

Hifi Pig

EXTRA

& GadgetyNews

AUGUST 2016

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HIFI REVIEWS

ROKSAN BLAK AMPLIFIER AND CD PLAYER
NAIM SUPERUNITI
MINUTE EL34 SE AMPLIFIER
ATC SCM19A LOUDSPEAKERS
CHARTWELL LS3/5 LOUDSPEAKERS
PROJECT VC-S RECORD CLEANING MACHINE
VERMOUTH AUDIO RHAPSODY CABLES
SOUNDCARE SUPERSPIKES
FLARE AUDIO ISOLATE & ISOLATE PRO

GADGET REVIEWS

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GEEK OUT V2 INFINITY PORTABLE DAC/AMP
VIEWSONIC VX2776-SMHD MONITOR
MIVUE 658 WI-FI DASHCAM
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PIONEER SE-MHR5 HEADPHONES

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CLASSIC ALBUM

Pink Floyd
Saucerful Of Secrets

by d pinkfloyd 1



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AIR Studios where BBC
Radio 2s Clare Teal joins the
Syd Lawrence Orchestra for
a direct to disc recording
session

BEHIND THE BRANDS
with Steve Halsall of KEF
UK

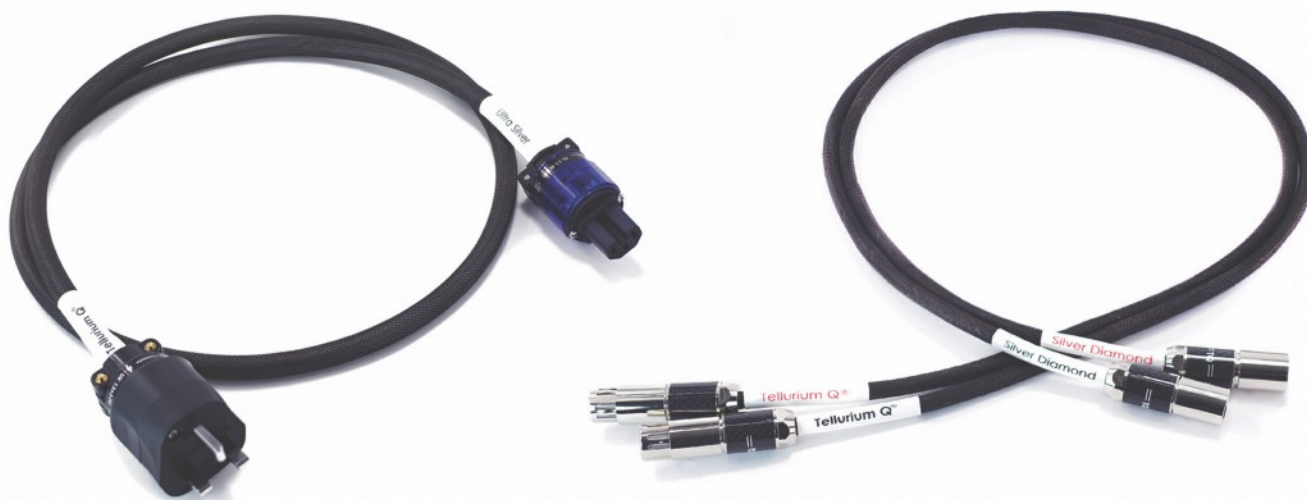


Tellurium Q®

8 products of the year and most wanted components
in just 2 years by preserving relative phase relationships in a signal



"The Stereo Times Most Wanted Components 2015 Award" (USA) - **Stereo Times**



"Tellurium Q have surpassed themselves here. It is often said that all cables colour the sound of a system to some extent, but the Silver Diamonds do it to a lesser extent than any other product I've heard so far."

- Jon Myles, *HiFi World* 2015

"But perhaps their reticence is understandable when the product sounds as good as this - after all, why let others in on the secret? Used in a variety of systems the Black Diamonds consistently revealed a wider perceived bandwidth, bigger soundstage and the ability to present transient details in an effortless fashion."

- Awards Edition, *HiFi World* 2015

"The Tellurium Q company has once again proved their products belong at the top of current cabling offerings. No matter how secretive or even mystic their approach may seem, the indisputable fact is their cables show a level of reproduction quality so far unheard of."

- Mono & Stereo, 2015

Find out why Tellurium Q® cables are achieving an audio cable grand slam from the publications below. Why not contact Tellurium Q or one of our many dealers, now.



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The Complete Audiophile Magazine

BEST PRODUCT 2015 High Fidelity.pl

HI-FI WORLD



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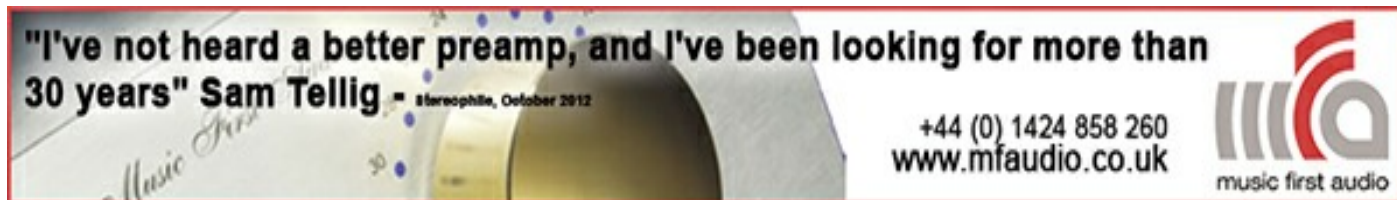
WELCOME

We have a bit of a revamp here at Hifi Pig Extra as you'll see throughout the publication. We've gone for a neater look and feel and even more content than previously. We've still got the great reviews, fab columns and music reviews but now we've added a few pages at the start of the magazine highlighting some of the hifi news from the past month.

