

Hifi Pig

EXTRA

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JULY 2016

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T Rex's Electric Warrior



INTERVIEWS

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speaks with Vince
Bruzzese of Totem**

**Miles Showell,
mastering
engineer at Abbey
Road, speaks to
Hifi Pig about half
speed mastering**

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HI-FI WORLD



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Hi-Fi News Review September '15

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Grandinote Proemio Preamplifier and Silva Power Amplifier



At £14500 for the pair, the Grandinote Proemio preamp and Silva power amplifier are far from bargain basement fodder, but do they warrant such a price-tag? Stuart Smith finds out

About Grandinote

Grandinote are based in Italy and headed up by Massimiliano Magri. The company use a technology they call Magnetosolid where solid state components are used in circuits more typical of valve amplifiers. Grandinote say this offers the advantages of both solid state and tube amplifiers. All the low signal stages in the amps are direct coupled without capacitors and every device has its own dedicated power supply. All their amplifiers run in Class A.

First of all let me say that the packaging of both items was very good indeed; sturdy single boxes with plenty of thick cardboard packing, a nice red felt cover over each item and a pair of white gloves for handling.

Proemio Preamplifier

Grandinote's £6500 Proemio is a line preamplifier offering three unbalanced inputs on RCA and three fully balanced inputs on XLR. The balanced XLR

Grandinote Proemio Preamplifier and Silva Power Amplifier

inputs can be converted to unbalanced inputs but I didn't mess with them as I had no need to.

Outputs offered are a balanced output and an unbalanced output. It's a full dual-mono constructed preamplifier operating in Class A with no feedback.

Like the Silva power amplifier it is a tad deeper than a standard bit of kit at 40.8cm, a bit higher at 19.6cm and less wide at 31.8cm- it has sort of a shoebox on steroids kind of look about it and on the rack it looks rather attractive with its clean, almost industrial aesthetic.

On the front of the unit there's six buttons that control program and volume (have a look at the photo) and a red LED screen. It's all very minimalist and sits on three solid aluminium hemispheres.

Round the back there's a lot more going on with all the aforementioned inputs and outputs. The only other input on the back of Proemio is the power socket.

Where I come from we have a specific saying when something is well built and solid, but for the purposes

here let's temper that phrase a bit and say that this unit is built like a brick outhouse. There's an immediate sense of solidity and that the unit is really well put together. A peek through the slotted aluminium top-plate shows us nicely soldered boards and a neat looking layout.

The review unit came with a basic looking remote that was functional rather than being anything special but I am assured that all Grandinote's retail offerings now come with a rather splendid looking remote control. The supplied remote did end up controlling the Lampizator Big7 DAC too but never mind, I completely lost the supplied remote anyway (found only after the units were returned) and resorted to using the buttons on the front of the Proemio.

Switch on the Proemio and there's a 99 second countdown shows on the front panel and you can do nothing but wait until the unit is up to speed. Choose inputs one to three for the unbalanced RCA inputs and four to six for the balanced inputs. This caught me out



Grandinote Proemio Preamplifier and Silva Power Amplifier



when I first used the Proemio (I' not read the manual) with a balanced input into the top XLR input, though to be fair to Grandinote it is clearly labelled as input 4!

Press the PRG button on the front and you can personalise some of the functions of the amplifier and decide what volume you' like each of the inputs to open up at...his is a useful function and allows you to set different volumes for each of the inputs automatically. For example you could have your DAC into input one to start at volume eight whilst the Reel to Reel on input three could start at volume 10. This function allows you to compensate if one source is quieter or louder than another without having to faff with the volume all the time. If you choose not to set the volume for each input it will automatically go to zero when you restart the machine or change input...o worth spending the time to set this up from the off as

the resetting to zero soon gets old.

Another feature of the Program button is balance left and right and I' pleased to see this!

The buttons on the right are labelled vol+, vol- and mute and are self explanatory.

Silva Stereo Power Amplifier

Apart from having only a large black button on the front of the unit the £995 Silva amplifier looks just like the Proemio. It' bloody heavy though, weighing in at 40Kg! Again this is a full dual mono construction offering up to 37Watts a side in full Class A operation. Round the back of the unit there' a bit of a break from the norm as the Silva has two power inputs, one for the left channel and one for the right... like this concept! There' a pair of pretty standard looking but well made speaker posts that will accept spades, bananas and bare wire.

Grandinote Proemio Preamplifier and Silva Power Amplifier



Inputs on the Silva are limited to a pair of fully balanced XLRs only which may limit the amps appeal to some.

The amp runs pretty hot and you'll need to make sure you place it somewhere where there's plenty of ventilation.

Sound

I had the Proemio and Silva in the system for pretty much the whole of their time with us (a couple of months) and used them almost exclusively during this period. All electronics were put through the Lab 12 gordian conditioner on automatic settings. Front end kit used was the Lampizator Big 7 being fed from a Melco unit or laptop, a Tascam 32 reel to reel and AnalogueWorks turntable with Wand arm and OC9III cartridge. Speaker cables for the duration were Tellurium Q Ultra Blacks, whilst interconnects were from Portento, Chord and Tellurium Q. Loudspeakers used

were Avantgarde Duo XD, HORNS Mummy and Leema Xens.

First of all I turned the units on and got nothing (see earlier comment and why you should always read the instruction manual) but then when I phoned Jack at UK Distributor BD Audio he soon put me right as to what I'd done! There was now sound but it wasn't good...it was far from acceptable, being grainy and decidedly lo-fi! Another call to Jack and I was told to let both units run for a while to "burn in" which I did, doing no critical listening for a good week or so. These take a lot of running in before they are on song it has to be said and I'd like to see them fully sorted before being sent out to paying customers. That initial turn on and playing your first tune can have a marked impact on the way a person relates to a new piece of kit and I'd suggest it best to get it right out the box rather than having to go through all that fumbling and uncomfortable getting to know you period.

Grandinote Proemio Preamplifier and Silva Power Amplifier

For the most part I used the Proemio/Silva pairing with the Avantgarde Duo XD loudspeakers which many readers will know have active bass and so are really only relevant in assessing the mids and tops of a new piece of equipment in the system...ut in this respect I find them so revealing as to be a really useful review tool.

On Jazz program you are treated to a very believable sound with trumpet and guitar sounding as lifelike as I've heard it in the system. There's speed and great bite to the music, with everything stopping and going back to silence when it should. When there are subtle decays these are really nicely portrayed and I put this down to the incredible quietness of the pairing; play no music and you can turn these up to very high volume settings and even through the 103dB sensitive Avantgardes you get nought but a gentle hum...ot absolutely dead quiet, but on more real world sensitivity speakers as good as. There's a real feeling here of there being real musicians in the room rather than listening to a recording. Vocals are well projected into the room and presented without adding anything "else" to proceedings; you get the feeling of nothing being forced or artificial. The Grandinotes are not as absolutely transparent as my Class D power amps and Music First pre in the mids, but what they add to the mix is a really pleasant warmth with regards to vocals. On the 11:11 album by Rodrigo y Gabriela we are treated again to a very realistic portrayal of the music and small nuances in the couples playing style – slaps on the strings or against the guitars body – feel authentic and "n the room" Again the fast attack and decay of the Grandinote pairing make for an exciting, edge of your seat presentation. High frequencies were never harsh, grainy or metallic sounding and again the word that comes to mind is natural. Looking into the stereo mix it's clear that the Grandinote pairing put instruments where they should be and keep them locked there...here' no drifting at all and this leads to



a feeling of things being right mix-wise. It also makes the stereo image more believable/palpable.

Playing techno I felt the need to turn the volume up a little to get the effect I look for with this kind of music. Am I suggesting the Grandinotes are a bit polite and laidback with techno and the like? No I'm not, but to feel the slam and vigour inherent in this kind of music it deserves to be loud and the Grandinotes let you go loud without feeling they are running out of steam or being pushed to hard...ut then they're not going to given the Avantgardes' makeup, so let's talk about them with perhaps some speakers that present a bit more of a challenge in the form of the Leema Xens.

Regular readers will be aware I use the Xens when we have less expensive electronics in for review and they're 85dB sensitive and 6 Ohms. They don't go super low but are great speaker in that nearfield studio monitor kind of sense of things. The Grandinote pairing struggled a little to be fair, but then with just 36 Watts on tap they were always going to, that said I've used the Xens with other low powered amps without

Grandinote Proemio Preamplifier and Silva Power Amplifier

issue. However, it's time to hook up another pair of speakers in the form of the hORN Mummy, a 95dB sensitive pair of loudspeakers with 12" bass driver and horn loaded tweeter. I've already got a good handle on the Proemio/Silva pairing in the mids and highs and I'm looking here at how the Silva controls and presents bass frequencies and it's good. There's grip and a feeling that the Silva is definitely in control of things. There's also speed and that on-off thing, which if a component can't do in the bass is a deal killer for me – flabby, woolly and overhanging bass is one thing I really cannot abide in a component. The bass guitar on Deep Purple's live version of Smoke On The Water was dirty and powerful...just as it should be whilst double bass had "texture" and (again) a natural feel to it.

My reference preamplifier is the Music First Baby Reference V2 and for the sake of a bit of experimentation I thought it would be fun to pair the Silva with it, connected via the Baby Ref's balanced output of course. First on the turntable was the new Rebolledo album, which is a killer by the way. Speakers in use were the Duos and what a treat this was. As mentioned these speakers are active bass, but somehow this pairing just allowed you to feel more of it – I don't know why this should be (answers on a postcard please). However, the Baby Reference is a passive design and to get realistic (ok, foundation shaking) volumes out the Silva necessitated turning the volume knob all the way to Thirty One (eat your heart out Marshall). With less sensitive speakers the Music First struggled to feed the Silva enough power and as such this would be a deal breaker for me to buy the Silva on its own. And here we are sort of getting to the crux of the matter; yes the Silva and the Proemio will work with other preamplifiers and other amplifiers, but to get the best out of each of them (with the limited experience I had in this regard – I also hooked up the Coffman Labs tube pre I have here) you really need to see them

as a two box integrated...ok I know that's nonsensical, but you get my drift.

Conclusion

So, what is there to add to what has already been said? The Proemio preamplifier and Silva amplifier form a spectacularly natural sounding partnership that gives the listener a great experience that has real class and finesse.

With the two Grandinotes you have a stunningly revealing pairing with slam, speed, energy and when needed elegance and grace. They are clearly made to be used together and play to each other's strengths.

It's clear that you are listening to components that can compete with some of the best out there in the price range and as such, should you be in the market for new amplification and have the required £14 500, they should certainly be on your audition shortlist.

This is definitely one of the best sounds I've heard in the reference system and, had the Silva had more gain and worked more efficiently with the Music First pre it would have been a keeper.

We don't do a Highly Recommended award, but if we did these would certainly have got it.

Pros:

Natural and revealing

Fast and controlled

Very well built

Cons:

Need reasonably sensitive loudspeakers

Really need to be used together

Long run in period

Price:

Proemio: £6500

Silva: £7995

Stuart Smith



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Mitchell and Johnson's trio of CD Player, Amplifier and Streamer cost a total of £947 which puts them very much in the budget category but can they satisfy sonically?

Dominic Marsh finds out for Hifi Pig.

Very little gets me more excited than budget components being sent to me for review. Let's be honest, when cost is no object it isn't an impossible undertaking to design and build something good if not exemplary yet when the budget is pared to the bone, if a manufacturer can not only get it right but elevate that product above the herd we can only admire and applaud their achievement. That's not to say what arrives will be a potential "giant killer" product as I have long since given up on that notion

because the products hailed as such rarely ever live up to the hype they are lavished in the cold light of day.

Not everyone has a bucketful of cash to spend on high end esoterica, so scouring the world seeking out those little gems that offer great sound at a great price has been one of my missions running in the background. It has not been an easy task I will admit and much to my surprise many manufacturers have been rather hesitant in responding to my requests for review samples. Wonder why that is?

One company that thankfully did respond was Mitchell and Johnson, who were to send something over the early part of last year in fact, but due to their pressures of work and my own pressures of work it was not actively followed up, that is until around a month ago when I did a re-scan of my diary entries during a catch up session. I sent another email off as a reminder and not one but three items from their product range were submitted for review in super quick time.

But, with three components submitted for review, it means a lot of work evaluating their performances, both as a complete system and of course paired with other components, so I beg your patience if this review expands considerably from the norm.

I will also forewarn you that I will quite often be using phrases like: "At this price point", "Within this price band", etc., I am sure you get the picture.

Construction

These units are best described as of functional build quality and given their price points it is not difficult to work out there was a fine line in the budget workings out how much would be spent on outward appearance, yet the end result is rather pleasing and not unattractive, in fact my wife remarked on their rather nice



Mitchell & Johnson SAP201V Amplifier, CDD 201V CD player and WLD+211T Streamer



appearance – something she normally doesn't do. The faceplates are 5mm thick brushed aluminium, more than ample for the task, inset function buttons below the displays also work as they should, although their small size and flush fitting is an annoyance and raised buttons would be much easier to operate. Rotary turn and push knobs for volume and menu selection, and the streamer in particular has a good quality full colour display panel, although the displays for the CD player and amplifier is rather plain and basic, so what more would you need besides?

The units all measure 430mm wide, 320mm deep (including speaker terminals and the streamer's wireless aerial) while the amplifier and CD player are just under 80mm high, the streamer measures a little more at 85mm high.

CDD201V CD player

As stated previously, the front panel is made from 5mm brushed aluminium on the review sample, also available in a black finish option. To the centre of the front panel is a large display panel measuring 142mm long x 42mm high, set into which is the CD drawer. The drive appears to be a super slim drawered CD-ROM drive rather than a dedicated audio CD drive, the giveaways being a lightning fast yet very smooth open and close operation and a very long seek time reading the Table Of Contents on the disc. Once the Table Of Contents (The innermost 'tracks' on a CD) track has been found, the player takes an inordinate 19 seconds to actually produce sound. Thereafter though track selection is as fast as any other CD player with no delays. The display itself consists of two rows of LED numerics, the top row showing the function selected as in "PLAY", "STOP", "REPEAT" etc., the bottom row showing the track number selected and



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Mitchell & Johnson SAP201V Amplifier, CDD 201V CD player and WLD+211T Streamer



time elapsed. I am baffled why Mitchell & Johnson have used 3 digits for track numbering when 2 are more than adequate as I know of no CD that has more than 99 tracks anyway and just as baffling is why playing time elapsed has been awarded 6 digits when again I don't know of any CD that plays for longer than 99 minutes duration, the extra digits making for a cluttered display. I would much rather see a track number saying a plain "6" for example than "006" and time elapsed as say "18:09" rather than "00:18:09". If I can just revert back to my comment about the small flush mounted front panel buttons which annoy, with the CDD201V player there is also a small delay between pressing (fumbling) with the button and the desired action being initiated and many is the time I have pressed the button more than once which cancels out what I wanted the player to do. So I soon got used to the notion of only pressing the button once, then leave it alone and let the player do what it wanted in its own time.

The CD player is supplied with a basic remote control, although the remote supplied with the streamer has the amplifier and CD functions incorporated into the one same remote, so that is a good reason to buy the whole ensemble together.

Connections are made via a pair of fixed output RCA line out connectors, an SPDIF digital RCA output socket and a TOSLINK connection. To the far left of the chassis rear is a standard 3 pin IEC mains inlet.

SPECIFICATIONS

Output Level

1.8V +/- 2dB @ 1KHz 0dB

Signal to Noise Ratio

>80dB (LINE, IHF-A)

Frequency Response

20Hz – 20KHz

Digital Outputs

OPTICAL (TOSLINK) 1, COAXIAL (RCA) 1

Channel Balance

>20dB

Separation

>60dB

Digital to Analogue Converter

Mediatek MTK1389DE

Dimensions

(WxHxD) : 430 x 80 x 283 mm

Weight

6.3 kg

Price at time of review: £249.00

SAP201V Amplifier

Moving on to the amplifier now, this unit shares the same width and depth as its stable mates although the height is the same as the CD player while the streamer is slightly taller. There is the central front panel display for functions, plus a row of push button function controls. To the left of the front panel is a mini

Mitchell & Johnson SAP201V Amplifier, CDD 201V CD player and WLD+211T Streamer



3.5mm stereo jack socket for a line level input and a quarter inch headphone socket. To the right of the display is a large rotary control for volume, plus pushing the control repeatedly cycles through bass, treble and balance functions and a default reset option. To the far right is a push button on/off power switch, above which is a blue LED to show power is applied which turns red in standby mode.

To the rear we find an IEC mains inlet socket, a single set of four speaker terminals which will accept 4mm banana plugs, spade connectors or bare wire. To the right of those is a TOSLINK and an SPDIF digital RCA input socket, then a set of line level RCA socket inputs for TV, AUX, NET-PLAYER, CD, and a PHONO stage connection (moving magnet), so there is a good selection of input options.

Rare at this price level is a built-in digital to analogue convertor in the shape of a Wolfson Micro WM8761 DAC chip, so too is a phono stage that accepts moving magnet cartridge input.

SPECIFICATIONS

Rated Output Power

40 W at 8 ohms, 2 ch driven, 1 kHz, 0.8 % THD (IEC)

50 W at 4 ohms, 2 ch driven, 1 kHz, 0.8 % THD (IEC)

Dynamic Power 150W

THD (Total Harmonic Distortion)

0.08 % (1 kHz 1 W)

Damping Factor

60 (Front'1 kHz'8)

Input Sensitivity and Impedance

250 mV/47 k(LINE)

6.5 mV/47 k(PHONO)

Output Level and Impedance

250 mV/47k(REC OUT)

Phono Overload

60 mV (MM 1 kHz 0.5 %)

Frequency Response

20 Hz-50 kHz/+1 dB-3 dB (LINE)

+14 dB, -14 dB, 100 Hz (BASS)

Tone Control

+14 dB, -14dB, 10 kHz (TREBLE)

+0 dB, -14 dB (BALANCE)

Signal to Noise Ratio

>85dB (LINE, IHF-A) 61 dB (PHONO, IHF-A)

Dimensions

(WxHxD) : 430 x 80 x 283 mm

Weight

6.3 kg

Price at time of review: £299.00

WLD+211T Streamer

This unit again mirrors the CD player and amplifier front panel layout, with the exception being a full colour central display and a USB input port.

Mitchell & Johnson SAP201V Amplifier, CDD 201V CD player and WLD+211T Streamer



It is equipped to receive wireless signals from a mobile device or a PC or via an RJ45 Ethernet LAN connection. So you can listen to any of the music tracks stored on your computer or network attached storage (NAS) drive, giving you access to your entire library without the need for any other device. If you own an Android or iOS device you can download the free UNDOK remote control application allowing you to browse all of your music from your mobile device. In addition to all this, the WLD+211T can stream your favourite tunes from Spotify via the Spotify Connect app (Spotify subscription required).

Linking to my PC wirelessly to the WLD+211T streamer was a simple straightforward matter and that thrilled me, as other wireless devices I have had for review seemed to concentrate solely on mobile phones and tablets running Android or Apple iOS and given all my stored music is on my desktop computer it has been rather frustrating at times. That of course

meant I could stream music for as many hours as I wished without worrying about battery power endurance issues from a mobile device.

Again, astonishing at this price level, we find a DAB and FM tuner included and with many thousands of internet stations to choose from, there is bound to be some stations you will enjoy listening to online. They are thankfully listed in numerical and alphabetical order so if there is a particular station you wish to find, using the large front panel rotary control to scroll through makes it not too difficult a task. It took me a good 10 minutes of high energy knob twiddling to find my local radio station Pirate FM. It was a targeted setting up challenge more than an innate desire to listen to what was being transmitted on that station, as I never generally listen to it.

SPECIFICATIONS



Mitchell & Johnson SAP201V Amplifier, CDD 201V CD player and WLD+211T Streamer

Total Harmonic Distortion (THD)

0.02 % (1 kHz 1 W)

Frequency Response

20Hz-20KHz, +/-3dB

Signal to Noise Ratio

>83dB (A)

Digital Output

optical TOSLINK connection, COAXIAL RCA

Analog Output

RCA/phono stereo left and right connections

Tuner

DAB (Band 3) DAB+ with additional AAC+ codec FM

Internet radio (requires network connection)

Frequency Range

FM 87.5 – 108 MHz

DAB 174.928 – 239.200 MHz

Network Connection

Wi-Fi 802.11b/g – WEP, TKIP, WPA, WPA2, WPS security

RJ-45 Ethernet jack

USB

Audio playback from USB (USB port is NOT Apple compatible)

Universal Plug n Play

Full uPnP support. Windows Media Player compatible.

Fully DLNA compatible. Apple compatibility with DLNA software application.

Windows Media Audio and iTunes playlist compatible.

Music Streaming

FLAC 1.5 mbit/s upto 24-bits/48k

WAV 1.5 mbit/s upto 24-bits/48k

AAC upto 576 kbit/s

MP3 upto 320 kbit/s

WMA upto 384 kbit/s

RealAudio upto 96 kbit/s

SPOTIFY CONNECT music service (subscription required) using Spotify Connect app.

App Control

UNDOK app for iPhone or iPod Touch and Android

Remote Control

Brushed aluminium remote handset which also operates SAP201V amplifier and CDD201V CD player.

Dimensions

(WxHxD) : 430 x 80 x 283 mm

Weight

6.3 kg

Price at time of review is £399.00

Sound Quality As A Complete System

Well, if you have just parted company with the grand total of £947.00 for this system and taken it home, what has your money bought? The first bonus is you have is no worries about matching and “synergy” which will be a great relief to many I am sure. Of course, no speakers are included in this package, but I have to hand a few pairs of stand mount speakers and I have averaged out the sound qualities across all of them because there was noted some common themes amongst the speakers being used. It should also be noted that they cost as much as this system, so it’s not likely they would be paired with it. I have also added a couple of likely candidates that are worth an audition to use with this set of components.

Nothing to do with the sound of course but good to mention at this point in the review, all three units have blue LED power on indicators that draw attention to themselves by their brightness. The LEDs turn to red when in standby mode, a lot less bright thankfully.

