a THD of 0.0006%, with the QP1 not much worse at 0.0015%.

First listening to the QP1r showed just how precise the sound was, and how much information can be coloured or lost in many DACs and players that I have played with over the last few years. Both models in the range use the 3x clock design in their CAS192D, ensuring stable and precise operation and with Cirrus Logic CS4398 DAC chips, and with the Current Mode Amplification technology makes it able to drive any of my headphones with great ease; and with 0.19ohm output impedance means it can drive low or high impedance headphones. Indeed there are settings for low gain mode and high gain mode for low and high impedance cans, respectively. The QP1r is the professional version.

Both are pure class A and using discrete transistors and components, and employ an iPod style wheel, with four touch sensitive buttons around this, two above and two below. The wheel takes some getting used to. This was certainly not Apple, and even more confusing than my Fiio X5 (which scrolls down the screen when you rotate anti-clockwise; opposite to



## Questyle QP1r DAP



what I would expect.) The scroll wheel on the QP1r needs to be pressed quite strongly for you to scroll up or down. Indeed you need to move it at some speed as well to navigate up or down to select a track and the bottom two touch sensitive buttons were my favoured method of navigating up and down in the end. What I did like, however, was the pin sharp resolution of the screen and speed of navigation of your music files; as soon as you put audio onto the internal 32Gbyte drive or the two microSD cards (128Gb max each), the files appeared in the menu, without the need to ask the device to add them to the library. Whilst the screen has a good definition, with a classy black and white screen around 43mm x 39mm which turns to colour if you have the cover design of your albums, some of the track information, such as the album is rather small and visible only in the right-bottom of the screen; I would prefer bigger writing for my old eyes.

Only at the start of my listening did the unit seem to glitch when playing Mp3 and wav-files, and walking on one occasion it stopped playing, necessitating me to pull it out of my pocket and press play again. I thought perhaps the battery was running out, but I

managed more than the quoted 10 hours of playing hi-def files between charges. But, and I really need to stress this, after a week in use it was as reliable as the British rain. One reason why I like to spend a large amount of time with each review is to iron out first impressions.

### SOUND QUALITY

Whether I fed it classical, jazz or pop it played with total authority and ease. The headphone amplifier is taken directly from their flagship headphone amp, the CMA800R, and the sound quality shows. Only when I used my Fiio X5 through the Slee Voyager headphone amp did I start to enjoy the sound as much as from the QP1r. The QP1r's headphone amp is good! While it was clear and extended, the Slee/Fiio had a better bass end, with a more valve-like musicality. But, in terms detail there was no comparison, and every time I returned to the QP1r. "Battle Royal" ("First Time: The Count Meets the Duke" Duke Ellington and Count Basie) had detail I couldn't imagine from the 1961 reel-to-reel to 24/192 copy. However, and this is the important bit, listening on the class-A Slee, I felt more involved in



# Questyle QP1r DAP

the music because I was less aware of the detail, if that makes sense. A bit like why many people preferred Plasma tv's over LCD rivals. The clarity wasn't so good, but the whole picture was better. My 24/92 rendition of Bax Tintagel Symphonic Poem wasn't quite so emotional for me in the Questyle. Christos Anesti 'Agnes de Venice' with its mélange of road noises, pink noise and electronics and ancient instruments, Greek orthodox vocal touches, record-scratches and much, much more, was clearer and with a wider soundstage in the QP1r, listening through my Audio Technica W1000X or Sennheiser HD650 headphones. This clarity did, however, seem to make the sound a tad clinical. Sting's Englishman in New York had an inspiring soundstage, though the tomtom wasn't quite as authoritative as I know. The 24/96 Drums Duet (LessLoss-Drums duet 5-24 bit-96 kHz-LL) was surprisingly open and the noise floor was exceptional. The sound was chillingly sparse and exposed allowing me to hear every nuance of sound with a clarity my Fiio just can't do. I could hear a pin drop. Again, though, it just lacked some of the musicality of the SLEE and Schiit headphone amplifiers.

At £699 it is still good value for money and is priced midpoint between the Pioneer XDP-100r and Acoustic Research M2 equivalents, but at this price point faces tough competition with other manufacturers vying for a place in the audiophiles' front pocket.



## CONCLUSION

When QueStyle first envisaged making a hi-res portable player they set themselves the target of making something as good as a complete hifi set up but in portable form, and they have managed almost like magic to squeeze into a mobile phone-sized pint pot something quite spectacular.

For a new comer to this scene this Chinese product is exceptionally good. After my initial disappointment at reliability it became extremely reliable and extremely fun to use. It also has sufficient output to drive my Sennheiser HD 650's without any trouble. After all, what is the point of a mobile device if you have to pair it with a separate headphone amp. I just wish it was slightly more musical, though.

**Pros:**  
**Definition**  
**Soundstage**  
**Looks**  
**Solid build**

## Cons:

**Slight lack of musicality**  
**The wheel!**  
**I would prefer bigger screen**

**Price at time of review £699**

**Janine Elliot**



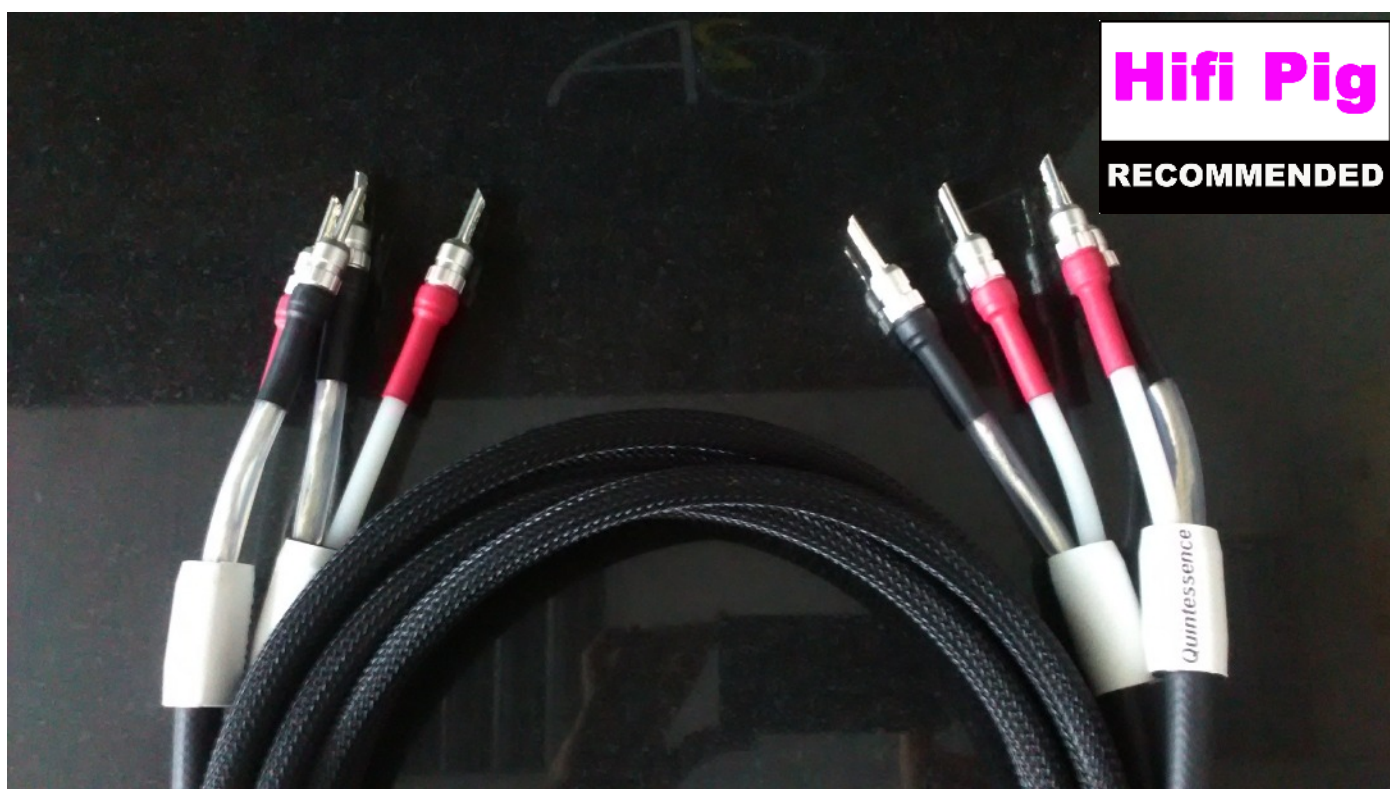
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# O2A Quintessence SUBLIM Speaker Cables



**O2A are a speaker manufacturer from Liechtenstein headed up by Anna Robathin. Here Dominic Marsh tries out the company's €1760 (2.5m pair) O2A Quintessence SUBLIM Speaker Cables.**

It's surprising sometimes where the products originate from for review by Hifi Pig. In this instance it is Liechtenstein, and it's a first for me. Also another first is these products are designed and hand built by a lady called Anna Robathin who originates from Russia and I mean that as no sexist remark, rather than a shining light that hifi manufacturers should not always be male orientated and a big welcome for design talent of female persuasion. In 2000 Anna graduated with distinction Vilnius High Technical school as an engineer of telecommunication (transmission audio, video and high frequencies signals and has good command of 5 languages (English, French, German, Lithuanian, Polish) and Russian as well. In addition she has got solid musical education. That provides the possibility to expertise the quality of Hi-End products and audio quality. In 2008 she created the first line of acoustic cables under her own brand name O2A and at the same time acoustic speakers and amplifiers were created in cooperation with French engineers.

O2A also produce a comprehensive range of both analogue and digital cables.

## CONSTRUCTION

The first thing that struck me when I opened the packaging for these SUBLIM speaker cables was

# O2A Quintessence SUBLIM Speaker Cables



how well built they are. The attention to detail is incredible even though the outward appearance is fairly basic and minimal. By attention to detail I mean the connectors are very good quality being made from copper. The heat shrink is cut and applied perfectly and the black outer mesh covering really is fitted tightly and evenly too. The outer diameter of the main cable is 12mm and reasonably flexible, which then splits into two tails at each end – one each for the positive and negative connections respectively.

The actual construction details elude me despite searching on the internet and the O2A website isn't all that forthcoming with details either, but I am given to understand the conductors feature copper and silver. I could have asked O2A to give me a detailed reply to a query, but my job is to convey to you what the product sounds like and in the cold light of day that is what counts in relation to money outlay for sound quality achieved, which to me is always the bottom line to consider.

Price at time of testing is 1760 Euros (GB£1366.00, US\$1992.00) for a standard 2.5 metre pair with the choice of either 4mm banana plugs or spade terminals. Other lengths and outer sheath colour choices are available to order.

## SOUND QUALITY

Overall balance is very neutral with no emphasis in any area of the audible frequencies. Bass is solid and articulate, in correct balance and proportion to the other frequencies so it was very easy to listen to. Treble is sweet and ever so slightly rolled off at the very top end so less than perfect recordings don't have a sting to them and this makes for long fatigue-free listening... a joy in that respect. What this cable is particularly good at is scouring out the micro dynamics in recordings, with more than one "not heard that before" kind of comments from me during the listening sessions.

For example, while listening to the opening track London Grammar's excellent 'If You Wait' album there is a wealth of synthesized reverberation effects and a deep penetrating bass line to the music, underpinning the female vocals. The SUBLIM cable portrayed this track with both the delicacy and power necessary to make it an enjoyable and satisfying listen. Track two from the same album contains some very obvious and deliberate fret fingering on steel strings from the guitarist and that comes across as crisp, defined and uncannily real sounding. The whole album is infused with artificial ambience and the SUBLIM cable rendered this perfectly.



# O2A Quintessence SUBLIM Speaker Cables

Ginger Baker's epic drum solo on 'Wheels of Fire' by Cream has the drum kit close mic'd during the performance which is ideal for testing transient ability. Snare drum and tom toms sounded taut and dynamic the way they should be and the cymbals had a polished refinement with no splashiness or tizz. Kick drum too has a solid "whump" that feels like it's hitting you in the pit of the stomach as much as you hear it with your ears.

Moving on to Derrin Nauendorf's 'Live at the Boardwalk' which is a live acoustic recording with Derrin playing solo acoustic guitar and accompanied only by a basic set of drums, the tonality of the guitar's sound was conveyed realistically and full of natural resonances and timbre. Every pluck on the strings was heard in great clarity and detail, although I cannot say that Derrin is the best of vocalists, but an enjoyable listen nonetheless.

Treble then is clean and clear, and I was able to pick out minute detail and finer points, even when the music got hectic. Bass has depth and power, without overhang or delay and is able to react to fast transients in a clear delineated fashion. Female vocals were up there with the best of the competition. Play a simple acoustic recording in a live venue and all the reverberation effects and ambience in a venue are delivered with solidity and competence. This was plainly evident when I played Fink's 'Wheels Beneath My Feet' live album and noted that the venue ambiences for each track actually sounded all different because they were each recorded at different locations during one of Fink's many European tours and in this respect the SUBLIM cable didn't disappoint at all. In the track called 'Sort of Revolution' we can hear the drummer driving down hard with his Floor Tom strikes which does reverberate powerfully around my listening room and really does show up any loose or flabby bass immediately when it occurs, but again the SUBLIM cables renders this very well.

The acid test for me personally is whether or not I play entire albums or just my favourite tracks off albums and secondly, how long do my listening sessions last for, so each album played from start to finish and very late bed times without realising what the time actually is, is a huge endorsement.

## CONCLUSION



How can I sum up these cables then? From appearance alone they are rather nondescript and I have seen a plethora of handsomely clothed cable confections over the years which had issues during the listening sessions. The O2A Quintessence SUBLIM cables on the other hand are no catwalk candidates as far as appearance goes, but had no issues sonically as best as I can tell, so priced at 1760 Euros for a 2.5 metre pair the majority of build cost appears to have been spent on the inside rather than the outside and that does impress me.

Neutrality is the keyword here and the entire frequency spectrum is in correct balance from top to bottom, so it isn't a cable designed to impress with its attention grabbing fireworks. It is all too easy to play track after track, album after album through these cables and you feel well sated at the end of your listening sessions. Has to be a recommendation from me then and well worth searching out for to audition in your own system.

### Pros:

**Neutral sounding with equal balance throughout the range from top to bottom.**

**Ranks highly in sound terms amongst its peers in the marketplace**

### Cons:

**External appearance doesn't convey high quality commensurate with cost.**

**Price at time of testing : 1760 Euros (GB£1366.00, US\$1992.00) for a standard 2.5 metre pair**

**Dominic Marsh**



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# Studio Connections Platinum Digital Cables



**Studio Connections are a cable company building their cables in the UK and headed up by Michael Whiteside. Here Dan Worth takes a listen to their Platinum digital cables costing £1350 for 1m, terminated lengths.**

Studio Connections takes a radically new approach to making cables by centring the design process on how the brain perceives spatial and positional information with sound. They first delved into the biology of how sensory receptors deduce position, distance and depth.

In developing the products, designer Michael Whiteside draws from a BSc in Electronics and over 30 years of recording music, manufacturing cables and building studios that have included recording and mix studios such as the BBC, EMI Abbey Road and King's College, Cambridge.

"The technical result for our cables is that they have very accurate timing across the broad, high frequency spectrum, that is essential for our ability to interpret spatial awareness. The musical result is that the cables deliver faithfully, allowing us to hear incredibly natural sound and stereo with realistic dimensions." says Michael.

Platinum Digital cable is designed to provide excellent balance and ground path on both the balanced and unbalanced versions and to prevent stray currents and interaction between earth and signal carriers, even at radio frequency. Like all Studio Connections cables, the conductors are formed in a high nitrogen content insulator to provide fast interconnectivity.



# Studio Connections Platinum Digital Cables

## PLATINUM DIGITAL CABLE - Measured

Technical Data and Specifications:

Conductor material: Ultra High Purity Scandinavian Copper

Primary dielectric layer: Olefinic/nitrogen foamed primary

Second dielectric layer: Solid polyethylene secondary skin

Lay: Parallel

Overall jacket PVC with Polyethylene (PET) Braid

Overall diameter 19.0mm x 7mm oval/ 0.747 inch x 0.275

Single Ended (Unbalanced)

Drain wire: 196/0.1 high purity copper

Capacitance (min) 11pF/m, 3.38pF/ft

Resistance 0.012 ohms/m, 0.0036ohms/ft

Conductor: 196/0.1 ultra high purity copper

Connectors: Studio Connections Custom RCA Gold Plated

Balanced

Conductors: 2x 196/0.1 ultra high purity copper

Capacitance (min) 11pF/m, 3.38pF/ft

Resistance 0.012 ohms/m, 0.0036ohms/ft

Drain wire: 7/0.2 tinned copper centre woven

Connectors: Studio Connections Custom XLR Gold Plated

## AT FIRST GLANCE

Each cable from Studio Connections (SC) comes in a nice presentation box, not overly elaborate by any means. Often with cables one is left wishing the product cost was less and the wooden box with gold inscriptions was just a Jiffy bag. With Studio Connections it is a nice satin cardboard box, sufficient for task and is graphically pleasing.

Inside you find an oval shaped cable. I was greeted by a XLR AES/EBU and an RCA SPDIF digital cable. On inspection the cables seem incredibly well made and have an understated yet high-end feel to them, I especially liked the plugs at each end. Their grip and strain relief on the cables was tight with no gaps and very strongly adhered. I rang Michael Whiteside and asked him about the plug bodies, he told me that they are actually made in house and the bodies are formed on a 3D printer - very snazzy. The printer itself was also built in-house with custom heads and configurations for speed and accuracy.



# Studio Connections Platinum Digital Cables

Installing them into my system was a breeze, there is great flexibility and although for the RCA version the plug casing looks large I didn't have any issues with varying equipment when connecting in close proximity of other cables.

I've been a long term user of Studio Connections cables and the former company name Abbey Road Cables, owning cables from each of their ranges over the past several years. I've always obtained a great balance of sound from their products and considered their ranges to be very well priced and extremely effective in application over many items of kit in various systems. My last experience with SC was about 18 months ago as I like to try new products from different companies, so when approached for a review of the Platinum Digital Cables, which I had not investigated until this time I was more than happy to accommodate the company.

## THE SOUND

With the cables already being thoughtfully burned in were ready to go out of the box.

As my DiDiT DAC212 doesn't accommodate AES/EBU I used an Audiobyte Black Dragon as my test DAC. Owning the Hydra X+ from the same company allowed me to connect both SPDIF and AES/EBU cables simultaneously and simply flick between inputs to compare with each and of course assess direct comparisons with other cables.

## Similarities

**I have had a lot of cabling from all over the world and I can stand on my oath and state that Studio Connections Platinum Digital Cables are some of the very best and the fact they are built here in England makes me smile even more**

This section of similarities needed to be the first and foremost piece of dialogue. Both cables have sonic differences from their respective implementation and the AES has a slightly darker or deader background, but most notably when listening to either cable I was drawn most definitely to the landscape of the image. The soundstage produced by both cables was very well locked in, allowing for a non bloated centre focus and deep, intricate details to hold areas of the soundstage that was already accompanied by other artefacts in a way that you began to believe that there really was increased layering and positional awareness of large instruments and smaller inflections of

vocals and room acoustics.

For example: Joss Stone's 'sticky mouth' could be heard so well that you want to offer her a glass of wine - or three. Nils Lofgren's guitar strings sat clearly in front of the body of the instrument with clear definition on his palm heel on the wooden casket, whilst crowd applause was crowd applause rather than a Sunday morning fry up sizzling away in the pan.

The construction of each cable is effectively what SC see as being the optimal configuration of chosen materials for each of the respective applications. A true 75Ohm SPDIF and a true 110Ohm AES/EBU, the latter being more effective on longer runs, yet in most domestic environments either should suffice.



# Studio Connections Platinum Digital Cables

## RCA SPDIF

When looking for an RCA SPDIF cable most of us settle on versions which are not true 75Ohm but rather 50Ohm. Most manufacturers believe this is sufficient, it does work and sound will travel from point A to point B, but impedance mismatches will inevitably create errors in timing, increased jitter and result in a poor or less stable image. On various pieces of equipment over time, which I knew would remain in my system for sustained periods, I would also have the RCA digital inputs reconfigured to the BNC type and always found great benefits in having the cable I was using at the time reterminated to comply. Using a Platinum digital RCA rescued me from the annoyance of pondering over this factor.

So, I began listening intently, firstly to some very bare acoustic music and gradually busied things up. During my initial listing tests I couldn't hear any hash in the background, notes decayed ever so well and tone was really natural with expressive timbre. As things got busier, introducing more instruments and a vocalist, I could clearly ascertain each's position within the soundstage accurately, with no blurring or smearing of the vocals. Even drum strikes would sit separately defined to string decays and

reverbs. With the busiest of orchestras or dance music at volume I had a new found extra stability to my stereo imaging.

The cable doesn't really have a sonic signature, it's very truthful and transparent and will allow the listener to hear a cohesive and balanced rendition of a recording and will help also in ascertaining system synergy. If the sound replayed after installing one of the digital cables mentioned in this review doesn't suit, then I would stress that there are clocking or software issues at play, or that the listener simply prefers a coloured representation of the sound, which of course is fine. If the system components are really well matched then the SC digital cables will simply just express this without bottleneck.

The Platinum digital being from a brand named Studio Connections should also not put the willies up you, there's no analytical portrayal of the music, no hardness, grain or unwanted nasties being reflected from one point to another, just a faithful, musical and pure sound that for me, doesn't leave me thinking about cables anymore.

## Balanced



# Studio Connections Platinum Digital Cables

I've always championed the 110Ohm XLR variant and its ability to sustain longer runs without affected noise pollution, better noise rejection and of course the stability and low mass of the plugs' conductors themselves.