This month we've reviewed some great gear including the new BLAK amp and CD from Roksan, the ATC SCM19A active loudspeakers, the Chartwell LS3/5 loudspeakers that bring back a classic design, a funky and inexpensive valve amplifier, the Swiss Army knife of a product the Naim SuperUniti, an amazingly affordable record cleaner from ProJect, speaker and mains cables from Vermouth Audio, the ever popular Soundcare Superspikes and, a little out of the ordinary, a pair of ear defenders from Flare Audio.

Janine Elliot focuses her Retro Bites column on an old favourite reel to reel player, Linette talks about how hifi looks and how this could affect our aural perception, I blather on about the origins of the name of Hifi Pig whilst Ian Ringstead talks about different loudspeaker designs. Hifi Pig reader Michael Howell tells us how he assesses a system's performance and John Scott pluck Pink Floyd's perennial favourite Saucerful Of Secrets off the shelf for his Classic Album. Add a smattering of album and live music reviews a whole host of gadget reviews and you've got an all-round mighty fine read.

I hope you enjoy it!



HIFI NEWS & REVIEWS

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WD RED 8TB NAS HARD DRIVE

PIONEER SE-MHR5 HEADPHONES

MUSIC

MUSIC REVIEWS

William S. Burroughs – Let Me Hang You

Lyn Stanley – Interludes

Michel Legrand – Bonjour Paris

Eyes Of Blue - Crossroads Of Time

Various - Let's Go Down And Blow Our Minds (The British Psychedelic Sounds of 1967)

The Tomcats – Running At Shadows : The Spanish Recordings 1965 – 1966

LIVE MUSIC

PiL – Edinburgh

Rickie Lee Jones – Edinburgh

CLASSIC ALBUM

This month, John Scott revisits the 1968 classic from Pink Floyd, Saucerful Of Secrets

IN THE STUDIO

Hifi Pig's Janine Elliot is invited along to world famous AIR Studios where BBC Radio 2s Clare Teal joins the Syd Lawrence Orchestra for a direct to disc recording session. Read on, it's fascinating!

INTERVIEW

Behind The Brands with Steve Halsall of KEF UK

COLUMNS

BIRDS EYE VIEW

Beauty Is In The Eye Of The Beholder. Linette Smith examines what the visual appeal of a system can do. In association with Tellurium Q.

BIRD'S EYE VIEW
ANOTHER VIEW FROM THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY LINETTE SMITH

VIEWS OF STU

Why Hifi Pig ? Why ? The truth behind the name and origins of Hifi Pig by Stuart Smith. In association with Music First Audio.

THE VIEWS OF STU!
COMMENTS, RANTS AND THE OCCASIONAL TONGUE LASH...BY STUART SMITH

FIDELITY MATTERS

There's More Than One Way To Skin A Cat. Different loudspeaker designs with Ian Ringstead.

FIDELITY MATTERS
A LIFETIME OF MUSIC AND AUDIO EXPERIENCES AND COMMENTS...BY IAN RINGSTEAD

READERS LIVES

How I Judge A Hifi System - Hifi Pig reader Michael Howell was born in England but now resides the good old USA. In this Readers' Lives article he tells us how he personally goes about evaluating a system.

READERS' LIVES
HIFI PIG READERS SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES AND THOUGHTS WITH OTHER READERS

RETRO BITES

Things are afoot in the world of reel 2 reels. Not only are there now at least 4 major companies producing reel to reel copies of famous master tapes, but very importantly after a long gap the Swiss tape recorder manufacturer Revox are bringing back the medium with a player based on the A700. By Janine Elliot. In association with Flare Audio

RETRO BITES
CLASSIC AND CISCAN AUDIO...BY JANINE ELLIOT



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MUSIC FIRST AUDIO

THE CHORD COMPANY

AUDIO HUNGARY

LIVING VOICE

Audiolab's M-ONE Announced

PRICE: £799.95

AVAILABLE: NOW

Audiolab's M-ONE compact integrated amplifier is the latest addition to the M-DAC family, harnessing the company's acclaimed DAC and amp tech in a single diminutive box. The M-ONE takes Audiolab's DAC technology, adds high performance pre/power amp circuitry and a range of connectivity options including aptX Bluetooth.