I believe I can sum up the sound of this system in just one word – ENTERTAINING. “High Fidelity” in the strictest sense of the words it isn’t, but the system does keep you entertained with its bouncy and snappy performance and it’s not until you put it side by side

Mitchell & Johnson SAP201V Amplifier, CDD 201V CD player and WLD+211T Streamer

with a system from a higher calibre that you get to realise where the holes in its performance are to be found, none of which cause any real concerns, especially so in this price bracket. The sound is larger than life and I cannot describe it better than that for you I'm afraid. The treble and midrange in particular reaches out to you quite readily and with good detail, yet listen closely and subtle ambience cues for example that you know are in the recording are not there, even though the treble region is rendered in spades. Deep bass with heft and weight too is somewhat diluted and seemed rather anaemic, set into the background almost and it is probably due to that 40 watts per channel power rating of the amplifier, so of course I pressed into service some other amplifiers with increased power on tap for comparison and more about this later on in the review. However, you could happily crank up the volume and it all held together pretty well with an increase in volume level without the amplifier shouting at you or showing any signs of distress or distortion and it still maintained that bouncy vibrancy throughout the volume range.

The loading time from a CD being inserted into the player's drawer to it playing music irritated the life out of me to begin with, but someone once told me that if you sit on a rusty nail for long enough the pain eventually diminishes and goes away. I have no intentions of putting that philosophy to the test thank you very much. Having said that, as time went on I was less annoyed by the CD player's long seek time, so there must be some truth in the rusty nail story. The front panel buttons never did stop annoying me though as I don't think I have large fingers to begin with and coping with the delay after pressing as well, but I did eventually find a technique that worked for me and thank goodness the remote control handset replicates most of the functions that needed a physical button press for, with the exception of the CD eject button.

I couldn't detect any sound differences between using the line level RCA connections and via the digital output of the CD player into the amplifier's built in DAC using a coaxial connection.

The real star of this set for me was the WLD+211T streamer which was an easy job in setting up and simple in use too. A few moments wait on start up as it establishes the connection to the PC via wireless link and once connected it identified the PC's disk drive location and directory, you then select which album you want to play and away it goes, the large rotary/push button doing a grand uncomplicated job, aided by that good sized clear colour screen too. Sound quality was very good through the complete Mitchell and Johnson system, but paired with other components it shone.

I had in for review a while ago (Reviewed in Hifi Pig, March 2016)) some speakers from TAGA Harmony, the B40 stand mounters which were priced at £320.00 for the pair which may have suited this system rather well. Not evaluated by me personally, some say the Q Acoustics 3020 speakers give a great performance and the price is attractive too at circa £189.00 a pair. Another great pairing would be the Monitor Audio BR2's priced at £230.00 a pair, with the stronger bass output from the larger driver complimenting the amplifier's performance well.

CDD201V CD Player Sound Quality - Standalone

Swapping out the CDD201V player to my own resident CD player and connected to the SAP210V amplifier, the sound really did open out and fill in. Ambience especially took on solidity and clarity that quite took me aback at first, depth of soundstage went from feet deep to yards deep in one leap and the bass output as well took a massive step up. Given my CD player has a price tag that dwarfs the CDD201V's, it comes as no surprise. It also tells me that my initial judgement about the amplifier's power output rating

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being solely responsible for a lack of bass power may have been a bit premature as it seems the CD player was evidently contributing to this trait. All is not lost however, as I then used the CDD201V purely as a transport into 2 other external DACs, one in the shape of a Primare i32 amplifier with the optional DAC board fitted and the other in the shape of Roksan's new K3 DAC. The results were amazing, a true night and day experience, but let's not get carried away by that, given the price differences involved. It does say though that if you are

**It does say
though, that if
you are
searching for a
transport, then
this component
would be well
worth a serious
audition ...**

searching for a transport, then this component would be well worth a serious audition and at this price point I am not aware of any serious competition to it.

SAP201V Amplifier Sound Quality - Standalone

Away from its stable mates, the amplifier let loose its true character. The vitality and bounciness was still there, but the bass output from a signal fed in that had full bass included, really came to the fore. There was more heft and power now, but it was wrapped in a firm tautness so the leading edges had a crisp delineation with no following overhang either, although the very lowest bass registers still lacked drive and impact. A good example of that difference was listening to "Anonymus II" track on the Focus III album. This track has plenty of raucous energy for any system to

contend with and the first element to suffer is the bass, both the bass guitar and the kick drum which all too readily get overshadowed and lost in the mix while at the same time blurring the cymbals. Focus were famous for playing a Flute in their compositions and many a system manages to mangle that into a screeching wail that hurts your ears but the SAP201V managed to stay the right side of listenable, as I thought it's lively personality would set off the screeching, but no, it fared very well in fact. At 6 minutes 18 seconds into this track the pace slows right down

to a great slow bass guitar solo, which slowly picks up the pace, joined soon after by the guitarist with single chord strums and then by the drummer on kick drum and high hat. The kick drum has to have a thump to it you can feel and that thump has to have shape and contour to it as well, which is very hard to describe in words, but once heard it is never forgotten. Sadly, the CDD302V CD player missed out on these subtleties, the bass just not meeting my criteria, yet ably handled by my resident player into the SAP201V amplifier, which, at its price point (there it is again) is truly remarkable.

The diminutive Pro-Ject MAIA amplifier has a lower power rating, has Bluetooth, costs more at £399.00 and sounds a lot smoother than the SAP201V but that has small size in its favour. Faced with a choice, I

would pick the SAP201V for its lively presentation and zippy delivery.

As more of an aside, I connected up a pair of Roksan K2 TR-5 speakers that Roksan have kindly loaned to me to the SAP201V amplifier and boy, did this amplifier

make the Roksan TR-5's dance. Again, not in a true high fidelity sense of course, but a VERY entertaining listen indeed. I also have here a pair of Axis voicebox stand mount loudspeakers which originate from Australia (Loaned by Dan Worth), that also came alive and danced when coupled to the SAP201V amplifier, despite trying several high end amplifiers with them for a good match. Again, synergy it wasn't, but it shows how the sprightly verve of this amplifier isn't going to be suppressed or tamed and I was grateful for that nonetheless.

WLD+311T Streamer - Standalone

I can happily report that I was very pleased with every aspect of the streamer. At long, long, long last I could play high quality music direct from my PC to it with no fuss, angst or pain involved and no need whatsoever to use a mobile device. And I like the price band it occupies, which I cannot find a competitor to rival it. Brilliant, I want one!

Conclusion

Right, I don't really need a recap on my findings regarding the pricing of these components do I? Thought not, so I will therefore sum up my take on this Mitchell and Johnson ensemble.

I wasn't that enamoured by the front panel push buttons, but I also am aware that even a small change to raised buttons will affect pricing, so put your fingers

**On the plus side,
the streamer is
a total peach in
every aspect...**

on a diet Dominic or use a rubber tipped stylus if you really cannot control your fingers. The CD player's long seek time is part of the package, so get used to it or spend a lot more on a deck that is faster read loading. That's not a big list of gripes is it?

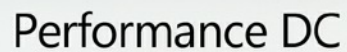
On the plus side, the streamer is a total peach in every aspect, the amplifier has enough bounce and vitality to entertain you for many hours and the humble 40 watt power rating is very deceptive as well, so that could also be money well spent and the CD player is a bit of a wolf in sheep's clothing when there is a good sounding transport lurking in there waiting to be discovered. There are a lot worse ways to invest £947.00 in the world of hifi these days and with the right speakers attached, you probably won't be in too much of a rush upgrading from this system in the future either.

Build Quality: Above average for the price and not unattractive either. Liked the brushed aluminium front panel and the superb colour display on the streamer. Did I mention the small flush mounted front panel buttons perchance?

Sound Quality: It has small sonic flaws in strict hifi terms of course, which are easily liveable with. Treat the system as pure entertainment and you won't go wrong.

Value For Money: Incredible bang for the buck with few (if any) rivals at the price.

Dominic Marsh

[illegible]

**A quality loudspeaker for just
€ 390? Lionel Payne, in his
first review for Hifi Pig, takes
a listen to the Triangle Elara
LN01 Loudspeakers**



Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED



Triangle Elara LN01 Loudspeakers

The Elara LN 01' are the smallest in a new four strong range of loudspeakers brought out by the French company, Triangle, a company that first started producing their wares way back in 1980. They measure 291mm x 165mm x 291mm and weigh in at 4.5kilos. They are accompanied in the range by a centre channel speaker (LN 02) and two floorstanders (LN03 and LN04) and all four models are available in two finishes – piano gloss black or piano gloss white. My review pair are black and I was immediately struck by their beautiful finish. If only all loudspeakers were this gorgeous !

They are a rear-ported bass reflex two way model with a 28mm silk dome tweeter and 135mm concave mid/bass driver. An interesting point about the Triangle designed silk dome tweeter used in these models is that it is the first ever silk dome tweeter that Triangle have used since their inception. They explain that using this type of tweeter has allowed for a less complicated crossover design as simplicity and good looks were the initial design brief for this range. The front baffle is 21mm thick with all other sides being 18mm. The tweeter has a specially designed front plate collar which helps to reduce reflections. The

supplied grilles are attached via invisible magnets and there is not a screw fastening to be seen anywhere. I should point out at this point that I was so happy with their appearance the grilles were never tested sonically. However, it would have been remiss of me to not check the fit and finish of them and I' pleased to report that not only are they also very attractive but they fit with good accuracy and the magnets have a strong pull to them.

Triangle recommends that they are kept at least 40cm from the rear wall (obviously for the rear port) and at least 2metres apart. I found that as long as these two criteria were met they weren' too fussy about placement. For the major part of my listening I had them on 600mm spiked Atacama stands and in free space as their bass content was admirable without the need for reinforcement. This positioning also helped to get a better soundstage which was fairly impressive. Also, because of their relatively small size I tested them in nearfield conditions as a desktop pair. They worked reasonably well in this situation as long as the volume wasn' turned up too high because my desk is up against



Triangle Elara LN01 Loudspeakers

a wall and the rear port came in to play as the volume increased.

Sound

When I initially hooked up the LN 01' I immediately felt that the treble output was a little reticent as well as having a slight hardness to it. This can often be the case with new, out of the box, loudspeakers so a period of run-in ensued before any serious listening would take place. I should also explain that due to my current circumstances I couldn't leave the speakers running all day and night to run-in but rather I had to be in my "ancave" almost all the time they were playing. This was mainly due to my wife's superb hearing and not being able to sleep if she can hear the slightest unnatural sound. Therefore a period of listening to these loudspeakers on a daily basis followed and I gradually heard the significant improvements to their sound, virtually on a daily basis. The treble did sweeten up immeasurably although I have to say the overall balance of sound left me wanting just a little more high frequency content. It's not that there was any information lacking but just that, again, I felt the treble output a little reticent. I did speak to my contact at Triangle and he offered a perfectly good explanation for this – namely that I was driving these loudspeakers with quite a high-end amplifier (Musical Fidelity Tri Vista 300) and they were far more likely to be driven by more budget type equipment, a lot of which may have a bright balance to their sound, particularly low-cost Class D amplifiers. Pretty sound thinking if you ask me! What did strike me through this period and beyond was how good the bass was. Not to say it reached herculean depths as we all know that is nigh on im-



possible from such a diminutive size but the low frequencies on offer were both informative and enjoyable. They certainly know how to boogie. I have to say that despite them not having the midband clarity of a Harbeth or my own Impulse H2' I could happily live with these as my main speakers for a time. Listening to London Grammar's debut album *If You Wait* highlighted how good these little speakers could be. In the opening track *Hey Now* they convincingly portrayed the atmosphere of the song and

Triangle Elara LN01 Loudspeakers

Hannah Reid's vocals shone through with tremendous clarity and presence. Just as it should be really.

One track I enjoy using as a review tool is Nitin Sawhney's Tides from his Beyond Skin album which mainly is the interaction between a pianist and drummer where the drummer almost exclusively is using cymbals and high-hats. I use this track to highlight the quality of treble reproduction but, strangely in this case, I was drawn more to the power of the accompanying piano. Another track I use, as do both Dominic and Dan of these pages, is Biscuits For Breakfast from Fink's excellent live album Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet. This track is also a good indicator for how the top end is conveyed and the Elaras do a lovely job with a sweet and informative treble replicating the cymbal strikes throughout the track. The penultimate track of this well recorded album is called Sort Of Revolution and the Elaras really showed their abilities conveying Fin's laid-back vocals with real credibility as well as producing a sweet top end and the driving bass lines with the odd thwack of the kick drum coming through with good depth despite their diminutive size.

Conclusion

I have to be honest and say that I really enjoyed my time with the Elara LN 01's. They are to my eyes aimed firmly at the lifestyle end of the market and the range including a centre channel version shows they are also aimed towards home theatre use. My guess is that many of them will end up as rear speakers in an all Elara home theatre set-up and I'm positive that they will be more than suitable for that purpose. However, for the asking price of 400 Euros they represent good value as an out and out stereo pair, particularly where room is at a premium. The driving bass rhythms these produced made them a real joy to listen to and, for me, their looks are sheer dynamite !

Pros:

One of the best looking loudspeakers, if not the best, for anything like this kind of money.

Wonderful rhythm and bass really creates the boogie factor.

Cons:

Slightly reticent treble output but nothing else at this price point.

Price 390 Euros

Lionel Payne



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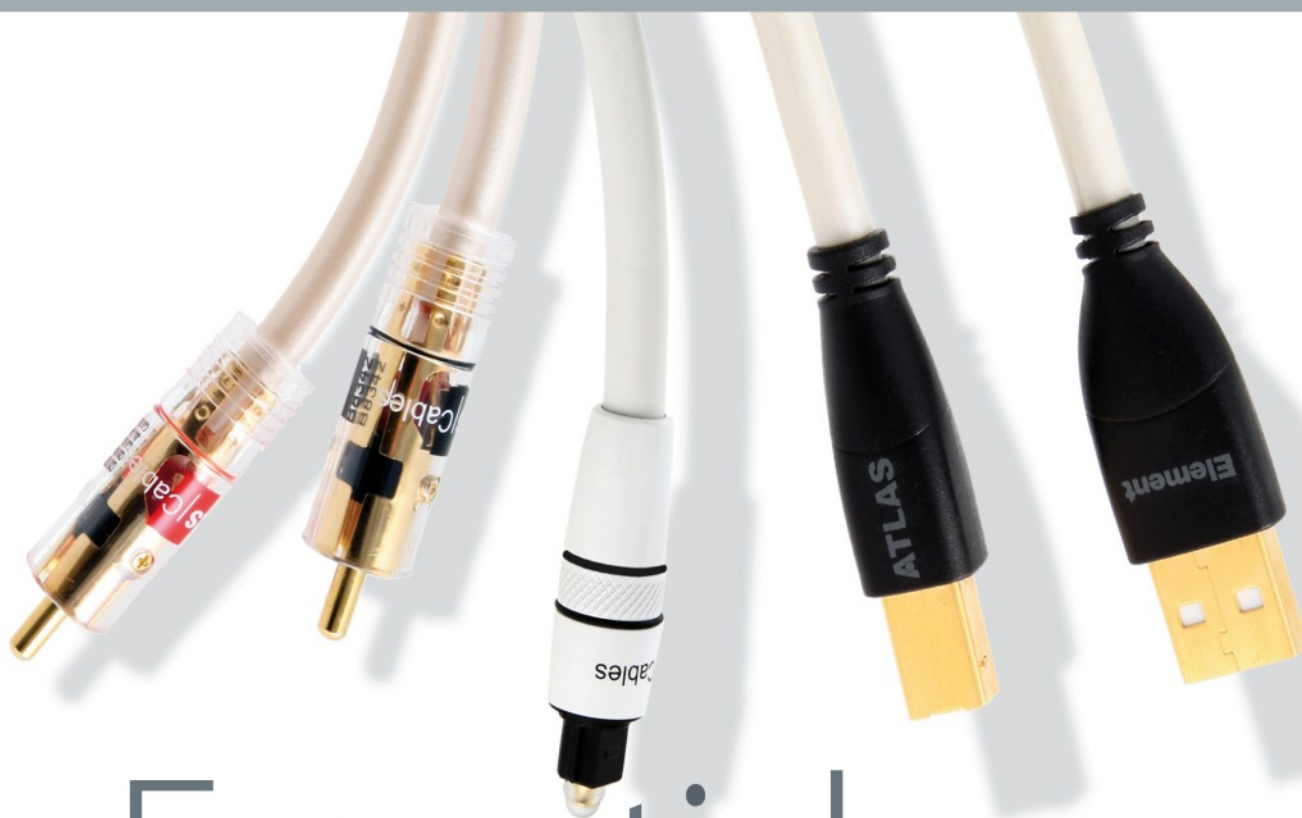
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Chord Electronics Hugo TT DAC/Headphone Amp



Hifi Pig
RECOMMENDED

Dan Worth has a listen to the £3000 Chord Hugo TT for Hifi Pig.

Hugo TT is a desktop orientated DAC and headphone amplifier following on from the success of the Hugo DAC/headphone amplifier. The new larger desktop-orientated device offers greater connectivity including two USB-B inputs, XLR and RCA outputs and two quarter inch headphone outputs.

Compared to the more mobile Hugo, the Hugo TT has a larger chassis, remote control, and alphanumeric LED display with input/sample rate data. Hugo

TT also boasts a mega 10,000,000 microfarads of supercapacitors.

Hugo TT supports up to 32-bit/384kHz audio via coax and USB, and 24-bit/192kHz over optical, plus DSD64 on all inputs and DSD128 via coax or USB (all via DoP).

In a key upgrade over the original Hugo, the Hugo TT benefits from a high-quality asynchronous B-type USB connection for both the SD and HD USB input. With two further digital inputs, a very nice gold BNC, RCA coaxial and optical allows for input switching of multiple connected devices.

Hugo TT also has A2DP Bluetooth capability and uses a custom-made module with the aptX codec to feed a digital signal directly into the DAC circuitry, so even without cables, music can still be enjoyed.

The Hugo TT retains the same Spartan 6 FPGA as Hugo. It has the same specification and measured performance as its mobile sibling.

Being a home-orientated device, the Hugo TT has been designed to run continuously from the supplied charger, however Chord's engineers have also improved the battery and added Supercap energy storage, a

Chord Electronics Hugo TT DAC/Headphone Amp

technology seen in F1 where supercapacitors back-up the cars batteries by sharing the load and charge demands, thereby protecting them. They serve a similar purpose in the Hugo TT, extending the battery life.

Inputs

- 1x Optical TosLink 24-bit/192kHz-capable
- 1x BNC coaxial input 32-bit/384kHz -capable
- 1x HD/SD USB B-type input up to 32-bit/384kHz

Outputs

- 1x3.5mm headphone jack
- 2x6.35mm (1/4-inch) headphone jack
- 1x (pair) stereo RCA phono output
- Fully balanced via XLR connectors

Fit and Finish

Releasing the Hugo TT from its double boxed transit packaging enlightened me to consider the more subs-

tantial dimensions and weight over the original Hugo. The unit, although considerably larger and heavier didn't warrant me to consider it completely non-portable. Of course it's not something which I could place in my pocket connected to a phone or DAP, but it's definitely something which can accompany a travelling businessman for use with headphones or active monitors.

The build quality is typical Chord and typically exceptional. The first incarnation of Hugo demonstrated a couple flaws, specifically with regards to socket space, which were soon rectified but due to Hugo TT's design this is not an issue. A well laid out rear panel with very high quality socket array and the front input selection and power buttons available were neat and tidy, although I am not a fan of the top mounted volume control as the position of the unit on my on desk was under the left edge of my monitor making volume adjustments awkward.



Chord Electronics Hugo TT DAC/Headphone Amp

There is a remote to Hugo TT, but it's not something I wanted on my desk as it would just get knocked around and end up finding a small crevice to fall into during working hours. Any current desktop equipment in my own case has its remote placed in a drawer out of the way, but again if I was a travelling the remote would prove indispensable, especially with small active speakers connected.

I was never fond of the previous Hugo's volume control knob and I am not of the TT, although it's functional and I can completely understand why Chord use it to keep the sleek lines and portability of the unit to a high standard - I would have preferred a front fascia offering with simple up and down buttons.

The casework of the unit and the quality of materials and finishing is exemplarily, dressed in black or silver the eye catching modernistic design oozes presence and even prestige.

Sound

For the integration of Hugo TT in my system I decided to use the device in a purely desktop format. Whilst obviously being a headphone amplifier its XLR outputs allowed me to connect my active Focals which sit on shelves above the main desk.

I use Spotify, Tidal and Amarra Symphony for my personal music collection stored on my NAS drive. Initial setup regarding gain levels took a little tweaking, if the Focals on-board gain was too low increasing Hugo TT's volume too much caused terrible distortion and without any form of numeric display it's difficult to know where you are with the product.

Using too much gain from Hugo TT will decrease battery life, so finding a balance between the Hugo and the Focals was imperative. I suggest to Chord that they have a volume indicator on the onboard display and also an indicator when the unit is say at 0db gain for a pseudo fixed output - or even have a button to drive the outputs direct rather than variable. A fixed output switch would have been a good idea to utilise the unit as a standalone DAC too.

Once I honed in the gain balance between DAC and active speakers music came through with real stability, clarity and crystal clear highs, that sparkled throughout my listening space. Vocals were utterly poised and held strong presence and position in the soundstage. Lower frequencies were tight and explicit, but never to the detriment of balance and focus, giving punchy articulated bass with plenty of detail, extension and flow. I was never a big fan of the Qute range of DACs, but when I first had the opportunity to review and hear the baby Hugo I was astonished at what Chord had developed and the Hugo TT is an outstanding progression of Hugo technology... which also features in some of their latest digital amplifiers, featuring the intelligent FPGA circuit which very few manufacturers have really been able to implement so competently.

For me Hugo and Hugo TT have an accurate, controlled and poised presentation which is clean and clear, but their specialty is to take all of these attributes and present them with undeniable attention to music, filling each note and frequency with all of its undertones and fullness; something that the Qute range of DACs for me didn't achieve.

Using Hugo TT as a Headamp

Adding my pair of AT-2000X's to the Hugo TT I first needed to switch the Focals off as the line outputs do not shut down when headphones are added. I played 'Kissing' by Bliss first and was greeted by a soundstage which was very large and filled with harmonics. Notes floated ambiently with focused vocals in a space outside of my head. It's very rare I'd ever describe a headphone se-



Chord Electronics Hugo TT DAC/Headphone Amp

tup in this way, I have heard many high-end rigs and still they never tick that box for me and often I hear people state 'it sounds like having speakers in front of you' but my own reality never suggests this. The Hugo TT still doesn't sound like a pair of speakers at the front of the room, but it has an exquisite range of tones that confidently breach the boundaries of my head giving a soundstage which is vast and wide in a 360 degree manner, with clear definition of spatial awareness, dynamics and pure and concise details.