In any balanced situation an 110Ohm cable will win over an RCA cable... this will be debated by tube lovers and the single ended circuit design of course. However, my latest preamp is a single ended design with unbalanced XLR outputs allowing for an XLR cable construction to be used. Many other cables can boast superior noise rejection properties in their most complex forms over XLR in its most basic, but I am purely commenting on the basic structures and standard implementation.

Using the Platinum digital AES/EBU over the SPDIF variant allowed for what seemed to be an increase of just a few percent in leading edge clarity and decay prominence. I believe that in this test, within my room and system that the AES was a superior implementation and companion to the digital front end I had in play from Audiobyte.

Transient response seemed faster also and if you could say that the RCA was a little softer then the AES was a little sharper, not in tonality but in the rendering of edges and decays. The SPDIF version could be said to be a little more musical and the AES a little more detailed, but this really would be system dependant and the differences are minor. The XLR based digital Platinum cable gave a little more clarity also to a male vocalists' lower tones and the RCA a little more roundness to a females' top end.

Most notably during all of my listening sessions with this cable was just how unforced and musical the sound was, ever so less digital and the imaging was just so much tighter, giving a feel of more accurate timing with realistic reverbs and decays. Everything I was hearing made more sense over all the other high-end digital cables I've heard to date and I felt the review item was really just 'fit and forget'. Nothing stands out but everything is better - if that makes sense?

## CONCLUSIONS

It's clear to understand how Michael Whiteside has spent so much time in the professional arena and

how his skills are referred to as 'absolutely crucial'. It's so easy to put wire into plugs and make a connection, but really understanding the true physics of each application of cable is absolutely paramount.

I appreciate the way Michael talks about cables and the analogies he has in describing design attributes to the less knowledgeable of us and when you hear how he explains topics to even the least savvy of us one can readily relate to what he is conveying and all information passed on from him to the industry and customers alike is all researchable and verifiable. There's no BS (apart from the industry standard) involved, it's just good honest dedication, experience and a commitment to his chosen sector of the industry and I guess this is why he is somewhat indispensable in his area.

Moving from one area of audio into another doesn't always transfer well, but a cable is a cable right? Wrong, each cable needs a pragmatic and experienced approach to determine it suitable for its chosen application. Then there is the tweaking of the standards to produce a superior version, I guess having a physics background can help with the relationships of electrons to dielectrics and material interaction on a tribo-electric level. Somehow I don't think most of us care really.

What we do care about is a cable which is honestly made by an individual who can clearly prove his credentials and review processes such as these which independently broadcasts opinions on the cables in question. I have had a lot of cabling from all over the world and I can stand on my oath and state that Studio Connections Platinum Digital Cables are some of the very best and the fact they are built here in England makes me smile even more.

**Pros:**  
**Well constructed**  
**Neutral and highly transparent**  
**Impeccable timing and soundstaging**

**Cons:**  
**Same with all high-end cables, they do cost a pretty penny.**  
**Price at time of review - £1350 1m**

**Dan Worth**





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## Atlas Cables Budget Loom



**David Robson takes these relatively budget-minded cables from Scottish manufacturer Atlas out for a drive both individually and as a full loom set up. Atlas EOS Modular 4 Way Power Distribution Block (unfiltered) £295rrp and Atlas EOS Power Cord. 13A 2sq mm (£160)**

The Atlas EOS 4 Way out the box looks and feels like a good quality and well-made piece of equipment. It has no switches or unnecessary lights added to it, just a simple steel encased functional box. Although reading the specifications on the Atlas website this is no simple box. Each outlet has star wiring and the box is shielded from Rf / EMI via a welded steel chassis. It has a maximum 2.3kw capacity.

The EOS power cords likewise are well made with solid looking plugs and shrouded in black nylon style webbing. Slipping the 13A plug into its socket with so much ease it was virtually sucked into position, this brings to the fore how well this bit of kit has been made. All the components inside the sockets have been designed to give as great a contact area as possible and use materials that aid in the process to get the electricity as “quickly and as cleanly” as it can to your equipment.

I was unsure of what to expect from fitting the EOS to my main system as I was lucky enough to have a dedicated mains electric spur added to my listening

## Atlas Cables Budget Priced Distribution Block, Power Cables, RCAs, Speaker Cables and Optical Cables

room on a rebuild a couple of years ago. I have also always used a cheaper filter block on all the electronics in my home routinely also.

There is always a lot of “debate” with regards to power supplies and mains filters (among all the other debates) on social media groups with some people just discounting it as Hogwarts Snake Oil, others vehemently needing to vent their disagreement and then those who will sit back and smile knowing that their money has been well spent. My own take is that I’d always add some sort of filtering, as long as it doesn’t detract from the sound quality. If you hear sonic benefits then Boomshanka Baby! Enjoy.

Back to the Atlas EOS. Playing the much overused Dire Straits “Brothers In Arms” CD there is a change to the music. It’s not a complete night and day, it isn’t even massively different in tonality. Then again, it doesn’t have to be, but different it is though! The change is more about a sonic perspective, maybe a little brighter. It feels like instruments have either grown or reduced slightly in size. Not in an unnatural way, just reorganised their relation to one another. This is only a very slight re-marshalling of priorities. Drums, guitars and vocals are as prominent as ever, but some of the associated percussion has moved a little in intensity, giving space to the music around it and offering up a bit more “realism” and believability to what I’m listening to. “Money For Nothing” bangs out with good timing and rhythm, Mr Knopffler’s vocals not getting congested in any way, drums and bass guitar striking the beat for the song and the growling lead guitar sits clearly behind the singer... but very clearly defined and in its own space. “Why Worry” has a similar presentation, the music feels quite airy and has taken on a delicate edge, the width and height of the soundstage seems to have grown too. Not with instruments but with space. During the track there is an echoing glockenspiel type sound from what seems to be the drum kit, towards the upper right of the sound picture. It arrives very much in a defined targeted position. Rock solid every time. Bass response throughout the album seems to dig a bit deeper, with a little added power and extension.

Throwing a bit of female lead vocal into the mix I pop in a bit of Joan Armatrading, from her “Love and Affection” album. The well-known “Drop The Pilot” trips out with nice timing and rhythm,

although the music seems to have lost a little in excitement. Her voice has lost a little sparkle somehow, and yet the sound overall feels a little brighter. Onto “Show Some Emotion”, the bass boogies out funktastically and the acoustic guitar strings come across detailed and have a nice hard metallic edge and feeling, cymbals have a crispness that isn’t too hard either. Her vocals yet again just not hitting the spot for me. A change of artist and recording is required.

Eddi Reader’s Fairground Attraction has been with me from my teens, an amazing singer whose CD single of “Clare” has accompanied me to every audition. I’ve recently expanded my single CD and bought into several more Eddi and Fairground Attraction albums. I’m glad to say any reservations about the earlier Armatrading vocals with the Atlas EOS attached has been unfounded as Eddi’s musicality is rich and warm on tracks like “Walking After Midnight” and “Jock O’Hazeldean”. Details from the instruments in the Parisian-esque presentation of “Clare” are all clear and present. The track can get complicated and sibilant towards the end, but it never becomes a painful experience. Just a pleasant assemblage of sounds.

### CONCLUSION

It’s in no doubt in my mind that the Atlas Eos and its associated power cables have an impact upon the sound by adding it to your system. I think if you have never used mains blocks/filters/conditioners before then bringing this to the table will bring pleasing results. It’s an open airy sound. It brightens up the sound a tad and adds a little hardening to the mids and treble, not in a clinical or acidic way but it takes a bit of the roundedness and a little warmth away from the sound.

I think the benefits need to be weighed up by the listener, as changes to a warm rounded sound if that’s your bag may not be to everyone’s taste. A home demo is recommended. If I was starting out again on my Hi-Fi journey I would definitely add a Mains block from the beginning, then build with confidence knowing you have a good launchpad from the off.

**Atlas Element Digital Optical Cable 1m (£30)**



**Atlas Cables Budget Priced Distribution Block, Power Cables, RCAs, Speaker Cables and Optical Cables**



The Atlas Element cable is a bright white flexible cable using a PVC outer and incorporates a single strand of Polymethyl Methacrylate (PMMA) at its core, this is sometimes known as Acrylic Glass. This inner light conducting fibre is coated with a thermal protective shielding reducing warping risk and then the white outer protective PVC covering giving a final protection layer from impact or other damage.

On examination of the metal die cast plugs there are 2 recessed rubber bands on each connector to aid to gripping the plugs, these are easily dislodged and can come off. Either they need to be replaced with a tougher band or done away with altogether. Apart from that the Digital Optical cable is fitted with quality moulded ABS Toslink connectors. Using a good quality Toslink is essential as unfortunately I have inadvertently damaged and broken off the optical doors with inferior connectors on cheap cables.

Using my last used CD for the previous EOS review (Fairground Attraction "The Very Best Of") for comparison purposes, it's immediately obvious that this cable loses nothing much in the way of anything

from the original sound within the CD player itself. Eddi Readers voice has its beautiful liquid quality left securely in place on "The Moon Is Mine" and "The Wind Knows My Name". The deep bass notes reaching down low, not getting flabby or loose, her voice sailing from low to shimmering high without losing any composure. The brush on the snare drum, sweeping and detailed so you can feel the pressure of the bristles on the skin. I'm finding it difficult to find a negative to say really. If really pushed there may be a slight rise within the bass of vocals giving an ever so slight wooden feeling to some deeper vocal moments, this on only some tracks and has to be hunted out as its on very few.

A track this is sometimes apparent on is my copy of The Eagles "Hotel California" (remastered) title track. Nay nonny nay, it's not there, there is a slight rise in bass though, a slight warmth to it. It's not an unlikable sound at all! It remains tuneful and allows you to follow the bass guitar closely. Guitars range out well at the commencement of "Life In The Fast Lane" followed soon after by the well defined kick of the bass drum. Vocals are accurately placed and hold enough detail to feel its gravelly nature. The

## Atlas Cables Budget Priced Distribution Block, Power Cables, RCAs, Speaker Cables and Optical Cables

dynamics of the track are all held in place too. There is plenty of weight in the lower registers, although possibly a softening to it. Soundstage on “Wasted Time” is wide and well spread, that warmth keeping the vocals a little back in the musical picture, but it’s perfectly acceptable given the price of the Atlas Element Cable and the performance as a whole is very good.

Just to round things off with a bit of head-banging rock (before my other half gets home!) Guns and Roses get to go for a spin. Appetite For Destruction can sound a little harsh on my system at times. “Sweet Child O’ Mine” comes across with true outdoor concert like credentials. Axle Rose’s voice hanging correctly out front of the speakers and electric guitars sitting in the background giving a good depth to the performance. “It’s So Easy” guitar intro is rock solid in its composure, the accompanying cacophony of drums and cymbals come crashing out, but still being able to follow the vocals is a good sign that the detail isn’t being lost within the music.

### CONCLUSION

This is a good budget Optical interconnect from Atlas. The Element portrays a faithful way to transport your digital signal from the player to the DAC. It loses very little if anything from the original recording. My own thoughts are that optical cable can add a little warmth or rounded sounds to music per-se. That is more about the equipment involved rather than the cable itself.

### Atlas Equator Integra Mk3 RCA 1M (£75)

First look at the Equator cable brings about a definite quality look and feel. The pearlescent off white outer is terminated with clear plastic type RCA connections. The cable feels weighty in its construction, and is nicely finished. The Equator Integra cable doesn’t seem to be marked as directional. If a cable isn’t marked as directional my rule of thumb is that I match the writing on the cable to the same orientation and let the signal flow to the direction of the writing. This may seem a little picky, but it gives every unit tested and reviewed the same equal treatment. This Equator cable is fitted with Atlas’s Integra RCA plugs. A non-magnetic two piece internal that is solder free and cold welded.

Further details are found on the Atlas website. Just to add, Atlas has supplied a Burn-In style CD with the cables. This is a really nice touch from the Scottish company. It’s also accompanied with an information booklet too that has a lot of information about this and other products. A welcome addition to your purchase.

After a few days burn in time I start my listening session with a bit of Steely Dan’s “Gaucho” album. And WOW! I’m immediately impressed with what I hear. A Beautifully succulent smooth sound, “Glamour Profession” bounces along with great verve and rhythm. There is a great deal of detail being pulled out of the recording, a very natural presentation. Bass guitar easily followed along with the vocals which can sound a little distorted with some cables, but with the detail brought out by the Equator this is not the case here. “Time Out Of Mind” starts with the Bass drum kicking away and a weighty piano intro. It’s deep and it’s taut and musically correct to my ears. The same can be said about the piano, it has a good presence and is not too forward or hard. The width and depth of the soundstage is just perfect. I have heard few set-ups, never mind cables alone, that can match what I’m hearing here. “My Rival” the slow melodic drum arrives with great timing and pace. The sound effects coming from far and wide within my listening room, the different cymbal strikes are easily differentiated between. If I have to be pushed to say a negative, it would be that the cymbals could sound a tiny bit crisper and the timbre could do with just decaying a millisecond longer. That is being super picky though.

From the funkiness of Steely Dan, to the chilled out tunes of Ben Howard’s “Every Kingdom” CD. A great album, not only for its content but its presentation too. The Detail in the track “Everything” gets brought to your ears. There is a bit of background shuffling and guitar string tuning and touching all heard clearly. The plucking of guitar strings and the touch of flesh on the metallic wires is all apparent, even the faked crackles and pops of vinyl (pet hate) is all there. Ben’s vocal is honed into the very middle of the soundstage. The inflections in his voice give an “in the room” presence and hangs a foot or more forward of the rest of the music. “The Fear” Guitar and vocal in isolated space, together and yet separate, the beat arrives and in great stereo “magicality” I have lost my speakers. They have

**Atlas Cables Budget Priced Distribution Block, Power Cables, RCAs, Speaker Cables and Optical Cables**



ceased to exist in the room. Completely gone, just music left. With the lights off and my eyes shut there is just black void and sounds.

In honour of the recently sadly departed Thin White Duke I play “Best of Bowie”. “Ashes to Ashes” rips out, taking me back to my youth, Bowie’s vocals clear and individualistic, even in the multi-layered presentation, never getting lost within the track. “Lets dance”, “China Girl” and “Modern Love”. Probably not the best loved songs for the Bowie aficionados, but all have me foot tapping and wanting me to find my sharpest tailored suits and shirts, and to find a local 80’s discotheque to handbag dance in (none of which now fit or even exist)!! The varying qualities and sound of recordings across this “Best Of” CD show that the Atlas Equator Integra is unfussy of what it’s presented with. It seems to take everything in its stride.

## CONCLUSION

I have to commend Atlas for this great cable. It stands up to cables costing five times or more the price. It wipes the floor with any budget cables. It’s neutral, rhythmical, detailed and balanced. The soundstage has to be heard to be believed. The only

downsides I can hear is that it could do with a bit more top end sparkle. My system is quite a warm sounding affair anyhow and this may not be the case with other set-ups. As is always the case you should audition your intended purchases at home where possible. This will be my recommended cable to all who enquire.

### **Atlas Equator Mk2 Bi-Wire (2 into 4) Speaker Cable 2m (£120 terminated)**

Having just reviewed the Equator Integra RCA cables I was looking forward to the Equator speaker cable. Both sets of wires have a very similar look of a pearlescent off white outer PVC style casing. The banana plugs fitted to my sample are my preferred gold plated Z style. I find these fit well into the 4mm holes and offer good contact. The banana plugs have grey shrouds which are not shrink-wrapped onto the cable leaving a gap from the shroud to the cable. I’m quite sure that all is very secure and well put together, but I’d like to see it fit a bit better with a more secure feel. Apart from that little niggle the rest of the cable is nice and flexible. My set for review is 2 banana plugs at the amp end to 4 at the speaker end allowing for Bi-Wiring. Where the cable splits to form the 4 wires there is an extra shrink-wrapped cover and it’s very secure and well finished.

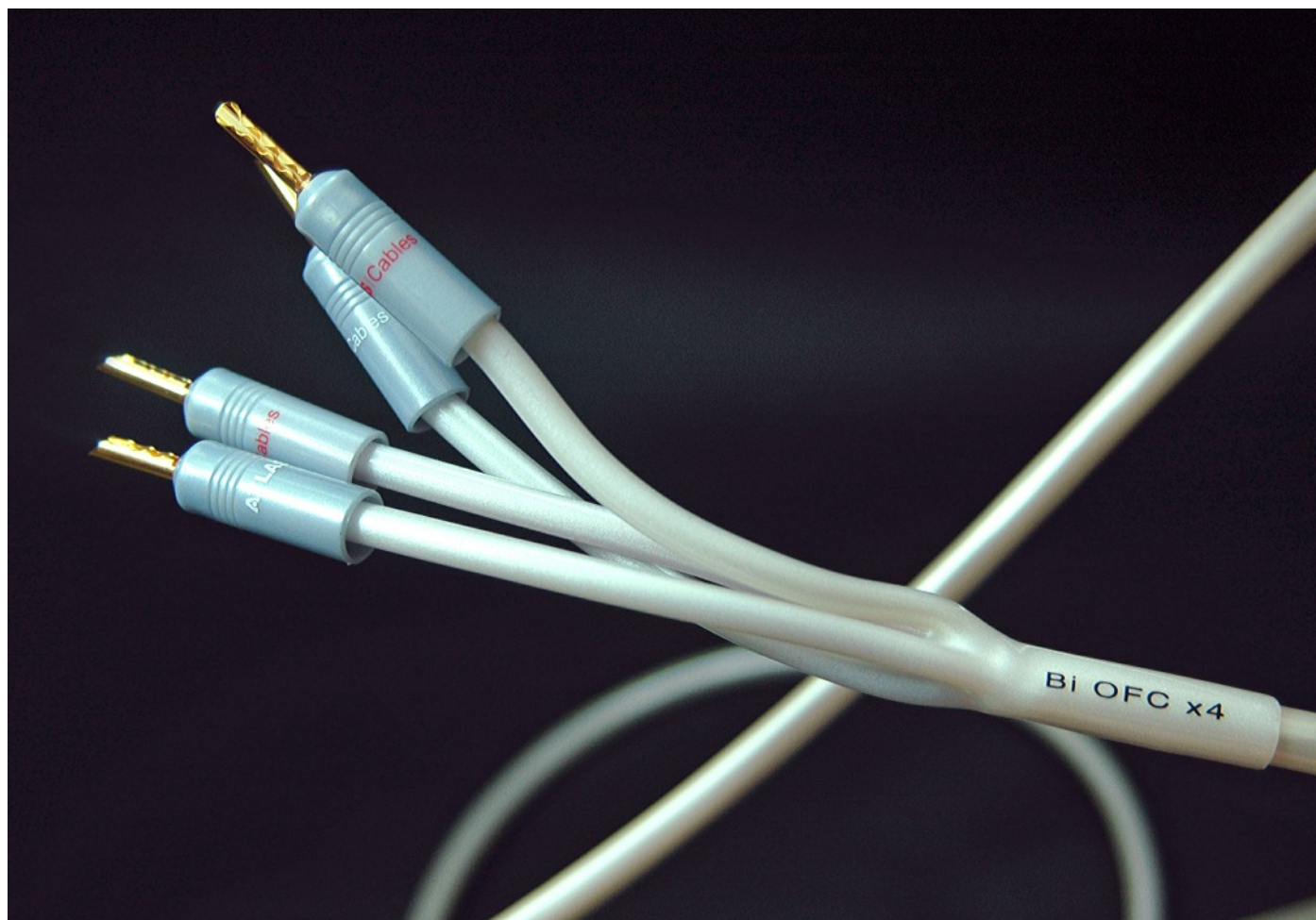


## Atlas Cables Budget Priced Distribution Block, Power Cables, RCAs, Speaker Cables and Optical Cables

After letting these cables burn in for a few days (Atlas offer a burn in service too) I load in the much used Eagles “Hotel California” into the CD. Rather apt after the sad departing of Glen Frey. We all know how this one starts with a nicely picked guitar. Strings come across well defined and frosty crisp, the percussion, cymbals and shakers all come through audibly clean, and appear out wide of the soundstage. The first thump thump of the bass drum kicks out with good power, but it’s a little less defined as the other instruments. This is the same for the other drum sounds, there is a slight softening to the stick strikes, making the drums sound a little soft. It’s not massively obvious and neither does it upset the song as a whole. Other details though are good. Nice smooth vocals, guitars are sweet sounding without becoming hair raising and the bass although a little softened goes deep.

Popping in “Crime Of The Century” a Supertramp staple for my listening tests and reviews, the story is the same. There’s bags of detail on offer from recordings. Playing “School” which has a lot of different sounding parts to the record, there is a good

depth to the sound, punchy and rounded. With just that slight softening to the basslines - this softening takes a little excitement out of the male vocals, luckily the Atlas Equator show good timing and rhythm helped no doubt by their weighty kick. “Hide In Your Shell”, the introductory Male vocals lose a little feeling and emotion to them as the bass tones within the low registers in the voice makes the words a little indistinct. It is by no means a muddy or distorted sound, as when the rest of the music picks up tempo it’s all good in your face fun. As much as I may seem to be picking holes in the Equator its positives far, far outweigh any negatives. To prove a point to myself I go for some modern pop. Jess Glynne’s “I Cry When I Laugh”. Now I’m not about to get my old disco dancing attire out of retirement and tell you I’m up with the young guns. This is about as modern as I get. “Hold My Hand” is initiated by single piano key strikes and Jess’s smooth, sweet vocals hanging out to the front of the speakers. (After having to turn the volume down 2 notches from my standard listening level, lordy!). This is followed by the big bass sounds of the club scene, it just bounces along with good head nodding, foot swinging tunefulness. “Take Me Home” shows



## Atlas Cables Budget Priced Distribution Block, Power Cables, RCAs, Speaker Cables and Optical Cables

how beautiful Miss Glynne vocal ability is. It's just a pity the music makers don't see how her voice should be accompanied by a full spectrum of sound from the piano ( like on Songbird, McVie/Fleetwood Mac ) not the compressed variant on this track. This is the recording and nothing to do with our review cables, as the Atlas Equator do everything in their power to make this song an emotional cracker. The deep bass banging out, the artists vocals not affected by the ka-thump of the rhythms. Putting the pop/disco driven "Don't Be Hard On Yourself" up to silly levels to see how the Atlas Equator coped, I can truly say there is something that takes me back to my youth with this pop music! Turning on the disco lights to add to the ambiance, the cable didn't distort this electronically assembled music; neither did it harden up the female vocals, keeping everything quite separate and distinctly apart. Towards the end of the track there are some very deep sound effects which were all handled without any fuss, and the drivers were held within a tight grip and not getting into a flap (unlike my disco trousers!).