Outwardly, the M-ONE is almost identical to the M-DAC+, Audiolab's flagship DAC component. It sports the same compact aluminium case, small enough to sit unobtrusively on a desk, table or shelf, with the same central OLED display and dual rotary control scheme. But while standalone DACs like the M-DAC+ require a separate power amp to drive a pair of speakers, the M-ONE has stereo power amplification plus preamp facilities for analogue sources as well as digital. The M-ONE shares the same core D/A conversion technology, based around the peerless ES9018 Sabre32 Reference chip family from ESS Technology in this case, the recently introduced two channel ES9018 K2M, little brother to the flagship eight

channel ES9018 chip found in the M-DAC+. It sports the same patented 32-bit HyperStream® DAC architecture and Time Domain Jitter Eliminator, unique to the Sabre32 Reference family, surrounded by Audiolab's signature circuitry. The preamp section mixes minimalist design with high-quality components, ensuring a short, direct signal path to maintain sonic purity. Volume is digitally controlled in the analogue domain, outputting directly to the Class AB power amplifier, which delivers an output of 40W per channel into 8 ohms—plenty of power to drive efficient modern speakers. A low-noise linear power supply benefits all circuits from the DAC to the power amp, incorporating a shielded, precision-wound toroidal transformer and multiple power supply sections to keep crossover interference to a minimum. In addition to the main power amp stage, the M-ONE shares the same high-quality headphone amp

featured in the M-DAC and M-DAC+, ensuring it's just as capable with headphones as it is when powering speakers. There are two USB inputs – a Type B socket (ideal for PC/Mac connectivity) and a Type A socket (useful for Apple iOS device docking and playback). Both USB inputs are compatible with PCM data up to 32-bit/384kHz, as well as DSD64/128/256, and both are asynchronous—data is regulated by the precision master clock in the M-ONE's DAC section, rather than by the source device, thus helping to minimise jitter. Other digital devices can be connected via optical or coaxial cables; one input of each type is supplied, supporting PCM data up to 32-bit/192kHz. These are accompanied by two RCA-phono inputs for analogue source components, while those who enjoy the freedom of wireless connectivity can pair smartphones, tablets and computers via Bluetooth, with support for the sonically superior aptX codec.



New Burson DAC, Headamp, Preamp

PRICE: \$499

AVAILABLE: LATE AUGUST

Australian brand Burson have announced a Noir Edition of the Conductor V2+ headphone amplifier/DAC/preamplifier.

The Noir Edition will have the same spec as the classic silver one



Timestep Modified Technics 1200 GAE

PRICE: FULL PACKAGE £5,764

AVAILABLE: NOW

Devon-based Timestep has garnered quite a reputation for its fully sanctioned modifications of various iconic Technics turntables. Now, designer Dave Cawley turns his attention to the recently-launched SL-1200 GAE deck and comes up with yet more cannily-crafted advancements in the form of the new Timestep EVOke, and we very much like the look of this at Hifi Pig Towers, being the huge fans of the Techy we are.

Like its predecessor the EVO, the new EVOke takes a brand new Technics deck, makes a number of smart revisions then adds a quality tonearm and cartridge.

The original EVO was a heavily modified edition of the Technics SL-1200 deck and over the past decade it enjoyed considerable success among critics and buyers alike.

Earlier this year, Technics launched a brand new edition of the SL-1200: the SL-1200 GAE. In its native Japan the first several hundred models built sold out within minutes. Although the SL-1200 GAE has only just arrived in the UK, Cawley was already hard at work on Timestep's measurements and modifications, having been approached by Technics some months ago who invited him to do so.



The new Timestep EVOke is the result. A Timestep-Technics tour de force, its technical measurements almost equal those of the Technics SP-10 MK-III deck.

"The standard Technics SL-1200 GAE, while superb, cuts costs in two areas: the tonearm and the power supply," says Cawley. "The arm is derived from the SL-1200 MK-IV and while it's better than some, it's not what I'd call an audiophile arm."

In the EVOke, Cawley therefore replaces the tonearm with an SME IV which, he says, "with its tapered magnesium armtube and silver finish is a match made in heaven". An Audio Technica AT-33PTG/II moving coil cartridge with

gold-plated solid boron cantilever provides the perfect complement to top off the system.

As for the power supply, the EVOke replaces the SL-1200 GAE's internal switch mode with an external linear PSU designed by Timestep. "While the SL-1200 GAE's power supply is very quiet," says Cawley, "a number of reviews have mentioned a 'haze', which our modified supply removes." Constructed with supreme attention to detail, the Timestep power supply's cable exits the SL-1200 GAE via a custom-made adapter plate; the gold-plated power connector is made by Furutech while the PSU connectors are both gold-plated Neutrik. The Chord Company has announced the launch of

Dates For North West Audio Show 2017 Confirmed

The dates, yes that's right dates, for the 2017 edition of the North West Audio Show have been announced as the 24th and 25th of June 2017.

Having listened closely to feedback of both exhibitors and members of the public attending the show, organisers have decided to concentrate efforts on just the

one venue (Cranage Hall) but to hold the event over two days.

This year's show was a huge success and we're sure that 2017 will be bigger, better and even more fun than this.

You can read about this years show [here](#).





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Chord Announce Shawline With Tuned ARAY Tech

PRICE: Analogue RCA 1m: £200; additional metres £80

Digital: RCA 1m: £200; additional metres £80

Speaker: £30p/m unterminated

AVAILABLE: NOW

The Chord Company has announced the launch of its new Shawline cable range, a cable we've been playing with here at Hifi Pig for a few months now.

The Wiltshire company commented it "can now make cables that do nothing. That's nothing as in no colouration: colour comes from the music not the cables; no signal loss".



The Shawline range is a hand-built-in-the-UK cable line-up that comprises digital, analogue and loudspeaker cables, and features the company's proprietary Tuned ARAY technology at a price of £200. The same unique conductor geometry as seen in Chord's Sarum Tuned ARAY cables is now available with Shawline. The line-up sits neatly above the entry-level C-series and the affordable Clearway range.