Another aspect which the Hugo TT really excels on is pace; Nils Lofgren's complex string work on his acoustic guitar starts and stops with utter precision, inflecting reverbs and acoustical awareness convincingly, while decays have their own ambient effect as another layer to the speedy musicians playfulness. I love how much clarity and control upper mids and the top end has, without ever over stepping the mark and becoming hard. The balance the Hugo TT has from top to bottom is fantastic, it can produce pin point accuracy and also subtleties with sublime interest and also fill out notes for a more realist appeal, conveying more natural presence and appeal.

'I Can Explain' by Rachelle Farell is a track I often use during my review process and I urge any potential TT listener to try this piece of music to assess tonality, dynamic control and subtlety of notes. This particular piece of music made me sit up and really accept how exceptional Hugo TT really was. It's not a busy piece of music, but with Rachelle's record breaking vocal, the tonality of piano and the natural dynamics displayed by her vocal range and which the TT accurately portrays where many systems struggle to present so pleasingly; I knew immediately that this piece of equipment is something of a marvel.

Chord are renowned for electronics which can produce a beat; Electronica and dance music is always a strong point for their designs and the TT can nail these parameters too. I listened to some Tidal club playlists and various other electronic music and to the flip side of the subtle and rich tones, TT hits notes as low as the human ear can possibly perceive and pun-

ches a beat that will have you up and out of your chair with the only moment of reality being when the headphone jack pulls out of the Hugo's chassis and you double check to make sure nobody saw you looking like a fool!

A real sense of realism is a term I would apply to Hugo TT. I don't find colouration in the sound per se, but its texture is a bit more sprightly than neutral. It deserves a great set of headphones to be partnered with and I'm sure I'd be able to get further improvements by upgrading to a more expensive pair of headphones, but I do like the ATs and they are a terrific tool for use in reviews being so transparent and articulate.

Conclusion

All in all the intelligent FPGA circuitry used in the Hugo template has been a true revelation to intimate headphone listening and amplifier/speaker combinations fuelled by Chord's electronics. I admit I was never favourable about the Qute range of DACs, but Chord have struck back hard, not with a product range that simply addresses previous errors and surpasses past DACs but have become true class leading products. Whether the budget can reach for a Hugo TT at £3000 or the original Hugo £1400, rest assured that Hugo will undoubtedly impress! I highly recommend it!

Pros:

Upmost attention to detail and micro details

Filled out balanced, dynamic and natural sound

Exciting yet subtle

Feature rich

Finished with excellence

Cons:

Volume indication and integration could be clearer

Price: £3000

Dan Worth

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Diamond F-200

Intimate Audio DS-108 Back Loaded Horn Loudspeaker



The Intimate Audio DS-108 back loaded horn loudspeaker is UK built and uses the four-inch Fostex FE108EZ driver. Ian Ringstead puts these £1595 standmounters through their paces for Hifi Pig.

Hifi Pig

RECOMMENDED

Horn speakers have been around a long time and as I said in my recent review of the Ferguson Hill FH-007 they are unique in their sound presentation, but require careful and skillful design.

Duncan Saul, whose idea these speakers are, was encouraged by friends to pursue this design as they felt he really had something special and unique with his idea. I talked at length to Duncan and discovered his musical tastes are very similar to mine with a passion for 70's prog rock such as Genesis, Yes, Wishbone Ash etc. Now horn design speakers aren't what some music enthusiasts would choose for rock music, but Duncan liked the concept and as he wanted to produce a speaker he could listen to his favourite music on, then the DS-108 is the end result.

Horn designs are complex and very varied and can cost a fortune; some will also take your living room over, especially in modern homes, so Duncan set about designing a reasonably compact room friendly model that had good bass output.

Construction

The unusual sandwich construction gives an amazingly strong cabinet structure without the boxiness sound of traditional four walled designs. Each and every pair is CNC cut, built and finished by hand in the UK.

The four-inch Fostex FE108EZ is an amazing driver with great midrange, a sparkling top end and credible acoustic bass. Amazing, considering the small 2.5-inch cone surface. Features include a unique Hyperbolic Paraboloid shell diaphragm, UDR tangential edge damping and ES cone manufactured from banana plant fibre. This all helps to produce a smooth and detailed sound. When I researched it I also discovered they aren't cheap! The retail on a single driver is about £150 so Duncan hasn't penny pinched on the parts cost and quality. Also this model has the latest addition of Taket Piezo Super tweeters which add extension and airiness to the sound, Wonderful sound can be heard from a wide range of genres, particularly female vocals, jazz and classic rock. These speakers are extremely valve friendly, perfect when partnered with a good valve amp.

Mounted on a 40 cm stand, this combination will fill a room with perfect imaging and atmospheric sound. Highly recommended is the granite plinth option, enabling the use of almost any stand, whilst retaining the isolation and levelling properties of the Viablue spikes. Duncan supplied a pair of Atacama 40cm stands which were ideal to place the DS-108 on and with the granite plinths worked very well.

I was sent a pair in piano white with a pale grey suede effect finish, but other options are available and bespoke finishes are not a problem if arranged in advance and agreed upon. They are reasonably slim

Intimate Audio DS-108 Back Loaded Horn Loudspeaker

and the drivers are mounted at the top of the cabinet with the ported front slit below running down the centre. The front baffle is finished off with a smart acrylic covering plate and a foam protective grille for the Fostex driver. The Fostex drive unit is very unusual in design and looks but I would recommend caution when handling the speaker and keep prying fingers, whether children or adults, away due to their delicate nature. This is especially true when unboxing them as your fingers could easily destroy the cone if misplaced.

As the Taket Piezo Super tweeters were fitted, connections on the back of the speaker were bi wire with four high quality binding posts and good wired jumper leads for single speaker wiring (I applaud this as

The addition of the Taket piezo super tweeter certainly made for an open airy top end

so many companies' penny pinch and put cheap nasty jumper links on their models). I chose to run them single wired as it was more practical, especially when I used a valve amp later.

Duncan had told me he had done a lot of experimenting with the design and trying different drive units. The back-loaded or rear-loaded horn loudspeaker system is like bass-reflex and double

bass-reflex speaker types in that the sound radiated from the back of speaker transducer is utilized to enhance the bass response. The difference however is that back-loaded horn (BLH) speaker enclosures make among the most efficient use of the back wave from the speaker driver. The back-loaded horn speaker enclosure operates by developing the bass response using the back wave from the speaker driver



Intimate Audio DS-108 Back Loaded Horn Loudspeaker



and an expanding horn section. The remainder of sound spectrum (mid and high-frequency ranges) is radiated directly from the front wave produced by the speaker driver. Back-loaded horn speaker enclosures are generally amongst the most efficient enclosure systems and respond well to the subtlest components of music signals.

For "tighter" sound reproduction, you can reduce the interior volume of the horn speaker cabinet using fill material.

As you can see designing a speaker is not easy and just building a cabinet and sticking a driver or two into it takes a lot of expertise and trial and error. I've listened to a lot of speakers over the years and none are perfect, but some manage to be really enjoyable. Once I'd run the D-108's in after a few days, I settled in to get used to the sound this speaker had to offer. The Fostex driver is surprisingly good for its size and has a reputation for being an excellent full range unit to use especially in horn designs. Fostex have a fine reputation anyway as a professional audio company,

**When you see them
in the flesh you
appreciate the work
that has gone into
them and the parts
costs are not cheap**

so they know a thing or two about sound reproduction. To my ears all horns have sounded coloured and I certainly don't profess to be an expert on them, it's just my opinion. The D-108 initially did sound coloured to me, but as I acclimatised to their particular traits I became far more tolerant and grew to like them.

The addition of the Taktet piezo super tweeter certainly made for an open airy top end. The bass end was also good given the size of the Fostex driver and went reasonably low in my listening room. Duncan currently has an add on sub woofer under development which matches the D-108 in looks and compliments it well as a stand. Those wanting more bass in a larger room can when the final design has been decided on. Duncan assures me he is pleased with the results so far, so it'll be interesting to see the difference later this year. As it was I was happy with the bass provided in my room. As I like a lot of prog rock I tried many different albums from that particular genre of music with great results. Bands like Marillion and Genesis from their early

Intimate Audio DS-108 Back Loaded Horn Loudspeaker

years sounded tight and controlled with good clear vocals. A combination of good recordings on my Project Extension 9 being very well reproduced by the Fostex drivers of the D-108 and that super tweeter.

The back loaded horn cabinet design undoubtedly aids the bass output and allows the Fostex driver to work to it's true merits of mid range clarity and sparkling sound.

Conclusion

As I said earlier it took me awhile to get used to the sound of the D-108, but once I had acclimatised I enjoyed what I heard. My review pair were in white with matching white granite bases (black is available as well). I personally liked the look of them and in a different colour scheme so might have my wife and friends. They certainly drew criticism aesthetically and most people didn't like the style, but as I have said so many times before everyone is different and hifi designs have always polarised people's opinions on looks and design. As the listener make your own decision.

Duncan and his team have come up with a very interesting design that I applaud them for and trusting their instincts, being brave enough to go with something different. When you see them in the flesh you appreciate the work that has gone into them and the parts costs are not cheap. Quality I am sure was uppermost in Duncan's thoughts when designing these speakers. Go on the website when it is up and running to explore them more. I have seen pictures of the matching sub's/stands and they complement the styling very well.

Pros:

Very clear sound with good bass extension and a lovely mid-range that works well with all types of music

Well made with high parts quality

Bespoke finishes available

Cons:

The looks will divide opinions, but make your own mind up (I personally liked them)

Price: £1595.00

Options:

1. ST Pizeo-Electric Taket Supertweeter - £150
2. Viablue or Soundcare Super Spikes - £50
3. Granite Plinth x 2- £50.00
4. Acrylic Front protection panel and removable grill - £150

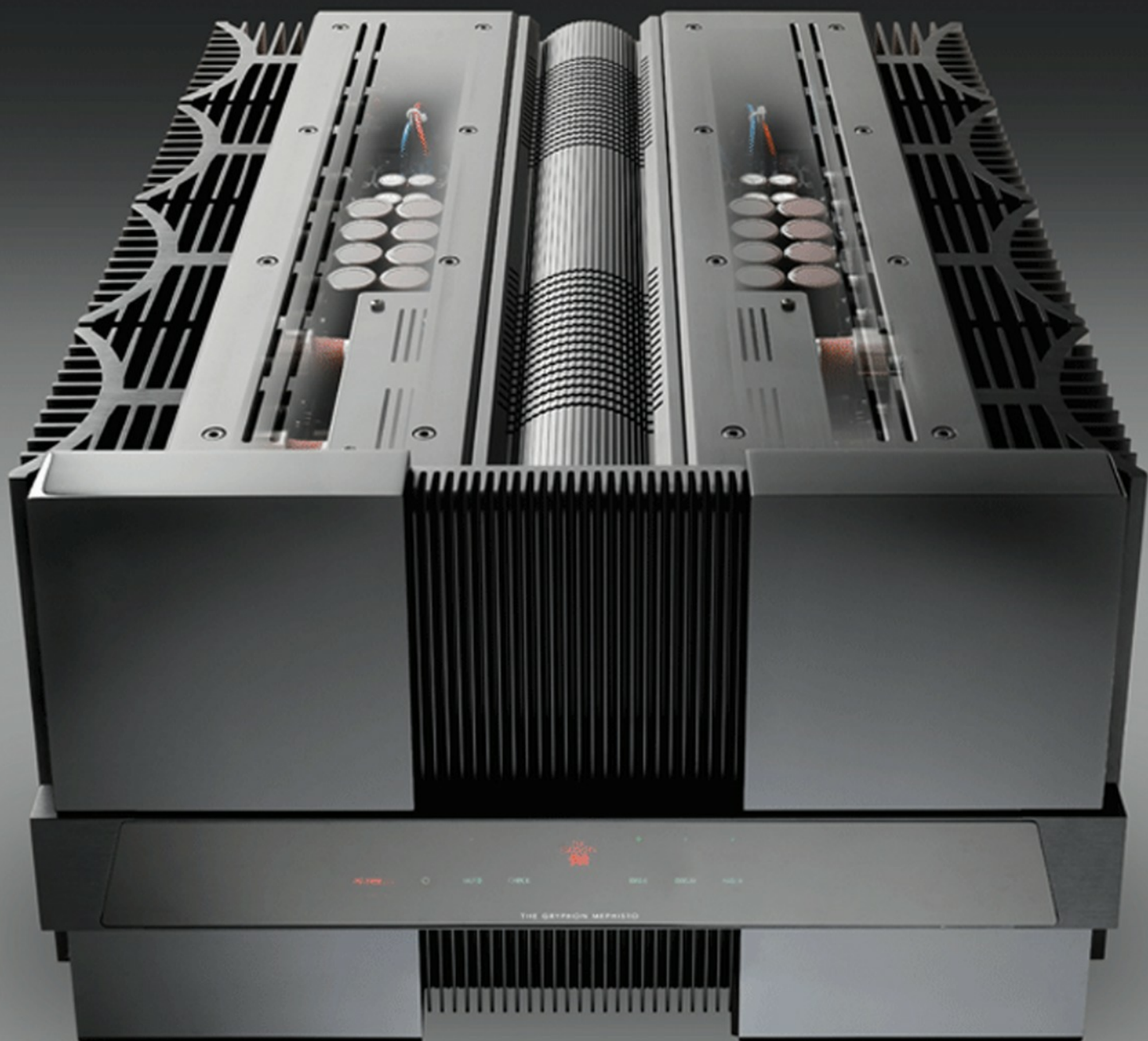
Specifications

Finish	Premium High Gloss / 'Nextel' Suede Effect
Colour	Range of colours available
Dimensions	500 x 210 x 320 mm
Power Handling	24 Watts (RMS)
Nominal Impedance	8 Ohms
Frequency Response	40 - 23 kHz
Sensitivity	90dB
Weight	15kg each

Ian Ringstead



THE GRYPHON



GRYPHON MEPHISTO

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MS HD Audio MS-E02SS Mains Block



Hifi Pig
RECOMMENDED

Submitted for review to Hifi Pig we have this MS HD Power MS-E02 SS, Star Wired mains block with surge protection and external earth point unit costing £369. Dominic Marsh takes a listen.

Ever since I have reviewed the Audioplan Power Star and Finefilter mains conditioner for Hifi Pig way back in April 2015, I have been rather disgruntled by the performance of my extant mains conditioner and have been searching for a better unit to replace it with, at a price I could afford, let me add.

Construction

This is a substantially built unit made from aluminum alloy and fitted with 6 UK mains outlets. Each of the outlet sockets is fully silver plated with high purity, high spring rate Phosphor Bronze socket clips that pass the BS Standard 30,000 times plug in/out test. The internal bus bars are heavy grade (5mm²) copper with silver plating and connecting wires are high purity copper, again with silver plating. The IEC inlet connector is a standard C14 x 10 amp rated type and is also made from copper, and silver plated. There is no filtration fitted, although there is a surge

MS HD Audio MS-E02SS Mains Block

limiter with resettable circuit breaker, so no fuse wire. Internal wiring is catered for by a star layout and also an external 4mm banana socket at the opposite end to the inlet IEC offers an earthing point. The case is finished off with black lacquer and the MS logo is ground through the lacquer to the metal beneath to shine a bright silver and looks attractive.

It has brass conical pointed isolation feet (which tend to slide around on a shiny surface), so I had to virtually corral it into a corner on the bottom shelf of my rack to plug and unplug cables when I couldn't get two hands to it to keep it firmly still. The brass feet are threaded into the bottom of the case with what looks to me like M6 threads, so alternative feet could be fitted with a better grip. On carpet or a less smooth texture it should be fine.

Price at time of testing is £369.00.

Sound Quality

Or rather the lack of a sound quality, as is the case with any mains block, surge protector, or mains filtration unit, they should have no sonic signature or characteristics of their own and impinge on the sound.

The first item I will check for then is any signs of compression, that is sitting on the dynamics and limiting the sound headroom. My first impression of the MS unit was how open and unfettered it sounded, with not a trace of curtailing or limiting of the sound. Space around instruments was huge, bass was delivered with great weight and power, while my system's natural ability to do yards deep imaging was enhanced even more, making it seem deeper



still. Everything sounded just so clear and insightful, with familiar recordings taking on a whole new dimension of appreciation, enjoying what was being heard and resulted in one of my listening sessions extending into the early hours, I was enjoying it so much.

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

Despite there being no filtration circuitry built in, it certainly sounded like there was. Treble definition was noticeably clearer, with ambience especially giving a more detailed and resolved sonic picture. Separation between instruments was noteworthy, without showing any clashing or crashing into each other during hectic music passages and sound staging too was crisp and pinpoint precise. I couldn't hear any squashing or suppressing of dynamics during the review at any time. If there was any compression

MS HD Audio MS-E02SS Mains Block

effects, then the most obvious symptom is that the bass acquires a boom artefact and loss of control, but no, I give this particular mains block a clean bill of health in that respect.

Conclusion

Considering the MS HD Power MS-EO2 SS doesn't have any filtration circuitry built into it, save for a surge suppressor device, it managed to convince me that it had! That tells me a lot of thought has gone into the design and build of this component. The sound was crystal clear without any compression and beyond that I couldn't level any criticism against it, save its skating propensities in my rack! I would expect this level of performance from mains conditioners costing considerably more, yet the price at £369.00 is worthy of consideration so I give it my recommendation. I have one on order no less and that ends my current search for an affordable good sounding 6 way mains block.

Pros: Superb sound quality at a reasonable price. Fit and finish is very good. Surge suppression built in.

Cons: Hard plastic feet makes the unit slide around on a shiny surface.

Price at time of testing: £369.00

Features and specifications

- 100% Compliant with BS 1363 and BS-5733 Safety Standards
- 6 Silver plated Premium Grade Sockets High Spring Rate Phosphor Bronze Sockets Clips Pass the BS Standard 30,000 times plug IN / OUT test
- 5 mm² Power Transmission Bus Bars with 1.0 µm Pure Silver Plating Star Earth Wiring.

Dominic Marsh



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RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY
JANINE ELLIOT



Hifi is an odd bod. We get great ideas, and then go backwards in sound quality before going forwards again. I mean, look at the resurgence of the LP, or the backwards philosophy of MP3. Most will say the CD was a bit of a white elephant. Of course we all remember the cassette tape, and some will be pleased that one hasn't come back, although a new "ReVox" reel2reel based on the Studer B-676 is on its way back soon as 1/4 inch tape begins a mini revival. Hurray.

I still have over 700 compact cassette tapes gradually losing their magnetism. That's a shame because they could actually sound pretty good, especially with the right Dragon in the house. The Philips system was developed in 1962 as a mono dictating machine, but this wasn't the first idea of a two-reel enclosure. RCA brought out a very similar, though enlarged version, more comparable to the 1976 Sony Elcassette (which I originally thought was a Mexican holiday

This month Janine Elliot takes a look back at the RCA Sound Tape

resort), back in 1958. This one was stereo!

The RCA Victor tape cartridge (also known as the Magazine Loading Cartridge or Sound Tape) was a cassette of 5 x 7 1/8 x 1/2 inches housing a stereo quarter-inch magnetic reel2reel tape that was designed to offer recording quality in a convenient format for the consumer market. It was introduced in 1958, following four years of de-

velopment, and importantly coinciding with the introduction of the stereophonic phonograph record.

As with the compact cassette, the RCA cartridges are reversible so that both sides can be played. Believe it or not, even before I was born an auto-reverse mechanism was available on some models that allowed the tape to run continuously. The tape runs at a standard speed of 3 3/4 ips. Of course this is only half the speed of the



“top quality” 7 ½ ips reel to reels that I yearned for in 1969 when I bought my , oh dear, 3 ¾ ips quarter track mono Ferguson “Play-master” valve reel to reel with “magic eye” recording level indicator. I had no idea the stereo RCA tape cartridge had been in existence long before I was.

Like the compact cassette, the plastic frame had “windows” to show if there was tape inside, though instead of one central plastic window there were no fewer than 4 small open slits, two either side of the reels. As well as through these holes, the tape itself was also more exposed to dust and magnets as it passed the tape heads. The RCA tape cartridge was also similar to the conventional stereo reel to reel tapes in that the two pairs of tracks were ‘interleaved’, meaning that you could even dismantle the cartridge, and re-spool the tape onto an open reel, and play it on such a conventional reel to reel machine. Indeed, RCA even offered an adapter for their Cartridge machines to enable them to both playback and record onto traditional reels of tape up to 5 inches in reel diameter.

Another idea, taken up by V2000/Betamax and VHS many years later, is the built-in brake system that automatically stops the tape spools from moving about when you are carting it about in your handbag on the way to your partner (late again...).

So, if the RCA tape cartridge was that good, why on earth would it

fail? And so quickly! Well, typical of many inventions of the last few centuries, all the different parts needed to get getting it all work together as one just weren’t in place at the same time, so whilst the invention of the tape itself was heralded in magazines such as March 1959’s edition of “The Tape Recorder” there just weren’t enough machines out there to play them on. Also, whilst American electronics were reasonably easily available in the UK and Europe, the makers hadn’t entered these territories with enough *vivre* to get the product popular enough. As a result the format disappeared from the public by 1964. Similarly, pre-recorded tapes were also very hard to find and so that also impacted on its demise. Most tapes that were available to record on were the equivalent of the C60, with 30 minutes each side, or 1 hour stereo or 2 hours if mono. Some machines even allowed compact cassette speed of 1 7/8 ips to double those times. Some RCA machines even had a sound-on-sound button to allow you to build up layers like a multitrack tape recorder.

The machines, mostly RCA Victor, were a lot larger than the infamous Philips EL3302 cassette that helped maintain that format until the 1990’s. They were transistorised and either as a mono or stereo player with removable speakers. Had Sony paid attention to the RCA tape cartridge, perhaps they wouldn’t have bothered with their Elcassette. Sony’s protectionism was the main culprit of its

own failure. Putting laws down to restrict which other companies could produce machines to play the tapes starved their invention from having a fair chance of life, just as DCC, MD and Elcassette had similarly done. So, only a few RCA Victor tape cartridge machines still exist, and none by other manufacturers. They were a clever idea and if left to develop would have made compact cassettes less attractive. However, advertised as “Stereo Orthophonic High Fidelity”, with 40-8000Hz and 45dB S/N ratio as standard, there was a lot of room for development had it taken off. They were quite clever machines, though, with some offering sound-on-sound facility via a button, so you could build up layers of music like the most successful amateur reel to reel of all, the Akai 4000DS.

Interestingly the review of the new tape format in that second edition of ‘The Tape Recorder’ did attempt to dispel worries that now having as many as 3 different formats - namely gramophone, reel to reel and the RCA Tape Cassette – wouldn’t be too confusing for audiophiles. It concluded that this invention was ‘probably the biggest single revolution in the tape field since the inception of plastic tape’, putting it on par with the gramophone. It did add a note of warning that all this would be dependent on the format being correctly and commercially promoted. Words of wisdom.