### CONCLUSION

The Atlas Equator Bi-Wire is the real deal, it has its qualities evenly spread across its abilities. It doesn't fail on any level. It gives a good amount of detail in the upper registers and it excels in timing, rhythm and its powerful presentation. The upper mids and treble are all well produced, nothing gets harsh or sibilant. The slight loss and fuzz of fine detail within the mid to low bass isn't glaring and is only bettered by cables several times its cost.

#### **Atlas Loom. 5. EOS Modular/Equator Integra RCA/Element Digital Optical/Equator Bi-Wire.**

Having tested and reviewed the supplied Atlas cable Loom as individual items, I have now assembled them all together for a bit of a listening session. I personally wouldn't have gone for a single manufacturer of cables to use in my system at one time (read 1980's-90's), as I don't think back then that any one manufacturer had a full set worthy of using. Today though, the choices seem to be greater than in the past and quality seems to be higher than ever. I would say though, that once you venture beyond the budget end of cabling, that trying to have an audition or borrowing cables from your dealer is the way to go. Some will give you cables to try at

home, some will let you buy cables with the understanding that if they are unsuitable you can return them and swap them for another. Be cheeky and ask. If your dealer won't do this then I'd suggest going elsewhere, as profit not service or your musical pleasure is first and foremost in his ethics.

Anyhow, onto a bit of listening. I'm not going to go to specific albums etc, just a general overview on the Atlas loom. Across the board all these cables The Element Digital, Equator RCA and Bi-Wire Speaker cable and EOS Modular block/cable have given a good account of themselves. To my ears there is nothing that stands out in a negative way. Together these cables form a great combination. They win big time on drive and rhythm, I get a slightly warm presentation when I use the Optical cable in the system, but I'm convinced that is the way with optical in every cable. There is an abundance of detail and information producing a good presentation of the music in every genre.

The Equator speaker / Integra RCA are great soul mates, they seem to be cut from the same audio block and suit each other. There is a slight loss of detail from the lower end of the musical spectrum from the speaker cables, but add this to the soundstage and clarity of the Integra RCA it's only a very minor gripe. The Equator Integra is my outstanding product in this group test. I'm blown away by the way it paints the sonic picture. It just makes me smile listening to it. It also makes me want to go out and buy one just to listen to every CD I own again with it in place! You may better it with other cables but you will pay a very heavy premium in cost to do that. I would also like to give a big Hurrah for Atlas supplying a Test CD with some of its products. It's a nice gesture and quite invaluable when breaking in new RCA/Speaker/Coax cables. That little attention to detail goes a long way.

The EOS modular electrical block and its associated cables are well made and offer a slightly different presentation to the music. This quality product would, in my opinion need to be tried and auditioned with a current system. Although if I was building from scratch I wouldn't hesitate to incorporate it from the start. Knowing that you're getting the best electrical feed and using it as trusted piece of lifetime kit.

**David Robson**

# THE CHORD COMPANY LAUNCHES CHORD- MUSIC, ITS MOST ADVANCED CABLE RANGE IN 30 YEARS

## ChordMusic

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The Chord Company has launched ChordMusic, the company's most advanced cable range in its 30-year history. The celebratory, flagship series distils 30 years of cable design and manufacturing knowhow into a ground-breaking line-up. ChordMusic is a revelatory product, developed using an exciting and entirely new insulation material which has never been used with audio cables before: Taylon®.

### Taylon®

The relationship between conductor material and insulation material is critical to the performance of any cable, particularly if the aim is to design cables that are tonally neutral – music is full of colour, cables shouldn't be.

For a long time Chord have used a combination of PTFE – in various forms – and silver-plated conductors; this combination is not uncommon and once burnt in, it is pretty neutral and has less tonal influence on the signal it carries than other types of insulation. Chord's Sarum Tuned ARAY and Super ARAY cables take this combination to its ultimate end point. The conductors are micro-polished prior to silver-plating and gas-foamed PTFE is employed as a dielectric. We have also fitted a PTFE RCA plug surround which improves upon the acrylic version previously used.

ChordMusic benefits from all of these advances; it uses the same Super ARAY technology and the same PTFE plugs. What sets it apart is Taylon® - a unique insulation material that has never been used to produce audio cables before. Taylon® is exclusive to The Chord Company and is the best-performing dielectric the Wiltshire specialist has ever used. Although its dielectric constant is very slightly lower than PTFE, crucially, Taylon® is phase-stable at typical room temperatures. Dielectric choice plays a critical part in the performance of any audio cable and Taylon® insulated conductors, combined with the Super



ARRAY conductor configuration, produce the most natural, musically coherent cables The Chord Company has ever developed.

## **Super ARRAY Conductor Technology**

All ChordMusic cables use the new Super ARRAY conductor configuration. Super ARRAY technology is a development of Chord's original Tuned ARRAY design. The Super ARRAY conductor technology keeps all the musical coherence of the Tuned ARRAY design and brings big increases in the levels of musical detail the cable is able to carry.

The Super ARRAY tuning process is very different for each cable type; the end result though is consistent. Super ARRAY technology produces analogue and digital cables that can carry breathtaking levels of detail in an extremely coherent and musical way.

The new Super ARRAY configuration used in ChordMusic requires the same exacting build as previous Tuned ARRAY cables and again, a combination of precision machinery and meticulous hand assembly is used.

## **Noise Reduction**

During the development of ChordMusic it became very obvious that we were dealing with a level of musical transparency we had not encountered before. This led to further experimentation. Seemingly insignificant changes in construction brought surprising improvements. Because of this, the ChordMusic cables have three external layers of noise reducing materials along their lengths. The first of these is designed to reduce levels of mechanical noise; the second was chosen to constrain the noise reducing layer in a very precise way; finally, beneath the white braided finish, there is a metallic external braid. Each one of these layers contributes to the overall performance.

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# The Chord Music Range

## **ANALOGUE INTERCONNECTS**

ChordMusic analogue interconnects are available in RCA, XLR and DIN terminations. The minimum length is 1m but since each cable is built and tested at Chord's own facility, custom lengths and custom terminations are readily available.

A Chord Music tonearm cable is currently in development and will be available later in the year and a ChordMusic power cable is currently at the design stage.

## **DIGITAL INTERCONNECTS**

ChordMusic digital interconnects are available in coaxial digital and AES EBU configurations. Coaxial digital cables can be terminated with either RCA or BNC. We are also able to produce custom terminations, such as RCA to XLR (AES EBU) for use with Devialet amplifiers.

ChordMusic streaming cables are fitted with high speed RJ45 connectors and are available in custom lengths.

A ChordMusic USB cable is currently in development.

## **ChordMusic SPEAKER CABLE**

Each set of ChordMusic speaker cable is hand built by Chord and features the same mechanical noise reduction layers as fitted to the analogue and digital interconnects, as well as – for the first time – an ARAY technology developed specifically for speaker cable. A new clamp design, unique to

ChordMusic speaker cable, is currently at the prototype stage and in another first, ChordMusic speaker cables will be fitted with silver-plated rather than gold-plated banana plugs and spade connectors. Chord's silver-plated banana plugs are machined to their specification in the UK prior to being silver-plated.

## PERFORMANCE

The wealth of detail that ChordMusic cables carry is quite extraordinary. Even better though, is the level of coherence with which they carry it. This makes it easy to listen to the music, rather than the recording and even mediocre recordings can be listened to for the musical performances they were always intended to be.

With ChordMusic, The Chord Company has produced something that can only be described as revealing a whole new musical landscape.



# With ChordMusic, The Chord Company has produced something that can only be described as revealing a whole new musical landscape

THE  
**CHORD**  
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[www.chord.co.uk](http://www.chord.co.uk)

ChordMusic is available for demonstration at the following retailers:

Acoustica, Cheshire  
[www.acoustica.co.uk](http://www.acoustica.co.uk)

Brian & Trevors, Greater Manchester  
[www.brianandtrevors.com](http://www.brianandtrevors.com)

Cool Gales, Somerset  
[www.coolgales.com](http://www.coolgales.com)

Cymbiosis, Leicestershire  
[www.cymbiosis.com](http://www.cymbiosis.com)

KJ West One, London  
[www.kjwestone.co.uk](http://www.kjwestone.co.uk)

Loud & Clear, Glasgow  
[www.loud-clear.co.uk](http://www.loud-clear.co.uk)

Martins Hi-Fi, Norfolk  
[www.martinshifi.co.uk](http://www.martinshifi.co.uk)

Oxford Audio Consultants, Oxfordshire  
[www.oxfordaudio.co.uk](http://www.oxfordaudio.co.uk)

Sonority Design, West Midlands  
[www.sonoritydesign.co.uk](http://www.sonoritydesign.co.uk)

Unilet Sound & Vision, Surrey  
[www.unilet.net](http://www.unilet.net)





# PROMOTION

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The Chord Company released its flagship product, ChordMusic, at the prestigious KJ West One yesterday and Hifi Pig's Linette and Stuart were invited there to take a listen.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

So, after a very long journey involving cars, ferries, trains, taxis and underground we find ourselves in the salubrious surroundings of London's W1 postcode and the well renowned KJ West One hifi shop. OK, that's downplaying it a little; KJ West One is a bit of an emporium and homage to all that is high-end audio. It's an audiophile's moist reverie packed as it is with high-end brands, all displayed over a couple of floors in the most beautiful surroundings. Needless to say we both poked about a bit and had a look at the main showroom, the upper listening room and the downstairs demonstration room.

But we were not here to ogle the super-models of the audio catwalk, we were here to take a listen to what Chord are calling a "revelatory product, developed using an exciting and entirely new insulation material which has never been used with audio cables before: Taylon®."

We were greeted by Sally, Nigel and Alan from The Chord Company and Jason from KJ West One who was responsible for putting today's system together and changing the cables throughout the demonstration that was to follow. A quick drink and a nibble on a canapé later and we were ushered into the dimly lit auditioning room to be greeted by a system made up of a full dCS digital front end (Vivaldi CD Player/Streamer with its external clock), the Naim Statement amps and preamp and a pair of Wilson Audio Alexia. So, a top flight system with a top flight price to match, but then the ChordMusic cables are not the stuff you can nip out and buy with your pocket change, with a 1m pair of analogue cables leaving you with not a lot of change out of £4000...the rest of the cables in the ChordMusic range are similarly costly.

The only thing that would be changing today in this system was the music being played and the cables that were being used!

This is by no means a review of the cables used of course and I can only express what I heard on a system that I am sadly unfamiliar with, in a room that is equally unknown. However, report on the next hour or so I must.

There were three parts to this demonstration with a different set of ChordMusic cables being introduced at each stage.

# HIFI PIG ATTEND LAUNCH OF THE CHORD COMPANY CHORDMUSIC RANGE OF AUDIO CABLES



## ROUND ONE

Out went a pair of Chord's Sarum XLRs from the dCS to the Statement and Statement internal XLR to be replaced with all ChordMusic. Initial thoughts were that there was more detail and a tighter feel to the bass. At the time Nigel was at pains to stress that fundamentally all we were hearing was a change in the dielectric from PTFE to Teflon®. This is an interesting concept and, as I come from a background of being seriously cable-sceptic, it was interesting to note that the improvements (most definitely) were clear for all to hear.

## ROUND TWO

Speaker cables get changed at this point from a pair of Sarum to ChordMusic. Here we noticed distinctly more bite to the music, with more top end detail and, to my ears at least, changing the speaker cables was a bigger jump in perceived improvement in performance than the changing of the analogue cables. Gathered at this launch event were several luminaries from the world of Hifi reviewing (you'll know their names should we drop them into conversation) and the general consensus from that end of the couch was that ChordMusic speaker cable was "brighter". The word "bite" I wrote earlier and cleaner is how I would have described the change.

## ROUND THREE

This was always going to be controversial as the perceived "wisdom" where computer people and audiophiles clash heads is that it's all zeros and ones and a digital cable will either work or it won't. So we followed the previous formula of playing a tune then a snippet of the tune on the Sarum cable then exchanging it for the new fangled ChordMusic cable so what we had was nought but ChordMusic in the system. Here the cables changed were the AES/EBU and the BNC to BNC clock cable and boy was the difference obvious. Linette turned to me and whispered exactly what I was thinking...this is the biggest leap in performance over all the changes...and I was certainly not expecting this one bit! More detail, more clearly defined bass with more texture were the order of the day.

At this point I opened my mouth to say I perceived this as the biggest change in the sound and Alan from Chord came back with a comment along the lines of "it's because it's all ChordMusic in there now" but after the dem' I collared Nigel and spoke to him about this and he expressed he felt it was in part because something was happening with the interaction between the new cable and the clock, stating that the clock is the heart of the system after all.

## ROUND-UP

So, I went to this event with an open mind and the promise of a glass of plonk and a few nibbles. What I got was the plonk and canapés (very attentive service here from Dan at Dan George Communications...but don't give the day job!) plus a bit of an eye-opener if I'm honest. The new ChordMusic is furiously (some would say reassuringly) expensive from my relatively impoverished perspective, but there were changes, and to my mind improvements, at every cable change. So the thing you need to ask yourself, as always when considering spending your hard-earned on an upgrade, is "do they make enough of an improvement in my system to justify me spending on them?" Only you dear reader can make that decision I'm afraid and all we can do is present our findings in the most straightforward terms we can. Nigel (pictured with a selection of the new ChordMusic Cables) is always good for a quote and today the thing I picked out was "When I was a teenager and had saved up long and hard for a new record the thing I got from the first time I played it was excitement. And this is what has led me to ChordMusic."

**Stuart Smith**





# Paint It Black

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

Tony Bolton



**"OUTSTANDING"**

Chord Signature Tuned ARAY  
HI-FI WORLD November 2014

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from all good Chord retailers.  
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THE  
**CHORD**<sup>TM</sup>  
COMPANY



# RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY  
JANINE ELLIOT



I have spent the past few Retro Bites talking about my favourite turntables, culminating in my favourite of all time, the Nackamichi TX1000, a wondrous feat of engineering. This time I want to talk about an invention in the early 20th century that didn't quite make it, though I really wish it had.

Arguably the greatest name associated with the manufacture of the turntable in the 20th century, and certainly the most prolific of them, was Garrard. This name began its life as early as 1722 as a London goldsmith and a provider of jewellery and other luxury items to the aristocracy. In 1843, Queen Victoria appointed Garrard to the position of Crown Jewellers and, due to the craftsmen and machinery in their factory, in 1915 Garrard & Company was asked to manufacture precision range finders for the British Artillery in the First World War. In 1915 the Garrard Engineering and Manufacturing Company was created, making motors and of course later turntables. The company was sold to the electronics conglomerate Plessey

**In the first of her series of articles looking at turntable designs that could have taken off, Janine Elliot looks at a clever doodad from the days of 78s from Garrard called The World Record, created by Noel Pemberton-Billing, the chap that set up Supermarine Aircraft Company which made the iconic Spitfire of World War II**

in 1960 and I remember being saddened when the company announced ceasing operations in 1992.

My choice in this edition is not their clever Zero 100, introduced in 1971, which had zero tracking error by virtue of the constantly changing angle of the head-shell as it traversed the record. Actually that was an idea copied from an earlier arm design from another British company Burne Jones thirteen years earlier. No, what makes me single out Garrard for the prize of the most forward planning idea of them all, one that has more in common with the CD,

was something they developed back in the 1920's. This was a few years before Garrard started producing electric motors for their 78rpm disc players and was designed to be attached to models such as those by HMV, Victor and Columbia. They could see there was a fault with the fairly new 78rpm format, namely that the fixed playing speed meant that there was more shellac being scratched at the start of a disc than there was at the end, and that whilst the last few rotations of your 78 still sounded quite respectable, it was probably a waste having it effectively playing much faster at the start of the

record, something mathematically known as 'constant angular velocity'. Now, if they could come up with a clever idea of maintaining a constant speed of travel across the record, or 'constant linear velocity' just as in the CD, then they could get much longer playing times. This principle was incidentally first proposed in a U.S. sound recording patent of 1886.

The "World Record" was created for Garrard by Noel Pemberton-Billing (pictured), an Independent MP for East Hertfordshire, who interestingly set up the Supermarine Aircraft Company which made the iconic Spitfire of World War II. This clever Meccano-style add-on gearing system was affixed to your HMV or equivalent phonograph and comprised a horizontal friction wheel which connected to the side of the platter. This wheel then geared with a larger vertical roller that fixed to the top of the record at the first groove to revolve it at a much slower speed, similar to 33rpm. As the main arm/cartridge moved closer to the centre of the disk, so too the vertical wheel moved closer to the centre of the disk along a tangential rod assembly, with the record effectively getting slower as it got closer to the spindle. The important thing was to make sure that at the start of playing your disk you made sure both stylus and vertical wheel were at the same groove; otherwise the speed would be incorrect. Considering the mechanics the end result was surprisingly good and importantly meant a 78rpm disk could last 5 - 10 times longer. If the same technology or idea had passed its way to the LP it could have meant

a single side of a record could have run for almost 5 hours, more than enough time for a Wagner Opera!

Interestingly, a similar idea to the World Record was also being patented by a consortium of Belgian and French gentlemen, though Pemberton-Billing is accepted as the inventor of this technique.

Unfortunately the mechanics wasn't that good

so there was considerable wow, by today's standard, and speed accuracy depended on you setting up the "roller" mechanism in roughly the same groove as the stylus at the start. But its failure perhaps wasn't so much due to the sound, but rather that the 10 shillings cost for each World Record was just too much to bear. The governor system was manufactured between 1922 and 1925, and forced to stop due to not being adopted by enough record collectors. The World Records obviously could not be played on machines without the gearing system, but normal records could be used on players if the gearing system was disconnected.

The story doesn't end there, as Noel Pemberton-Billing also invented a combined heating and cooking unit, the "Phantom Camera System", and even set up



the first Australian gramophone recording plant. But perhaps he will be remembered more for a criminal trial in May 1918, the result of mentioning, in a journal that he had founded, the existence of something called the 'Black Book'. No, he didn't foresee the Red Book, better known as the CD. This book reportedly had the names of some 47,000 allegedly gay English men and women being blackmailed by the German Secret Service. His trial was big news for many years, and the witnesses in the trial included Lord Alfred Douglas, the love and arch-rival of Oscar Wilde. His World Record will, however, for me be the most important contribution he made to the world. If the public had given it a fair chance, like the V2000, Elcassette or DCC, then the audio world might not have needed the temporary detour that was the CD.

# FIDELITY MATTERS

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



I cut my hifi teeth on vinyl in the 70's and it wasn't until the mid to late 80's that records started to wane in sales as CD the saviour of the universe took over. I was very reluctant at first to take on CD and it was the 90's before I succumbed to the silver discs seductions. Then about ten years ago I saw the light and got into vinyl again. In the interim period I sold or gave away quite a bit of my record collection and just stored about a hundred of my most cherished albums. Having a young child in the late 80's meant it wasn't practical to have a turntable and CD's were so convenient that I even sold my turntable, shock horror!

Every year since the late 90's there has been rumours that vinyl is making a comeback. Recently Sainsbury's started stocking vinyl again and I am overjoyed to see this, but they only stock about twenty different popular titles currently. That may increase if sales take off, but I won't hold my breath. Now I'm not trying to be a party pooper here, but I honestly can't see records selling in their millions again as in the 70's. I

## Ian Ringstead looks at the resurgence of the big black disc

avidly go to charity shops now whenever my wife and I visit other places or scour the second hand record stalls at shows.

Today audiophiles are in several camps whether it is the latest digital streaming and storage devices with very high sampling rates and capabilities, DSD, FLAC etc. or like me hanging onto my analogue roots with vinyl. There are even rumours that the humble audio cassette is becoming a niche product to own again and of course reel to reel has always had a hardcore of fans and even they are being catered for again, albeit at a high price.

As we have seen, CD sales have plummeted and high street stores like HMV seem to sell mainly DVD and computer games these days with CD and vinyl taking up

less space than ever. I have to revert to eBay or Amazon to buy my music as high street stores have diminished considerably.

Vinyl revival is a term being used by the media and listeners of music to describe the renewed interest and increased sales of vinyl records, or gramophone records, that has been taking place in the Western world since the year 2007. The analogue format made of PVC had been the main vehicle for the commercial distribution of pop music from the 1950s until the 1980s and 1990s when they were largely replaced by the compact disc. Since the turn of the millennium, CDs have been partially replaced by digital downloads. However, in 2007, vinyl sales made a sudden small increase, starting its comeback, and by the early 2010s it was





growing at a very fast rate. In some territories, vinyl is now more popular than it has been since the late 1980s, though vinyl records still make up only a marginal percentage (<6%) of overall music sales. Along with steadily increasing vinyl sales, the vinyl revival is also evident in the renewed interest in the record shop (as seen by the creation of the annual worldwide Record Store Day), the implementation of music charts dedicated solely to vinyl, and an increased output of films (largely independent) dedicated to the vinyl record and culture.

Though many sales in vinyl are of modern artists with modern styles or genres of music, the revival has sometimes been considered to be a part of the greater revival of retro style, since many vinyl buyers are

too young to remember vinyl being a primary music format.