Bryston Now Roon Ready

Bryston has announced new firmware version S2.28 for their digital music players that delivers Roon Ready capability.



With a simple firmware update, all BDP-1, BDP-1USB and BDP-2 devices become Roon Ready. BDP owners can use the Update Firmware function in Settings to update to the new version S2.28 firmware.

Cambridge Audio Offer Free Google Chromecast

For a limited time only Cambridge Audio are offering all new and existing customers of the brand's Universal Blu-ray player, the CXU, the option to easily add the functionality and convenience of Netflix, iPlayer and many more streaming services to their players via the offer of a free google Chromecast.



New Hifi Shop Opens In Liverpool

Liverpool based Do Good Audio is a wholly new retail venture, but has a link to the past. Martin, the founder of Do Good Audio, discovered his great grandfather owned one of the earliest audio shops in the country. Located in Wakefield, West Yorkshire in circa 1920 "Wireless Radio & Gramophone" sold wireless equipment, gramophones, 78s and other audio

electronics, although the eventual fate of this business is unknown.

After working for many years as a building contractor, Martin has taken a leap of faith and started what he describes as "a small online retail outlet". Together with his partner Kirstie, they ran their business as an online only retailer, but they craved the excitement of a busy shop floor, and the opportunity to



share their knowledge and passion for Hifi with like-minded folk. The Liverpool shop has allowed Do Good Audio to diversify the product range and provide a comfortable demo room.

Brands stocked include Musical Fidelity, Roksan, Marantz, Pro-Ject, Dali, Q Acoustics, Edwards Audio and many more and Martin says theirs always the offer of a good cuppa when you visit the shop.



Project

AUDIO SYSTEMS

RPM 3 Carbon



Carbon Style

The award-winning RPM 3 Carbon turntable takes the same basic styling of our iconic RPM 1 Genie design, but adds advanced audiophile technologies to deliver a premium performance from a striking device.

The minimalist aesthetic, available in three high-gloss finishes, is accented by the thick vinyl-topped platter, which spins on a high-quality inverted bearing for super-smooth rotation.

The decoupled motor is powered by a built-in generator, for a consistent performance, and sits within a guide in the plinth for optimal belt tension.

The innovative 10" S-Shape tonearm is made of aluminium and carbon fibre, for unrivalled rigidity while retaining a low mass. The arm benefits from a new magnetic anti-skate system and is supplied as standard with an Ortofon 2M Silver cartridge.

Available Now for £599.00 (UK SRP)



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Hi-Fi News Review September '15

Clones Audio Announce

PRICE: FROM HKD11,799

AVAILABLE: NOW



The Host is the first digital music server of CLones Audio and comes equipped with a high performance USB digital audio output, Ethernet port, solid-state drive for music storage and full linear power supply with the super low noise regulator modules.

New Flagship IEMs From Noble Audio

PRICE: FROM £1,350/\$1,850

AVAILABLE: NOW



Noble Audio has launched a new flagship in-ear monitor which, for the first time, features proprietary Noble drive units. The range-topping Katana IEM benefits from nine custom-made drive units for each ear and is principally manufactured in the USA. Featuring a two-part US-made precision-machined aluminium chassis, Katana is smaller and lighter than the previous Kaiser 10U flagship.

Absolute Sounds To Distribute dCS Audio Equipment In UK

Absolute Sounds say it is pleased to announce its appointment as sole UK distributor of dCS audio equipment with immediate effect.

Based near Cambridge, dCS is a world leader in digital audio replay systems for domestic and professional use. The company is widely acknowledged to have pushed the digital audio performance envelope as a result of its many proprietary technologies, most famously the dCS Ring DAC™ – a shining example of British technological ingenuity

Commenting on the appointment of Absolute Sounds, David Steven, Managing Director of dCS, said:

“dCS has been developing state-of-the-art digital audio technology for almost 30 years. Since becoming Managing Director in 2009, I have been committed to furthering our pioneering tradition with products that deliver the finest performance available today.

“One of the most crucial elements in helping our customers enjoy an unrivalled listening experience is the support offered by our global distributor and dealer network. We are constantly looking for partners who share our passion and commitment to deliver an unforgettable in-home musical experience.

“Absolute Sounds has been the primary architect of the UK’s high-end audio scene over the past four decades. We share a passion for providing wonderful sound and exceptional customer service to discerning music lovers; by working



together we can make that experience even stronger.”

Ricardo Franassovici, founder and Managing Director of Absolute Sounds, added:

“There are very few digital audio products in the world that deliver the level of performance we demand from the brands we represent. The components made by dCS unquestionably do, with the company’s proprietary technologies cementing its status as a true digital audio pioneer.

“When we auditioned the latest dCS Vivaldi 2.0 digital playback system, we were inspired by its magnificent sound quality. And when David Steven and his team of engineers shared their forward-thinking vision with us, we became excited at the prospect of our new partnership. On a personal note, having known David’s father prior to his death in 2009, I am delighted at the prospect of working with the innovative company that he helmed for many years and that his son now steers toward further success.”

Meze 11 Neo Available For Pre-order

including iOS, Android, and Windows.

PRICE: FROM £49

AVAILABLE: NOW

Romanian company Meze Headphones has announced that the new line of earbuds, the Meze

11 Neo, is now available for pre-order. The aluminium housings hold the titanium coated dynamic neodymium drivers and the earbuds are compatible with all audio playing devices,





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Avid Hifi Announce Reference Four Loudspeaker

Following the successful launch of their Reference loudspeakers at the Munich Highend show, where they won the Hifi Pig Loves You award, Avid Hifi have expanded their range further to include their new entry level Reference.