Janine Elliot

FIDELITY MATTERS

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



The vast majority of electronic devices require a power supply, whether it is a linear power supply or the now popular switch mode power supply (SMPS). Whatever the type, we take them for granted and we rely heavily on them to power or charge all our electronics doodads.

Most people would assume that as long as there is a power supply designed to use a device, then the quality is not important as long as it works and is fit for purpose.

Back in the eighties that was generally thought to be the case with hifi components until companies like Naim decided to rewrite the rule book and introduce separate add on power supplies (SNAPS). Naim argued that the built in power supplies of their amps, which in standard mode powered the pre amp as well, could be greatly improved in sound quality and power output if a separate high quality power supply was added.

Cyrus also followed suit in their amp range with their integrated

Ian Ringstead ask if power supplies and ancillaries are important in your system?

amps being offered with the addition of a PSX power supply. Having owned and used both amp ranges and used the add-on power supplies I can wholeheartedly recommend their benefits.

A better power supply is like a bigger and better car engine, in that the performance takes on a whole new level of improvements that the integrated standard unit struggles to keep up with. It took quite a few years for other companies to adopt Naim's ideas (Julian Vereker being the main driving force originally), but now add-on power supplies are common as an upgrade to many manufacturers ranges. The accessory market has also benefited and the performance of good components can be lifted substantially with an upgrade.

I recently invested in a new custom made DC power supply for my Project Extension 9 turntable. It comes with a standard wall wart SMPS that probably only costs a few pounds and does a decent job, but I got to thinking that surely a dedicated linear power supply would lift the performance like it had done with my amps in the past. I had read many enthusiasts had improved their turntables performance by getting a specialist power supply and seen a few companies offering their own. Some are reasonable but others are rather expensive upgrades. I opted for a good quality unit at £300 which I felt was commensurate to my needs and wouldn't break my wallet. Value for money is close to my heart and although a more expensive supply may be better, I can't

justify the outlay. Having used the new power supply for a few weeks now I can say it was worth the expense. The soundstage is far more open and detailed than before and I get less hum issues. This was therefore an upgrade I am truly pleased with and could be extended to other components like phono stages, headphone amps etc. Companies like Graham Slee do just such an upgrade with his units which again I have used very successfully.



Another variation I am currently trying out is a valve amp where the power supply is in a separate case to the pre amp, transformers and valves. For a sub £1000 amp this is exciting and delivers excellent results. Battery power supplies (going off grid) are also an alternative which some purists swear by and even go as far as to have a whole bank of large cumbersome batteries in their system. The results may well be excellent as there is no influence or contamination from our normal AC mains borne supply, but cost and practicalities spring to mind again for most music lovers.

A controversial subject is the use of mains conditioners and purifiers to alleviate the pollution problems of our mains supply from the National grid. We take electricity for granted like we do breathing, but think about it, there is pollution in

the air all around us which we inhale 24 hours a day and the same is true of our mains supply. Obviously the rate of pollution varies dependent upon where we are and crucially the time of day has an influence too. If you think of the times when your system seems to be on song and sounding great it is usually late at night when many people are in bed and industrial activity may be lower. I have found this to be the case on numerous occasions.

I won't get embroiled in the arguments for or against purifiers and conditioners, I have tried several in my system and differences are tangible, but the cost of many units I find hard to swallow. (That is down to you the reader to decide) A dedicated, separate mains spur was one of the most effective things I have done, with an addi-

tional earth ground from outside in my garden to aid isolation. The improvement in the bass was palpable.

To conclude my experiences have been that a good mains supply coupled with a decent mains block, sockets, mains leads and where possible upgraded power supplies all contribute to a great sounding system. Get the foundations right and the rest will follow. I'm not saying good equipment choices aren't important, it's just that without these good foundations everything won't gel as well, and long term may crumble through listener dissatisfaction and loss of interest in this marvellous past time. Now we don't want that do we?

Ian Ringstead

THE VIEWS OF STU!

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



In Association With



As we've been driving back from another hugely successful North West

Audio Show (1002 miles not including the ferry) we've had the rare joy to listen to Radio 4 in the car. However, our journey has been filled with highs and lows; as a keen stay in Europe believer Friday morning left me somewhat shell-shocked and unsure of the future in store for Europe.

One of the great programs we managed to catch on our long, wet and windy drive South was a program all about cognitive dissonance, and needless to say the whole of the program had a distinctive post Brexit referendum bias. The basic question the program was asking was; as voters, do we reinforce our decision to vote one way or the other once we have put our X in the box in a behavioural way and would those that voted to lea-

More piff and waffle from Stuart after a bit of a bar room psychology lesson courtesy of Auntie Beeb

ve reinforce their decision in the weeks and months to come; in essence would their convictions be bolstered, or would they go down the cognitive dissonance route and have thoughts that swung wildly from thinking they were correct to thinking they'd made a terrible

mistake?...and naturally this got me thinking about Hifi...how could it not?

We have endless debates in the Hifi community about whether analogue is better than digital and vice versa, whether one cable is better than another...or indeed

"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
STU!**
COMMENTS, RANTS AND THE
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TANTRUM...BY STUART SMITH

whether cables make a difference at all and we air our views pretty publicly. Airing our views is stating our position to our peers - a kind of making our mark in the polling station and airing our views makes each of us more steadfast in our own personal beliefs...or so the theory would go.

From Wiki "Dissonance is felt when people are confronted with information that is inconsistent with their beliefs. If the dissonance is not reduced by changing one's belief, the dissonance can result in restoring consonance through misperception, rejection or refutation of the information, seeking support from others who share the beliefs, and attempting to persuade others"

Last month I wrote an article and basically came to the conclusion that every decision we make with regards to the products we use is simply down to taste and that none of us were right and yet everyone was right. It must have struck a chord as a virtually identical article appeared on a US site only a couple of days later. But now, given my bar room psychology lesson courtesy of the Beeb, I began to question whether I was right to

However, reality would raise its head again when I'd go round to friends and realise that in actual fact their systems really did sound better than mine and that's when I got a serious case of upgraditis and the audiophile rot well and truly "set in" for good

suggest that "everyone was right and, at the same time, everyone was wrong". Perhaps what we are actually doing is reinforcing our decisions after we've bought product X, or made statement Y. It's caused me to do a bit of soul searching if truth be known and made me question whether I've made purchasing decisions purely on what I've heard, or if I've bought something and then talked myself into the mindset that I had indeed made the right decision.

I'm sure everyone reading this article will have made a substantial audio purchase, got it home and then wondered if they had made the right decision and then either subconsciously talked themselves

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into loving the item in question or swung wildly from loving it to hating it and back again, I know I have. I remember when I first got into Hifi in my teens and going round to friends houses who had systems and pretty much everyone of them sounded better than mine and then I'd go home pop on a record and loathe my system with a passion, but not having the money to buy better gear I'd listen to it and look for all the positive things I could and come round to

loving my system again. However, reality would raise its head again when I'd go round to friends and realise that in actual fact their systems really did sound better than mine and that's when I got a serious case of upgraditis and the audiophile rot well and truly "set in" for good.

Being in the review game I find myself in a fortunate position of not having to worry about the need to convince myself of a products merit or otherwise. If something comes in that sounds better than the gear I have then it is bought and it stays in the system...providing the money is there! If a product sounds worse then I make notes, and convey my

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thoughts on it as honestly as I can and it gets sent back to the manufacturer. Of course there is stuff that comes into the house and it trounces the reference gear sonically but it is so expensive as to be unobtainable; what to do now, do I save for the better item or do I do what I did as a teenager and go back and convince myself my system is “better”? The thing is I no longer need to do this, I can accept that some things will never be and move on, happy in the knowledge that my system does what I need it to do.

So what about the guys that box-swap constantly; what is going on in their minds? Do box swappers live in a constant state of insecurity about their systems merits, are they perpetually searching for the curate’s egg, or are they simply trying to listen to as many different permutations of gear as possible to satisfy some kind of inner curiosity? Again I’ll draw on my own personal experience (YM-MV!). As I mentioned earlier, as a teen I just didn’t have the dosh to swip and swap my setup, but about ten years ago I got back into Hifi in a big way and found myself in the fortunate position of being able to box swap pretty much whenever I liked, within certain budgetary constraints; some of the swaps were positive and some were neg-



ative. If I’d made a mistake the item in question would be moved on and I’d get something else in and over the past decade this (what I consider to be) fairly “careful” and considered box swapping has led me to the current system we use as the reference. I suppose, to an extent, I’d put myself in the searching for the curate’s egg camp of box swappers, though individual items do stay in the system for a **lot** longer than they used to and I can honestly not see me changing one item in the current system for quite some time...oh hang on, I’ve just bought a new reel2reel player and know that I’ll be looking for a different one in the near to mid future.

So, the question I suppose once again all boils down to who is right and who is wrong and do you

know what, I don’t think it matters. We are all in the audiophile game for our own ends and whether you swing wildly from loving your system to hating it, or find yourself completely content with your system it doesn’t matter so long as you are happy and enjoy what you do. I got a bit of flack and got called a cop out for saying that “everyone was wrong and everyone was right” and that everything came down to taste in the final analysis, but I stand by my statement and believe that if you are enjoying your setup as it stands or want to swap components in and out all the time then feel free to carry on.

Oh hang on a minute, I think I’ve changed my mind.

Stuart Smith

"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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BIRD'S EYE VIEW

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

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What is it about audiophiles and cats? They just seem to get on, many of my fellow audiophiles say that they like nothing better than sitting back with a glass of wine or whisky or a cup of tea, with a warm cat on their lap, relaxing and enjoying their favourite album. One friend, who makes very nice hifi and has a penchant for reel 2 reel tape machines, told us recently that he has four cats who all just turned up on his doorstep and stayed 'because I'm a nice guy'. The cats obviously knew he was an audiophile. This seemed an appropriate article to write this month as Hifi Pig Towers has been somewhat overrun with cats, all be it three of them very small kittens. Our resident beast, Clio, has been joined by Monty, Squeak and Ali, the products of a feral mother who deposited them in an

In this month's Birds Eye View Linette discusses audiophiles and their cats. Yep...cats!

out-building and took off once they were around six weeks old. Monty and Squeak have since found a new home so things are settling down a bit, but for a while the only thing that would calm the three savage wee beasties was to play them music, just about any music. So this kind of throws up the questions, do cats actually enjoy music? Do they have musical preferences? Could there be such a thing as a true Audiophile Cat?

If you have a cat or cats yourself then I am sure you will have no-

ticed how they react when you put on different types of music. Maybe your cats shares all of your musical tastes, or maybe they disappear the minute the system gets switched on. Many audiophiles are Jazz fans so it follows that maybe their cats are too, indeed our Clio loves the dulcet tones of Lyn Stanley, but then she's a sophisticated lady just like Lyn. She settles down and relaxes, positioning herself in the sweet spot when we play soothing music with a strong female vocal.



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2015

HI-FI WORLD

The opposite type of Jazz Cat would be a jumpy, skittish Ornette Coleman fan, but more 'challenging' Jazz can be a bit too much for some of our feline friends. The opening riff to Deep Purples 'Smoke On The Water' from their acclaimed 'Live in Japan' album has our Jazz Cat running for the hills, but perhaps your cat is much more of a Classic Rock Cat than ours?

Rumbling bass and searing guitars keep Classic Rock Cat purring happily. The little kittens in residence at Hifi Pig Towers are a lively type of cat. They spend most of their time racing every which way they can, round and round the room and up and down the bass traps, we even suggested to GIK Acoustics that there was a whole new untapped market out there for them, combining room treatment and cat furniture for audiophiles and their cats to enjoy together. They are definitely Techno Kitties, racing around like frantic 'Crasher Kids', only to be soothed by repetitive Techno beats. When they grow up I imagine they will become Housecats, just like Felix.

Classical Cat has refined tastes and will sit for hours with their audiophile human enjoying some fine symphony or opera. Or you may have a real yee'haw Country Kitty who loves the sounds of

Willie Nelson and Patsy Cline. Whatever your musical taste, I am sure that you can tell if your cat is enjoying listening as much as you are, they just seem happy and relaxed or perhaps stare intently at the speakers.

There has recently been some research that suggests that cats don't actually like 'human' music, rather they much prefer specially created cat music. Studies carried out in 2015 by the University of Wisconsin led them to conclude that music needs to be 'species specific' and be in the frequency range and with similar tempos that the species uses naturally in communication. The researchers worked with musician David Teie who believes that animals have an intuitive biological response to sounds that they heard in their early development. Teie had developed 'Music for Cats' which to me, sounds like some kind of purring, chirping, ambient chill-out music, but the University's testing found that it was preferred by cats when compared with their response to 'human' music. They also found that there was a more significant response in younger and older cats, than in middle aged cats.

Some cats are obviously into the hifi its self, just like their audiophile human, and they appoint themselves various important audiophile roles. The Amplifier

Toaster Cat isn't sitting on your big, class A amp just to keep warm, he's making sure that everything is in order for your listening session. Turntable cat has an equally important role, he's making sure that you got that ultra expensive cartridge aligned juuuuust right. The Room Treatment Crew are doing you loads of favours by checking to see if they can pull down your carefully placed acoustic panels, see you need to put them up again, properly this time! As for the Cable Testers, if they can bite through your cables then perhaps you need to consider an upgrade, they are only pointing out what you knew all along. If you have a penchant for electrostatic speakers though you may be better off without a cat, Electrostat Climbing Cat is not a popular creature.

But joking aside, perhaps the reason that cats seem drawn to audiophiles is because, when we listen to music, it calms and relaxes us, it is therapeutic and de-stressing. When we are calm and relaxed, so is our cat, so enjoying listening to music together is just another way of bonding with your pet, whether you are listening to your favourite tunes or something more cat specific.

Linette Smith



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HIFI WORLD

Dealer's View

It seems change is the only constant that we all experience. Nowhere is this truer than in the world of High Fidelity. All of us can rattle off various audio and video trends that we all thought would be with us forever only to see them gone....8 track tapes and players, cassette recorders, VHS recorders and of course Beta-Max. Vinyl is making a big comeback people say. Truth be told, it never left for reasons we will talk about in our next article. Currently the rage is streaming services and streaming devices. You buy a new toaster most likely it will stream Pandora as you wait for your daily bread to be burned.

Have A Plan

So the question needs to be asked how one makes smart purchases in the middle of all of this flux. We like to think that we have a good answer to this. The first place to start is to make a plan. I know it sounds very elementary but you would be surprised how few people actually do it. One of our long time customers is a surgeon. He's a big jazz fan and spins vinyl anytime he can. He always comes to our store dressed in his surgical green garb and talking on his iPhone. He listens to various gear and invariably gets interrupted time again by "the office". When he buys something the evaluation lasts maybe 3 minutes at most. He runs out before we can ask key questions. He loves SET valve amps which is fine and well. But you have to match your speakers very carefully with SET amps. Recently our doctor was listening to a pair of high end speakers which are rated charitably at 86db 1 watt 1 meter. His amp puts out a whopping 12wpc. Only the most efficient speakers can work well with his amp. The manufacturer of the speakers he was enthralled with suggests (mandates) that these speakers require a minimum of 200wpc. Our experiences support more like 300wpc. On his next visit with

cappuccino in hand for the good doctor we sat down and put a plan together that saved him a tidy amount. Make a plan.

Use A Template

With this in mind an effective plan has to be a realistic plan. If you're 25 years old, it's unlikely you would be contemplating purchasing the flagship speakers of Magico, B&W, or Wilson. We use a template with our customers which starts out defining the type of system you would like. Is this going to be a two-channel stereo? Are you planning on doing a home theater system? What is the overall budget? These questions act to effectively guide you into defining what products work for you. Without this guide people tend to be taken in by 4k flat panels at the big box stores. They take their new video delight home only to find that the only speakers they can now afford are the goose fart X1's. (All of us have owned the GFX1's. We just know them by a different name.) So where to start?

Start With Speakers

We always recommend starting with good speakers. Good speakers make any system sound better. Whether you are playing CD's, using reel-to-reel tape (it's coming back!), spinning vinyl, using digital downloads or streaming from one of the many subscription sites, good speakers will always make a significant impact. In the allocation of your hard-earned money, we suggest 45% to 50% of the budget be allocated for speakers. If you're building a home theater system, we suggest getting easy to drive and efficient speakers. Multichannel amps are not known for large power reserves. So 8 ohm speakers that are at least 89db at 1 watt 1 meter make for an easy to drive home theater system.

Mate The Electronics To The Speakers

Your choice of electronics should be matched to the speakers you like. If you chose your speakers when they were connected to a 300 watt per channel solid state amp, be aware that they will sound completely different with a lower powered valve amplifier. So try different amps and preamps with your newly

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found speakers. Your dealer should have no issues with this. If they object or are not eager to help...get a new dealer to work with you. Helping customers is our job. Your dealer should know this matching of electronics to the speakers is critical in having a great overall system. But we ask that you the customer be honest with us. It's fine to put a dealer through many hoops if your plan is to make your purchase from that dealer. Exercising the local dealer then buying elsewhere is a topic we've talked about previously. This is not a good thing for either the dealer or the customer. There are certainly faster ways to the bank than being in the AV business. Most dealers I know do this out of a love of music and the gear. We are not part of the so called 1% to be sure. So be open about your plans with us.

Make Smart Decisions On Cables And Accessories

I've seen great plans go to the rubbish bin with poor decisions on cables or accessories (particularly racks.) We are of the belief that good interconnect and speaker cables do make a contribution to your system. We have free training classes here once a month. The topics change but far and away the most popular class is our cable class. No topic gets people as worked up as the subject of cables. So we let people decide for themselves. We present cables, both interconnect and speaker cables, from all price ranges from the very modest to the very extravagant. The results are amazing. Even those who came with the hard over view that cables make no difference at all end up walking out of the class with a new understanding. Our view is that it's your system. Do what you think makes good sense to your budget and to your ears. But clearly do not drop thousands on cables if the system costs less than the cables themselves. We've seen where this goes.

Take Time To set Up Your New Gear

People are understandably excited to get their new gear home and get listening to music. Try to resist the rush to do so. The best thing in the long run is to take your time in setting everything up. This especially true of setting up and positioning your new

speakers. The speakers should be away from side and rear walls with the same overall positioning between the two. Here our big Magico's are three feet away from the side walls and three feet nine inches off the rear walls. We've experimented with various placements. For our room this positioning sounds the best. Plan on moving your speakers to different positions and listening to them. It will be well worth your time. Please allow for a break-in period of your new gear. When speakers are new the individual drivers are stiff initially. We say that speakers change in tone and richness after about 150 hours of playing them. We recommend playing your system at low volume while you are at work to move the break-in process along.

Read The User Manuals

I know this is not popular with many people but take the time to sit down and actually read the user manuals on everything that you have purchased. There will be features in your pre-pro or amp that you did not know existed. At least once a month or more we get calls saying their new DAC is not working. (Lately the calls have been all about DAC's or Turntables). The call ends quickly when we point out a non-descript button on the front controls the type of source input (SPIDF, AES/EBU or DIGITAL COAX). It's prominently mentioned on page 2 of the user manual. You get the point.....read the manual.

As an aside, please fill out your warranty cards. This is how the manufacturer tracks the item you bought. It's well worth the five minutes of your time. If something does go wrong then you're on record with them and they will address the issue significantly faster.

Enjoy!

This is all about having fun and enjoying music. Invite your friends over and play music. Be a missionary for our hobby.

Mike Twomey owns Big Kids Toys AV in Greensboro NC. Mike is delighted that reel-to-reel recorders are coming back.

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Canadian loudspeaker manufacturer Totem is well known and well loved the world over, to- day Mike Two- mey speaks to the company's president Vin- ce Bruzzese for Hifi Pig



perspective on the line and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you for speaking with us.

I have to ask, what was your first Hifi system?

Vince Bruzzese: In my mid teens (1969) I had scrounged around for my first Stereo System and it was principally made up of a pair of Acoustic Research AR2ax speakers, a pair of tube Quad II mono amps with a succession of various small pre-amps and a Thorens TD125 tt

Mike Twomey (Hi-Fi Pig): When you think about designing a speaker do you have an "end point" in mind? By this I mean do you say that I want this new speaker to have this technical profile or are technical specs secondary to how the speaker sounds?

Vince Bruzzese: I must say that technical innovation and serious evolution was always a guiding foundation. More importantly I wished that a speaker maintain attributes that made it strong technically (in a Totem way) but also has distinguishing characteristics, both audibly, emotionally and psycho-acoustically that would endear it for its particular and individual attributes and strengths.

Mike Twomey: When we sell loudspeakers (including Totem) we rarely talk technical spec's unless the customer asks. We'd rather let the customer decide what speakers sound enjoyable for his or her music. It's our opinion that Totem speakers sound warm and rich and many of our customers talk about this. So how do you design a speaker so that it sounds rich and warm?

Mike Twomey (Hifi Pig): Today I have the pleasure to be speaking to Vince Bruzzese the President and Designer of Totem Acoustic in Montreal Canada. Totem has been in the loudspeaker business since 1988 which, I believe, is a remarkable run given the nature of this business. My own company Big Kids Toys AV sells Totem speakers so we have a good

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It took decades of critical listening and observations and many years of development to create subwoofers that were "phase friendly" inter-collators

Vince Bruzzese: I must say that the 'End' Totem sound is a result of all that we hold dear. Technical strengths from our systems are and will remain a de facto pillar, but our real DNA remains in the correct phasing, speed, emotion, off axis natural presentation and spatial articulation of our speakers. Any slight alteration of our carefully crafted product just for extra technical merit is certainly a no-no. We meticulously sound test in normal environments for months and sometimes years on end from a multitude of positions to make sure that things are not disturbing and are intellectually and emotionally stimulating. The result has to surprise, excite, pamper, stimulate and incorporate easily into home environments! And, we hope, bring you to the next level.

Mike Twomey: One of the concerns that we as a dealer have is to introduce new customers to our amazing hobby and passion. To this end, Totem has introduced the KIN series of speakers and recently you added the KIN FLEX. We view this speaker as an important new product that pretty much anyone can afford and we think it sounds great. Can you tell us more about what you were after in designing the KIN FLEX and KIN MINI?