In November 2014, it was reported that over one million vinyl records had been sold in the UK since the beginning of the year. Sales had not reached this level since 1996. The British Phonographic Industry (BPI) predicted that Christmas sales would bring the total for the year to around 1.2 million. However, vinyl sales were still a very small proportion of total music sales. Pink Floyd's *The Endless River* became the fastest-selling UK vinyl release of 2014 – and the fastest-selling since 1997 – despite selling only 6,000 copies.

Record Store Day is an internationally celebrated day observed the third Saturday of April each year. Its purpose, as conceived by independent record

store employee Chris Brown, is to celebrate the art of music. The day brings together fans, artists, and thousands of independent record stores across the world.

Record Store Day was officially founded in 2007 and is celebrated globally with hundreds of recording and other artists participating in the day by making special appearances, performances, meet and greets with their fans, the holding of art exhibits, and the issuing of special vinyl and CD releases along with other promotional products to mark the occasion.

In 2013, for the week of Record Store Day in the United Kingdom, 68,936 records were sold (an 86.5% rise from 36,957 in 2012). This can be broken down into 1,249 7" albums, 25,100 12"

## FIDELITY MATTERS

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

albums, 27,042 7" singles and 15,545 12" singles.

The visibility of records on the new chart will hopefully alter this. With fiction, the hardback and paperback charts have existed separately for years. Like hardbacks, vinyl is now seen as more prestigious; hardened collectors may buy only a dozen new albums a year, but they'll be the ones that will matter most to them. These days records are more than mere product – when music is free to listen to digitally you have to fear for the future of the compact disc in a jewel case, but a vinyl record has the cultural weight of a hardback. Besides, it's a more enveloping experience than hearing Spotify through your laptop; once you've put a record on it dares you to walk away, or even to skip a track. There are added layers of enjoyment. Record Store Day started in 2007, with well- thought-out, limited edition vinyl records to lure in buyers and remind them that if they didn't shop there, the shops would all soon disappear. The tangible negativity around the event this year – the notion that fan and labels are being milked by record companies and not just the major labels – is healthy. It suggests that Record Store Day isn't necessary any more; the vinyl boom has outgrown it. In the West Riding of Yorkshire alone there are now independent shops in Leeds, Halifax, Huddersfield, Skipton, Shipley and Holmfirth. Best of the new crop is the Record Cafe in Bradford, a former bookies which sells vinyl by day and real ale by night.

Elsewhere, Urban Outfitters is selling records to young people



whose older siblings had probably never seen a record player – across the globe it is now one of the biggest stockists of vinyl. Old heads might be critical about the limited selection, but if you're 14 years old and you pick up a Modern Lovers LP while buying a new pair of jeans, that has got to be healthy for the future of vinyl.

So as I see it, vinyl may never be the force it once was, but it has never gone away, nestling in the background ready to remerge. During my dormant period with my record collection they sat in the storage unit gathering dust but I never gave up on them; I'd

invested far too much money, time and memories in them to get rid of them. I'm glad I persisted because when I listen to them now on my system they sound sublime, and at times amaze me how a tiny diamond tracking a wiggly groove of plastic can produce such a fantastic sound. With modern technology like the mobile phone and computer the record looks positively primitive, but boy can it still show us a thing or two.

Happy listening and spread the word, vinyl is alive and kicking.

**Ian Ringstead**



# THE VIEWS OF STU!

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



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**V**inyl records are a weird thing, despite their crackles and pops and the need for meticulous care, it seems that people really have a deep rooted love of the format, despite all its foibles. I'm sure there are many readers who have saved and bought a record only to place it on the platter for the first time and realise it's warped beyond playability, or have had a favourite record that they've ill advisably decided to play after a couple of sherbets only to find the morning after that there's a great big scratch across their particularly beloved tune... I know I have. I wrote about how we become attached to vinyl particularly a while ago and in this instalment of Views I wanted to take you on a personal journey of my love (and hate) relationship with vinyl over the last thirty five years or more.

## In this months Views Of Stu, Stuart Smith takes us on a rambling personal journey through his relationship with vinyl

My story begins when I was around ten years old in 1976. Those of a certain age will remember that this was a particularly hot summer and there were hosepipe bans, roads melting and for me the abiding memory is one of unbridled joy and freedom. It was also the year that I bought my first album, a record called Disco Tex & His Sex-O-Lettes. It had come out the year earlier and I'd never heard it, but myself and a friend had got it into our heads that we were going to spend our pocket money on a record each

and so we ventured into Barsnley town centre to a thrift shop called John Brittens (I think). Now this shop sold all manner of things, from shampoo to fly screens (an essential item in any home in 1976) but they also had a selection of vinyl records that had clearly proved unsalable in the proper record shops. I'd never heard the record if truth be known and I was more drawn to the front cover image I'm afraid. I got it on the little Dansette my parents owned and played it and hated it...but I was hooked. The same year my

"I've not heard a better preamp, and I've been looking for more than  
30 years" Sam Tellig - *Stereophile*, October 2012

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**THE VIEWS OF  
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parents bought one of the new fangled music centres and I would play their collection of Abba records on it in the front room...I was a bit of a fan and went to see their movie a year later. My next vinyl purchase however was in 1977 when I bought The Sex Pistols' God Save The Queen and Pretty Vacant singles which I played to death on the Dansette that I'd now inherited. So in the living room of the flat above my parents' pub I would be listening to Abba, whilst in the sanctuary of my own room I'd be hammering my two Sex Pistols singles and leaping around like a nutjob.

And that was the sum of my record collection for a while, until, whilst on a school trip to London in '79 (I will have been 12),

I went into WH Smiths in Windsor and bought myself Squeeze's Cool For Cats single on pink vinyl and I was hooked again. Blondie were the first band I really got heavily into, I can't for the life on me understand why a young chap would find this band so attractive, and I saved up and bought Parallel Lines that had come out a year earlier in '78, then Eat To The Beat...and then I got into The Jam and the Two Tone thing and my purchasing of vinyl soared. I was

# I often think back to these days and the hammering that the vinyl got. I imagine most of it would be unplayable now in a domestic situation

still playing all this music on the little Dansette until I pestered my folks to buy me, and it was the height of sophistication at the time from my perspective, an Amstrad TS 40 tower system.

Then metal came along! I was buying more and more vinyl, the only real format that was available to me other than pre-recorded tapes, but they just didn't do it for me at all and I stuck firmly with the black stuff. I'd got myself

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quite a collection for a young teen and I'd spend hours upon hours in my room listening to records, reading the liner notes and loving every minute of it.

And so it continued until I left home and went to university. Armed with a new found freedom and a grant cheque to spend on what I liked I went out and bought myself a second hand LP12. I'd already by this time acquired a Technics SLDL1 but the old fruit box was what I'd been hankering after for a good few years and so it was duly bought...only thing is I could never afford an arm and cartridge so the Techy was my plaything for a while longer. I bought vinyl voraciously in the first year or so at uni; punk, rock, American

hardcore... you name it, and the collection grew and grew until one day I found myself alone in a nightclub with a head full of magic and a wholly new kind of music beating its rhythm into me. House had arrived! It was late '87 and I was hooked on this new genre. The rock, punk and whatever else took a back seat and "Jack Trax" was all that could be heard banging out from my dingy little flat. I still had the LP12, SLDL1, a Musical Fidelity The Preamp, a

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Crimson Electric amp and a pair of Wharfedale Diamonds, but I wasn't content and so, chancing it a bit, I walked into a hifi shop in Sunderland and asked the owner if he fancied swapping all my kit for a pair of new Technics 1210s. He agreed and the rest, as they say is history. I was a DJ, got myself a slot on radio, a residency in a club and the 12" singles flooded in from all over the world. I opened a record shop (vinyl only) and just couldn't resist taking a copy of whatever was great and adding it to my collection, which quickly grew to well over 3000 bits of vinyl. At home I had a pair of decks, my sound system PA and that was it. No hifi and nothing but house and techno got played and so logically (read stupidly) I decided to flog my collection of everything that wasn't what I was playing out. Big mistake!!!

So I had masses of vinyl, my life was filled with music and all was good. I often think back to these days and the hammering that the vinyl got. I imagine most of it would be unplayable now in a domestic situation. It never got cleaned, the headshell of the turntables often had a penny blutacked to it to stop it bouncing around when at parties and they got slung about quite a bit whilst DJing. Most folk reading this would be horrified I'm sure.

Time moves on though and our first son Billy was born. Djing until 4 in the morning, having a shop to open at 9 and a newborn at



home was not a recipe for a sensible life and so the time to move on had arrived. The shop was sold, all the vinyl was sold (other than a few prized pieces) and we moved away from the city we were in. A proper job was sought, CDs became the format of choice, along with a cheap little system from Richer Sounds and I took a hiatus from vinyl of about twelve years until, now having moved to France, I bought on a whim a full Linn system including an LP12 and the vinyl buying started in earnest.

Of course, like anyone who has foolishly disposed of their vinyl collection, I can never hope to replace all the classic albums that I had, though I am trying and there's never a week goes by where I don't buy at least a couple of albums to add to the collection. I'm much more careful now and realise that these 12" pieces of black magic are much more

precious than I previously gave them credit for. They are filed alphabetically and they are cleaned meticulously and I've fallen in love with vinyl all over again. Of course I have other sources and to be honest the cleanliness and hassle free operation of CDs and computer files dictates that these are my main source of listening, but there's seldom a day goes by when I don't look through my vinyl collection, pull an old classic from the shelves, sit down with the cover in my hands and listen all the way through, without thinking to skip a track or make a playlist. There is something exquisite about vinyl that is indefinable and I'm glad to see the resurgence in the format is continuing apace. Will I ever be without my record player and records again? Never say never, but I can't see it happening in this lifetime!

**Stuart Smith**

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# BIRD'S EYE VIEW

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

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**T**here are just under two months to go before the polling booths open in the UK for the referendum on whether Great Britain should stay in the European Union or if it should leave. Christened the Brexit (which I did actually think was the name of some kind of breakfast cereal, when I first heard it) this topic is just one of those that you can't escape from. Discussed endlessly on TV, radio and the internet and in homes, schools and workplaces across the UK, everyone has an opinion. People are divided on whether it's "better the devil you know" or is a leap into the unknown going to turn out to be the best bet? Various campaigns, for and against leaving, sprang up but the official two are "Vote Leave", fronted by the likes of Conservative cabinet minister, Michael Gove, Labour MP, Gisela Stuart, London Mayor, Boris Johnson and ex-Conservative MP, Iain Duncan

## In this month's Bird's Eye View Linette Smith looks at the possible effects of Britain leaving the European Union (Brexit) on the UK's Hifi Industry

Smith, whilst the official 'stay' campaign is "Britain Stronger in Europe" which is led by British prime minister, David Cameron.

So what, you may ask, has all this got to do with the hifi industry? One of the main bones of contention in the debate is how a vote to leave or stay with affect UK businesses and their trade, both inside and outside the EU. Even USA President, Barack

Obama, has got involved, stating that he feels that the UK would basically be too insignificant a nation for the USA to trade with straight away if it left Europe.

The UK has a long history of hifi companies. Brands that are respected and sought after the world over such as Linn, Chord, KEF and Harbeth to name just a few. Great Britain is a nation that



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prides itself in being at the forefront of new technologies and developments and there are many new hifi companies springing up to take their products to the global market. There are also distributors and dealers bringing EU and worldwide brands into the UK, so with hifi being an industry heavily involved in both import and export, any changes in the status quo are likely to have an impact. I wanted to find out what people in the actual industry think about the subject, these are the people behind brands both big and small, manufacturers, dealers and distributors, so I asked a series of questions to a wide range of people. Before looking at what the hifi industry people that I questioned had come back with, I took a look at what the two main 'leave' and 'stay' campaigns had to say about the subject of trade. These quotes are taken directly from their official websites.

Vote Leave kick off their 'Trade' section with the claim that 'Trade, investment and jobs will benefit if we Vote Leave.' This statement is followed by four 'facts':

1. 'After we Vote Leave, British businesses will trade freely with the EU. Many countries around the world trade with the EU without accepting the supremacy of EU law.'
2. 'Only 6% of UK firms export to the EU and the EU has been a declining market for UK exporters over the past decade.'
3. 'The UK is the EU's largest

export partner. It is overwhelmingly in the EU's - particularly Germany's - interests to agree a friendly UK-EU free trade deal.'

4. 'EU membership means Brussels is in charge of UK trade and we have no independent voice in the World Trade Organisation. If we Vote Leave, we can negotiate for ourselves.'

Countering these statements, the 'Business in the UK' section of the Britain Stronger in Europe campaign say that '89% of businesses back staying in Europe'. Their four 'facts' are as follows:

1. 'Over 80% of Britain's small businesses see the EU as an important market.'
2. '61% of small business exports go to the EU.'
3. '70% of major businesses expect to experience 'some' or 'significant' damage if we left Europe.'
4. '200,000 UK businesses trade with the EU.'

So, on to what people involved in the hifi industry think. A Director of one of our large UK hifi brand's, which trades globally, thought that a Brexit would have an overall negative effect on their business, saying "Potentially it could make it harder and more complex to export products into Europe increasing costs and leading to higher retail prices." On the subject of how the end customer would be affected they said "I think overall there will be

little change to the end customer. We could see an inflation in prices but this happens anyway and strong competition between products will tend to reduce this."

Jonathan Billington, of UK manufacturer, Music First Audio, thinks that the proposed Brexit is perhaps being driven by issues other than the impact staying or going will have on British trade and industry. "Leaving the EU will have no effect on my business. The pros and cons will cancel each other out. I will vote to stay in. Most of the people who want to leave are only doing it because they don't like foreigners. Not a great argument to use to make such a large change."

Martin Boddy, MD of Entotem, a relatively new UK manufacturer who trade mainly within Europe says "I do not believe there will be an immediate effect as something that has been put in place over such a long period cannot be pulled down overnight. I think the pound may weaken against the Euro in the immediate aftermath which may help with exports in the short term." He adds "Uncertainty drives fear. People can easily stop spending on what are seen as luxury items. So sales may be harder to achieve." Thinking about whether a Brexit would have any effect on the popularity of UK brands in Europe and European brands in the UK, Martin said "Possibly but it may work in our favour in some countries and be detrimental in



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others. The bottom line is no one knows. If the UK is the catalyst to the breakup of the European Union, and trade barriers are put in place, a tit for tat battle could ensue and both sides loose.”

Yvonne Hawkey, who is one of the Directors at Sonata Hi-Fi, a London based dealer and distributor, who also deal globally, mainly with Europe, Asia and the USA, also thinks that there could be a negative effect on the British hifi industry, mainly due to the trade barriers that could spring up

**Asia and the USA, also thinks that there could be a negative effect on the British hifi industry, mainly due to the trade barriers that could spring up between the UK and Europe**

between the UK and Europe. She thinks that the end customer could face issues such as “Increased prices, lack of access to certain brands (and) less support with servicing and repairs”

Harry O'Sullivan, MD of British brand, The Bespoke Audio Company, expands further on this point and thinks that the end customer would lose out. “In the worst case, the UK leaving the EU would lead to a reduction in the range of brands available and a weaker domestic manufacturing base.” He goes on to say, “The UK HiFi industry is world renowned and this means a healthy export market for UK manufacturers. Equally, there is a strong demand for imported brands from UK audiophiles. If



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the UK exits from the EU, these imports and exports can only become more difficult.” As a company that trades within Europe and worldwide, Harry does feel that there will be detrimental effects on his business with the EU. “Travelling and working around Europe is smooth and efficient and transfer of payments is straightforward. Helpful VAT arrangements make it easy to deal with

European customers and suppliers. The isolation caused by the UK exiting the EU would have an immediate detrimental effect on our day to day transactions with other EU countries, overly complicating things which are currently simple. In the longer term, there is potential for it to damage the perception of the UK and our company by others in the EU because of the increased complexity in doing business.”

Geoff Merrigan, a Director at Tellurium Q, who sell their products worldwide, echoes the fact that the future is uncertain. “There would likely be a period of uncertainty which would affect consumer confidence EU wide and that will cause a dip in sales. Customer confidence is a key factor in a healthy business.” He adds, “Much depends on whether other countries leave the EU, if (the) UK actually leave. Nobody has the full information or can

## **For the period immediately after the vote to leave there would be much supplier, customer and ultimately consumer insecurity...**

accurately predict the future from either outcome.” On whether he sees a positive or negative effect on his business, if the Brexit does happen, Geoff says “I do not see a major change apart from more administration because there is a little more paperwork dealing with countries outside of the EU. Either way, in or out there are problems that have to be addressed. There is no clear cut short term advantages to either path.”

Alan, who works for another major UK hifi brand, again which trades globally, gave us his personal view of the situation. He thinks there could be “Short term pain with EEC trading...no change globally...pound would drop making exports cheaper. Some input costs would increase....lots of our materials are made in UK so this would be positive. Long term (the) EEC is unstable and its future is looking less certain....if it goes into meltdown in the future

that will be a bigger mess and hurt UK Ltd more.” For the industry as a whole he suggests that, “Good guys will grow. The weaker and borderline guys will struggle and the vagaries of the change could accelerate their demise.”

A major UK distributor of products from Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Japan and the USA thinks that a Brexit

would have a “very negative” effect on his business. “For the period immediately after the vote to leave there would be much supplier, customer and ultimately consumer insecurity. Import prices would rise owing to weakness of the pound (which can already be seen in the strength of sterling post Boris (Johnson) coming out for Brexit) Administrative policies re the EU will surely change increasing admin costs and most probably demanding additional working capital (VAT and duty advance payments on import). So my business will have to find further working capital, and suffer reduced profitability; or increase prices.” He thinks there will be a grave impact on the UK hifi industry, and industry as a whole in the UK. “In the event of Brexit as a whole the country will suffer and the hifi industry with it. This will happen because of a weaker currency, economic uncertainty, renegotiation of duties with



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## BIRD'S EYE VIEW

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

trading partners and general consumer insecurity leading to less spending. It is to be expected that economic growth will falter for a period of time reducing activity and disposable income. On top of this it would trigger Scotland to probably seek independence and to rejoin the EU with all the uncertainty that will create.” He has strong feelings against the theory that a Brexit will actually lead to trade being easier for the UK “Brexit will NOT give rise to any improvement of economic activity but quite the reverse. Those who are outside the EU – Switzerland and Norway are obliged pay into the EU as all the EU members do; and they are also required (to) meet all the same criteria as the EU countries do as well such as laws, free movement of labour and so on. They have been obliged to do this even though they have no representation when the decisions/laws are being made. So obtaining access to the EU will cost the UK the same as before. On the subject of new trade deal negotiations between a non EU member United Kingdom, he brings up similar points to President Obama. “On any basis it is difficult to see that on Brexit that the UK will obtain any better terms with its trading partners than today, at the very, very best they will be the same and the

# Whichever way things go when the votes are counted in June, one thing remains clear. The UK has a strong heritage of hifi brands and businesses, both young and old, that are respected the world over

expectation must be that they will be worse.”

Nadine Chaix, Export Manager, of French company, Waterfall Audio, gives us a view from Europe. She suggests that it may be harder to trade with the UK, from inside Europe, if the UK leaves.

“Definitely higher prices as there will be a fixed charge for Customs documents and shipping will be higher in prices, as well as not as easy and fast. All my exports to Switzerland and Norway, take longer and are more “painful” in the EEC, it is easy!” She goes on to say “But it might also be good for (French brands) as UK products will have Import duty in France as well and become more expensive.” She does think that a Brexit could fuel a 'British buying British' surge. “UK customers might buy more UK brands as a

“nationalistic” industry boost.”

The opportunity to comment on this subject was put out to a broad range of people involved in the hifi industry, I was expecting at least some to come out strongly in favour of the UK leaving Europe, after I had read the facts and figures on the 'Leave' and 'Stay' campaigns' websites. However, it seems that there is a great level of uncertainty about what will happen if the Brexit actually comes about, the

general feelings from the people that I spoke to seems to be in favour of the UK remaining in Europe, both from those in the UK and trading partners in other European countries. Whichever way things go when the votes are counted in June, one thing remains clear. The UK has a strong heritage of hifi brands and businesses, both young and old, that are respected the world over. The continued rise of consumer interest in hifi globally and the popularity of all things 'British' will hopefully see the industry continue to flourish, whatever the referendum result.

With thanks to everyone that gave me their opinions whilst I was writing this article.

**Linette Smith**

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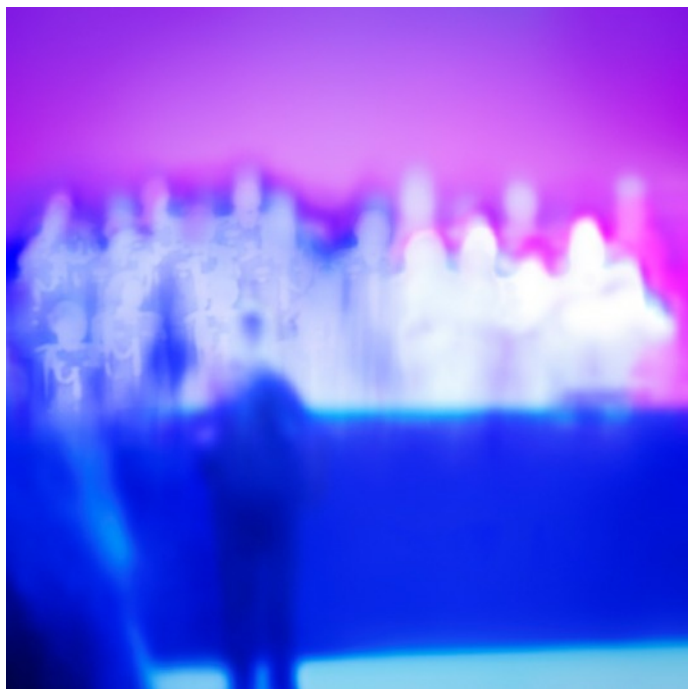
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# MUSIC REVIEWS

## Tim Hecker – Love Streams (4AD Records)



If you're lucky enough to be living on a remote tropical island, then it's likely that you've never heard of Tim Hecker. Admittedly, I was a late starter myself, picking up on Tim's work only after he'd released his sixth album, the ground-breaking "Ravedeath, 1972", much of which was recorded on a church organ. Tim's now moved across to 4AD Records for "Love Streams", which should hopefully extend his listener base quite considerably.