Reference Four employs the same unique cabinet construction and vibration damping techniques, sandwiching the drivers between metal plates and guiding unwanted resonances away from critical points to their internal tuned mass damping element as other loudspeakers in the range.

Manufactured from up to 15mm aero-grade aluminium plate at their Huntingdon factory in the UK, each visually fixture free hand crafted cabinet contains one 6" Bass/Mid driver and a 28mm soft dome tweeter, each retaining the titanium voice coil former for lightness and rigidity, identical to other Reference models.

The Reference Four cabinet is also reflex loaded, the bass performance being optimised and the tuned port exits below onto the defusing plate minimising room positioning issues. Dedicated optional stands are specifically designed to optimise the loudspeakers performance.

Price is expected to be less than £10 000



Mark-Levinson № 526 Dual- Monaural Preamplifier At Karma-AV

PRICE: FROM £15.000

AVAILABLE: NOW

Karma-AV have announced the availability of the Mark-Levinson № 526 dual- monaural preamplifier. The № 526 is a 12-input dual-monoaural design featuring Pure Path circuit topology, a class-A 'Pure Phono' stage, a 32-bit DAC, and a class-A Main Drive Headphone output.


The Mark Levinson № 526 offers digital decoding up to 32-bit, 192kHz from PCM and double-speed DSD.



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Iota QT Ultra-SP Turntable & Satori Tonearm

PRICE: FROM £5,695

AVAILABLE: NOW

The Iota QT Ultra-SP turntable & Satori tonearm is the flagship model in a range of four turntables all of which are designed, manufactured, and hand built here in the UK by Iota Audio Design

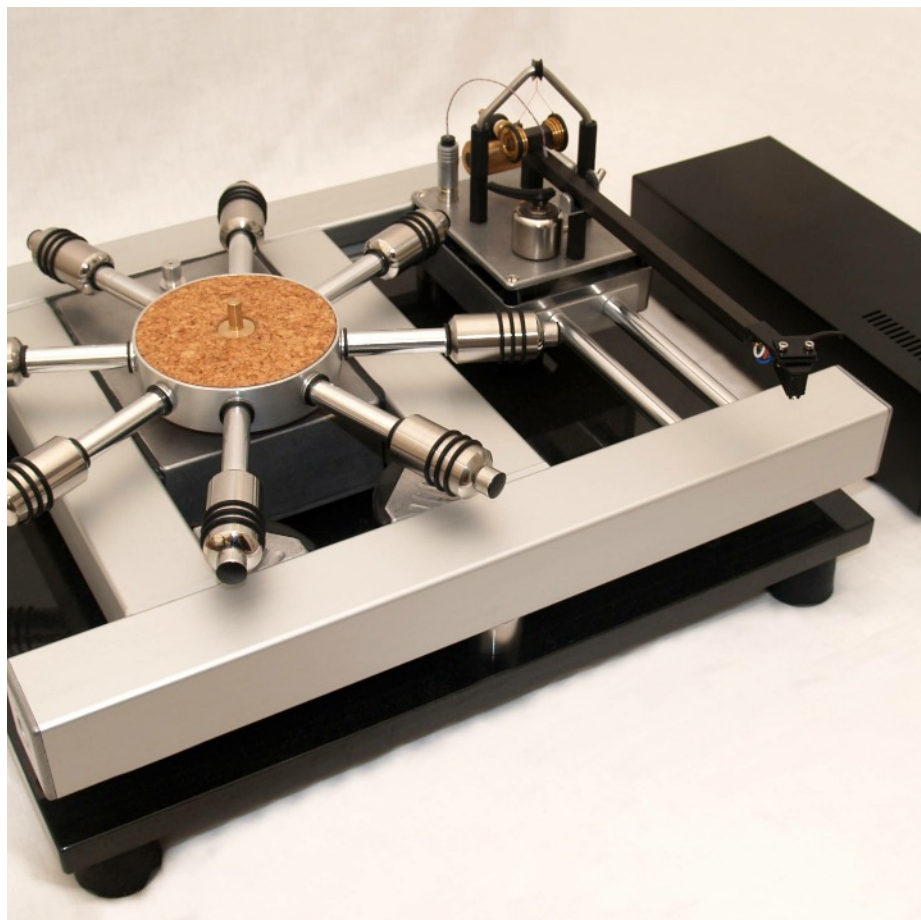
The Ultra SP turntable is built to order, and the final finish options are to each individual customers preferences, from the thickness and profile of the diamond polished granite base board, to the options for fine paint, lacquer or even gold, silver, or other plated metal finish to key components used in the manufacture of this product

The company's Ultra SP turntable in "XL specification" offers a larger chassis and baseboard designed to accommodate multiple tonearms of any size or type, but all other aspects of its specification are the same.

The Spindle Platter on which the vinyl record is placed is made up from 26 individual components, these include a combination of 316 stainless steel high mass peripheral weights, as well as aircraft grade aluminium alloy components, plus natural cork, Acetyl turned components and advanced polymer resin bonding agents.