Vince Bruzzese: I have been a 'consumer' all of my life, one who values excellence in 'any' product and who finds it endearing to have something that lasts functionally beyond its supposed designated lifespan. People live to follow and chase something that allows them a different insight into things and I would rather have less of something but of a higher calibre and quality and I think most people come around to that - a good belt, a great cutting knife, a proper pie-

ce of furniture, a great pair of shoes!! All these quasi artisanal products that have a certain soul and functionality should be made as available options to everyone. However, less should not really 'be less'. People on a certain budget should be exposed to 'quality that is affordable'. Totem has put enormous efforts to initiate revolutionary, very affordable products, that when properly used are absolutely engaging, and have sound and aesthetic qualities second to none. It has always been our credo.

Everyone deserves to experience what we believe to be 'ultimate' in terms of affordable sound.

Mike Twomey: One of the trends that we've seen in the past few years is the expanding role of subwoofers. Traditionally subwoofers were used only in home theatre applications, but now we sell the smaller subwoofers like the KIN SUB and the KIN MINI SUB to augment a pair of stereo speakers; a 2.1 system. Is this a trend that you see around the world in other markets?

Vince Bruzzese: In our distant past we had done everything possible to have speakers that were full range or quasi full range (even our smaller monitors) and benefited from the sonic and phase advantages of minimalistic set-ups. Knowing that human physiology concentrates most of its computing power in the central octaves of sound, extracting frequency extremes has certain cost downfalls and adds unwanted complexity that actually interferes with our finely tuned sensory anatomy.

It took decades of critical listening and observations and many years of development to create subwoofers

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that were "phase friendly" inter-collators . We had to develop these friendly, yet high performance systems not only for our excellent architectural offering, but also for multi -channel demands and also the great resurgence of stereo and 2.1. Once we mastered the materials, design and science of these very friendly space friendly small enclosure subs, it became natural to offer fantastic bass supplementation for an extremely wide variety of needs.

Not all environments and homes are created equal. We sell throughout the world and certain European homes have walls and structures that offer much more in terms of natural bass supplementation than American/Canadian homes that are built and constructed differently. Some markets actually utilize subwoofer bass supplementation more than others, but simple, very correctly managed/accomplished 2.1 and 3.1 systems seems to be getting great traction everywhere. We think we are at the forefront there with our subwoofer offerings.

Mike Twomey (Hi-Fi Pig): Speaking of Subwoofers, of all the issues we have in getting speakers to blend in to perform well, subwoofers tend to be the most challenging to tune well. This is especially so when we use two subwoofers. Any thoughts on how our readers can get their subs to behave well?

Vince Bruzzese: In larger area environments or multichannel systems, consumers who can afford or manage two subs will benefit from the doubling effect. Contrary to common belief, we like to sometimes intermix our offerings. In a large system, the Tribe Double 8 sub's transient speed, quick impact and musicality blends perfectly with the larger and slightly deeper Thunder II. Placing one in the front and another in the back often improves things, allowing for a complete overlap that benefits the environment.

We know that the Kin Mini Sub is extremely, extremely phase friendly and will offer bass supplementation for any speaker and any brand. The Storm and Tribe Double 8 follow suite.

I think that the immediate reaction by most people is to use the sub at too high a volume whereas I would generally like to use as little volume as allowable to

get full benefits. When one hears the actual image size and foundation improve, you're on the right track. As in a proper shallow crossover, also allow the speaker and sub to overlap in frequencies. If a speaker's in room lowest point is let's say 50 Hz, then use the sub's crossover to intermix at 70-100 Hz. This is why our subs can actually reach a coherent 200 Hz plus...easily. This facilitates intermeshing.

' All ' our subs have a phase dial allowing adjustments from 0 to 180 degrees and

it's not just a single 0 or 180 degree switch. We find that most adjustments are actually between 75 to 115 degrees on the phase dial (corresponds to 10 to 2 o'clock position on a watch). Phase adjustment is the most difficult so start at 90 degrees and then go up or down 5-10 degrees at a time to adjust . If another person can help moving the dial while you listen, this is beneficial. Of course these recommendations are for Totem Subs.

Mike Twomey: Totem's flagship line of speakers, the Element series, uses a torrent driver which you've spent considerable time developing. Can you tell us about your goals in designing the Element series?

Vince Bruzzese: The Element series follows our Totem philosophy of having having a small chassis produce a holographically huge, dynamic and immersive sound (stable image) from a more radically dynamic and speedy package.

We had most areas covered with our traditional lineup. Making larger speakers was not to our liking and certainly not Lucy Lentini's who directs our company. I believe that a speaker has to intermesh in a room in a more fashionable, but also more discreet fashion. The trend is to incorporate intelligently rather than dominate a room. Things have to be timeless yet add to the visual (discreetly) and aural environment (hugely).

We believe the Element Line to be a huge step in Dynamic speaker design. The larger 7 inch Torrent driver has a 15-17 Hz free air resonance and therefore stays out of trouble in producing anything above

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20 Hz. Not having any crossover parts in front of it also helps in the correct phase interactivity in a room. It's lightning fast one inch throw in or out allows transients, speed and image size that seems completely out of proportion .

It's radical claw shaped internal radial magnet design allows incredible control over the voice coil and woofer movement. We even 'copper clad' the multi layer square voice coil wire protecting it from any danger. We put over 7.5 man hours into each of these exquisitely and extensively machined and hand assembled 7 inch Torrent drivers. Depending on the electronics one can extract not only life size (stand up) imaging but excruciatingly wide and large staging. These speakers can easily be put close to the wall (Fire and Earth) or positioned in as a statement in the middle of a room (Metal) . The Fire monitor has the added benefit of performing very well even on a 'low-boy.' It will image super tall and large 1 foot off the floor. It can also phase in (lock in imaging) very far apart.

Being vertically oriented Totem does all work internally and our smaller than normal margins allows the Element product to come out at the retail level at a very modest price point. We think that properly driven the Element line represents extraordinary performance at any price. Using crossover parts only in the tweeter section (to protect it from excessive lower frequencies) and having this enormous magnetic control over the hugely dynamic yet smooth woofer allows things never before experienced .

Mike Twomey (Hi-Fi Pig): What music are you listening to these days? Any recommendations for our readers?

For Modern Electronica I prefer a digital source as most material is only available on this format

Vince Bruzzese: I seriously like all types of music. From avant-garde Electronica, true to tradition Led Zep and Hendrix to Monteverdi and 50-60's Jazz.

It seems to me that my source changes when the music changes. I have a wide jazz and classic array collected over the years on vinyl and on a great TT on this is magical. For Modern Electronica I prefer a digital source as most material is only available on this format. I would say that musical preference evolve and I think

Totem is a valued guide to bring you to a fuller realization of what you truly enjoy.

Mike Twomey (Hi-Fi Pig): You love cars. Any interesting cars that you have owned?

Vince Bruzzese: I seem to be a bit of a gear head and interesting cars have been part and parcel of my life. Driving big American cars was fun but I seemed to appreciate handling and feeling over raw acceleration. Here are someThe first car I owned (16) was a Fiat Arbarth 850 Coupé. Then a succession of Older Mopar. Later '70 Volvo 144 (I still have it in storage) . Datsun 280 z, A Saab 99 FB. Multitude of Diesel Mercs (Still have a 84 300sd) couple of Ferrari 308 GTS (Still have a '78 Weber equipped one)

A recently acquired Porsche 911 S '83 Cabrio I drive occasionally , and a 6 speed Gallardo I drive very rarely because of the poor roads here. (For sale HA!) . So all in all cars that last and are super fun. Feeling and texture over extreme ! There were many many others but that's enough! Thinking of installing a pair of Kin Mini Flex in my next large sedan.

Mike Twomey (Hi-Fi Pig): Thanks again for the time Vince.

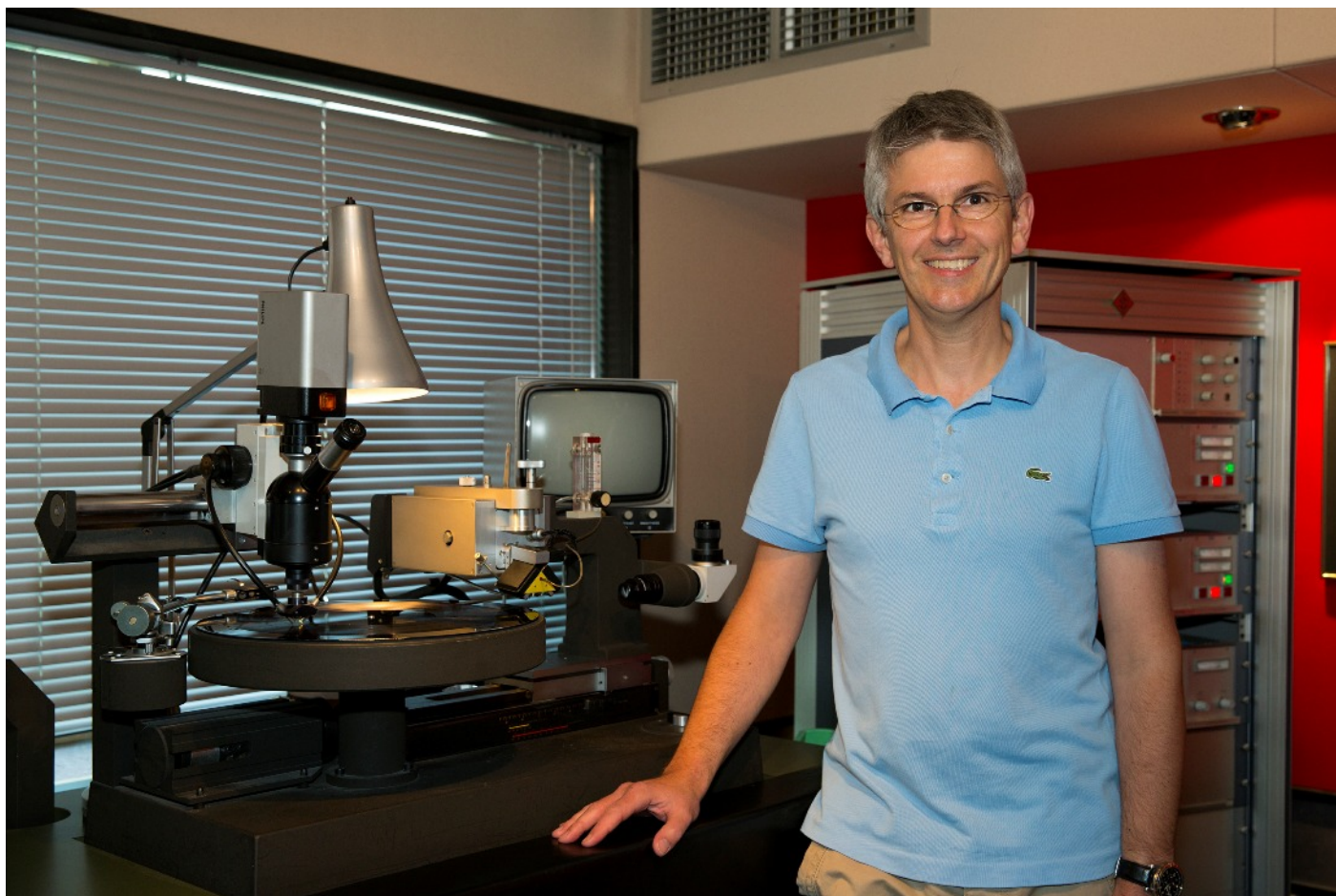
Mike Twomey

Interview

We at Hifi Pig recently bought and absolutely raved about the half speed master version of the John Martyn album Solid Air released on vinyl by Abbey Road. Miles Showell is the mastering engineer behind the project and Hifi Pig caught up with him for a chat.

Hifi Pig: Half speed mastering will be a new concept to many Hifi Pig readers, can you explain in simple terms the process.

Miles Showell: Half speed mastering is a vinyl cutting process where the both source is played out and the cutting lathe is running at half the real time rate (effectively the source and the disc cutting lathe are locked together but both are running at precisely half the correct speed). The advantage of this is that the system is not stressed. The cutter-head draws somewhere between 1/4 to 1/3 of the current from the drive amplifiers than would be required for real time cutting and the recording stylus has twice as long to carve the intricate groove into the lacquer master disc. Unfortunately however, it is not as simple as running everything at half rate. There is an EQ curve (RIAA) applied to all vinyl records and by running the lathe at half speed, all the frequencies are wrong. Abbey Road have installed custom designed and built RIAA filters into the cutting amplifiers that feed the modified VMS 80 lathe. These custom filters apply the correct EQ curve when cutting at half-speed.



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Hifi Pig: And what do you believe the sonic benefits of half speed mastering?

Miles Showell: All the difficult to cut high end frequencies become relatively easy to cut mid-range frequencies. This results in cuts that have excellent high frequency response (treble) and very solid and stable stereo images. What you need to bear in mind is that the only way a pressing plant can press a really high quality record is if the process starts with a really high quality cut.

Hifi Pig: Are there any negative aspects to the process?

Miles Showell: The most negative aspect to half speed mastering by far, as well as its Achilles' heel is de-essing which is a process that is often required to avoid sibilance (vocal distortion) on the record. None of the tools I would ordinarily use for de-essing on a real time cut work at half speed so I need to pre-treat everything by capturing all the audio at high resolution digital then treating every "sss" or "t" sound in every vocal on every song before progressing. Be-

cause I wanted to make sure these cuts were as good as possible I used a very time consuming but incredibly accurate method. It would have been easy to strap a de-esser across the signal path when making the high resolution transfer but the de-esser would not be able to differentiate between a bright vocal, a loud snare drum, hi-hat, bright guitar, tambourine and all manner of other high energy sounds that do not require any reduction or limiting. My method is slow but doing it this way only treats the offending vocal problems and leaves the rest of the music untouched.

Hifi Pig: Clearly we at Hifi Pig heard distinct sonic benefits with half speed mastering, why do you think the practice has not been more widely adopted.

Miles Showell: The process has a few drawbacks from the point of view of the engineer. Most notably having to listen to all the music at half speed. It does tend to make you a little stir-crazy if you are not careful. Also it is far more labour intensive than a regu-



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lar cut as well as obviously time consuming (especially as we insist on an acetate as part of a half-speed cut so both myself and the client can be sure everything is alright). Owing to the extra work from me, having a half-speed cut done is quite a lot more expensive for the client compared to a regular real time cut. Finally, the groove spacing computer on the lathe operates in a very different manner at half speed which has meant I have had to learn a new set of skills in order to get the lathe to cut as efficiently as possible. Happily all these issues melt away as soon as I listen to a half-speed cut, there is such a marked improvement that any issues suddenly seem insignificant. The fortunate thing for my clients is that I have spent the best part of the last 12 years developing my skills in this precise area. When I was getting going I had a huge amount of help via email from Stan Ricker in California. Stan was my hero and the King of Audiophile half-speed mastering. He had cut a great many records for Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs and it was his work with them that inspi-

red me. He was amazed that anyone else was interested enough to try cutting at half-speed and I was amazed that he would share his knowledge and offer advice to me. Sadly Stan died last year but I will be forever grateful to him for his inspiration and encouragement. Without wanting to sound too big headed, I now have more experience at half-speed cutting than anyone else and Abbey Road has become the home of half-speed mastering.

Hifi Pig: The John Martyn recording is taken from a high-resolution copy of the quarter inch master, why are you not cutting straight from the master tape?

Miles Showell: The biggest variable when cutting from tape is the replay machine. Every individual roller in the tape's path will have a direct effect on the quality of the audio emanating from the machine. In addition to this, the 35 Hz low-frequency roll off on a Studer disc-cutting advance head tape machine is in effect coming into play at 70 Hz at half speed. This is a problem if you want to hear as originally

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intended the lowest register of the bass end on a recording. In addition the masters for John Martyn's album were encoded with Dolby A noise reduction. Dolby only ever made a very small quantity of half-speed enabled Dolby A cards, none of which are available to me. Although the technical team at Abbey Road are more than capable of modifying some spare Dolby A cards for half-speed use, to do so would require an intimate knowledge of the expansion circuit in the card which has never been made available outside of the Dolby Company. Finally, analogue tape becomes degraded with each pass over the replay heads. These tapes are getting old and it is no longer considered good practise to play and play and play precious old original masters for fear of damage and general wear and tear. Far better then to eliminate the variable of the replay machine, to decode the Dolby noise reduction correctly and to minimise wear of the master by capturing the music digitally at very high resolution using professional converters locked down with stable external word-clocks. To capture from an Ampex ATR-102 with extended bass heads is a far superior method in my opinion.

Hifi Pig: The market for vinyl is growing every day, do you think vinyl playback offers sonic benefits over high-resolution digital playback? If so, what are the benefits?

Miles Showell: I would say vinyl offers a very different and unique experience over high-resolution digital. For obvious reasons it is a very hands-on music carrying format and for a lot of people having a nice thing to hold on to and to cherish is very important. Whereas playing a data file on a hand held device or from your computer is far less rewarding. That said, vinyl is not a format that is not suited to everyone. It takes a huge amount of effort to care for your records

I would say vinyl offers a very different and unique experience over high-resolution digital

as well as correctly set up your turntable, arm and cartridge combination, but if you manage to get it even remotely right, the sound quality is capable of impressing the most vehement sceptic. Another advantage is that the user can "tune" their system to their particular requirements. For example, do you go for the super sweet top end of a moving coil cartridge or the power of a good moving magnet design?

Then there is a huge choice

of phono pre amps some of which retail for silly money but even a budget unit will in most cases improve the sound over the on-board phono stage in many integrated amplifiers. The scope for tweaking the signal path is infinite with a vinyl playback system. Compare that to choice of high-resolution digital replay systems and the differences between the different converters are on the whole much smaller.

Hifi Pig: Currently there are only a small number of recordings available in this format, are there plans to expand the albums available and if so what titles are in the pipeline?

Miles Showell: There are indeed plans for further albums in this series. Sadly I am not at liberty to disclose any titles as yet. What I can say is that there will be one further album this coming autumn from a very big artist. This album has been half-speed mastered but the big difference is that it will be released as a double 45 R.P.M. LP. This will raise the quality bar even higher. Currently, the cut I did is working its way through the processing department of the pressing plant (Optimal in Germany who produce consistently excellent pressings). This is the same plant that pressed the initial six albums for the Universal / Abbey Road Half-Speed classic re-issues. If everything goes to plan, there will be another set of albums released early next year. The delay is largely

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due to ever growing lead times at every pressing plant on the planet. Both Universal and I are totally committed in making these releases as good as they possibly can be. Consequently this takes a lot of time. If every record was made this way we would need at least twice as many cutting rooms and engineers as there currently are and that is pretty much impossible.

Hifi Pig: Is it a struggle for Abbey Road to keep the old disc cutting lathes operational.

Miles Showell: Yes it is. The vast majority of the lathes still running were made in what was then West Berlin by Neumann, the company better known for their microphones. There have been no new lathes made since the mid 1980s and all the men at Neumann who built them have since died. Unfortunately, they did not write everything down so some of their collective knowledge has gone with them. Because of this, there will almost certainly never be any new lathes. Therefore we have to look after and treat very carefully the ones we have. Luckily they were masterpieces of engineering excellence which is a huge benefit. However Neumann built them for a life cycle of 10 years or so and here we are more than 30 years in and we are working them as hard as ever. Abbey Road have been cutting grooves in discs since the doors first opened in the early 1930s so the technical team here have amassed a huge library of experience in maintaining them which makes our lathes among the very best working examples anywhere. For any really specialist lathe work we have a very close working relationship with two of the six people on the planet that know how to fix the tricky stuff.

Hifi Pig: These albums are branded as Universal / Abbey Road. What are the origins of the relationship with Universal and what was the goal at the start?

There is resurgence in vinyl sales and a demand for good quality pressings

Miles Showell: Universal own Abbey Road as it was one of the assets they acquired when they bought EMI. I am freelance here but shortly after I started I was able to persuade the management that half-speed mastering was worth the investment. Initial feedback from my early clients was so good that it was the management who approached Universal and said you have a fabulous library of recordings and we have a

world expert on half-speed mastering in the team. There is resurgence in vinyl sales and a demand for good quality pressings. Therefore why do we not get together and create the highest quality vinyl records possible by pooling our resources and playing to all of our strengths. Thankfully, Universal thought it was an excellent idea.

Hifi Pig: Many audiophiles are passionate about analogue playback and reel2reel tape is becoming increasingly popular as a format, any plans for reel2reel releases in the future?

Miles Showell: I had noticed the return of 1/4" tape and the forthcoming new machine from the re-vamped ReVox brand. To be honest pre-recorded reel to reel tape has never been anything other than a niche consumer product. While I certainly wish ReVox the very best of luck and I certainly do not want to rain on anybody's parade, I am not really sure domestic open reel tape will ever break out of its niche fanbase. As far as plans for releases go, that would be a question for the record companies. I have no say in the work I do. I certainly cannot choose what I work on but given the difficulty in making good quality domestic pre-recorded reel to reel tape, I would be very surprised if any major record company would ever want to embrace it.

Album Reviews

Let's Eat Grandma – I, Gemini (Transgressive Records)



You may have recently read about two girls from Norfolk who look uncannily similar but are, in fact, unrelated. Rosa and Jenny are both 17, met when they were 4 years' old and have been inseparable ever since. Together, they make music under the moniker Let's Eat Grandma. Whether or not you enjoy their debut album really comes down to whether you like their mixture of darkness and light. Oh, and their voices.

Let's talk about those voices – they lie somewhere in between Björk, Kate Bush and Clare Grogan (Altered Images). They're girly, girly voices which actually sound much younger than their 17 years, but they strangely suit the music. Like sweetness and sour, they just work together. More mature voices could derail the songs from their youthful, energetic pitch. However, if you have a couple of young daughters of your own, you may perhaps find this music sounds a little too close to home.

'Deep Six Textbook' is the first tune out of the bag – and it's pretty amazing, all told. I first heard it a couple of months ago and I've been unable to shift it from my head ever since. It's a song which I couldn't really describe as a 'builder' as it doesn't really go anywhere, and yet for five minutes every moment

feels like a moment when the world around you ceases to exist. It's a perfect blend of harmonies aligned with a stunning melody. It's early days for 2016, but it's currently my single of the year.

Elsewhere, tracks such as 'Eat Shiitake Mushrooms' contain lashings of energy – but the bizarre rap section around halfway through just doesn't work. It's also nearly three minutes before the vocals kick in, which is too long. 'Sax In The City', by comparison, is far more interesting, with its cobbled instrumentation, rough edges and sheer fun. It could be the sound of a dozen London buskers, fronted by two teenage girls.