Just as "Ravedeath" was an interesting and complex body of work, Tim's unafraid to break down boundaries which incorporate a diverse selection of sounds. On "Music Of The Air", we're introduced to many different languages, which seems to make sense when they're brought together, layered and ordered.

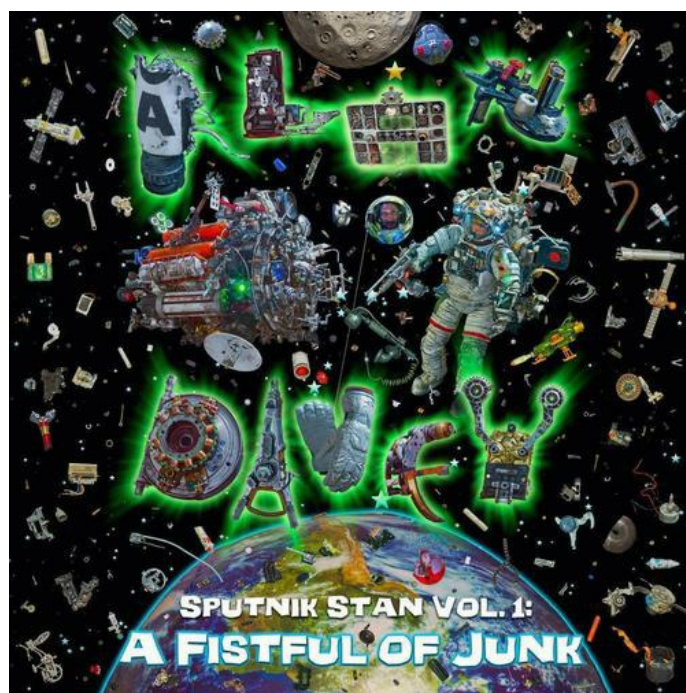
The music sometimes feels fragmented – and that's intentional. During "Bijie Dream", for instance, musical notes are flying around all over the place, as if willing the listener to attempt to contain them. However, there are also moments of extreme beauty, such as the choral leanings during certain sections of the music; "Voice Crack" features dissonant vocals which echo atop various ambient electronic instruments.

The most suitable point of reference I can offer here is William Basinski, whose "Disintegration Loops" work from 2002 fabulously underlined the devastation caused by the 9/11 attacks in New York. Not unlike Basinski, "Love Streams" could also be used to soundtrack recent world events such as the Paris attacks or rhetoric from dubious world leaders. Similarly, "Castrati Stack" has an immersive quality, particularly with its haunting vocals, which conjure a whole range of thoughts and images.

"Love Streams" deserves to be heard in a single sitting; it makes a compelling case for music which is complex, haunting and thought-provoking.

Paul Lockett

## Alan Davey – Sputnik Stan Vol.1: A Fistful Of Junk



Most readers who have heard the name Alan Davey will naturally associate him as the bass player for space-rock stalwarts Hawkwind where he manned the bass from 1984 to 1996 and the again between 2001 and 2007. But he's had loads of other projects away from Hawkwind including Bedouin, Ace Of Spades, Gunslinger, Eclectic Devils and The Psychedelic Warlords. He's probably my favourite bass player... period and so I got myself both the double vinyl copy and the CD release of this album.

# MUSIC REVIEWS

The double vinyl version is a real back to giving fans real value and interest in the packaging, coming as it does on coloured vinyl (one green and one orange) along with a comic book, A3 poster (though this is limited to 200) and a glorious gate-fold sleeve. The CD is less elaborate in its packaging but you still get the comic.

A Fistful Of Junk tells the story of Sputnik Stan who is a cosmic scrap collector in his ship SS Garbage Can picking up space detritus...it's a proper concept album with the tunes themselves interspersed with clever segues! Of course this was always going to be a space-rock album, but, for the main part, it's pretty heavy space-rock...which is a good thing to my mind! It's got humour too with Aluminium, Titanium, Uranium, Magnesium being one of the segues I mentioned sung along to the Muppets' theme music and heavily distorted.

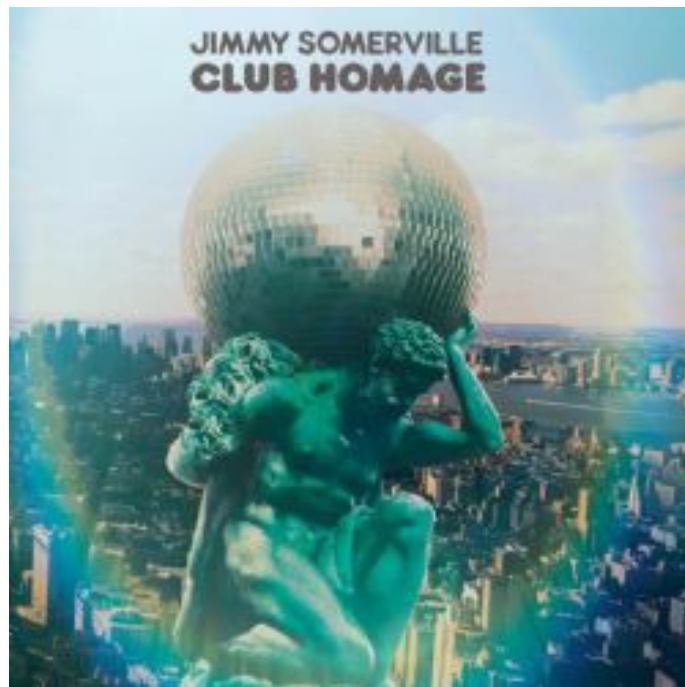
Space is a lonely place and our pal Sputnik Stan is not immune to its effects and so takes a deviation to his plotted course and makes his way to the International Sales Station (formerly the International Space Station) which seems a riot as the UFO (Unidentified Flying Orgasm), which is a kind of cosmic knocking shop manned by a couple of "exxpert" technicians offering such services as "Teabag with the Queen" for a mere \$94, is located there. But Sam isn't distracted too long from his mission and he's soon off again with the final tune ("18 Engines One Mission") collecting space junk. This track is the real deal and anyone who is a fan of heads down space-rock will not be disappointed! Davey's bass playing on this track is fantastic!!

A fistful of junk isn't all "heavy" stuff and we're treated to the sublime and down tempo Hubble's Looking Tasty These Days with beautiful vocals by Zoie Green.

So, regular readers will know I'm a bit of a fan and this was always going to be a positive review, but seriously, if you enjoy space-rock, or just appreciate great rock music, I can't recommend this album highly enough. The fabulous concept, the great packaging on the vinyl package and the comic with the CD is the icing on the cake.

Highly recommended! Go buy it!  
**Stuart Smith**

## Jimmy Somerville – The Club Homage (Cherry)



**C**lub Homage, out on the 29th April, follows on from Somerville's (yes, he of Bronski Beat and The Communards fame) disco album of last year called "Homage". Now I'm a bit of a sucker for disco and love some of the people who are involved in remixing some of the tracks from Homage for Club Homage – TomMoulton, Felix Gauder, Robbie Leslie, John Winfield and Sebus & Larzo – so was well pleased when this CD (in limited, black vinyl effect) landed on my desk.

Club Homage opens with Travesty (Extended Mix) and it sets the scene perfectly – hedonistic Studio 54 70's disco with fabulous four to the floor beat, relentless bass line, strings and a soaring falsetto vocal that could only be Jimmy Somerville...there's even a bit of syndrum in there for good effect. This, the extended version breaks into a conga, clavinet (I think) and bass driven segue before getting back to the main track. It's proper arms in the air, hot and sweaty dancefloor music from an era that shaped a lot of the house and garage music that came later.

Next up is the Tom Moulton Mix of Strong Enough and the theme continues. You may not know the name but Moulton was responsible for some of the truly great disco mixes of the 70s. He's the one that



# MUSIC REVIEWS

did the non-stop mix on Gloria Gaynor's record "Never Can Say Goodbye", The Trammps "Disco Inferno" and, a personal favourite of mine, First Choice's "Doctor Love". Again this is pure unadulterated disco of the highest order, this time with choppy guitar taking the lead.

Overload (Felix Gauder Remix) is up next and this takes on a much more tech-disco feel. The kick is still four to the floor and there's the necessary arms in the air drops that get the hairs on the back of your neck standing up before the tune comes back. This tune is mixed much more for the modern dancefloor and has a touch of the Dedmau5s about it. Yep, this is one for the younger, EDM (I hate that term) crew and is a tune I'd have definitely dropped all those years ago...I can definitely see this being a huge hit with the current crop of dance-heads.

Back To Me (Extended) is up next and is back to the straight up disco, though slightly "downtempo", with a somewhat subdued and plaintive vocal track. It has all the prerequisites of disco and is the perfect track for a hot summer day's outside dancethon... glass of something cold in one hand, the other in the air and mingling with the crowd. Great stuff!

Next up is the Robbie Leslie mix of Travesty chalking up an impressive eleven minutes and eleven seconds. Again, like Tom Moulton, Leslie is a bit of a legend and one of the first international DJs and this mix is fantastic. Clearly a life behind the decks has left its mark and this is a DJ that truly understands the dancefloor and what makes a crowd move as the tune manages to keep the beat pounding along and yet ebb and flow at the same time. Again a fabulous tune.

There's an extended mix of the original Travesty mix and then Some Wonder, another classic disco tune that is sure to have your fingers snapping. Lights Are Shining is perhaps, to my mind the weakest tune on this record but the penultimate track Strong Enough (John Winfield mix) which has funky guitar chops, four to the floor drums and an absolutely brilliant filtered bass more than makes up for it. This is disco brought up to date with a cool funky strut but without losing the music's original soul and I love it.

The final track on Club Homage is the Sebus and Larzo remix of Travesty and it's a very modern and

cool interpretation of the track. Brooding bass synths drone, filtered stabs float about all over the place and there's a definite feel of Daft Punk here with vocoded vocals...and that's no bad thing in anybody's books I'd suggest. A fine fitting end to a very fine record indeed.

Highly Recommended!

Stuart Smith

## Tangerine Dream – The Official Bootleg Series: Volume II (Reactive)



I like Tangerine Dream a lot and it's fair to say they are probably the first music that wasn't mainstream pop that I was exposed to in my early teens. I used to babysit for my cousin and her Father (my Uncle) Keith had an interesting record collection that I used to dip into whenever I was there. Tangerine Dream were a mainstay of his collection, along with Kraftwerk and a host of other more "out there" and avant-garde musicians that I otherwise would not have had the opportunity to hear.

As I grew up I bought more of the albums from Tangerine Dream and to this day I have to buy

## MUSIC REVIEWS

second hand vinyl copies of albums I know I already have in the collection.

Now bootlegs are an interesting proposition. As a teenager, a bit older by this time, I had a mate who was obsessed with Led Zep' and as well as all the official albums he would go down to Barnsley Market when the second-hand market was on and buy dubious vinyl copies of their gigs at what I thought outrageous prices. So, an official bootleg is a bit of a contradiction in terms and could usually be summed up as "dodgy live recordings that weren't good enough for proper release".

**OK, this is not a truly great set of records if this is your first foray into the music of Tangerine Dream, but it is essential if you are already a fan of their music as it gives a great insight into what the band must have sounded like live in this period.**

And so to this collection from Tangerine Dream. You get four CDs that feature a couple of classic concerts, one in Paris in 78 and the other in East Berlin in 1980. You also get a nice illustrated booklet and an essay on the band. It's well presented and interesting stuff if you are already into the band.

The Paris recording is from March 78 at the Palais de Congr s and features the short lived line-up of Edgar Froese, Chris Franke, Steve Joliffe and Klaus Kreiger on drums. The first CD it has to be said is a

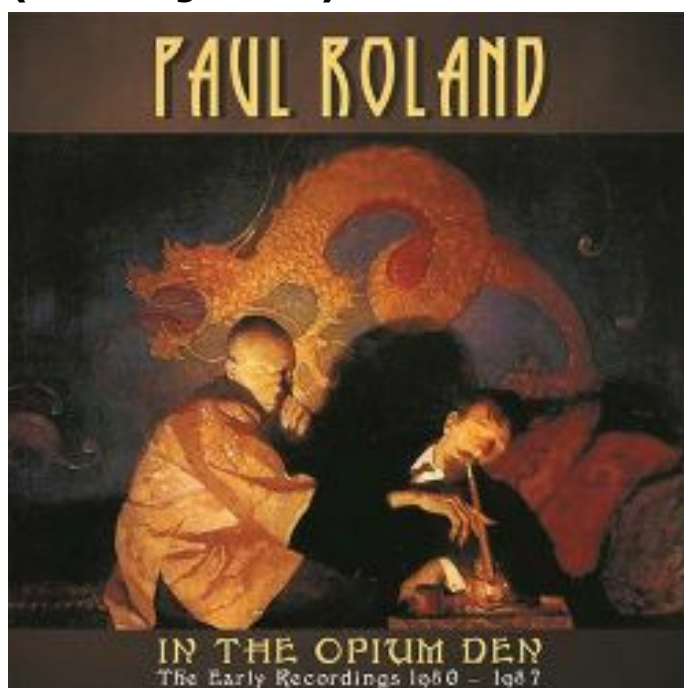
bit ropey sound-wise but that shouldn't matter overly. However, things pick up significantly over the next three CDs and listeners are treated to a good variety of what goes to make Tangerine Dream so special and so influential.

There is the Cyclone era vocals and electric guitar with the Joliffe line up and then you get the more familiar analogue sequencer led sounds that will be more familiar to Dream fans.

OK, this is not a truly great set of records if this is your first foray into the music of Tangerine Dream, but it is essential if you are already a fan of their music as it gives a great insight into what the band must have sounded like live in this period. You do get the impression that the audience are sat in reverence and that the musicians are on stage, heads down and surrounded by banks of synths and whilst the music is somewhat predetermined there does seem to be a degree of improvisation and playing within the tunes.

One for the fan but well worth seeking out.  
Stuart Smith

### **Paul Roland – In The Opium Den : The Early Recordings 1980-1987 (Cherry Red)**



## MUSIC REVIEWS

**T**his dropped on my desk a couple of months ago and I really wasn't expecting much of it. It's from a period of music that wasn't great in my opinion and from an artist I admit I'd heard nothing of previously. And so it stayed in its protective covering for longer than it really should. In a fit of not being able to find a CD I wanted to play in the car I grabbed this and was rather pleased I did.

This is a collection of three albums of Roland's (Danse Macabre, Burnt Orchids, The Werewolf Of London) singles and EPs and then a couple of out takes from an unreleased second album.

There's a touch of the steam-punk throughout this collection in the lyrics that draw from Victoriana and horror fiction (think Edgar Allen Poe) that could only come from the mind of an English singer songwriter. Look at some of the titles to see what I'm getting at here: The Great Edwardian Air-Raid, Burnt Orchids, Blades Of Battenburg, The Old Dark House

and Go Down You Murderers. See what I mean? It's hardly the stuff of bubblegum pop is it! Musically too, In The Opium Den is sombre and dark (in a good way) and it's no surprise that his music was a favourite at the legendary Goth club, The Batcave. I'm often reminded when listening to this collection of Robert Calvert's solo output and again this is a very good thing. Brain Police is particularly Bob Calvert in style to my mind...with a touch of Kraftwerk thrown in for good measure.

There's not a bad tune on here despite it not being particularly mainstream fodder and I consider it a bit of a gem that I'm very pleased to have uncovered. It's not going to appeal to everyone that's for sure, but if you enjoy quirky, English pop/rock then this could well be right up your street, there's a fab' version of Floyds Matilda Mother which should give you an idea of what's in store.

Highly Recommended!  
**Stuart Smith**

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## MUSIC REVIEWS

### Madeline Bell – Blessed With Your Love (STS Digital, Reel to Reel)



There's a bit of a buzz around reel to reel recordings at the moment and the number of audiophiles and music lovers taking up the format is clearly on the rise...and in response there are a growing number of companies offering up reel to reel recordings to cater to their needs. Step up to the plate STS Digital from The Netherlands and headed up by the lovely Fritz and Netty de With.

Many readers of Hifi Pig may well be familiar with the name Madeline Bell as she's worked both as a solo artist as well as with Dusty Springfield and Serge Gainsbourg. In the UK she was a member of Blue Mink who scored a few top twenty hits. She's sung with Joe Cocker, had Led Zeppelin's John Paul Jones produce her album Comin' Atcha and did some backing vocals for Elton John's classic Honky Chateau...plus a whole load more including being part of disco band Space and appearing on Giorgio Moroder's EMC2.

She's still singing and performing and this particular album Blessed With Your Love was originally released in September of 2000 on the Dutch label Challenge as simply Blessed and it's a bit of a belter!

Blessed kicks off with The Look Of Love (Bacharach/David) and sets the laid back jazzy theme for what is to come. Sail on Sailor is a tune you'll know the moment you hear it and Bell does an absolute stunning job with it and musically it's really nicely done without detracting or taking over from the main course which is Bell's beautifully silky vocal style...so effortless and unforced!

**The real star of the show on this record is of course Bell's vocal talent, but in this format, recorded without Dolby or other wizardry being added really allows her to shine**

Gershwin's Home opens with cool with strings, pianos and again Bell's deeply seductive vocal talent before the sax comes in and lifts it a little. Jonathan Larson's Season's Of Love from the musical rent and with the unforgettable "Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes" opening is up next and has more of what this album is all about – cool, relaxed and exquisitely performed jazz which is given space to breath. Even the Beach Boys' Medley sounds just right...and I really expected this to be a cheesy non-entity but it's far from it and I absolutely loved its foot tapping familiarity, delivered in such a different style.

Good Morning Freedom from the aforementioned Blue Mink is an absolutely cracking tune, first released in 1970 on the Philips label and if you were around at this time you'll know it... I was three at the time and I recall it somehow. It's given a bit of a polish and update here but still maintains its funkiness.

Dreams, the penultimate tune on the album and written by Landesbergenand is a dreamy laidback

# MUSIC REVIEWS

Sunday morning affair. This is perfect drift away Sunday morning music that is more of an instrumental enhanced by Bell's sparse vocal to begin with, but here we have her in more plaintive mood and expressing the sentiment of the tune magnificently and in such a restrained and controlled manner.

Final tune on the album is The Last Laugh, co-written by Bell and Landesbergen and it finishes off the album much in the way it started and continued. I don't know the tune but it seems instantly recognizable in some way that's indescribable. I think this is perhaps down to the way that Bell manages to be instantly likeable and accessible. No, this is not my usual kind of thing but it's been on the tape machine loads since I picked it up in late February and is great to have on as background music whilst working or reading, but it's also engaging and thoroughly enjoyable when you sit in front of the main rig and give it a proper, more involved listen.

The real star of the show on this record is of course Bell's vocal talent, but in this format, recorded without Dolby or other wizardry being added really allows her to shine. Yes it's a bit dirty and very analogue sounding, but it's dynamic, wonderfully charming and a real treat to sit and listen to both for the sheer gorgeousness of Bell's vocal talent and the way this has been recorded to allow instruments to shine in their own right.

Highly Recommended.  
Stuart Smith

**We spoke to Fritz de With, responsible for this reel to reel copy of this album and he had the following to say.**

We get a lot of e-mails from audio fans from all over the world and they always ask the same question: what is your motivation to make such beautiful recordings, well here we go.

The first reason is that we like music very much, it is a wonderful way to express feelings and communicate with other people on the same level.

We like also the sound of musical instruments, played in fine acoustic surroundings, they sound so

pure and warm. Unfortunately most CD, LP and Reel to Reel tapes are bad recorded, with a harsh sound too closed in and without ambience. For this reason we started with STS Digital twenty years ago to do something totally different and the results are our recordings with a fine selection and series like: Dynamic Experience, Celebrate the art & spirit of music, Siltech Test Demo CD, The Absolute Sound Reference lots of LP's and Reel to Reel tapes.

We give in these series and products every musical instrument the space they need, so the original sound can develop its typical sound of various instruments with the help of good ambience. A sax will sound like a sax and not like a clarinet and a piano sounds like a piano and not a keyboard. Now you understand how important it is to record music in a good sounding concert room or church and not in a dry studio with close miking.

To get the best out of our Schoeps microphones we use gold/silver cables from Siltech and copper cables from Van den Hul and we clean up AC current with our own developed 6 pack AC Power Block. We use our ears by first listening in the concert room or church where an orchestra is playing for some time and then go back to our recording room to get the sound what we first heard in the concert room/church, as natural as possible. It is usual dictated by placing the microphones not too close, we also put a lot of effort in mixing and mastering the recordings, we guard the whole recording process with our ears like a wolf in the night.

Every step we check the results and compare the process with the original recordings.

We understand that regular CD, LP and Reel to Reel Tape recording companies can't effect such a Rolls Royce treatment. We can do that, because we ask the best brand audio manufactures, for their financial support, they help us to go as far as we possibly can go to reach that High-End standard.

If you listen to our productions on CD/LP, remember that we did our utmost best to get for you all the benefits of our effort to go far beyond the best of the best.