As a standard option the tonearm is supplied with XLR balanced connections and so very long cable runs from the turntable can be used. However, The Iota tonearm can be supplied with standard type connector plugs at no additional charge for use in conventional systems

The turntable is supplied with the Ultra SP power supply which acts as a mains regenerator. Frequency stability is crystal locked to ± 30 parts per million. In fact in order to provide both 33 and 45 RPM for the two-speed model specific crystals, ground to exact specification were used. Speed change is achieved by the flick of a switch. The unit is also available for all other international mains supplies & None UK/ EU voltages.



Schiit Audio Have Introduced Modi Multibit DAC

PRICE: FROM ££5,695

AVAILABLE: NOW

Schiit Audio have introduced Modi Multibit, the most affordable DAC in the Schiit Multibit lineup. Modi Multibit, joins Bifrost Multibit, Gungnir Multibit, and Yggdrasil in the Schiit Multibit DAC line.

Modi Multibit is built on Schiit's proprietary multibit DAC architecture, featuring Schiit's unique closed-form digital filter on an Analog Devices SHARC DSP processor. For D/A conversion, it uses a medical/military grade, true multibit converter specified down to 1/2LSB linearity, the Analog Devices AD5547CRUZ.



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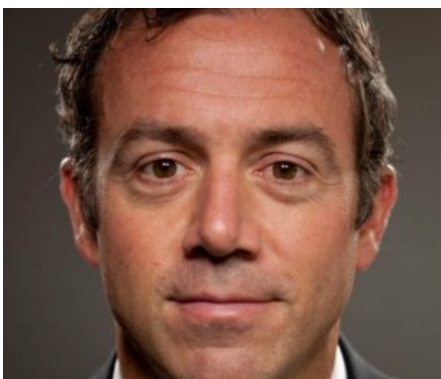
PMC Appoints Franco Lock



PMC is enhancing its operations in the Asia Pacific territory through the appointment of Franco Lock as business development manager to drive the company's expansion plans throughout this key market.

Based in Hong Kong, Lock has over 10 years' experience in the Asia Pacific region audio industry, having worked for other prestigious audio brands in business development and sales director positions. Prior to the audio industry, he has served global FMCG companies, focusing on marketing and business development.

MQA Announce Mike Jbara as CEO



MQA, the music technology company founded by Bob Stuart, announced today that it has hired music executive Mike Jbara as CEO. In addition to day-to-day leadership responsibility, Jbara will sit on the Board of MQA Ltd.

Jbara joins MQA from Warner Music Group, where he has held roles as Head of ADA Worldwide, President of WEA Corp. and most recently, EVP of Technology and Business Process.

Goldmund Launches A Support Centre In Taiwan And Restructures Its Distribution In China

Swiss company Goldmund has been present in Asia for more than three decades. Issued in 1982, at a time when most audio brands were trying to conquer the USA, this one had the clear objective of serving Asian customers first. Since then, Asia has continuously been Goldmund's preferred market, and the first one in terms of sales.

It is thus not surprising to discover that Goldmund is opening this summer a new sales and technical support center in Taiwan. Located in Taipei, the new center will provide quicker technical services to its distributors and customers. It is also a demonstration centre where the latest products of the brand can be experienced in a private home environment that includes a dedicated room with a Logos home cinema. The showroom will be at the disposal of Goldmund's professional partners and will welcome end users for private listening sessions (by appointment).



Nelson Pass' First Watt F7 Amplifier Announced

PRICE: FROM \$3000

AVAILABLE: NOW

First Watt's new F7 power amplifier (MSRP: \$3,000) is a very unique power amplifier says the company's press release that's just landed at Hifi Pig. It's a two-stage push-pull JFET (input)/MOSFET (output) topology with fewer parts than any First Watt amplifier to date. The new F7 has been created as an updated version of the earlier F5 amplifier.

Like all First Watt designs, it is a relatively low power (25W/channel into 8-ohms) simple Class A circuit, designed with an unusually low parts count.



Some Follow

others

Leedh!



The Sound of Science

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

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

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

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

Leedh - The Sound of Science

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

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

Roksan BLAK integrated amp and CD Player

By Dominic Marsh

Roksan's latest BLAK range of equipment has high-end aspirations say the UK based company. Dominic Marsh sees if this claim stands up to scrutiny when he test drives the BLAK CD and BLAK amplifier costing £2490 and £2759 respectively

ROKSAN BLAK AMPLIFIER AND CD PLAYER

Roksan is a name that should be familiar to most of you reading this, but how many of you have put any of their products on their auditioning shortlist I wonder?

Roksan really have upped their game of late with these particular products under evaluation and indeed the K3 standalone DAC I also reviewed recently for Hifi Pig. The K3 DAC simply astounded me when I first heard it and that was fresh out of the box, which then improved after some running hours had been put on it, similarly so with their K2 TR-5 speakers which have also had a major revamp and re-launched as the “S2” model. If that wasn’t surprise enough, the next on the list is this Blak pairing of amplifier and CD player.

The Blak pair here are Roksan’s new flagship products and sit at the top of their range which the company says has the highend market firmly in its sights. High ambitions then and with a claim like that you would expect a commensurate price tag to match, although the amplifier retails at £2,750.00, while the CD player retails at £2,499.00.

CONSTRUCTION

BLAK AMPLIFIER

The dimensions are a stockier offering than other amplifiers in the Roksan ranges, being somewhat taller. The review sample was finished in a dark charcoal colour, and what appears to be a “brushing” effect on the surface so it isn’t solid colour and in some lights it looks almost like wood grain when seen close up. Other colour choices are available, namely “Opium” and “Anthracite”. The chassis itself is made from pressed steel and finished in black, while the front fascia plate is made from 8mm alloy and the outer edge thickness is left as bare metal.