Musically, the instrumentation tends to be quite minimal, with the vocals doing much of the work. Such is the case during 'Chimpanzees in Canopies', where the line "Does it echo underwater?" is repeated – and the way that "underwater" is pronounced doesn't automatically lead you to believe that these girls originate from Norwich. Reykjavik maybe, but certainly not Norwich. There's a catchy chorus, which I really like.

'Rapunzel' is a stand-out track. Close your eyes during the opening bars and you're transported to somewhere between The Wizard Of Oz and one of those musical jewellery boxes which you wind up with a key. The somewhat random lyrics, "My cat is dead, my Father hit me, I ran away, I'm really hungry", describe a fairytale world which sounds... well, kind of random – but completely correct in the context of this album.

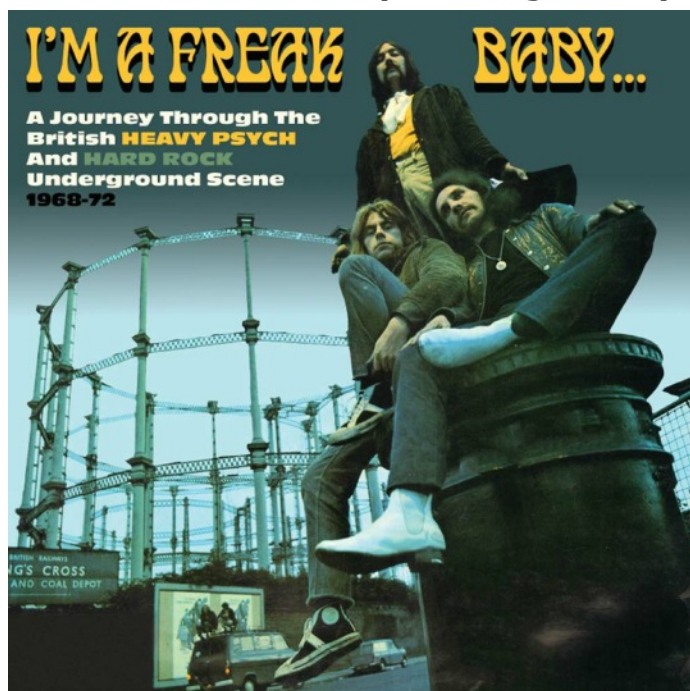
There's been a large amount of interest in Let's Eat Grandma, and I'm pleased to say that on most accounts, this album delivers. It's not going to knock you out cold with its hooks, but it's one of the more interesting listens I've heard during 2016. It's certainly like nothing else I've listened to recently and there's more than enough here to keep me engaged. The fact that I keep returning to it for repeated listens should probably tell you all you need to know. If you do nothing else today, be sure to look up 'Deep Six Textbook', the album is worth the entrance price for that track alone.

Paul Lockett and began music show business managers and **Listen to a track from the album using this QR Code** personas including Toby Ty settling on the name Marc Bo in 1965 and releasing his first



Album Reviews

I'm A Freak, Baby : A Journey Through The British Heavy Psych And Hard Rock Underground Scene 1968-72 (Cherry Red)



Out on the 29th July I'm A Freak Baby is really going to appeal to a certain kind of person...and I count myself in with this lot. As a teen I had hair down my back, wore an Afghan coat, stank of patchouli oil and listened to psych rock and heavy rock from the late 60s and early 70s, so when this landed on my desk I was a bit giddy with nostalgia and keen to give it a play.

I'm A Freak, Baby : A Journey Through The British Heavy Psych And Hard Rock Underground Scene 1968-72 comes in a clambox with a 36 page booklet and is spread out over three CDs and claims to be the most comprehensive and wide-ranging anthology to have been put together of this underground scene. British psychedelic music could often be seen as being whimsical and airy-fairy, but there was also a harder edge towards the end of the 60s as per Uriah Heep and Deep Purple and it is this a heavier rock music that would later give rise to the First Wave Of British Heavy Metal. There are names on here that many will know and love such as The Deviants, Pink Fairies and Hawkwind Zoo from the infamous Ladbroke Grove area of

London but there's also heavy blues in the form of Chicken Shack and The Groundhogs. There's even a handful of unreleased tracks on here.

If you know this kind of music you'll know pretty much what to expect from I'm A Freak; heavy, head down guitar riffs, soaring guitar solos and well, take a look at the geezers on the front cover, do they look like they're going to be into namby-pamby folk inspired whimsy. No, they're beer drinkers and hell raisers that like to rock out and this is the perfect album to rock out to, take a listen to the track above to get an idea of what you're getting into here.

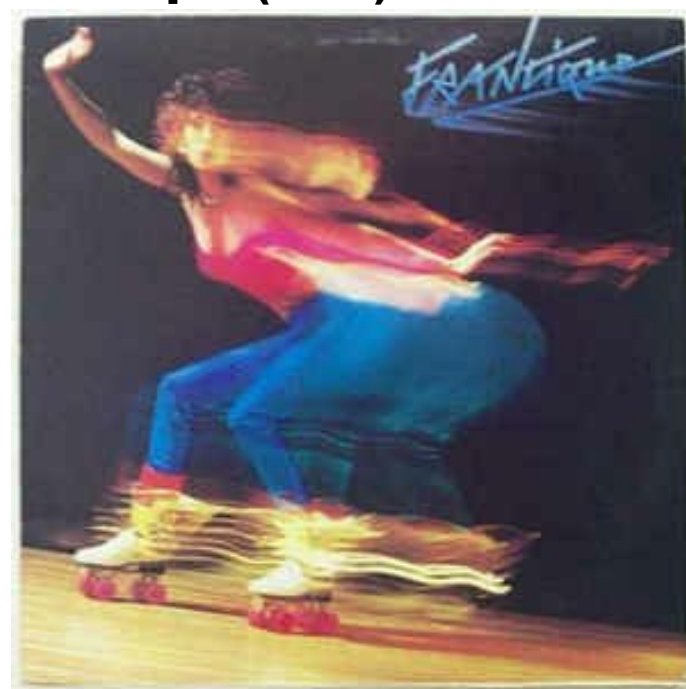
I'm a Freak Baby is pretty much an essential collection and a great document of a period and style of music that had a huge influence on me personally.

Stuart Smith

Listen to a track from the album using this QR Code



Frantique (BBR)



DISCO is big at Hifi Pig Towers and many a Saturday night is spent strutting our stuff around the listening room...there's even talk of us getting a

Album Reviews

mirror-ball. So what better than this album by all girl three piece that had a huge hits in '79 with Strut Your Funky Stuff (you'll know it of course!) and their follow up "Getting Serious".

By the time this record came out the anti-disco backlash was at its height and on July 12th of '79 there was the infamous Disco Demolition Night at the White Sox baseball ground in Chicago where disco records were exploded and a riot ensued

The original album only had four tracks on it, though they're all (bar one) over seven minute extended disco mixes. This re-release on Big Break Records has the original four tracks plus another four bonus tracks, including the fabulous Steady With Teddy.

By the time this record came out the anti-disco backlash was at its height and on July 12th of '79 there was the infamous Disco Demolition Night at the White Sox baseball ground in Chicago where disco records were exploded and a riot ensued. However, disco continues to show its influence, take a listen to Jimmy Somerville's Club Homage for example, not to mention house and garage music.

So, Frantique is unashamedly disco and it's a great record that has all the required elements of this really wonderful genre; four to the floor beat, finger snaps, funky basslines and all the rest.

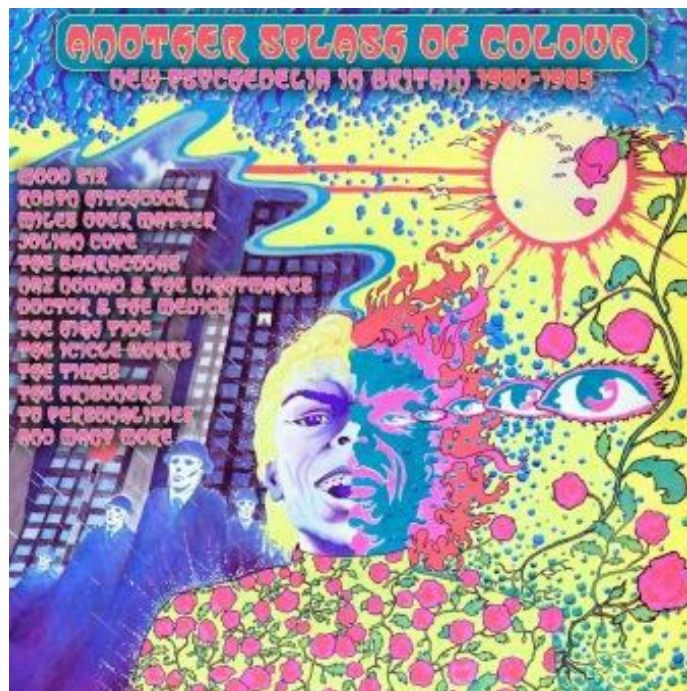
If you enjoy disco this is a great record. It's had a good few plays here over the last few weeks and Strut Your Funky Stuff is one of the classics! The front cover of this album really says it all!

Stuart Smith

Listen to a track from the album using this QR Code



Another Splash Of Colour: New Psychedelia in Britain 1980-1985 (Cherry Red)



Between 1980 and 1985 Britain was experiencing a bit of a psychedelic revival and Another Splash Of Colour expands on the original album A Splash Of Colour issued in '82 and highlights many of the bands of the Nu Psych scene from that era. All the tracks from the original album are present and correct and appear here on CD for the first time ever. If you weren't privy to the scene then many of the names herein will be new to you...as some are to me. Mood Six, High Tide, Miles Over Matter, The Barracudas and The Times are all included.

Many years ago I had the album "A Pretty Smart Way To Catch A Lobster" which was recorded live at the legendary Alice In Wonderland Club and this collection of tunes is pretty similar, though much more all-encompassing having a total of 64 tracks, but chart topping Doctor & The Medics are included here too. There's also tracks from Nick Nicely, Icicle Works, Soft Boys, TV Personalities, Direct Hits as well as early releases from Creation Records.

There's also tunes from some of the mod revival bands that later naturally evolved into a more psychedelic sound...even UK Subs and the Damned (under the name NAz Nomad And The

Album Reviews

Nightmares) had a bash at psychedelic tunes and they're included here too.

These three CDs come in a clamshell box accompanied by a 9000 word sleeve note by Neil Turner (Ex NME) and is great value.

Musically it's pretty much as you would expect from British psych and it obviously borrows pretty heavily from the late sixties. However, the tunes here all sound pretty fresh and are really accessible, erring more to the pop side of things than the heavier psych we saw on the I'm A Freak collection reviewed earlier this month; think jangly guitars and indie vocals that borrow from early Syd Barrett Pink Floyd.

There's a good few unreleased tracks and, I'm very pleased to say there's not a bad tune on Another Splash Of Colour. It's the perfect summer soundtrack to lie back on the grass, close your eyes and let the sounds of a bygone era wash over you and take you away on a trip.

Highly recommended and even Michael Moorcock's Deep Fix are represented...and this is a very good thing.

DISC 1

THE HIGH TIDE – Dancing In My Mind

MOOD SIX – Just Like A Dream

MILES OVER MATTER – Something's Happening Here

ROBYN HITCHCOCK – It's A Mystic Trip

THE BARRACUDAS – Watching The World Go By

NICK NICELY – 49 Cigars

THE TIMES – I Helped Patrick McGoochan Escape

THE ATTRACTIONS – Slow Patience

THE EARWIGS – Keep Your Voice Down

CHARLIE HARPER – Night Of The Jackal

THE MARBLE STAIRCASE – The Long Weekend

BLUE ORCHIDS – Work

THE SILENCE – Love Letters

KNOX – Gigolo Aunt

THE CHICAYNES – Further Thoughts

THE VANDELLS – I See Everything

KIMBERLY REW – Stomping All Over The World

DELMONTES – Don't Cry Your Tears

THE MONOCHROME SET – On The Thirteenth Day

FUTURE DAZE – Connect*

THE SOFT BOYS – Only The Stones Remain

FIRMAMENT & THE ELEMENTS – The Festival Of Frothy Muggament

THE VON TRAP FAMILY – No Reflexes

*previously unissued

DISC 2

NICK NICELY – Hilly Fields (1892)

THE HIGH TIDE – Electric Blue

THE THIRD EYE – Pass Myself

MILES OVER MATTER – Park My Car

SQUIRE – No Time Tomorrow

THE MARBLE STAIRCASE – Still Dreaming

THE BARRACUDAS – Inside Mind

DEEP FREEZE MICE – A Red Light For The Greens

PAUL ROLAND – Dr. Strange

MICHAEL MOORCOCK'S DEEP FIX – Brothel In Rosentrasse

CLEANERS FROM VENUS – Wivenhoe Bells II

SCARLET PARTY – 101 Dam-Nations

LE MAT – Waltz Of The Fool

THE DREAM FACTORY – The Haze*

THE LEGENDARY PINK DOTS – Waving At The Aeroplanes

MODEN ART – Fiction & Literature

Album Reviews

THE JETSET – And We Dance On

THE HEARTBEATS – Forever

THE PRIMEVALS – Where Are You?

PURPLE HEARTS – Hazy Darkness...

PINK UMBRELLAS – Raspberry Rainbow

THE TV PERSONALITIES – The Dream Inspires (Live)

*previously unissued

DISC 3

THE REVOLVING PAINT DREAM – Flowers In The Sky

NAZ NOMAD & THE NIGHTMARES – I Had Too Much To Dream (Last Night)

JULIAN COPE – Sunspots

THE JASMINE MINKS – Mr. Magic

THE ICICLE WORKS – Nirvana

THE WAY OUT – Do I have To Be Here?

THE PRISONERS – Reaching My Head

PLAYN JAYN – In Your Eyes (Live)

THE DENTISTS - Strawberries Are Growing In My Garden (And It's Wintertime)

DOCTOR & THE MEDICS – Barbara Can't Dance (Demo)*

BIFF BANG POW! – A Day Out With Jeremy Chester

MOOD SIX – Plastic Flowers (Psycho Version)

FREIGHT TRAIN – Man's Laughter

THE ONLOOKERES – You Know Everything

DIRECT HITS – Doctor Ben*

THE GREEN TELESCOPE – Two By Two

MAGIC MUSHROOM BAND – Wild Eyed Electric

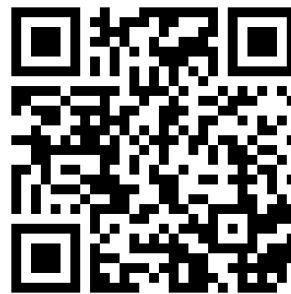
BRAINIAC FIVE – Endless River

CAPTAIN SENSIBLE – The 4 Marys Go Go Dance All Night At The Groovy Cellar

*previously unissued

Stuart Smith

Listen to a track from the album using this QR Code



Renaud – Renaud



This has been an absolutely huge record in France achieving the highest week one sales in fourteen years and going Double Platinum in its first week of sales. I wasn't expecting this to land on my desk and when youngest son saw it he declared it rubbish...though I strongly suspect he's only heard snippets, or none at all.

If you have never heard the name Renaud that doesn't surprise me, but in France he is an absolute icon of folk-rock with his often politically inspired and anti-authority lyrics. He's seen as a bit of a rebel and as a youth he was an active participant in the May '68 riots and tunes like Société Tu M'Auras Pas ensured he was widely regarded as the voice of Paris.

I didn't want to like this record and fully expected it to be pretty crap if I'm honest, but was pleasantly surprised by the content. Even if Renaud didn't sing exclusively (other than the odd line on the track Dylan) in his native tongue there is no denying that

Album Reviews

the music is clearly of French origin; indeed the tune Dylan could be seen as being a bit of a pastiche given a Gallic dusting.

Musically most of the tunes are downtempo, though the footstomping opener (J'ai Embrassé) is a belter of a tune where he speaks of Renaud embracing a cop

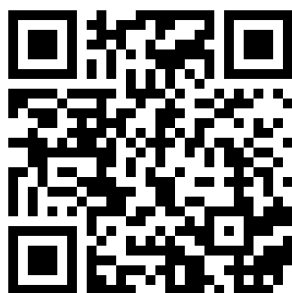
Musically most of the tunes are downtempo, though the footstomping opener (J'ai Embrassé) is a belter of a tune where he speaks of Renaud embracing a cop. Les Mots (track two) takes the mood and tempo down a little with Renaud's vocal being accompanied by piano and acoustic guitar alone...really quite a beautiful tune. Toujours Debout follows and is a great sixties inspired (jingly guitars) pop tune that I think is the clear hit here. The album ends (although there is a hidden tune) with La Batterie which is Paris personified in song and you know what, I've thoroughly enjoyed this record.

The boy was wrong and this will get a god deal of play here at Hifi Pig towers and I full understand why it has been such a huge success in France. I'm writing this and listening on headphones whilst on the ferry across to the UK on the day that Britain goes to the polls and decides whether to leave the European Union and the fact that this record is very French sort of brings home to me that we (the English people) are significantly culturally better off being part of the union.

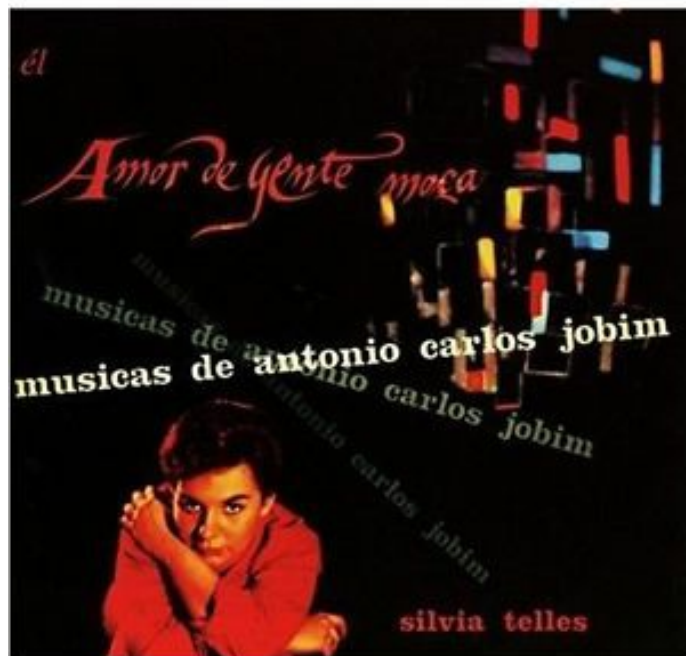
Whether the success of Renaud will be repeated on the English side of the Channel I don't know, but if you enjoy music that is passionate, defiant and rebellious then you ought to give this a go.

Stuart Smith

Listen to a track from the album using this QR Code



Silvia Telles – Young Love – The Music Of Antonio Carlos Jobim (él)



Sylvia (or Silvia) Telles was the first female bossa nova singer, and is widely regarded as the most influential of her generation. She was Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim's favourite vocalist and is seen as being the best interpreters of his songs. She was a huge success in her native Brazil and soon attracted the attention of the US market and with her starting to record albums with arrangers like Nelson Riddle and jazz guitarist Barney Kessel before she was killed in a car accident in 1966.

This album is made up of her first record Amor De Gente Moca (Young Love); released in 1959 the album was exclusively made up of Jobim's works with many of them being written specifically with Telles voice in mind. There's also tunes from her Canta Para Gente EP, Amor EM Hi-Fi, Silvia and Garcia

Musically Young Love is laidback and chilled bossa nova that harks back to an age where songs were beautifully crafted by their writers and wonderfully delivered by the singer. This is really quite delightful music that is a million miles away from what I would normally listen to but it's easy to appreciate why Telles became such a star in her homeland. There's a certain

Album Reviews

cinematic feel to the compositions and I can't help being reminded of Sunday afternoon, post lunch, black and white films that we were forced to watch because there was nothing else on.

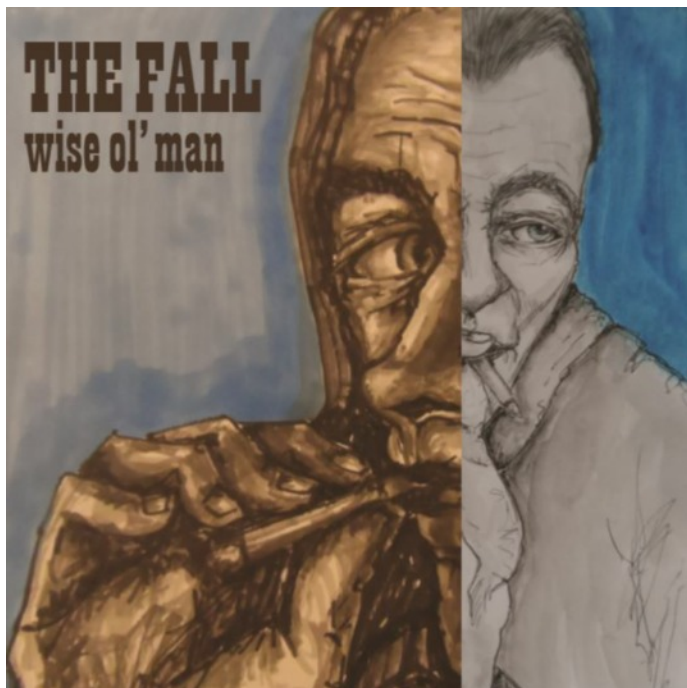
Interesting and beautiful music that doesn't really do it for me but will, I'm sure, find favour with many looking for a throwback to the past.

Stuart Smith

Listen to a track from the album using this QR Code



The Fall – Wise Ol' Man (Cherry Red)



Marc E. Smith's The Fall divide opinion perhaps like no other band I can think of. On the one hand you have a devoted to the point of obsession fanboys, whilst on the other you have folk that just don't get them. I fall (no pun intended) somewhere in the middle which is a bit of a cop out some may say. I do sort of understand the attraction of the band that formed in Manchester in 1976 and whose sole constant member is Smith, but then I buy their records and then think...why?

This incarnation of the band is Peter Greenway (lead guitar), Keiron Melling (drums), Elena Poulou (keyboard and vocals), David Spurr (bass) and of course Smith himself on vocals and it has a distinct punk aesthetic that reminds me somewhat of Butthole Surfers...this is a good thing. There's strangled guitars, odd electronic sounds and, of course, Smith's brutally delivered vocal that I find impenetrable and slightly disturbing. Track three Dedication Not Medication (Remix) nods its head to abrasive punk-electronica and is a very good tune indeed, if a little 'uncompromising', and I suppose this one word sums up The Fall very nicely...uncompromising!