**Fritz de With**  
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**LIVE**

# **Nikki Lane – The Voodoo Rooms, Edinburgh**





## LIVE

Nikki Lane's 2014 album *All Or Nothin'* fused country songwriting with Spectoresque *Be My Baby* drums, glam rock handclaps and Muscle Shoals electric piano. Tonight, there are no drums, no piano; just Nikki and her Fender acoustic with back up from special guest Jonathan Tyler on guitar and harmonica but Lane's rock and roll attitude shines through.

While Lane has yet to make a major impact in the UK, she is playing tonight to a packed out Speakeasy Bar at Edinburgh's Voodoo Rooms – a nearly-newlywed couple have travelled from Amsterdam just to be here and gasp with self-deprecating teenybop enthusiasm at a brief behind the scenes glimpse of their heroine.

Opening with *Good Man*, Lane quickly proves that her songs are solid enough to stand on their own, shorn of studio embellishment. That said, I'd give anything to see her belt this out with her band. The country soul keening of *You Can't Talk To Me Like That* is an early standout leading to the first of Lane's "shit talking" between-song banter; she tells us that she's trying to perfect the art of talking shit while playing guitar but hasn't mastered it yet. Citing her ex-husband as inspiration, she launches into *Man Up* which mixes humour and pathos in the classic country tradition.

Lane and Tyler haven't been playing together too long. They arrived in the UK a few days ago and have been faced with the challenges of mastering a stick shift gearbox while driving on the "wrong" side of the road, local geography and place name pronunciation. Top marks, though, for a near spot-on "Edinburgh" although it slips occasionally to "Edinbrough". Tyler is still getting to grips with the intricacies of some of the songs and Lane keeps him on track with off-mic encouragement and the occasional steely glance. "You wouldn't want to fuck with her" he jokes to the audience and, joking aside, I suspect he's not wrong.

Tonight's show mixes songs from *All Or Nothin'* with a few from her first album *Walk Of Shame* and a handful from her only-just-finished new album which I'm really looking forward to hearing. Lane



has – for the first time ever, she tells us – written a set list for tonight's show but she quickly goes off piste and asks for requests from the audience, resulting in the lovely, but apparently rarely played, *Coming Home To You*.

Lane rounds the show off with *Right Time*, whose refrain of "It's always the right time to do the wrong thing" seems to sum up the Nikki Lane ethos, and ends with a singalong version of Dylan's *You Ain't Going Nowhere*. For all her on-stage sass, she is clearly appreciative of her audience and happily makes a bunch of new friends after the show.

Nikki Lane is currently touring the UK and Europe. If she's playing near you, go and see her. It's always the right time.

**John Scott**

## CLASSIC ALBUM

# Following the recent tragic demise of Prince, John Scott takes a look at what he considers The Artist Formerly Known As' masterpiece, Sign O The Times.

When I started the Classics column almost two years ago my intention was to feature a range of albums from the 1960s and 70s; albums that deserved to be acknowledged as classics but at the same time avoiding the obvious choices. I had no particular list of albums that I wanted to write about – if one popped into my head and it felt right then I wrote about it. Recently though, the Grim Reaper has forced the Classics column to double as an obituary page. The last couple of months featured tributes to David Bowie and Lemmy. When Keith Emerson died I decided not to pander to the Pale Rider's rock and roll cull but then he upped the ante by picking off Prince and that just could not go ignored.

I don't know if The Reaper is putting together some sort of Dead Aid festival in the hereafter but if so, I think he has a good enough line up now. Do us a favour Death, leave our heroes alone.

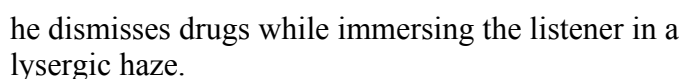
For the first time, the Classics has moved into the Eighties to honour what may be Prince's masterpiece Sign O The Times. By the time Prince released Sign O The Times in 1987 he was already an established superstar. Having recorded his debut in 1978, the critics and public really began to take notice with 1980's Dirty Mind album. It was the 1982 album 1999, however, that really saw him conquer the pop world. Many acts go through a purple patch but Prince had a purple reign and from this point on he could do no wrong with his fans. Even though he was a proven multi instrumentalist, arranger and producer, since the 1999 album Prince had aligned



himself with The Revolution, a core band of backup musicians.

Sign O The Times would see him present himself as a solo act again even though many of the tracks on the album featured contributions from members of The Revolution. "It's not the notes the notes you play, it's the notes you don't play" said Miles Davis and Prince takes on this good advice in the opening, eponymous track of Sign O The Times. Sparse beats and basslines, skeletal guitar and understated keyboards underpin a tale of gangs, guns, drugs and AIDS; a protest song every bit as pertinent to its times as Blowing In The Wind Was to the early 1960's. Prince was always a contradiction, mixing the carnal and the spiritual. On Play In The Sunshine





To be picked out to play in such august company, Bob clearly has to know his stuff. I can imagine the telephone call from Jeff Lynne must have gone something like: “Hi, it's Jeff. Jeff Lynne. The guy from ELO. Yeah, the band that did all the Beatles knock offs. Anyway Bob, listen, Dhani Harrison is putting together a tribute show to his dad and we need you to play the guitar solo in While My Guitar Gently Weeps. There's me and Tom Petty and you know, we could do it but we are not really lead guitar guys. We're going to have Steve Winwood too and he could do it standing on his head but he's going to be playing Hammond so we really need you to nail it for us.” So Bob's feeling pretty stoked; he's going to show Eric a thing or two and when the night comes he gives it all he's got and he makes a pretty great job of it. From his facial grimaces you can see that he is putting all he has into it. But then, just towards the end of Bob's solo the camera pans to the right of the stage where a little guy in a scarlet fedora is playing



# CLASSIC ALBUM

along on his Telecaster. As Bob's solo ends, Prince – for it is he – takes to the centre of the stage and rips out a solo of devastating virtuosity, innovation and emotional depth. And it is utterly effortless. Bob is toast. Within the first 20 seconds of Prince's solo he has been completely forgotten. Jeff is kicking himself; why the hell hadn't he put the call through to Paisley Park instead of to that cocknozzle Bob. And who the hell had got hold of Prince? It was probably that wanker Winwood. Everybody knows that whenever there is an all star band to be put together Jeff Lynne is the go-to guy. It'll only be a matter of time now before Winwood is replacing him in the Wilburys.

Seriously though, if you see the video of that performance and don't think that Prince is one of the greatest guitarists to have graced a stage then you need the phone number of Bob's therapist. If I Was Your Girlfriend and I Could Never Take The Place Of Your Girl see Prince getting down and dirty while the live track It's Gonna Be A Beautiful Night demonstrates why Prince was one of the hottest live acts of the last fifty years.

So, in summary, Sign O The Times is probably Prince's masterpiece. Given his legendary productivity, it's equally possible that there are unreleased tracks in the Paisley Park archives that tower over its achievements but we may never know. For now though, it is the finest encapsulation of one of the greatest talents we have ever seen.

John Scott

## AT A GLANCE

**Released: March 31st 1987**

**Recorded: 86 -87**

**Genre: R&B, funk, smooth soul, psychedelic pop, hard rock, electro-funk**

**Length: 79:52**

**Label: Paisley Park, Warner Bros.**

**Producer: Prince**

### Side One

**"Sign o' the Times" – 4:57**

**"Play in the Sunshine" – 5:05**

**"Housequake" – 4:42**

**"The Ballad of Dorothy Parker" – 4:01**

### Side 2

**"It" – 5:09**

**"Starfish and Coffee" (Prince, Susannah Melvoin) – 2:50**

**"Slow Love" (Prince, Carole Davis) – 4:22**

**"Hot Thing" – 5:39**

**"Forever in My Life" – 3:30**

### Side 3

**"U Got the Look" (featuring Sheena Easton) – 3:47**

**"If I Was Your Girlfriend" – 5:01**

**"Strange Relationship" – 4:01**

**"I Could Never Take the Place of Your Man" – 6:29**

### Side 4

**"The Cross" – 4:48**

**"It's Gonna Be a Beautiful Night" (Prince, Doctor Fink, Eric Leeds) – 9:01**

**"Adore" – 6:30**

## INTERVIEW

**Chris Moon is the owner of HigherFi, the US based company whose claim is to be “the world’s largest online dealer of luxury audio”, but, amongst other things, he’s also a songwriter and producer with 12 Million sales to his name. Chris is credited with the discovery of the artist Prince, writing of the first hit song (Soft & Wet), naming the artist, teaching him to record and produce in the studio and writing 3 of the 4 songs on the demo tape that got him signed with Warner Bros. Records. He’s lived with a tribe of “head-hunters” In New Guinea and a whole lot more.**



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

I was a the recording engineer, producer and writer who discovered Prince when he was 16 years old, taught him to engineer, produce and write his own songs and wrote his first hit song for him, Soft & Wet.

When I wanted to learn about music I got on a plane at age 17, flew to Hong Kong and purchased myself a multi-channel reel to reel and a camera as I also wanted to be a fashion photographer. I came back and built my first recording studio in the basement of the house I lived in in Minneapolis and did fashion photography on location – this way I was able to pursue my two passions. I guess I was a better engineer/producer than photographer as that was the one I made all my money with. Great sound was always linked to great music for me – what’s the point of one if you don’t have the other?

**Proudest moment/product you’re most proud of?**

One of my four goals in life which I set in my teens was to write a hit song and the first time I heard my song playing on the radio I was in a grocery store. It

# INTERVIEW

was that first hit song for Prince and I remember thinking, I wonder when everyone in this store is going to break into dance, I really thought they would. Then, when my parents heard my music on the radio and it was in the Billboard Top 100 they finally said to me, “we always thought you were wasting your time in the recording studio but I guess we were wrong, we’re so proud of you”. That’s all any child ever wants to hear from their parents – some recognition for doing something right.

## **What Did You Learn About Music In The Studio Producing Prince?**

The funny thing is what I learned about music that made the biggest difference for both Prince and myself was that the music wasn’t the most important thing. You can have great talent, great music, great production and great songs, but without great marketing no one will ever hear it and its all a waste of time.

The most important thing about MUSIC (and great audio equipment) is being able to get it into the hands/ears of the audience ... without that what have you really done other than satisfy yourself? If you are in business and serious about it, understanding how to actually deliver your song/product/equipment/message to the audience is Job #1, making it great comes after that but many people seem to get these two things reversed and make truly great products THEN try and figure out how to get it into the marketplace. There seems to be a story floating around out there that if you make it, they will come ... WRONG!

The story should be: If you can reach enough people, some of them will buy even if the product isn’t great. Look around you for plenty of evidence of that statement.

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

I launched a speaker that was truly unique and created sound in a way no other speaker ever had. I found some very special technology (I didn’t invent it) that allowed a person to hear music WITHOUT using their ears. It even worked on some deaf people. This device transmitted sound directly into the brain bypassing the ears, and you could hear music coming

from INSIDE your head, not outside it. Plug your ears as tight as you can and you would hear music emanating from inside your skull. I made the mistake of trying to announce this in a press release and everyone who read it became convinced it was some kind of scam or something – it was just too hard to believe without experiencing it for yourself. I eventually withdrew all description of this product and shelved it, realizing it did my reputation more harm than good. Too much innovation isn’t always positive.

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

We just released a magnetic audio levitation stand that has been selling well worldwide and is a fun product that both enhances the sound of a device on it but also aesthetically enhances the appearance of it. I have several turntable designs I am looking for a partner to build right now which are very innovative and we are working on a VERY SMALL high-end speaker that shows a great deal of promise.

### **You and your system**

#### **What component do you miss the most?**

Prince – the main component of a stereo system is the Artist – without that you have nothing to listen to  
**How often do you listen to music?**  
Every night from midnight to 3:00am, doesn’t everybody?

### **The state of the industry**

The high-end audio industry is dead as we know it, its just almost none of the manufacturers still left have really figured it out yet. When was the last time you walked into a home of a non-audiophile and saw a real stereo with decent speakers sitting there... really if you think about it very few people have stereos in their living rooms any more.

As a group we have not even tried to enrol young listeners into the hobby and as a result they have all turned to headphones. Speakers are almost like turntables today – a niche product for the few. Today’s generation wants portable sound that goes with them, not a static system in one place with bulky components. They want to listen to music



# INTERVIEW

alone, for them it is a solitary act where they choose what they listen to, when and how loud.

For the last 5 years we have been surveying a very wide range of everyday people and many, many women to understand how they think about music and here is what they ALL say when asked.

Is music important to you?

ANSWER: Very important

How often do you listen to music?

ANSWER: Every day

How do you mainly listen to music?

ANSWER: On headphones

Is the quality of the music you listen to important to you?

ANSWER: Yes

What's the very most you would ever spend on high quality headphones? ANSWER: \$200 – \$300

If you won the lottery tomorrow and had unlimited funds what kind of home stereo would you buy?

ANSWER: Bose

We (HigherFi) sell the worlds most expensive audio gear all over the world and for us there will always be a strong business as we are specialists in selling preowned, high-end audio for customers no matter where they live – all of the gear out there will need to be sold and we are uniquely positioned to be able to actually move it for customers who are looking to transition out.

The three factors that are now contributing to the demise of the current high end audio as it existed are: All the “old-school” audiophiles who purchased most of the gear are now around 60 and over and retiring. This means they are moving into townhouses, condos and small places ... net result – no room for the big audio system anymore.

These customers are all losing their hearing, and they are realizing it so they start to think, what's the point of a high rez audio playback system if I can't hear very well anymore.

They are now on more limited incomes as they go into retirement so having big money wrapped up in a big system that they cant really hear well enough to appreciate just makes no sense, so not only do they stop buying high-end audio but now the majority of the buyers of high end audio have transitioned into sellers of high-end audio.



We are working with and consulting for numerous high-end audio manufacturers around the world to manage this transition in a way that keeps them in the game. We have a number of proprietary marketing strategies we are helping them employ to stay relevant and prosperous in a very changing world. Anyone that continues selling the old way, the way it's always been done will simply see their buying audience evaporate. As global leaders in online high end audio marketing we have been pioneering since our inception.

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

**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?**

The recording I would grab would be Prince's first demo tape that I made with him singing 3 of my own songs and the demo tape responsible for getting him signed to Warner Brothers, I still have it and its probably the only one left in the world.

**Many thanks Chris for taking the time out to chat with Hifi Pig.**

# Cubot X17 Smartphone Review

**Overall score 8.3**

**Build quality 8.5/10**

**Design 8.5/10**

**Sound quality 7/10**

**Looks 8.5/10**

**Value 9/10**

**The Cubot X17 is the Chinese made selfie-loving smartphone that is now available in the UK through Amazon.**

Chinese manufacturer Cubot Mobile has been working on expanding their empire and, to this end, they have been making their devices available around the world via their website plus other distributors such as the ubiquitous Amazon.

The X17 is very much a mid-range smartphone with an eclectic mix of features and specification all offered for a low end price tag.

Let's have a look-see and see if Cubot have given the X17 all the must haves and most of the nice to haves that you'd expect from a mid-range blower.

## **Cubot X17 design**

Although the Cubot X17 is not an ugly phone from any angle it isn't what I'd call stop-you-in-your-tracks gorgeous either. That said,



most phones these days (yes there are a few exceptions), upon first glance at least, follow the same skinny slab aesthetic so it's really no biggy.

What does matter, however, is the quality of the materials it's made up of. My initial thoughts were promising as the X17 has a reassuring weight to it. On closer inspection Cubot have utilised metal, glass and a decent plastic which leaves the impression of a beautifully thin and sturdy smartphone.

Talking about the plastic bits, the phone was already wearing a thin and flexible plastic case protecting its rear. Not only that, a matte screen protector was also fitted.

The protective case is not a hardcore, 'drop me as much as you want' kind of deal, but it should stop the back of the X17 from scratches and some minor klutziness. It is nice to see Cubot including this and the screen protector in the bundle from the off though.

Along the top of the phone you'll find the 3.5mm headphone port.

The lock and volume keys are along the right hand edge.

On the left side there is a single tray which will take a pair of SIM cards (Micro and Nano) or a SIM and microSD card.

On the back of the X17 there's a camera at the top left corner complete with a dual colour flash module while, at the opposite end, is a single speaker grille.





# Cubot X17 Smartphone Review

The 13MP rear camera module protrudes a little when the device is out of the case, but sits flush when in it, just like the sticky-out camera on the Nexus 6P. This is a good reason to keep the handset in the case provided. There's a 5MP selfie cam up front.

Finally, there's a USB port on the bottom edge for charging and hooking up to a computer.

The Cubot X17 uses capacitive buttons at the bottom of the screen, these don't light up which can be a bit tricky to find in the dark.

## Cubot X17 performance

### X17 specifications

Cubot have made a number of compromises with the X17's specification in order to offer it at such an attractive price point. Some of these are where you'd expect corners being cut, some are not.

Under the hood you'll find a MediaTek MT6735 System-on-Chip, 64-bit, 1.3 GHz, quad core



ARM Cortex-A53 processor built on a 28nm processor size. This is partnered with 3 GB of RAM and ARM's Mali-T720 GPU. Not sparkling but capable.

The phone lands with 16 GB of internal storage and a MicroSD card slot, shared with a SIM slot, that will play nicely with up to a 32 GB card.

The Cubot X17 is rocking a 5-inch, 1080 by 1920 resolution LCD display that packs in for 441 pixels per inch (iPhone 6 has 401ppi) and so gives lovely sharp images.

The 2,500 mAh battery has a claimed battery life of two to three days on standby which seems feasible from my findings.

All good thus far really, and the good stuff continues with the dual SIM standby which offers one NanoSIM and one MicroSIM slot. Connectivity comes by way of 4G Cat. 4 LTE with support for Bands 1, 3, 7 and 20, 3G HSPA, Bluetooth 4.0, 802.11 b/g/n WiFi, GPS, FM Radio. Again, a great list for the money.

### X17 display

The Cubot X17 has a pretty standard screen and res on paper. The 1080p, 5-inch display gives it the respectable 441ppi score which should make a sharp and clear screen. The thing is, that's only part of what makes a display good. There's also the matters of colour accuracy and saturation, brightness levels, how the screen copes in direct sunlight with reflections and glare, and we shouldn't forget that, as this is a touchscreen device, its sensitivity should also be taken in to consideration.

The 441ppi does indeed give a nice sharp image for pictures as well as text. In the default screen setting, the X17's LCD colours weren't as 'POW!' as I was hoping for.

Thankfully, Cubot has added a MiraVision option in Settings → Display menu of the handset. Don't be expecting AMOLED levels from this magic setting but, to my eyes, the colouration does seem to be more vibrant when compared to the stock scheme.

That's not the only screen setting either. The X17 comes with three modes: Standard, Vivid and User, that latter of which is fully





# Cubot X17 Smartphone Review

customisable to your liking through adjusting brightness, colour saturation, sharpness and colour.

I had no issue with the screen's sensitivity, even under the provided screen protector. Typing, sweeping and flicking through apps were all done without issue. The screen protector's slight matte texture and appearance actually makes using the device a nicely tactile experience.

## X17 in use

The Cubot X17's quad core, 64-bit MediaTek MT6735 processor has a maximum clock speed of 1.3 GHz and is mated with the ARM Mali-T720 GPU. For those who look at things like this, you will most likely agree that these aren't particularly pant-wettingly exciting specs.

I could go off on one and start breaking down the respective performance and abilities of each element and go in to how they work together but, for most people, all you really want to know is how does it feel and how it is to use.

Moving around typical Android applications such as the Chrome browser, Gmail, email (for Hotmail, etc), Calendar, Contacts, Hangouts, the X17 is smooth and rarely trips up or feels laggy.

If you have cleared RAM of running applications (long press on the Home button and then swipe them away), bringing up a really chunky application could take a couple of seconds, but recently used applications are quick to access. Long pressing the Home button also shows the neat read out below for Battery, Volume, Memory and Temperature.

Much of the reason for the Cubot's fluid performance is down to that 3GB memory, which minimises how frequently Android needs to swap applications in and out of its memory. Having plentiful RAM means that the device doesn't run into the usual low-end model performance hiccups. The Cubot is set up the way Android performs strongest: the relatively weak processor is kept sprinting through typical applications thanks to there being plenty of memory.

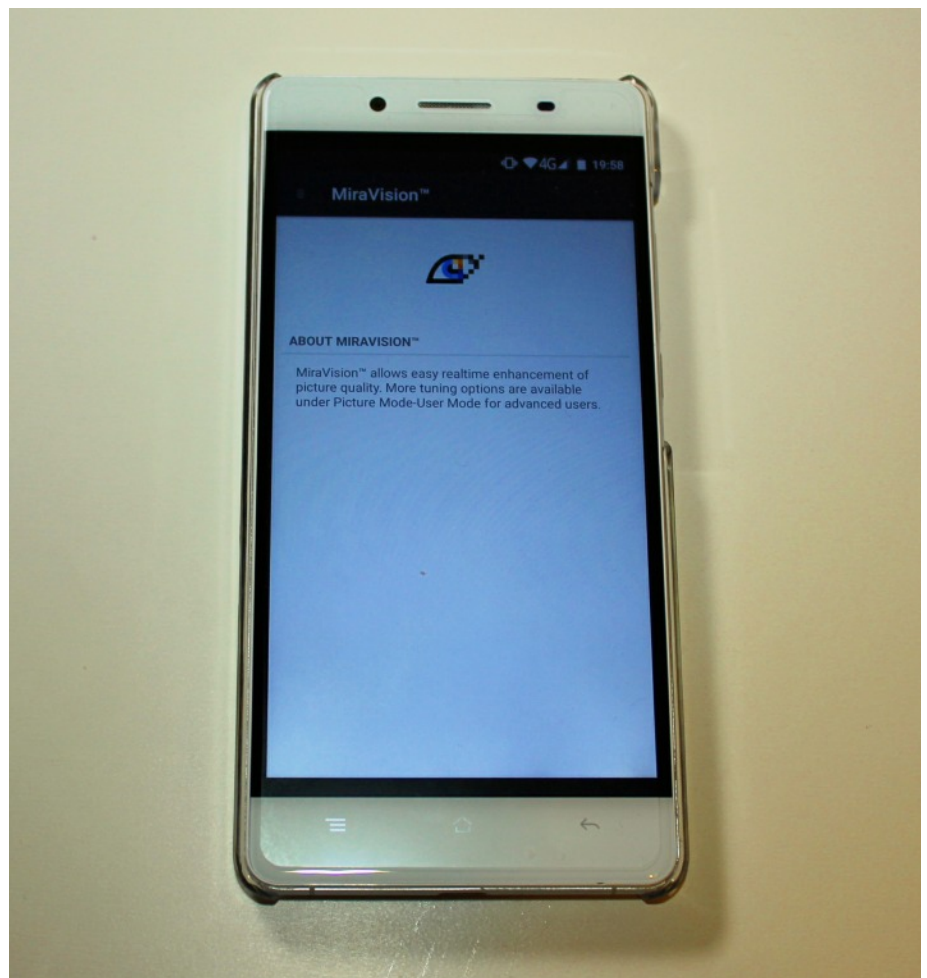
## X17 sound

Cubot has chosen to give the X17 a single rear mounted speaker which is generally a sticking point with me. Either your hand is going to cover it or, when you put your phone down, it's just going to lose any definition as the sound hits the surface the phone's on.