Front panel layout is the epitome of minimalism, with a chrome bezel quarter inch headphone socket, then a large Perspex central window which indicates (by a large LED display) which source has been selected, then a neat ring of round dot shaped LEDs which illuminate as the volume control is adjusted, so you can see even at a quick glance what the volume level is set at. The large volume control has a chrome finish which at one time was almost a hallmark of earlier Roksan products. Unless you are facing dead square on to the amplifier, then the knob itself obscures some of the LED indicator ring because the knob is quite deep. I sit to the left of my rack and didn’t advance the volume control beyond the 12 o’clock position so I was always able see how many of the ring LEDs were lit.

To the right of the Perspex panel are three chromed buttons that have a left arrowhead symbol and a right arrowhead symbol, then another button in the set which is labelled “OK”. The left and right arrowed buttons select the required source and the “OK” button is pressed to confirm the choice made. These three button also double up for setting the brightness of the LED display by holding

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ROKSAN BLAK AMPLIFIER AND CD PLAYER



down the “OK” button and using the arrowed keys to set the display brightness level.

Sources available are PHONO (Moving magnet), DAC (USB only), XLR balanced connection, BT (Bluetooth), Line level 1, 2 and 3, with the commensurate connectors found on the rear panel.

Bluetooth pairing was very simple and fuss-free. There is a DAC section on board, but only via a USB “B” type of connection to it.

OK, so where the heck is the ON/OFF power switch I hear you ask? Roksan have taken to locating them under the main chassis on the front far left just behind the front panel, which is

infinitely better than on the rear panel as some manufacturers have taken to doing (much to my own annoyance) and the benefits of that is little fingers belonging to little people (polite way of saying “children”) shouldn’t be able to switch anything on while those same mischievous little fingers do some exploring of what that big shiny knob does when you might not be looking. The rocker switch is orientated from left to right on the chassis and quite a few times when I went to switch the amp (and CD player too for that matter) off and the rising arm of the rocker switch caught the underside of my finger and switched it on/off in quick succession, even though I don’t have large hands and fingers. I perfected the technique of using my little finger for this operation and I don’t recall having this issue with any of the K3 components. If the switch orientation was changed to fore and aft on the chassis, or bigger feet fitted to raise the chassis a soupcon higher then of course that would give more space to perform this operation.

Hiding behind the front panel to the front centre of the underside is yet another rocker switch with a white rocker. This is a special switch engaged



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Diamond F-200

ROKSAN BLAK AMPLIFIER AND CD PLAYER

when listening with headphones via the front panel socket. Instead of the connecting plug contacting an internal switch within the socket that disconnects the speaker outputs, this separate rocker switch engages a dedicated headphone amplifier and shuts down the main power amplifiers, allowing those power resources saved to be focused on the headphone amplifier instead, which Roksan say enhances the listening experience via headphones.

The amplifier does get warm to the touch, but not excessively so and a hand can be comfortably rested on it without any harm. For that reason plenty of space should be allowed when housing the amplifier in a rack to maintain an adequate air flow for cooling.

BLAK CD PLAYER

Not unnaturally, the physical dimensions of the CD player matches the BLAK amplifier and it similarly has a large central LED display panel which shows basic information like track selection and playing time, both elapsed and remaining. Like the amplifier, the display is dimmable but seems to take a

short while longer to respond to the setup buttons being pressed.

The slim line CD drawer is located within the Perspex display panel and is pretty quick in operation and seek time is also very quick.

The rear panel has 3 types of digital output; AES/EBU XLR, RCA SPDIF and a TOSLINK connection.

SOUND QUALITY

The amplifier was the first to be delivered to me and the CD player followed shortly afterwards, so I did get the chance to listen to the amplifier on its own using my resident CD player as source. I was immediately struck at how effortless the amplifier sounded, even with the volume cranked right up and it never once blared at me, nor did it muddle any of the details no matter how complex the music was.

No matter what genre of music I threw at this pair, they never once became wrong footed or confused, they just played it like it is with a rock solid steady and consistent power which wasn't brutish or overpowering by any

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ROKSAN BLAK AMPLIFIER AND CD PLAYER



means. In fact, you could listen for hour after hour and never be fatigued by the sound and some might interpret that by thinking they were dull, boring and perhaps a shade lacklustre, but not so, there was more than enough excitement to keep you enthralled and before you realised it the clock had advanced way past your regular bed time.

I did try the amplifier through its Bluetooth and USB connections, more from curiosity than an innate desire to spend any amount of time listening through these portals. The Bluetooth connection to my mobile phone was quick and simple to master, the sound quality was pretty good too, much better than I expected. The USB connection was superb in sound quality, well as good as my generic USB cable would allow and one day I will invest in a boutique USB cable, having heard what they bring in sound quality gains. I tried both the single ended RCA inputs and of course the balanced XLR inputs which sounded clearer and more dynamic.