Venice With The Girls is a splendid tune that's not a million miles away from the early tunes of Joy Division. Facebook Troll/No Xmas For John Quay is a seven minute tune that begins with buzz bass and builds to be a corker of a song that should have broader appeal than just The Fall fans, but then descends into musical (ordered?) chaos that is utter genius to my mind.

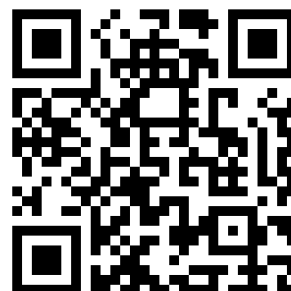
The final tune on the EP is All Leave Cancelled which is really rather a beautiful tune in a ruthless and caustic kind of way. It's structured, repetitive and has a menacing synth growl that cuts through the unyielding bass line and drums, whilst the lead guitar builds and builds. It's an instrumental tune and possibly my favourite on the record.

Here's the thing, Marc E. Smith is unyielding, obstinate and uncompromising. He has brilliance and genius that go beyond the meagre rock star outpourings of lesser men and he is something of a national counter-culture treasure. Whilst many of his peers have succumbed to the likes of oven chip advertisement voiceovers, Marc E. Smith has continued to plough a furrow more stubborn and more pig-headed and all power to him for this!

Highly Recommended and not just for fanboys!

Stuart D. Smith (No relation)

Listen to a track from the album using this QR Code



CLASSIC ALBUM

Fearing that the world is heading to hell in a handcart, John Scott takes refuge in T Rex's *Electric Warrior*



An old Chinese curse: May you live in interesting times. For many of us in the UK, these are becoming quite possibly the most interesting times we have ever lived through. Just over a week ago, as I write this, the UK voted to leave the European Union. The result came as a surprise, not least to many

of those who voted to leave but never seriously thought the vote would go their way. The two main political parties are in meltdown, both scrabbling around to replace their incumbent leaders. Scotland is determined to remain part of Europe, as is Northern Ireland, and is preparing a case for a second Independence vote in case things don't

go its way. In short, people are baffled, bemused and even a little bit scared. What do we need to help see us through? Well, you can't go wrong with a perfect piece of pop music from a more simple time so for this month's classic album I bring you *Electric Warrior* by T Rex.

Born as Mark Feld to working class parents in east London, Marc Bolan was determined to become a star from an early age. He was given his first guitar at the age of nine and immediately formed a skiffle band. One of his school bands featured vocalist Helen Shapiro who would go on to have a massive hit with *Walking Back To Happiness*. After being expelled from school at 15, Bolan – although he had not yet taken that name – worked as a fashion model and began making contact with a number of show business managers and recording demo discs. Hopping on the Mod bandwagon, he experimented with a number of personas including Toby Tyler and Mark Bowland before settling on the name Marc Bolan, signing with Decca Records in 1965 and releasing his first single *The Wizard*. Some months later, Bolan turned up unannounced at the home of manager Simon Napier-Bell and announced that he was going to be a huge star and needed someone to help make that happen. Napier-Bell welcomed him in – I can't imagine that happening these days if you turned up unannounced at Simon Cowell's house – and, impressed by Bolan's songs, arranged an immediate recording session. This eventually led to Bolan being given a place in the group John's Children. That band broke up quickly after Bolan joined and he deci-

CLASSIC ALBUM

ded to start his own band, Tyrannosaurus Rex, recruiting the band members just hours before their first gig, which was, unsurprisingly, a disaster. Bolan quickly decided to ditch the band apart from percussionist Steve Peregrine Took and Tyrannosaurus Rex proceeded as a duo.

The band's acoustic pop psychedelia met with some success – DJ John Peel was a big fan – and their popularity built steadily over the course of their first four albums, despite musical differences between Bolan and Took resulting in the latter being replaced by Micky Finn for the album A Beard Of Stars. This album also saw electric guitars beginning to contribute to the band's sound, a development that continued with the next album as the duo renamed themselves as T Rex and relaunched themselves with an album of the same name.

While a couple of tracks from the T Rex album, namely Beltane Walk and One Inch Rock hinted at a more commercial direction, the band's change of

direction towards glam rock was clearly signalled by the singles Ride A White Swan and Hot Love – these were the days when singles were often stand alone releases to tide fans over until the next album release, not just a selection of tracks plucked from an already released album.

Follow up album The Slider continued what Electric Warrior had started on it

Bolan added bass player Steve Currie and drummer Bill Legend to the band. Producer Tony Visconti provided the signature glam rock sound – overtraced blues-based guitars with spare, drum and bass often accompanied by Visconti's intricate string arrangements. There is some ongoing argument amongst pop fans as to whether Bolan or David Bowie gave birth to

glam rock. Bolan fans cite Electric Warrior as the first glam album while Bowie aficionados claim that title for Bowie's The Man Who Sold The World which had been released the previous year. As Visconti produced both albums, perhaps he deserves to be crowned as glam's creator. Regardless of whether or not Electric Warrior qualifies as the glam Big Bang, it does represent a textbook example of an artist redefining how they wish to be perceived, distilling it into 11 songs and nailing it so perfectly that it becomes the template for a whole musical genre.

Opening track Mambo Sun taps into a primal voodoo groove. Bolan's new teenybopper audience might not have heard anything like it before but put together with Bolan's androgynous good looks it spoke to parts of them that contemporary pop stars like Cliff Richard, one of Bolan's early heroes, simply did not reach. With Cosmic Dancer Bolan takes superficially disposable lyrical and musical themes and



CLASSIC ALBUM

turns them into something joyous and life-affirming by dint of nothing more than his own charisma and self-belief. Jeepster and Get It On provided the big hits, Life's A Gas provides a moment of reflection but as its lyrics make clear, Electric Warrior contains no profound insights into the human condition: "it really doesn't matter at all, life's a gas."

Having refined his persona to exactly what he wanted it to be Bolan found himself somewhat hoist by his own petard. Follow up album The Slider continued what Electric Warrior had started but failed to build on it. Lacking his friend David Bowie's ability to constantly reinvent himself – but let's be honest perhaps no one other than maybe Bob Dylan has matched Bowie for that – Bolan's mainstream popularity waned and his subsequent albums became more and more unfocused.

1977 saw Bolan staging a successful comeback playing to newly appreciative audience and securing a weekly TV show, Marc, in which he introduced new bands and was reunited with old friends including David Bowie. The show was a hit with its teenage target audience and a new phase to Bolan's career seemed assured. Unfortunately, with the cruel irony that life seems to save for our true stars, Bolan was killed in a car accident 9 days after the final show was recorded.

For just a couple of years, Marc Bolan defined what it meant to be both a pop star and a genre-defining artist. Check out Electric Warrior to see how it's done. Get it on.

John Scott

AT A GLANCE

Released 24 September 1971

Recorded March–June 1971 at Trident Studios and Advision Studios, London, England; Wally Heider Studios, Los Angeles; Media Sound Studios, New York City, United States

Genre Glam rock

Length 39:02

Label Fly (UK), Reprise (US)

Producer Tony Visconti

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Dali Menuet Speakers

After my review of the Dali Rubicon 5 floorstanding loudspeakers I was asked if Danish Audiophile Loudspeaker Industries had anything smaller and a little more kind to the bank account. So, I asked if I could take the Dali Menuets for a spin.

I really enjoyed my time with the Rubicons – they suited my room, not only in how they looked but also with how they sounded.

Can the compact Menuet speakers wow me in the same way?

Dali Menuet design

The Menuet is equipped with a 4.5-inch wood-fiber woofer along with a 1.1-inch soft dome tweeter.

Both of these drivers are designed to be dynamic, fast, and precise.

Dali decouples each of these drivers from the cabinet using rubber gaskets. Not only do these rubber gaskets help reduce the transfer of unwanted vibrations between the drivers and the cabinet, they also create an airtight seal around the drivers.

I like the way that Dali has integrated the downward firing air-flow optimised port in to the binding post casement. According to Dali this port was designed to do three things: Eliminate port noise, allow for a lower tuning frequency and, finally, make it possible to place the Menuet's near, or even against, walls without adversely affecting bass precision.

The grills attach to the fronts just like the ones on the Rubicons did, via holes in the driver baskets. This is another neat design touch



by the clever Danes and means that you don't have to see ugly plugs in the face of your speakers if running them naked.

The Menuets feature subtle curves along the cabinet which measures only 9.8- x 5.9- x 9.0-inches and weigh 4.1kg each, making them truly compact bass reflex loudspeakers.

As you can tell by the photos, I was sent a pair in black high gloss lacquer but they are also available in rosso veneer, light walnut veneer, and the white high gloss lacquer.

The black is a bit of a fingerprint/dust magnet – not great for clean freaks.

Dali Menuet sound quality

When I first sat them on my stands and plugged the Dali Menuets in to my system, hastily grabbing the nearest CD to me (Pornography by

The Cure), I was a little taken aback to start with. As 'One Hundred Years' started I was surprised by how wide and open the sound stage was on such a claustrophobic track.

The sound being projected was clear, musical and focused.

Changing the mood a little (a lot) I played Mozart's Sonata for Two Pianos in D Major – Allegro con Spirito being performed by Thomas Enhco and Vassilena Serafimova. I think this is a great test, especially for the treble as one of the piano's roles is taken by Serafimova's marimba playing.

The diminutive Dalis manage to capture the clear ringing of the percussion as well as the decaying reverb of the piano.

The high-end wasn't as much of a wow as I got from the hybrid ribbon/dome set-up on the Rubicons but it was revealing and crisp enough to capture the bite of the acoustic instruments when pushed but was also detailed in the

Dali Menuet Speakers

the acoustic instruments when pushed but was also detailed in the softer sections.

The 4.5-inch driver was typically fast and precise through the Sonata and when changing tack again to 'Roundabout' by Yes.

The harmonics were bell clear but once the track kicks in the compressed, growly, plectrum-driven bassline cuts through with the notes starting and stopping on a sixpence. There is no overhang whatsoever.

I do feel that the mid-range is a little forward on the Menuets but it is so articulate and expressive I think that this gives them a great character.

Righty, it's time to test the lows. Tool's 'Ticks and Leeches' was first up and even though Justin Chancellor's basslines aren't of the low rumbling kind, Danny Carey's drums more than make up for it.

This is where I think I found the Menuet's Achilles heel – drum driven rock and metal. The presentation of the low mids was clear, focused and true but I felt that the low-end was lacking a little in depth.

The same was evident in the dirty distorted dance stylings of Nine Inch Nails and 'The Hand That Feeds'. What should have had the



pictures shaking was instead pushed out in to my face.

The bass is good – 'U Can't Hold No Groove' by Victor Wooten was warm and bouncy – but I don't think the Menuet speakers were built with clever metal in mind.

This did improve when I moved the speakers nearer the wall though, I have to say (from my original placement of about 2.5-feet from the wall pushed back to just over 1 ft). So, a note to you all considering the Menuets – *remember that they like their*

backs up against something solid!

I replayed some Tool and this did indeed make a difference.

Keeping it Jazz-y, Stanley Clarke's deep acoustic bass oozed musicality in 'Bass Folk Song #13: Mingus'.

The Dali Menuet speakers handle electronica really well with Kraftwerk's 'The Robots' and Cabaret Voltaire's 'Sensoria' spreading their own different takes on electronic soundscapes across my living room.

The Menuet's possess a level of balance and refinement that I was not expecting from speakers designed to be wall mounted or placed close against a wall.

They are also, to my ears, quite truthful speakers and not coloured to make up for their lack of stature.

They manage to deliver precision and balance whilst, at the same time, producing a rhythmic and engaging quality that makes listening to music fun and enjoyable.

Dali Menuet review conclusion

The Menuets practically embody



Dali Menuet Speakers



wall).

You're not going to get the same depth as their larger siblings but these really have to be up there as some of the best bookshelf speakers available at the moment, and in this price range.

They look great and are agile enough to handle complex music whilst not losing any of the musicality.

The Dali Menuet speakers have character along with articulate mids, detailed highs and tight, tuneful lows.

If you're looking for speakers to wall mount or sit on a shelf – the Dali Menuet should definitely be on your audition list.

Dali Menuet speakers price and availability

The Dali Menuet bookshelf speakers are available now for £800.

Overall score 8.5

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8.5/10

Sound quality 8.5/10

Looks 8.5/10

Value 8.5/10

Buffalo DriveStation

We are consuming more media when we want to these days, rather than being tied down to fixed scheduling. Streaming on demand is all well and good but what happens if the programme isn't featured on one of the catch-up services though? The Buffalo DriveStation HDV-SA hard drive is here to, literally, save everything.

External hard drives are pretty handy things to have around and, as we're recording and streaming a lot of our content, a drive that can

signed to sit next to, or on top of, the likes of your DVD player or TV box.

Personally, I have placed this one under my Panasonic TV where it fits perfectly, adding some symmetry with my Android TV box that sits on the other side.

The DriveStation is available loaded with either a 1, 2, or 3 terabyte 3.5-inch SATA hard drive on the inside. The one I have been sent for review is the 1TB model.

At just 20 cm wide, it doesn't

Not only did Buffalo spend time making it look good/invisible, but they also made it quiet.

Inside the DriveStation there are vibration-dampening rubber elements, and no whirling fan to annoy you whilst you're in the room.

This means that, even when the drive is being written to, there is hardly any hint of the typical crunching and whirring of a disk drive. What sound it does emit will almost certainly be lost over the distance between your TV and the sofa.

Around the back of the DriveStation you'll find just two ports, one for power and one for data – but more design work is evident around here too. Instead of your regular flat slab panel, the port area of the drive case is narrower. This means that the power and USB 3.0 cables don't sit proud of the case and so allows you to push the Buffalo DriveStation Media hard drive to the very back of a shelf or cabinet, and the wires are free to trail out of the side, downwards or upwards depending where they need to go.

As a side-effect, this makes the drive look like it is some kind of modular unit or, perhaps, a mini games console.

All-in-all, the DriveStation's size and style suits the job it has been designed for – small enough to sit with/under/near your skinny TV and plain enough not to distract from your viewing pleasure, yet also stylish enough not to have been whacked in to submission by an ugly stick.

The DriveStation measures 207mm x 123mm x 40.5mm (W x D x H) and weighs a mere 900g.



live in our living room that isn't bulky, noisy or runs hot would be an ideal solution. Especially now that we're in to Euro 2016 season! Well, that's what Buffalo seems to think.

Buffalo DriveStation design

The Buffalo DriveStation HDV-SA is a rather compact recorder and it has been specifically de-

signed to sit next to, or on top of, the likes of your DVD player or TV box. But, that's the whole point of its stealthy looks.

This, I can only put down to a very clever bit of design work from the team at Buffalo – that and the lack of interest my other half has in some of the bits of tech I add to our home.

Buffalo DriveStation

Buffalo DriveStation performance

The Buffalo DriveStation HDV-SA is awesomely plug and play, which is ideal as most buyers of this gadget will be more interested in saving shows than getting down and dirty with setting up their tech.

Just think, you could be up and running, recording all the Euro 2016 football matches to save and watch over and over again in under 5 minutes – not sure if that's going to be a good thing or not just yet.

Once I had plugged one end of the USB cable in to the DriveStation and the other end in to my Panasonic telly, it was just a case of plugging in the power lead and using the TV's menu to recognise the drive and format it appropriately. Job done.

The DriveStation powers on and off automatically with whatever it's plugged in to and, no matter what I connected it to, it was discovered by them all.

The USB 3.0 connectivity is a definitely bonus as the increased speeds when compared to 2.0 are noticeable when transferring video. The drive has a rated transmission rate of 5 Gb/s max.

Recording and playback quality was great and having it linked to the television to record bits not covered by the on-demand channels is something I could easily get



used to. Especially as the alternative may be a little.... Copyright ambivalent, shall we say?

Buffalo DriveStation review conclusion

The DriveStation HDV-SA does exactly what it promises to do – record your favourite shows so that you can watch them whenever you want to.

It's rather subtle exterior means that it can sit there quietly (and it is very quiet) doing its thing and you will hardly notice it.

The Buffalo DriveStation media hard drive HDV-SA is one of those plug and play and forget items that you will only feel its purpose when it's taken away.

Every home that has sports fans or telly lovers should have one of these.

Buffalo DriveStation HDV-SA price and availability

The DriveStation HDV-SA is available now for around £85.

Overall score 8.1

Build quality 8/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Looks 8/10

Value 8/10

Astro A40 TR Gaming Headset and Amp

Up until now, all the headphones GadgetsNews has had to review are from a purely musical point-of-view. As gamers have equally specific requirements we have the Astro A40 TR headset and amp bundle to test.

The Astro A40 TR headset comes bundled with the MixAmp Pro external soundcard and can also be customised thanks to some clever interchangeable bits.

Astro is a well-known brand for US gaming fans and, looking at the base of the amp, it is in Europe via the Skullcandy brand.

Astro A40 TR design

Let's get the one thing out of the way to start with. These are wired headphones.

Some of you might be considering moving away from this review right now but, if you are LAN gamer or actually get involved in e-sport games, having a physical connection makes the headset much more reliable in crowded settings and removes the risk of interference. This is why TR equals Tournament Ready folks!

The Astro A40 has been going for about 5 years now and the design hasn't really changed that much during the years.

The earcups that house the 40mm drivers are sat in a glossy plastic ring that lets it pivot slightly up and down for comfort. It also connects to the headband through a metal tube that both protects the earcup's cable as well allowing it

to turn completely sideways and lay flat.

The headset is nicely chunky and surprisingly light, tipping the scales at 13.3 ounces. The plush, cloth-covered padding on the ears and under the headband makes wearing them a comfortable and pretty sweat-free experience during gaming marathons.

The left cup holds the 3.5mm connector to the included MixAmp Pro TR and this points straight down. A rather nice touch is that there is a recessed 3.5mm connector for the removable, flexible boom mic on both earcups. This enables lefties and righties to use the mic with equal ease. More about this in the performance section.

The earcups' panels (dubbed 'tags' by Astro) are removable, being held in place by magnets. One of these tags has a cut-out to accommodate the mic connection.



The A40 TR is vented, which means there is space under the back panel of each earcup. This helps to avoid sweaty lobes but also means that sound can leak out.

Astro A40 Mod Kit

Thankfully, if you want a more sealed experience for better bass and/or privacy, this is where the A40 TR Mod Kit comes in handy.

All these bits snap on and off thanks to the magic of magnets. That is, everything except the headband padding. This you have to wrestle with slightly. I will admit to being slightly worried that I might break something, but that was seemingly unfounded.

This £48 Mod Kit includes two additional tags with rubber gaskets to block off the vents, leather-covered earpads and headband padding. You also get a larger, voice-isolating boom mic. The

Astro A40 TR Gaming Headset and Amp



voice-isolating boom mic. The black and green colour scheme is great if you have an Nvidia themed rig.

Like other Astro headsets, you can also swap out the tags with a variety of colours and styles for £16 per pack. These cosmetic tags are open-back, like those included with the A40 TR itself.

Astro MixAmp Pro TR design

The MixAmp Pro TR that's included with the A40 TR offers plenty of connectivity and control options.

The MixAmp is a 1.7- x 3.1- x 5-inch (HWD) rather good looking, sturdy, plastic box.

The face is dominated by a large volume knob flanked by Dolby, EQ, and Power buttons.

Below this array is a smaller mix knob. This lets you balance the audio between the game you're

playing and your team's voice chat on the fly.

The back panel holds a micro USB port, an optical audio input, and a 3.5mm stream output (for mixing the headset's feed into a broadcast, stream, or recording).

The front panel is home to the 3.5mm connector for the headset itself, a 3.5mm auxiliary input, and two ports for daisy-chaining multiple MixAmps together (for full team communication and synchronisation on a hardware level).

In order to have clear sight of the settings, the MixAmp is angled up

slightly. It sits on a smooth, tapered rubber base that keeps it from slipping and helps with isolation.

The A40 TR + MixAmp Pro TR comes in two versions. One is designed for use with the Xbox One, while the other is designed for use with the PlayStation 4 and PlayStation 3. Both will work equally well with your PC, and both headsets can plug directly into your smartphone using the same cable you hook up to the MixAmp Pro TR.

I have been sent the White Xbox One version of the headset and, even though I am using it with my PC, it registered instantly as soon as I plugged in the USB cable.

Astro A40 TR and MixAmp Pro performance

The A40s come loaded with a single 40mm driver in each earcup. These dish out a frequency response of 20Hz to 21KHz and, for those of you who like this kind of thing, a claimed impedance of 48 ohms, THD of 0.1 per cent.

The MixAmp Pro offers a per channel power output of 70mW and frequency response of 20Hz to 20KHz.



Astro A40 TR Gaming Headset and Amp

The MixAmp Pro offers a per channel power output of 70mW and frequency response of 20Hz to 20KHz.

Personally, I have no problem with a wired connection as my tower sits on my desk but I can see how this might rankle with some who might have their console sat under the TV across the room.

My issue is that, as Astro have fitted the cups on each side with a mic connection, why could they have not done the same for the headphone cable? The NAD VISO HP50 headphones allow you to choose which cup the cable goes in so you don't have it trailing across your front, why can't the Astro A40? At the moment, my tower and the MixAmp are to my right. The cable enters the headphones through the bottom of the left cup... annoying lead time. It's a small issue, but possibly something that Astro could do with addressing for a premium product.

A40 TR gaming

I'm not usually one for gaming with headphones on as my PC audio rig is pretty good, I reckon. The thing is, after playing a few first person shooters (Black Ops, Counter Strike, Left 4 Dead 1 and 2, etc), as well as clocking up some time with Project Cars wearing the A40 TR, I might be a convert.

Audio through the MixAmp and the A40s come through really powerful and clearly. The clarity of dialogue is really impressive. Effects, such as gunfire and eerie noises in games such as Left 4 Dead 2, were also top notch.

The soundstage wasn't as wide as what my speaker set up produces. Saying that though, I could still



get a good feel as to which direction noises were coming from. The headphones weren't as spatially impressive as I was hoping for, but they do give a decent amount of 'surround sound'. So, differentiating between sounds from behind or in front of you in the game is pretty good.

Where the A40 TRs trumped my speaker set up was in immersion. I felt more a character in the games rather than a player of them – if that makes sense.

Playing team games the mic was clear. To hear an example, have a listen to this (I'm the non-Irish sounding chap).

A40 TR music

The Astro cans (not to be confused with Astrakhan) and MixAmp gives a bass-heavy response, which I kinda expected.

It's not totally uneven though as the amp tends to sculpt the high-mids and treble accordingly. This slightly compensates for the presence of the beefier low end.

The sources being used are Tidal and as some choice Flac tunes.

With these the Astro TR and MixAmp Pro has an awful lot that keeps me grinning.