There is a tiny little bump next to the speaker, which I assume is to mitigate the latter point by giving the sound somewhere to escape, but I found that when the X17 was out of the case and put on a table the speaker was still very easily muffled.

In the case, it's a different story with alarms and ringtones being easily heard. I still don't think that the rear of the phone is the best place to shove a speaker and, with all that real estate up front being taken up by those capacitive buttons, it makes me wonder why Cubot didn't opt to stick with the stock Android on-screen buttons and use the room saved for one or two speakers front firing speakers.

Despite the speaker pointing away from the screen, it sounded better than I was expecting and would suffice if you planned to annoy



# Cubot X17 Smartphone Review

people on the bus – as long as you were careful where you put your hand.

Sound isn't particularly awesome through headphones either (tested with Oppo PM-3, Onkyo H500M, Skullcandy Hesh 2) but if you just want music to drown out the commute, then the Cubot X17 will do the trick. It's not going to get audiophiles going weak at the knees though.

## X17 cameras

The X17 uses a 13MP rear camera which, through clever interpolation trickery, can take pictures at a synthetic 16MP resolution. Cubot uses a similar trick for the front facing camera too, bringing the 5MP pixel unit to an 8MP synthetic image.

The stock camera application has the usual range of automatic and manual features, including setting the exposure, resolution, colour balance and saturation.

There's an object focus lock and gesture control (pull a V for victory sign and it'll set off the countdown timer) for taking those selfies, plus a range of live filters that may be applied to pictures. The photos above are straightforward snaps, as the kids would say #NoFilter.

Most of you are more likely, however, to use the main rear camera to snap friends and views. Here the camera tended to struggle with overexposure under certain lighting conditions. On the flip side though, the Cubot X17 is pretty quick at focusing on objects in the foreground.

The front facing camera performs well enough and will happily do the job for selfies and vidchat.

## X17 software features



I've mentioned that the handset has touch-sensitive buttons rather than the on-screen ones offered by stock Android. These are arranged in menu, home and back from left to right, which is another difference. It doesn't take much getting used to but I am more used to the virtual buttons now and I did find myself missing the on-screen multi-tasking button until I discovered that I just needed to long hold the home key.

Cubot has given the stock Android interface moderate tweakage. The drop down menu, for example, enables one tap control over the data connection whereas stock Android requires two taps. As the X17 comes with MediaTek's HotKnot short range data transfer radio, there is also a shortcut for this in the drop down menu.

You do get a few extras in Cubot's user interface which includes the aforementioned gesture control as well as double tapping the screen in order to wake the device, or double tap the home button to lock the screen.

Some of the X17's stock applications (the gallery, camera and FM Radio) support the ability to use Air Gesture and, to be honest; I found it to be a mixed bag unless I was doing my 'Force Wave' close to the screen.

The most important thing about the software was the distinct lack

of bloat. Cubot have rightly trimmed the fat where ever they could which has resulted in quick and perky performer.

## Cubot X17 review conclusion

The Cubot X17 is a very capable mid-range device.

Cubot has obviously taken care in choosing which individual features were to be kept and which should be dropped in order to bring the price down and improve the phone's performance.

Yes, the audio on the X17 could be better as could the rear camera but they do work and perform well enough for casual users.

On the upside, the screen is good and the device performs strongly and has plenty of nice additional software features.

Now, take in to consideration the £125 price tag for a SIM free smartphone which this build quality and I think you've got yourself a bargain.

## Pros

- - Decent screen
- - Responsive software
- - Looks nice enough
- - Doesn't feel cheap
- - Bonkers low price

## Cons

- - Average camera
- - Poor speaker for music

# Devil Horns Earbuds Review

**Overall score 8.5**

**Build quality 8/10**

**Design 8.5/10**

**Sound quality 8.5/10**

**Ease of use 8.5/10**

**Value 9/10**

**The Devil Horn earphones from EMIE look fun but how do they sound?**

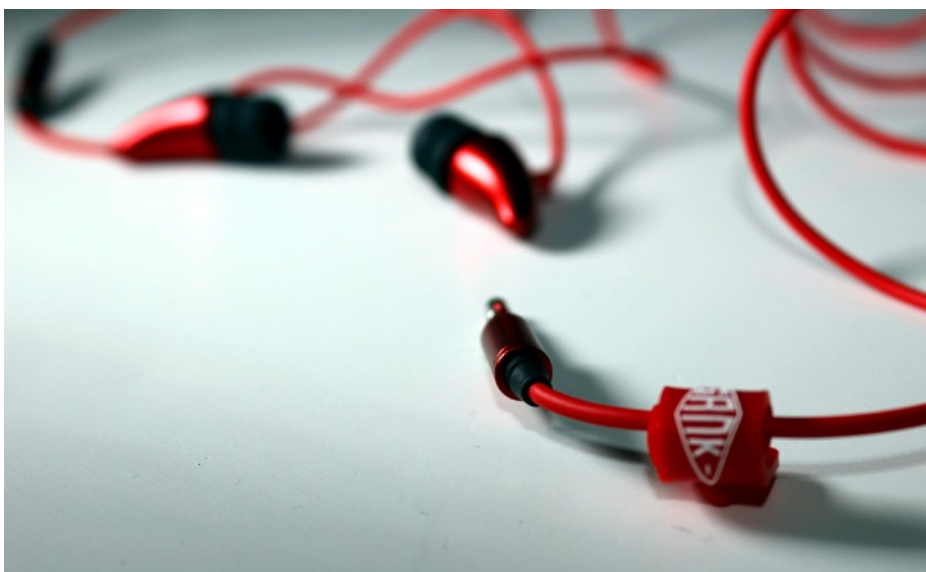
Let's face it – earbuds, earphones or IEMs, whatever you call yours there's one thing that they generally have in common and that's how they look.

True, some are rounded and others are more angular but, on the whole, they're pretty much barrels with a softer end that you shove in your lugs. Not the Devil Horns from EMIE under the GANK brand.

The Devil Horn stands out from the more rank and file earphones thanks to their devil-horn design but are they comfortable and how do they sound? Well, I've tested a set in order to answer those questions.

## **Devil Horns earphones design**

I will be the first to admit that these look like something you'd find in a hen party goodie bag but there are some neat design touches



that made me want to test them further.

Let's start at the pointy end. These earphones have been designed by MACRHINO (nope, me neither) which appears to be made up of Mason Z and Bob W. Nah, still none-the-wiser.

The buds are made from nicely weighted metal which could be aluminum but can't be certain. The buds I have been sent are finished in a nice metallic red finish (blue is also available) and I believe that this is a painted coat rather than anodised.

They do look good and at 16g feel like quality earphones.

The 1.2 metre anti-tangle cable has some neat additions too. Not only

is there an in-line remote and mic, there's a 'chord zipper' which adjusts where the cables split to go to each ear. Also fitted is a rubberised cable tidy.

The cable terminates in a standard 3.5mm plug whose top portion is finished in the same metallic red paint.

Now, that big demonic red nose that the buds come packed in also has a purpose.

This storage case, which will keep your Devil Horns safe and tidy, can be used to only unleash the length of cable you require. At the bottom of the case is an aperture which will allow you to run the jack plug end out of whilst the earphone end runs through the top. Clever.

The presentation tin has a secondary foam layer that packs another 4 pairs of alternative eartips (small single layer, small double layer, medium size double layer and large single layer).

This all very impressive but is this style over substance?

## **Devil Horns earphones performance**

## **Devil Horns comfort**





# Devil Horns Earbuds Review

They don't appear to be the most comfortable shape to wear but, sticking with the tips that were already fitted, they had a decent snug fit.

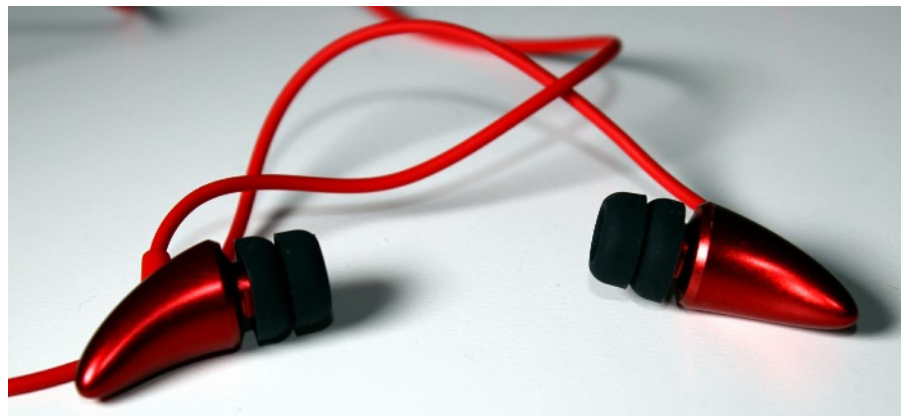
I have long hair so the little metallic horns didn't make their presence felt with my hair down. To be honest, even with my hair tied back no one seemed to notice. The fact is, they're not that prominent. Also, the horn part seemed to rest naturally on the back part of my lobe so, if anything, they looked like they were fitted to the shape of my ear.

## Devil Horns sound quality

Up til this point I will admit to treating these earbuds as novelty items. I know that's quite discriminatory as I was basing that purely on how they looked. Bad Jay!

Walking around with the Devil Horns in and my offline Tidal playlists playing, it soon became evident that these are actually pretty decent on the audio side of things.

These have a frequency range of 20Hz – 20kHz paired with a sensitivity of 93±3dB.



Steely Dan's 'Peg' came through nice and clear. Little People's 'Basique' really showed that these horns can handle the bass too. The low end is punchy and rounded without losing impact.

'Friction' by Imagine Dragons is quite a good range test as there's some decent peaks at both ends of the frequency range and the Devil Horns really did handle it well.

The distorted bass line wasn't muddled, the vocals clear with the highs sparkling without any nasty edges.

## Devil Horns earphones review conclusion

From what started off as a seemingly novelty item aimed perhaps at ladies who are about to

get hitched has really managed to turn me around.

I have made no bones about my earbud ambivalence, and this remains. But, I am an open-

minded individual who is able to perform my journalistic duties impartially. This means that everything from £10 earphones through to £1200+ headphones will still be marked on their merits as well as their value for money.

I will admit that the styling of these earbuds will be a bit "love 'em or hate 'em" but their Marmite appearance aside, I was surprised by how good these actually sounded. Especially when you see their price.

## Devil Horns price and availability

Looking on EMIE's website it's all in US dollars with the Devil Horns with inline control costing \$42 and, without \$40.

However, on [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk) you can get either Red or Blue for under £15.

### Pros

- - Interesting design
- - Comfort
- - Sound quality punches above price
- - Presentation
- - Price

### Cons

- - Styling might not be for everyone



# Fugoo Tough and Style Bluetooth

## Overall score 9.1

Build quality 9.5/10

Design 9/10

Portability 9.5/10

Looks 9/10

Value 8.5/10

**The Fugoo speaker has the ability to dress for any occasion thanks to a range of natty looking jackets. I have been sent the Fugoo Tough along with a Style jacket.**

I get emails almost daily asking me to review the latest Bluetooth speaker and, as you can imagine, it has got to the point where something has to jump out at me.

One such device stood out and it was called Fugoo.

The Fugoo (named after Fugu, the rather risky Japanese puffer fish delicacy) is waterproof, mud-proof, drop-proof and shock-proof in its naked 'Core-X' format. So a tough Bluetooth speaker, that's been done before right? Well, it's

not only tough but also adaptable thanks to its three jacket options – Style, Sport and Tough.

### Fugoo design

Like the puffer fish, the Fugoo looks a bit odd in its naked Core-X self.

Unbolting the Tough jacket to get to the nitty gritty core just takes an

Allen key and the removal of four hex screws.

The thing is the Fugoo Core-X is built to take knocks already. Its construction includes a reinforced case with co-moulded seals and shock absorbers to protect the internal drivers and tech.

The end caps, for example, are able to absorb impact on all eight corners while the seals protect the speakers from the elements such as water (to a depth of up to 3ft), snow, dust, and sand.

Wrap that all up in the Tough jacket and you get an ultra-rugged portable speaker. This protective layer is made up of a fibre-reinforced resin and aluminium frame.

The Fugoo has top-mounted controls shown here on the Tough and then Style jackets.

As well as the + and – volume controls you might have noticed the mic which is more obvious in the Tough pic above. This makes it good for hands-free speakerphone action.

In total there are six drivers – two tweeters, two mid/woofers, and





# Fugoo Tough and Style Bluetooth

two passive radiators – that are strategically placed around all four sides of the product to deliver sound in all directions.

At one end you'll find the on/off button and the one for pairing Bluetooth.

Flip it around and there's the Aux in and the USB charging ports.

The Fugoo comes bundled with a USB and Aux cables in their trademark colour, which is a nice touch. You also get a neat carry bag too!

## Fugoo performance

### Sound quality

The Fugoo promises a 360-degree sound experience.

This is handy as this means you can take it the park or a festival, shove it in the middle of your group and you will all be able to enjoy the omni-directional tunes.

I am glad to report that it does work and sounds pretty good.



Thanks to those drivers, the Fugoo does go louder than you'd expect something of this size should with the output apparently able to hit 95 decibels.

Those bass radiators enable the Fugoo to handle a frequency range from 60Hz-20KHz, the lower

figure means that you do get a decent bass punch from this little speaker.

Regardless of which jacket the Fugoo is wearing it kicks out respectable bass and clear highs with a really focused midrange.

Going from New Young Pony Club's 'Jerk me up' to 'Torch' by Soft Cell, the lows are defined and high-hat hits sparkle just as you'd want your pop songs to come across.

It's not just pop that the Fugoo enjoys though.

'Cowboys from Hell' by Pantera crunches and grooves through its awesome 4:03 minutes, whereas the bass rumbles nicely on the opening bars of 'Celebrate your Mother' by Eighties Matchbox B-Line Disaster.

I was really impressed by the separation on





# Fugoo Tough and Style Bluetooth

more complex tracks such as 'Inertiat Esp' by The Mars Volta with all the interweaving lines clearly discernible.

For those who want to use the speaker as a speakerphone rather than just for playing tunes, the Fugoo is full-duplex capable.

Sound is clear and the omnidirectional microphone with echo cancellation and background noise reduction means those on the other end can hear you loud and clear.

## Jackets

The Style jacket is really lightweight and hardly adds any bulk to the Core-X speaker. It also looks great in the silver mesh finish and the Fugoo label is nice fashionable touch. It really works sat on a shelf in the kitchen or living-room.

The Tough, on the other hand, does add weight as well as girth but there is no denying its purposeful appearance. As it boast all kinds of superpowers (withstanding 3 foot drops, etc) I had to test some of these out.

I am happy to report that being dropped on to flagstones from my eye-level (6 foot) didn't bother it at all. Neither did a dunking in the

bath with Bluetooth still connected and playing 'Here Comes Your Man' by the Pixies without missing a beat.

## Stamina

Having all this portable power and punch requires a decent battery. Thankfully this particular speaker has the legs to last for 40 hours of playback from a single charge.

From empty to fully loaded, the speakers are fully charged again in 3.5 hours via the fast charging Micro-USB charger, which is included in the box.

A really neat addition is that your other devices can sip juice from the Fugoo by simply plugging them into the speaker which will then double-up as a kind of battery pack.

## Fugoo review conclusion

For me, the speaker that the Fugoo had to beat is the Damson Vulcan and looking at the size of this little speaker I very much doubted that it could come anywhere close.

What surprised me is that where the Vulcan does look and feel more powerful, the Fugoo has a more flat and true response than the Vulcan. Where the Damson speaker leans a little more to the

low mids and bass, the Fugoo achieves a clearer presentation thanks having a tighter mid-range and a clearer treble.

Add in to the mix its waterproofing and ultra-tough build as well as being about half the size of the Damson then the Fugoo is definitely one to consider, although the latter is at least £50 more expensive.

I also like the fact that you can change how the Fugoo looks thanks to the jackets. I can testify that the Style really looks good with its silvery mesh and the Tough looks and feels bomb-proof.

If you want decent sound, in a small package, wrapped up in a good quality build then trying this Fugoo is probably a better decision than trying the other variety.

## Fugoo price and availability

You are able to choose which jacket comes in your Fugoo box:

- Style – £185
- Sport – £212
- Tough – £190

You can then purchase the remaining two jacket options individually should you wish. There are also a variety of straps, mounts and remote controls available too. Check out the Fugoo website for more details.

## Pros

- - Very portable
- - Looks great
- - Balanced sound
- - Awesome battery life
- - Swapable jackets

## Cons

- - Bit pricey
- - Some might want more bass



# iFit Classic Analogue Fitness Smartwatch

**Overall score 8.5**

**Build quality 9/10**

**Design 8.5/10**

**Accuracy 8.5/10**

**Ease of use 8.5/10**

**Value 8/10**

**The iFit Classic combines a fitness tracker with the luxurious and timeless looks of an analogue watch.**

The iFit Classic is not going to go toe-to-toe with the Tag Connected but I have had a number of positive comments about how it looks. Even better is the astonished faces of those that I then tell that it is tracking my steps and calorie intake.

I think that we've all become used to how smartwatches and fitness trackers tend to look, that's one of the main reasons I was so happy to be given the chance to review the iFit Classic.

## **iFit Classic design**

At first glance the Classic looks like a diver's watch with a main dial and then three sub-dials – until you figure out what those secondary readings are there for.

The iFit Classic is equipped with scratch and “break resistant” glass and a chunky, yet lightweight body.

The strap is a soft rubberised band, again keeping in with the diving/sports watch theme.

The version I have been sent to review is the ‘Obsidian’ model and, as you can already tell, it's mostly a neat little black number with a red second hand and red accents on the face.

Either side of the crown, which is used to set and change the time as



normal, you have two buttons flanking it.

These are used to manually input your calorie intake. Holding down the bottom one prepares the watch to take on the information, whilst the top one is used to tap in the calories at 50 calorie intervals on the subdial at the 6 o'clock position. Finally it's back to the bottom one to log the information which is then added to the overall count in the subdial at the 12 o'clock position. It sounds a lot more complicated than it actually is.

The subdial at 9 o'clock is your step counter.

On the underside of the iFit you'll see the charging points which connect with the supplied charging cradle.

The Classic is very comfortable to wear and is a good looking watch.

## **iFit Classic pairing and set up**

The first time you use the watch, press and hold the bottom button for 3 seconds. After approximately 3 seconds, the watch will exit

shipping mode and the hands will begin to move.

Download the free iFit app and once installed open it up and follow the on screen instructions. This will then take you up to pairing the Classic with your phone.

To do this, press and hold the top button for 3 seconds. The red LED on the dial will flash. Then, in the iFit app, select the watch from the list of discoverable devices. The iFit app will display your watch for you to select and sync.

Your watch will then flash a green LED light on the dial to notify you that the pairing is successful.

The good news is that, after pairing the watch, the iFit app will automatically sync whenever the iFit app is open and Bluetooth is enabled on your device. You can also manually sync the iFit Classic by opening the iFit app.

During the initial setup you will be asked to set your goals, alarms, sleep, and other settings.



# iFit Classic Analogue Fitness Smartwatch

I found all of this painless and pretty straightforward.

## iFit Classic fitness log

The iFit App can track calorie intake, steps, distance, calories burned, and sleep patterns.

For the first few days I was punching in the calories manually via the watch until I realised that the app can not only do that, but you can actually just scan the barcode on your food's packaging! That makes things a heck of a lot easier, I can tell you.

The step counter works by motion detection but that's not all. The iFit Classic will also be able to tell when you have not been moving for a while and let you know when you need to move.

When you've been immobile for too long it will vibrate and light up. This amount of time can either be set in the app but it is preset to 30 minutes.

## iFit Classic stamina

I've managed to get just over a week's wear before needing to recharge the iFit Classic.

You do get a warning when it hits 20% battery by way of a red flashing light every-now-and-then.

The watch includes a charger that you snap onto it and then you can plug into any USB capable port.

## iFit Classic review conclusion

I've been using the Classic for a couple of weeks now and, at the beginning, I will admit to being a bit harsh on it. I have a collection of vintage Rado watches and replacing my Manhattan or

Starliner for the Classic just seemed a bit wrong to me.

However, this is a very comfortable watch to wear and, as I have said, has had its fair share of admiring glances. If I was to

realise how much distance I cover on an average day. This is all good stuff.

## iFit Classic price and availability

The iFit Classic is available in two colour options – the Obsidian has platinum-coloured accents with obsidian black band, or Frost which has warm rose gold-coloured accents with a frost white band.

The iFit Classic is available now at Nordic Track for £199.

## iFit Classic specifications at a glance:

- 3-axis accelerometer
- Vibration notifications
- 7-day rechargeable battery via USB power cable
- Wireless sync via Bluetooth® 4.0 BLE to iFit fitness tracker app
- Water resistant up to 50 meters, so you can swim, do dishes or take a shower without removing it
- Android and iOS mobile apps available

## Pros

- - Looks good
- - Clear app
- - Comfortable
- - Clear face and dials
- - Water resistance

## Cons

- - Can't see dials in the dark
- - Pulse monitor would've been a great addition



have one niggle about it though, it would be that none of the hands nor hour markers are luminous. I even tried a variety of button presses to see if there was a backlight – I couldn't find one if there is.

What it did point out was my erratic sleeping pattern (it knows how long you sleep for!) as well as the fact that some days I go way over my calorie target, whilst others I consume about half the amount I should. I also didn't



# Manfrotto Lumiemuse 3 LED Camera Light

**Overall score 8.9**

**Build quality 9/10**

**Design 9/10**

**Portability 9/10**

**Looks 9/10**

**Value 8.5/10**

**Manfrotto Lumie is a range of new compact, inexpensive, high performance photography lights. They sit below the high-end Manfrotto Spectra range of LED light panels but, as with most Manfrotto kit, would happily suit the prosumer or enthusiast level of photog.**

My first experience with a light panel came by way of a suggestion from a professional photographer friend when I asked about how to get better results from shooting at shows, especially A/V expos. He suggested an extremely budget panel that did the trick but is also quite large and cumbersome.

There are three sizes of the Lumie light available: the smallest is the Lumiemuse 3, which I have here, that features three LEDs. The medium-sized Lumiemuse has six, and the largest, Lumiemuse has eight. As you'd expect, the bigger the unit the more light power it's capable of outputting.

## Lumiemuse design

All of the Lumie range packs Manfrotto's new super-bright surface-mount LED technology. What this means is that the panels utilise fewer but bigger and brighter LEDs than the Spectra models.

The Muse is loaded with three of these lights and the panel is really compact and sleek looking. Measuring only 1.1 x 3.4 x 2.3-inches / 28 x 86 x 59 mm and weighing just 73g the Muse will



happily fit in any pocket or camera bag.

What I really like is that instead of taking AA, AAA or even camera batteries (like my current panel), the Lumie series has a Li-Ion battery that recharges via Micro USB.

This makes the Lumiemuse extremely portable and, as most of us will be carrying a laptop or tablet around, should prevent us from running out of juice.

One remark needs to be made at this point though, be warned that the rubber plug that protects the micro USB port isn't attached and, I for one, nearly lost it within seconds of opening the box and getting the Lumiemuse out.

On the opposite side of that micro USB port you'll find the on/off button which also is used to access the 3-step light dimming.

The Muse also comes with a tripod and hotshoe mount as well as colour and diffusion filters.

I have no complaints regarding the build quality of the Lumiemuse at

all and that's to be expected from a brand such as Manfrotto.

## Lumiemuse performance

The colour balancing filters that come included in the Muse bundle help adjust the colour temperature of the light and simply snap-fit onto the front.

The 3-step dimmer is also very useful to get the right amount of illumination on your subject. The colour temperature is quoted as being 5600° K – that might mean something to some of you but, all I can say, is that it is quite white.

Light output is 220lux and is bright enough to provide enough lighting on your subject without bleaching the scene. Above are three photos using the diffuser at the different lighting levels.

Using the included colour filter, you are better able to match the lighting with skin tones – ok, so the small rhino isn't the ideal model, but above you have the 3 lighting levels with the colour filter on.

Mounted on top of my Canon EOS the Muse is hardly noticeable in so

# Manfrotto Lumiemuse 3 LED Camera Light

far as weight is concerned. Even though I had rotary control with my monster lighting panel I found the three levels provided by the Muse was enough in most situations and definitely more subtle than the built-in flash on the EOS.

The battery lasts around an hour of constant use so it is worth remembering to turn the light off in between rooms at an event such as Sound & Vision in Bristol. To this end, I would've liked a low battery warning or a way of checking the battery level so as not to be caught out.

The Lumiemuse does have a green notification light just above the USB port which flashes when charging and lights when you press the button to go through the lighting levels, all it needs to do is appear red when the charge is low. Is it really that much to ask?



I realise that a ball mount is available but, for the Muse, I think that a simple hinged adjustment could have made it even better value.

## Manfrotto Lumiemuse review conclusion

I found the Lumiemuse great for what I tend to snap which are mostly stationary objects – Hi-Fi, phones, headphones, etc.

The Muse's 3 LEDs are capable of covering this kind of thing and its

small size allows me to get me in close at Hi-Fi shows.

Yes, the port protector could go missing at any moment and the panel is fixed in position but these aren't deal breakers. Neither is the lack of a battery indicator – these are all 'like to have's' rather than must have's and I think Manfrotto knows this.

At home I have started to use the Muse in

tandem with my obviously oversized lighting panel which I now have fitted to a flexible portable tripod. Together, I cannot imagine needing much else.

The Manfrotto Lumiemuse is a very versatile and useful tool and, as my photography pal said, "flashes are so 2010".

There are cheaper on the market but the Muse is well priced for a lighting panel from such a respected manufacturer. Check out the Lumimuse range on the Manfrotto website.



## Pros

- - Lightweight
- - Compact
- - Bright with control
- - Diffuser and filter included
- - USB rechargeable

## Cons

- - Hinged or ball joint adjustment would be useful
- - No low battery indicator
- - USB port cover easily lost

# Onkyo H500M Headphones

**Overall score 8.9**

**Build quality 9/10**

**Design 9/10**

**Portability 9/10**

**Sound quality 9/10**

**Value 8.5/10**

**The Onkyo H500M headphones are part of the latest range from audio makers. With their promise of portability and bringing out the best of your high res digital library, has Onkyo bitten off more than it can chew?**

These days it's all about the high resolution, lossless digital audio for those that care about how their music sounds on the move. There are many players to choose from or DACs (digital analogue convertors) that will do their best to improve what comes out your phone. But what about headphones?

I know that there's plenty of top flight headphones to select from but when you're on the commute or just having a walk, you don't really want to be carting around half-a-tonne of earpleasers strapped to your head.



The Oppo PM-3 have been my go to cans for when out and about, and I'll have the occasional dalliance with a Bluetooth set (currently Skullcandy's Hesh 2) but what I wanted to go even lighter?

## **Onkyo H500M design**

These on-ear cans certainly look comfy and what instantly struck me when I got them out of the box is just how remarkably light they were. Almost disappointingly so.

That might be an odd thing to say but I am guessing that these headphones come in at around

190g and, because of that, their first impression is that of something brittle and, dare I say, cheap.

Now, I know that I have just contradicted myself in saying that lightweight is better for when you're walking about but then said because these are so light that they felt disappointing but stay with me here a bit longer.

Yes, they are light, but they are not cheaply made. Not at all.

These closed back headphones feature an aluminium housing which provides a rigid metal cabinet to eliminate unwanted vibrations.

The headband is soft and comfortable as are the earpads. The headband has enough tension to gently hold them on your noggin without having to employ a vice-like grip.

Included is a detachable, 1.2 metre, twisted, tangle-free cable which is also low profile and lightweight (especially when compared to the Atlas Zeno). The cable is also fitted with a one-button in-line remote which also houses the microphone for hands-





# Onkyo H500M Headphones

free calling. The plastic used for this and the bottom of the headband feels to be of good quality.

I like the little design touch of the metal posts that connect the band to the cups with the right one marked with a red line.

The H500M are available in white or black and look modern and rather slick in my opinion.

## Onkyo H500M performance

The H500M are fitted with 40mm drivers which boast a super-wide frequency range of 7Hz-40kHz.

This leads me to believe that when Onkyo attached the Hi-Res Audio sticker to the headphone's cable, they were feeling quite confident about things.

o, high quality audio you want? High quality audio you shall have.

As you might already know, there are several streaming services that offer audio at CD-quality or higher. I was an early adopter of Tidal (pre-music star take-over) and am still a fan so this was my streaming channel of choice.

Right from the off I could you hear that these headphones really do offer something extra when compared to other headphones I have hear to test.

The sound is very clear and full with all the notes are neatly separated across the range. I was particularly impressed by the level of isolation that these on-ears actually managed to offer.

Cranking up the dial with some FLAC Fleetwood Mac and even at loud volumes the sound quality is still good. The mids are especially clear with guitar and vocals



harmonising rather than fighting for space.

The bass has a very strong presence without being overbearing or muddled, even when playing the classic grungy stylings of Mudhoney and early Nirvana.

OK, so not everyone is willing to pay for Tidal or even the better version of Spotify so it was time to test it with some of my older MP3s which were ripped at embarrassingly low bit rates because players had small memories back then.

After some rather toe-curling moments getting past that hissy, washy cymbal sound that you get with low bit rate rips, I did notice that the mids in the headphones also dropped away slightly. The sound was still good, level-wise, but I was glad to get back to the comfort of a more lossless environment.

## Onkyo H500M review conclusion

The H500M costs £130 and for cans this good that is more than a fair price in my mind.

If you don't want the isolation of over-ear headphones and the weight or chunkier look of ones that offer a purer sound, I have no hesitation in recommending the Onkyo H500M. Saying that, you will most probably also have to add a fair wadge of cash too as these sound really good for the price.

For a mobile headset I would've loved it if they could fold up smaller to pack away – but that's a very minor point.

I guarantee that these headphones, with good quality material, will have you grinning like a Cheshire Cat, especially if you are only just discovering the pleasure of lossless digital audio.

They are available now from Selfridges and Argos. For more details head over to the Okyo site.

## Pros

- - Lightweight
- - Removable cable
- - Sound quality
- - Comfort

## Cons

- - Don't fold

# Skullcandy Grind Wireless Headphones

**Overall score 8.8**

**Build quality 9/10**

**Design 8.5/10**

**Sound quality 8.5/10**

**Ease of use 9/10**

**Value 9/10**

**Skullcandy Grind Wireless on-ear headphones is a continuation of the brand's mission to snip the cables from their range.**

I was invited to go and visit Skullcandy at their UK launch of the Grind Wireless cans and chill out on a rather warm evening in the centre of Soho.

You may recall that I recently reviewed the Skullcandy [Hesh 2](#) wireless headphones not so long back and, where they were impressive for the price, they seemed a bit unbalanced sonically.

Have Skullcandy managed to resolve that in these, the smaller and lighter Grind Wireless?

## **Grind Wireless design**

One thing that Skullcandy continues to do is offering their products in a wide, and sometimes baffling, array of finishes and



styles. The Grind Wireless is no different.

You can choose from a total of six different colourways ranging from a camouflage/tartan mash-up to a sleek and minimalist black and chrome number.

The ones I have here are, to my mind, a more classic and classy finish in black and brown faux napped leather.

Beneath the leather covering is soft black foam, stitched into place with a breathable mesh layer. The nicely cushioned foam and soft ear pads work together to form one of

the most comfortable and well-fitting on-ear headsets I've tested.

The Grind Wireless has three no-nonsense control buttons around the rear of the right earcup: volume up, volume down and the central function button.

Each volume button, when held down for three seconds, skips to the next or previous track depending on whether you were holding the + or – control.

The main function button is responsible for controlling Bluetooth and answering incoming calls as well as powering the headset on and off.

Also on the same side is where you'll find the micro USB charging and audio jack ports.

The Grind Wireless comes with a built-in microphone, as well as an optional 3.5mm audio jack for the times you need to be tethered to a device – or the rechargeable battery runs out.

## **Grind Wireless performance**

### **Grind sound quality**

As the Skullcandy Grind are a tenner cheaper than the Hesh 2 I tested I thought that they might be



# Skullcandy Grind Wireless Headphones

on a par with each other with, perhaps, the Grind being a little light in the bass.

My first test was at [If Music](#) with some choice vinyl being sent to the headset via a Bluetooth transmitter and venerable Technics SL-1210.

First up was Hendrix live at the Atlanta Pop Festival. I should not have doubted the Grind Wireless's ability for bass as I sat through this almost mythical gig from 1970.

I had them sling on some Trip Hop as I was now worried about the higher register and this proved to be needless also, with the Grind performing surprisingly well in the demo area.

Now, it's not that I'm not trusting, but the thing is... well... I'm not. The EQ would obviously be set to get the best from these cans so I scurried home to get my test set unpacked.

They have now lived with me on my commute for a week-or-so and, I have to say, are surprisingly good.

The Grind Wireless do actually have a nice deep, well-rounded sound with remarkably clear mids and highs.

I have slung pretty much everything at these headphones from Nile to Nils Lofgren, and EST to AC/DC and the light Grinds have managed to cope really really well.

Granted, they're not a real match for my benchmark set of [Oppo PM-3](#) planar magnetic cans but those are five times more expensive than the Grind Wireless – and they're not even wireless!

## Grind stamina



All the information points to the Grind Wireless having around 12 hours of battery time, which I found to be fairly accurate with them needing a charge after 5 days of commuting and blocking out my workmates during lunch break.

Saying that, I have had been forgetful and left them switched on when I've stopped the music playback and just taken them off. Now, some Bluetooth headsets, when they've been left dormant, will switch off automatically in order to save charge. The Grind don't – they sit there like an expectant puppy ready to play again.

Other than that, pairing the headset and everything else is painless and battery life is reasonable. Also, should your cans die when you're away from power, you've always the option of jacking the cable in.

## Grind Wireless review conclusion

It's hard not to compare audio quality between different headphones whilst ignoring the price. The thing is, price isn't always the mark of quality.

The Skullcandy Grind Wireless delivers in every area you would want. They are not only lightweight and comfortable but sound great and are well put together.

Add the fact that they only cost 70 notes, then you're on to a sure fire winner.

The Grind Wireless have set the bar for Skullcandy as far as I am concerned.

## Grind Wireless price and availability

The Grind Wireless are available now directly from [Skullcandy](#) and other [retailers](#) for £70

## Pros

- - Balanced sound
- - Lightweight
- - Range of colours available
- - Can use wired
- - Great value

## Cons

- - On-ear cans do allow leakage



# Skullcandy Hesh 2 Bluetooth Headphones

**Overall score 8.6**

**Build quality 9/10**

**Design 9/10**

**Sound quality 8/10**

**Ease of use 9/10**

**Value 9/10**

**Hesh 2 from Skullcandy are over-ear style headphones and, because no one likes getting tangled up in cables, Skullcandy have unleashed a wireless set, which I happen to have here to review.**

The Skullcandy Hesh 2 Bluetooth headphones are what I would describe as being full-sized cans.

You have the option of running these fully wireless or wired – but are these mid-range priced headphones anything to get excited about?

## **Hesh 2 Wireless design**

These headphones are remarkably subtle for Skullcandy who I would normally expect to produce something in neon or, at least, camouflage print (these are available in the latter finish).

The set I have been loaned are in a rather tasteful matte black finish



emblazoned with a chrome-finish skull logo which I think looks pretty cool.

The chunky padded faux leather earcups are really comfortable and offer pretty good passive noise-cancelling isolation from the outside world.

Between the padded cups and the hard matte plastic body is another chromed detail in the ring around the ear-pieces.

The headphone is equipped with a three-button remote on the right

ear cup which is also home to a microphone.

The large illuminating multifunction button serves as the power on/off button, call answer/end button, and pause/play button.

The volume buttons don't light up but are really easy to find when wearing the headphones. These also double as track advance/back buttons when you hold them down for 3 seconds.

On the left cup is where you'll find the micro USB charging port and a 3.5mm jack lead port. The headphones are bundled with a lead, complete with inline remote and microphone, that allows you to use the Hesh 2 Wireless as wired headphones.

The headband has a softer rubberised finish than the cups and features the Skullcandy name embossed along its length.

The overall build quality seems to be darned good for this price point.

## **Hesh 2 Wireless performance**

### **Sound quality**



# Skullcandy Hesh 2 Bluetooth Headphones

The Hesh 2 are fairly well balanced but do seem to have a little bit of bass push, but not so much that it will overwhelm you.

The sound is perhaps more on the warmer side when compared with more 'honest' headphones such as the Oppo PM-3.

Even though they are a little heavier on the bass than I would normally like, they don't muddy the overall experience or make the performance appear dull. On the other hand, if you are looking for an exciting reproduction of your music, it's perhaps best to look elsewhere.

Mids and highs are crisp and clear without sounding clipped.

Because of this slightly warmed and smoothed output you are better able to get away with 'lossy' recordings than you would with headphones such as the Onkyo H500M, for instance. This means your MP3s and Spotify tunes will be fine here.

The extra bass does make these good for movies and more action-based box-set series though.

## Stamina

Battery life is pretty great for a Bluetooth headset.

Skullcandy claim 15 hours of battery life and they've easily got me through a week's worth of commuting and an episode of Dare Devil each lunchtime so I think they can manage more than the company is claiming which is fine by me.

If you should run out of battery power nowhere near a power



source then you can attach a cable and use the Hesh 2 as wired headphones.

The sound changes a bit in wired mode to me though. It's a little like the mids have been scooped as the bass and treble appear higher in the EQ and so the music has more edge to it. It's down to personal taste as to whether or not this characteristic is better or worse than its wireless output.

## Hesh 2 review conclusion

The Skullcandy Hesh 2 Wireless is a competent performer.

I like how they look and they are comfortable to wear for long periods of time. Bluetooth is always a good thing when commuting – the amount of people getting tangled on the tube is a source of almost constant amusement.

Granted, these might not be the most exciting or truest sounding

cans out there but, for £80, they do everything they promise to.

For another tenner you could get the Lindy BNX-60 noise-cancelling cans but, out of the two, I actually do prefer how the Skullcandy Hesh 2 sound.

These are great for video watching, especially action flicks.

## Hesh 2 cost and availability

The Skullcandy Hesh 2 Wireless headphones are available now in White/Brown, Black, or Camo for £79.99 direct from the website.

## Pros

- - Wired/Wireless option
- - Good isolation
- - Easy control
- - Decent hands free
- - Comfortable

## Cons

- - EQ a little one-sided



# ViewSonic Pro7827HD Projector

**Overall score 8.6**

**Build quality 8.5/10**

**Design 8.5/10**

**Picture quality 8.5/10**

**Ease of use 9/10**

**Value 8.5/10**

**ViewSonic has added some new members to its LightStream family and I have had the ViewSonic Pro7827HD for a week to see how it performs.**

The LightStream entertainment projectors promise to give you incredible colour accuracy as well as stunning image quality.

Having previously loaned a ViewSonic projector I can already vouch for their rather unexpectedly good audio quality.

What I was really interested in seeing is how the image quality and colour saturation has improved with the new tech.

Let's get to it shall we?

## **ViewSonic Pro7827HD design**

The ViewSonic Pro7827HD that I have been loaned is finished in a



very nice and stealthy black brushed finish which, although won't be that masked against a white ceiling, does make it less conspicuous when the lights are off.

The Pro7827HD does share some design points with the PJD7830HDL in so far as you can tell that they're from the same company – and that is certainly no bad thing.

The projector measures 316 mm(W) x 228 mm(D) x 103.7 mm(H) and weighs just 2.6Kg

Around the back you will find one standard HDMI and two HDMI/MHL inputs, composite, component, audio, micro USB, RS232 and RJ45 connectors.

All of this is tidied away by a neat cable management hood which simply clicks and then screws on.

On top of the Pro7827HD are the power and stand-by buttons as well as source, colour mode and menu selectors. Needless to say, these can also be accessed by the bundled remote control.

There are also a dials for the vertical lens shift (handy for short throw projecting), zoom and focus.

## **ViewSonic Pro7827HD performance**

Plugging in my Amazon Fire Stick directly into the Pro7827HD's HDMI port gave me instant access to a range of films. I think that, if I ever came to own a projector, the Fire Stick and possible Chromecast would get plenty of use.





# ViewSonic Pro7827HD Projector

The Pro7827HD is the first in the LightStream line to feature an RGBRGB 6-segment colour wheel. This is powered by ViewSonic's SuperColour technology which kicks out Rec.709 cinematic colours within the sRGB colour space.

What that all means, as far as I could see, is that the special coating used to filter segmental spectrums of RGB actually intensifies the Red, Blue, and Green colours. The end result is increased visual performance. This was more noticeable on playing Blu-rays through the projector via my Oppo disc spinner.

The 1080p Full HD picture on the Pro7827HD seemed to have better hue and colour saturation than my previous test device from ViewSonic. I would say that the colour gradients are definitely better handled by this new projector.

The 2,200 lumens brightness mated with 22,000:1 contrast ratio really pushes out a clear and sharp picture, even when the light in the



room is far from optimal – my living room drapes are nowhere near blackout quality.

It was good to hear that ViewSonic have continued to install a decent speaker set-up in their home cinema projectors and the Pro7827HD's 10w unit is also packing the company's SonicExpert sound enhancement tech.

Naturally, if you were looking for a full home cinema experience then I would advise adding external speakers but, for quickly watching a film within 5 minutes of unpacking the Pro7827HD, the internal sound slinger did really well.

## ViewSonic Pro7827HD projector review conclusion

The Pro7827HD is a compact, full HD, home entertainment projector. With its 1080p resolution, the Pro7827HD projector delivers a wider colour range for an almost true-to-life picture quality.

Its built-in 10W speaker and support for a number of inputs, including wireless if you opt for the additional PortAll dongle, is really impressive at this price point.

## ViewSonic Pro7827HD price and availability

The ViewSonic Pro7827HD is available now RRP £649. More details are available [here](#).

## Pros

- - Compact
- - Decent built-in speaker
- - Good picture
- - Range of inputs
- - Lens flexibility

## Cons

- - PortAll dongle another £70