The A40 TR headphones might not be the final word in musical reproduction but Rammstein through these is a beast! The industrial pounding of Sonne and Du Hast are amazing; chunky guitars and bass doing their thing whilst the keys and vocals are still clear in the mix.

I would, however, recommend you avoid the more gentle part of your music collection. I dare say that the A40 TR doesn't really know how to treat tracks such as 'Finn' from Tori Amos or Esbjorn Svensson Trio's 'Tuesday Wonderland'. The bass and upper ranges are all well and good but there does seem to be something lacking in between.

Their handling of movies was on a par with gaming, which is no real surprise to me to be honest.

MixAmp Pro tweaking

There are some handy pre-set EQ tweaks which are engaged by

Astro A40 TR Gaming Headset and Amp

MixAmp Pro tweaking

There are some handy pre-set EQ tweaks which are engaged by pressing the left-hand button beneath the main volume dial.

The Pro setting, indicated by a red light in the top left of the button, reduces bass and emphasises mids and highs.

Core mode is indicated at the top right of the button and applies no equaliser effects whatsoever. A light at the bottom right or bottom left shows that Media or Astro/LAN modes are live respectively.

These will push up the low and mid-range with the latter mode adding microphone noise cancellation for noisy environs.

Astro A40 TR and MixAmp Pro review conclusion

The Astro A40 TR headset is brilliant for its designed purpose – gaming. The thing is that it's also at the upper end of the price range.

Aimed squarely at the more serious end of the gaming community, the

Astro A40 TR is kitted out as such.

The design hasn't really changed but this just means they got it more-or-less right in the first place.

OK, it's not wireless but I don't think that's really a deal breaker. Especially when you consider the headset's fantastic build quality and performance.

Astro A40 TR and MixAmp Pro price and availability

The Astro A40 TR and MixAmp Pro TR in white (Xbox/PC/Mac) is priced at £200 on the Astro website. The black PS4 version can also be had for around the same money.

Overall score 8.1

Build quality 8/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Sound quality 8/10

Value 7.5/10



Vodafone Smart ultra 7

Remember the Vodafone Smart ultra 6 phone GadgetsNews reviewed last August? Well, they have today released the follow-up. I give you the Vodafone Smart ultra 7.

The Smart ultra 6 was very popular and even won awards so the new kid had better have its whits about it.

Can the Smart ultra 7 fill the boots of its predecessor?

Smart ultra 7 design

The ultra 7 sports a 5.5-inch full HD display and measures 152.2 x 78.12 x 8.68mm – so, 6mm shorter than the 5.5-inch iPhone 6S plus but a mill wider and thicker. It feels good in your hand though.

The IPS screen is protected by from super strong Dragontail glass (no dragons are actually harmed in this process). Gorilla glass would've been nice but money needs to be saved somewhere. The bezels are kinda chunky but, again, you have to consider the asking price of ultra 7.

The glass on the front subtly

Whereas, at the bottom, is where you'll find the microUSB charging port and the speaker grille.

The rear of the phone has a plastic, kinda carbon fiber effect panel. This is thin, but does not feel cheap. It also lends some grip to what could be an otherwise slippery handset.

There's only really anything



happening down one side of the ultra 7. Down the right hand edge is where you'll find the power button and the volume rocker. These have a really nice textured finish and look to be the same as you'll find on the Platinum 7.

The other side is unfettered by such things.

This does mean that the back has

to come off to add your SIM and

The face of the phone is home to a front facing 5MP camera and flash as well as a physical home button. The other two Google buttons, back and multitask, are hidden either side. These come alive when needed.

The chrome finish around the ultra 7's edges ensures the home button stands out on the front.

The main camera, found around the back, has a 13MP sensor and is equipped with a flash and autofocus.

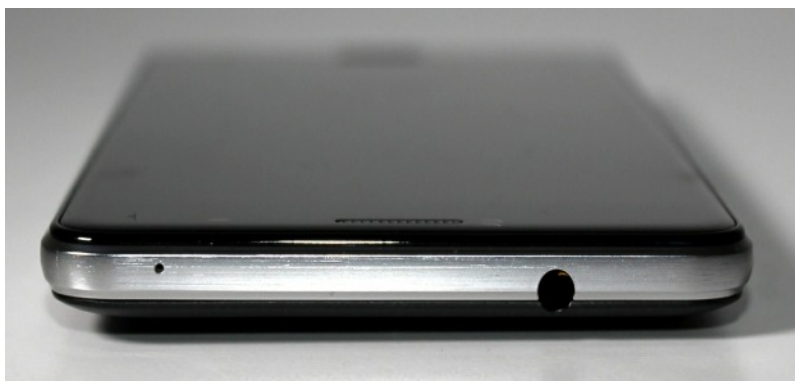
The overall fit and finish of the ultra 7 is nice and the bevelled edges of the screen makes it feel like a premium product.

Smart ultra 7 performance

Under the hood of the ultra 7 is a potent octa-core processor mated with 2GB of RAM.

You get 16GB of storage as well as Android Marshmallow straight out of the box. Things move slickly from app to app with nothing really lagging – so all is well there.

As you'd expect from a phone at this end of the market, there's no fingerprint sensor or quick-charge support.



curves towards the edges which is a sweet touch though.

The top edge of the phone accommodates the standard 3.5mm headphone socket.

microSD cards. This simply pops off and there's a little cutaway at the bottom left corner to help you get a start.

Vodafone Smart ultra 7

Battery

The battery is pretty large though, at 2,960mAh battery, and has been lasting a full day on a single charge. This has been through more than average use as I have been cramming in a review for today's release.

Display

The 1920x 1080 HD display is sharp and the colours appear natural. There is a very slight gap in between the display panel and the glass though. This doesn't cause any major issues, but there is a slight warm tint when looking at the screen at an angle.

Saying all of that, it's still a great screen and spec sheet for the price of the handset.

Smart ultra 7 software

You do get some of the carrier's apps offered to be loaded, which is par for the course now. To be honest, it's nice to have the option rather than have them sat on the phone already. These are fairly useful as a Vodafone customer though and can be accessed via the Vodafone Start app window that appears on the second page of your Home screen. I am happy to report that no other bloaty software could be found before I synced my Google account with the Smart ultra 7. In fact, I am pleasantly surprised that it's virtually identical to a plain Android experience.

Everything from the app drawer and settings menu is just you'd find it in a Nexus phone. I am sure that this is why it's so fast, fluid and responsive. This also brings the added bonus of Doze mode in Android Marshmallow so, any time that it spends in standby, doesn't consume too much of its go juice.

Smart ultra 7 camera

The 13-megapixel sensor with phase detection autofocus (PDAF) is equipped with HDR and an f/2.0 aperture.

It also shoots in full HD resolution and sits alongside a dual-tone LED flash on the back of the phone.

This is another area with the Smart ultra 7 seems to punch above its weight. In my opinion, this camera

What did surprise me was that you even get manual controls within the camera app. Handing you control of brightness, shutter speed and white balance.

If selfies are your thing then you'll be happy to see that the front-facing 5-megapixel snapper comes with a dual-LED flash. Don't be expecting great results from this though – my attempts seemed to come out a little on the fuzzy-side. Again, I have been blazing through this review over a couple of days so that might be due to operator error.

Vodafone Smart ultra 7 review conclusion

It has been a bit of a whirlwind review but I am struggling to think of a comparable smartphone that is able to stand up to the Smart ultra 7 for the price.

The screen is decent, it looks and feels good and the camera is capable.

The Cubot X17 comes close although with a smaller screen but a tenner cheaper. I would still rather choose the Smart ultra 7 as it just performs better.

Smart ultra 7 price and availability

The Vodafone Smart ultra 7 is available as of today, June 27th, for the unbelievable price of £135 direct from Vodafone.

Overall Score 8.3

Build quality 8/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Sound quality 8/10



will be more than acceptable for most users.

The shots come out pretty good in strong sun and in poor lighting. The only let down here is that the HDR setting seems to wash some of the colour out when compared with the standard shooter.

There is ample detail and great colour in the normal mode.

Netgear Nighthawk X8

If you like your router to look mean, have blue LEDs and rock a cool name, surely the Netgear Nighthawk X8 R8500 should be on your list?

The Netgear R8500 X8 looked a beast when I first met it back in February. Back then the AC5300 standard router had a curiously wavy top. It now seems that the designers have since flattened it though.

Thankfully, the more important stuff has remained just as impressive on the spec sheet – as well as the looks department. The most striking part of the Netgear Nighthawk X8 has to be those antennae that light up blue. But how does the rest of it stack up? Let's have a look.

Netgear Nighthawk X8 design

Nighthawk might well bring up images of stealth, sleekness and other Ninja-like qualities. Well, the X8 doesn't really match up with any of that; although it is mostly black.

What you get is a rectangular object with with four antennas at the back.

Also around the rear you have six Gigabit LAN ports (most routers only have four) in addition to the Gigabit WAN (or Internet) port. Two of those LAN ports can work together in a aggregation mode to create a 2Gbps connection to a wired client. These are currently employed by my NAS drive.

Joining those ports there's a power on/off switch, and a reset pinhole.



There is a USB 2.0 and USB 3.0 port along the side of the router behind an easy-to-open door, and the front boasts push-button control of Wi-Fi, LEDs, and WPS.

The router isn't inconspicuous in any shape or form. For a start, it's large. The Nighthawk X8 actually measures 12.44- x 10.39- x 2.44- inches and weighs 3.7 pounds (1.7kg).

As I mentioned before, the original one I saw had a wavy texture on top which broke up the lines as well as deterred anyone from resting a drink on it. The one I have here is flat, but does retain a wavy design for the vents.

The router is designed to stay flat on a surface but it's also wall-mountable. I quite like how the X8 looks. It's purposeful and a bit aggressive – a bit like some military hardware. In that case, I suppose Nighthawk might well be a fitting name.

Nighthawk X8 antennae

So, those antennae then. What's that all about?

Well, instead of using a 3×3 configuration and stack six antennae on the X8, Netgear goes a slightly different route. The R8500 rocks a 4×4 configuration – hiding four antennae internally, and then the four active external antennae. The latter are obviously the ones fitted with blue LEDs that signals their active state.

The active antennae contain amplifiers that help boost the signal without any crosstalk or signal loss that can sometimes come with modern PCB circuitry.

Each 5GHz radio is able to broadcast at 2.1Gbps compared to 1.3Gbps on Gen 1 devices, and the bandwidth on the 2.4GHz channel is also increased from the 600Mbps found on Gen 1 devices to 1Gbps.

Netgear Nighthawk X8

When you take both 5GHz channels at 2,100Mbps and add it to the 1000Mbps on the 2.4GHz channel, you end up with a number around 5,300Mbps, hence the AC5300 standard branding.

Like the Linksys EA7500 we've had before, The Nighthawk X8 supports MU-MIMO, which stands for Multi-User Multiple-Input, Multiple-Output. This is essentially the same technology we saw in 80211.N routers (MIMO) but with multiple channels of data at once, instead of just a single channel.

Netgear Nighthawk X8 interface

If you have ever had a Netgear router before then you'll be familiar with its friendly, uncluttered, interface. I have no real issue with it as it is clear and easy to navigate – it's just a little... uninspiring.

There isn't really a set up routine for the X8 which is a really good thing. None of that downloading of firmware and following a wizard nonsense here. It was a case of plugging in the necessary cables and then having the internet. There are things you can sort via accessing the router by going to Netgear's easy-to-use URL Routerlogin.net. I did that using my smartphone but a computer would probably be less fiddly.

Logging in to the interface requires the standard Netgear default credentials (admin/password) and then you are greeted by the browser interface. You can access the setup



wizard from anytime within the browser interface under the main advanced tab should you so wish.

The main area of the interface gives you everything you need to know about your config at a glance. Here you can see the status of your Internet connection, number of attached devices, Parental Controls status, whether or not the Guest Network is enabled, and if any storage devices are attached.

Heading over to the 'Wireless' menu, you can see the SSID for the 2.4GHz network, and further down there's the 5GHz network. I like the option to have different names and passwords for the different frequency networks. Obviously, you can set them to be the same too.

Basic and Advanced options

In the Basic tab you have six boxes in the main window which are almost, apart from Dynamic QoS, a repeat of the left hand text menu.

This is OK, as a lot of people will prefer the friendliness of a GUI whilst others like things spelled out. Here's what behind each option:

The basic interface for the "Internet" displays your IP address, DNS settings and Mac Address.

The Wireless menu lets you change SSIDs, channels, and wireless modes for each band. You can also alter security options, change passwords, and enable Smart Connect. As you can see from the screenshot above, I have Smart Connect enabled. This means that, by one set of credentials, you have access to both 5GHz networks.

The Attached Devices menu lets you see, well, attached devices. Here is what it looks like in my home when I'm here alone. Tablet, laptop, PC, phone, cameras, etc.

The Access Control is a sub-menu you get to by clicking a hyperlink at the top right of this screen. This lets you block or allow individual clients, or ban everything all at once.

You can then edit a device's name, set its priority for bandwidth in QoS and also designate a device type listing.

The Dynamic QoS menu is either on or off. However, from there you can drill down and prioritise devices in terms of bandwidth allocation.

Netgear Nighthawk X8



Parental Controls

This is an odd one. Clicking this option sends you to a page on Netgear's website. This prompts you to download an application named Netgear Genie that is basically the exact same controls you see in the web browser, except in a smaller, application-sized form. Apparently the only way to access Parental Controls are from within this application.

I've had a look around and was a little nonplussed to be honest.

Advanced options

The advanced menu gives you a bit more control for those who want it.

The home screen shows the status of all wireless networks, the internet connection, and the router itself.

Under Advanced sharing, you see connected devices and the address to access them via the local network, HTTP/S, FTP, and FTP over the internet.

Under the USB Functions you can configure the ReadyCLOUD service to access it from any connection via the mobile app as well. This is pretty

neat as if you have USB drive attached it suddenly becomes a NAS of sorts.

Netgear Nighthawk X8 performance

I have been really impressed by the R8500's performance over the last few weeks.

The X8 has taken everything I have thrown at it. Stability-wise the Wi-Fi has been rock-solid with no drop outs even when there's been multiple devices streaming and downloading at the same time. This could well be down to those clever antennas that help deliver very high signal quality.

Nighthawk X8 range

I have a powerline adapter upstairs which also clones the Wi-Fi signal – something I needed with the EA7500 as there were a couple of low signal areas up there. I now have that option disabled thanks to the R8500. The house is modern with fairly thin walls but also I can see at least 5 of my neighbour's Wi-Fi router SSIDs which could also cause interference.

Nighthawk X8 storage performance

Plugging in a portable drive into the USB 3.0 port the R8500 delivered decent speeds for sending/retrieving chunky files to it. Via a Gigabit connection, the X8's performance was fast enough for local media streaming and file sharing. What really sets the X8 apart though is its port aggregation feature which my QNAP TS-215 loves. I can drag a Blu-ray rip from my PC to the NAS in no time – that's whilst listening to FLACs being streamed to my Hi-Fi.



Netgear Nighthawk X8



but in terms of Wi-Fi bandwidth, thanks to its eight antennae design, and upcoming support for MU-MIMO it helps define the next-generation of wireless routers we'll all be using in a year or two from now.

For me, this is one of the fastest routers GadgetsNews has ever tested. It's definitely a premium

Nighthawk X8 review conclusion

Let's get the elephant in the room front and centre right now. The Nighthawk X8 is not a budget router. The R8500 costs between £380-£400 depending where you buy from.

This means that the X8 isn't for everyone – but I don't think it's pretending to be.

Do you stream HD/4K movies? Stream PC games to your Nvidia Shield tablet to play on the telly? Have Network Accessible Storage? Have a load of devices

connected at any one time? Then you might be the kind of person who would benefit from the Netgear R8500 Nighthawk X8.

There are ways in which you could get the port aggregation niceness via a router and separate switch with the function, but the X8 has it all in one box.

The R8500 is a tri-band router which means that it's able to spread its available bandwidth over three different bands (1 x 2.4GHz and 2 x 5GHz). Living in a gadgety household means that we benefit through the shared love and have noticed faster times over, say, dual-band routers.

Yes, the Netgear Nighthawk X8 R8500 might be overkill for some,

product and delivered premium performance.

Add to that the great range and throughput on the 5GHz channel, abundant ports and a complete feature set I can't help but recommend it.

If you're in the market for what's possibly the best Wi-Fi router available right now, you owe it to yourself to check out the Nighthawk X8 R8500.

Overall Score 8.8

Build quality 9/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 9/10

Performance 9/10

Value 8.5/10

ONEmicro DECT Speakers

Here's something I don't think GadgetsNews has reviewed before – DECT speakers. The ONEmicro speakers have certainly ignored the more oft trodden paths of Bluetooth and WiFi as viable options for wireless transmission – but how do they sound?

The ONEmicro speakers use Digital Enhanced Cordless Telecommunications (DECT). If that sounds familiar, then look at your landline phone – DECT is the standard used for cordless phones; and traffic lights for that matter.

As ONEmicro uses DECT it actually uses less power than Wi-Fi or Bluetooth.

The speakers also use a dedicated 1.9GHz channel with no sharing of bandwidth which should mean better sound stability than with Wi-Fi and Bluetooth.

ONEmicro design

The speakers themselves are cylindrical in shape with a diameter of 62mm and sit 52mm tall. They might be small but they're weighty – tipping the scales at 300g per speaker.

The reason for the weight is that the cabinet is constructed from 20mm of iron.

The main “metal ring” body is split with the base being a harder white plastic, and featuring the ONEaudio logo. The upper section is a creamy white with a white mesh speaker grill on the top.



The base of the speakers are finished in a white rubbery material. This prevents them from sliding about and probably helps with isolation.

In between of these sections is a clear plastic ring that allows the blue LEDs inside to show through.

On the base of the speakers you will find two buttons, one is the power and volume up, whilst the other functions as both a mode select and volume down control.

Each speaker also features a microUSB charging port.

ONEmicro set up

Along with the speakers you get an aluminium USB DECT dongle. This sports the ONEaudio logo and an opaque end cap. The dongle is very nicely made it has to be said.

The ONEmicro speakers use the dongle to communicate with the

sound source. This means that it might be a little different to how you'll usually set up your wireless speakers.

To get everything sorted is really simple though and takes seconds.

First you have to connect the USB dongle to your audio source device – laptop, PC, tablet or smartphone.

The next step is to turn on the speaker/s. To do this just press the button with the ‘plus/power on’ symbols. The speaker will then sniff out the dongle (LED indicator blinks once).

As you may have already worked out, the ‘minus/power off’ symbol turns off the unit.

Once paired/connected (LED indicator stays on), the speaker will announce “connected to dongle, I’m on the left” or “I’m on the right”. The latter part also let’s you know how to position the

ONEmicro DECT Speakers



the LED indicator will do a quick flash – so to speak.

ONEmicro connectivity

The ONEmicro speaker comes with a male to USB Female cable. This all allows you to connect the dongle to most microUSB-equipped smart devices so that you can stream music directly to the ONEmicro speaker.

Once the speaker is on, you can get a report status by pressing and holding the ‘plus/power on’ symbol.

Pressing and holding the ‘minus/power off’ symbol gives you a report on battery usage, sound profile (warm, natural or clarity), audio mode (HQ or ECO) and whether the speaker is connected to audio dongle.

When the dongle is working it will show an orange light. As I have a Nexus 6P that sports a USB Type C connector I couldn’t test it out for this review. I did manage to get it connected to my Nvidia Shield tablet, my laptop and PC tower though without issue.

Another cool feature of the ONEmicro speaker is that you can

freak people out. If you’re using a headset on your PC you can put the speakers in another room and then whisper in to the headset mic... Being DECT means that the speakers have pretty good range (50 meters outdoors and 30 meters indoors). The ONEaudio site does state that this function is more purposeful though. Apparently it makes for a mini PA system.

ONEmicro performance

Most audiophiles will get a bit sniffy around the idea of wireless audio connections. Reasons regarding channel synchronisation, time jitter and phase error between left and right channels (as well as between woofers and tweeters) are often raised. These concern both Wi-fi and Bluetooth solutions.

However, using DECT for their speakers ONEaudio have managed to get channel synchronisation to within 0.5 uS. According to the company, this is 50 times better than Wi-Fi.

Time jitter is less than 0.1ppm, which is about 10 times better than Bluetooth. But, even more impressive still, ONEaudio can

manage zero phase error between tweeter and woofer and between left speaker and right speakers.

The speakers contain a 50mm driver that delivers 5 watts of audio with an 85-19000Hz frequency response.

ONEmicro sound quality

I was amazed at just how much sound these little speakers can dish out. But it’s not just the volume that was impressive, the quality of reproduction is up there too.

For most of the review I had the speakers set to HQ and Natural – but Clarity really did add some zing to acoustic tracks.

I eased on some classical music to kick off with and the ONEmicro did a fine job. The individual instruments were placed in an immersive sound stage.

Testing the speakers with something more bass-oriented did show a slight weakness, but if bass is your thing, there is an optional sub.

ONEmicro DECT Speakers

More acoustic tunes of the singer/song writer variety sounded nice and clear with piano and guitar bristling with character.

I was taken aback as to how good video sounded through these speakers. Catching up with Game of Thrones on my tablet it was like having my

own miniature cinema. In fact, you can apparently pair up to 16 ONEmicro speakers so you could be surrounded. Well, either that or have the same music playing in every room of your house.

Overall the volume and quality of sound for speakers of this size is truly mind bowing, with the added bonus that DECT allows perfect audio phasing to create amazing soundscapes.

Battery life

Re-charging the speakers only takes around 4 hours which gives back 20 hours of play time.

Before it gets critical, the ONEmicro will let you know by the LED blinking red.

ONEmicro speakers review conclusion



I will openly admit, I never expect much from mini speakers. I always find myself making excuses because of their size. I mean, what should I expect from a pair of speakers that are smaller than a can of coke when stood on one another?

The fact is that these are some of the best wireless compact speakers GadgetsNews has had to review.

They are versatile, portable and sound great. You can get a fabulous soundstage as you can adjust them as you wish because they aren't constrained by cables.

ONEmicro price and availability

The ONEmicro speakers are available to purchase directly from

ONEaudio for just \$199.99 (£150) or \$399 with subwoofer. The ONEmicro speakers come in white, pink, apple green or sky blue.

It looks like ONEaudio have something interesting in the audiophile range coming up soon too! Looking forward to seeing and hearing the \$4k speakers that sound like 200k ones.

Overall Score 8.5

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 9/10

Sound quality 8.5/10

Value 8.5/10