Bass timing was absolutely on the button, power and depth impressive, but with complete control and authority I have seldom heard from other amplifiers. The top end impressed in a similar vein and that was evidenced when I connected up my 'horror' speakers that show any deficiencies in that region very clearly indeed. The Mordaunt Short MS20 Pearl Edition speakers I have are armed with metal dome tweeters that are totally ruthless and unforgiving when it comes to high treble energy and it takes very little to provoke them into harshness and brightness so I have a private shudder to myself whenever I introduce them into an evaluation session. The Roksan BLAK pair formed an instant sweet partnership with the Mordaunt Shorts and it was a marriage I could easily live with full time because from top to

bottom of the audible sound palette it was a rare pleasure to listen to without any fatigue and I am none too sure if the 'horror' epithet is too well deserved for these speakers.

Next to be connected up was Roksan's own K2 TR-5 speakers which I have here on loan following my earlier review for Hifi Pig. In isolation when I carried out that review on these speakers I could get a very good performance from them when introduced into my resident system, good enough to merit a recommendation from me, but it wasn't until they were paired with the BLAK components that I realised that Roksan had not unnaturally voiced the speakers with components from their own stable. What was a "good performance" beforehand turned into something much, much more on the end of the BLAK pair. The treble was so much sweeter and better delivered, imaging acquired true depth and space, while the bass not only was more powerful it also turned bass into delineated shaping and texture with a crisply defined beginning, middle and end to each bass note.

The acid test for me is how well this pair stand up to my intimate knowledge of Fink's "Wheels Beneath My Feet" live album. The intro strikes on the ride cymbal the drummer plays on track one called "Biscuits For Breakfast" is so convincing and just so realistic, as is the pounding kick drum that features throughout the entire album. Interestingly enough, the benchmark for true high fidelity for me personally is how almost tangible and very much lifelike how the rim shots sound on the snare drum.

This CD has been recorded in different venues throughout Europe during one of Fink's many tours so the venue ambience is different for each location and the BLAK amplifier homes in on

this like a laser guided Cruise missile and missing none of it. Each audience reacts differently too and this is one of the very few amplifiers I have installed into my system that really does make you feel you are sat in amongst the audience. No "shooshing" sounds like bacon frying in a pan during the applause, each audience member is an individual, clapping, whistling, cheering and cat calling enthusiastically all around you.

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

Of course if the track "Sort of Revolution" hasn't got my toe tapping or in extreme cases joining in with the audience in clapping in time with the kick drum, then perhaps something is amiss, because it has that enthusiastic compelling energy inherent in the recording that only music Philistines can ignore. Fear not dear readers, Dominic's toe was in tapping aplenty here.

To match the amplifier's balanced input, we have a pair of XLR balanced output connections.

CONCLUSION

I think the real attraction of being a hifi reviewer is being pleasantly surprised from time to time when you get sent a component (or components), that really does kick your established preconceptions aside. I wasn't expecting this level of performance within this price bracket and Roksan have certainly upped the ante in the direction they are heading. I was told by Roksan that they spent an inordinate amount of time in voicing the BLAK amplifier and CD player pair and I believe that implicitly, because I heard for myself how well they have achieved

ROKSAN BLAK AMPLIFIER AND CD PLAYER

that. It is certainly aimed at the higher end of the market for sure and the closest amplifier I have heard is Aaron's "The Chrome One" (Also reviewed in Hifi Pig) which costs three times as much.

The BLAK CD player is a very competent great sounding component and I have no quibbles with it at all.

The only downside for me was the amplifier not having the DAC being more multi-functional beyond having just the sole USB input connection, but having said that Roksan's new K3 DAC is truly superb at only £1,250.00 and would be a wise investment that matches the BLAK pair visually and on a par sonically. Even so, for £2,795.00 you are getting one heck of an amplifier for your money with a balanced input, an inbuilt phono stage and Bluetooth connectivity too, not to mention a sound you probably might adore as much as I did, which is why I give it a hearty recommendation

A sound you probably might adore as much as I did, which is why I give it a hearty recommendation

SPECIFICATIONS

AMPLIFIER

Inputs: 3 x RCA line inputs
1 x Pair analogue XLR inputs
MM phono input
aptX Bluetooth input
USB Type B
Phono MM Input
Gain: 76.75dB @ 1kHz
Input Impedance: 47kΩ, 150pF
Line & XLR Inputs
Input Impedance: XLR: 24kΩ
RCA: 40kΩ
Gain: @1kHz, 37dB
THD (@1W): 5kHz less than 0.02%
THD(@12W): 5kHz less than 0.035%
Power Output: 8Ω: 150W
4Ω: 230W
Frequency Response: 20Hz – 80kHz @-3dB, 12W
Channel Balance: >0.3dB
Cross Talk: <-104dB
S/N Ratio: > 76dB
Dimensions: Face Plate Width: 440mm
Body Width: 400mm
Height: 140mm
Depth: 305mm

CD PLAYER

Outputs: Optical
Coaxial
XLR
RCA
Peak Output: 2.5V
THD: < 0.001%
Linearity: > 89dB
Jitter: < 135ps
S/N Ratio: > 108dB
Stop Band Rejection: > 100dB
Dimensions: Face Plate Width: 440mm
Body Width: 400mm
Height: 140mm
Depth: 305mm

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Minimalist layout on both amplifier and CD player has a sublime elegance to it.

Sound Quality: Very difficult to fault.

Value For Money: This pairing isn't cheap, but I reckon you will be in no hurry to upgrade.

Pros:

Understated design
Sublime performance
Fatigue-free, yet detailed listening
Great value

Cons:

Mains switches are fiddly where they are located
USB input only for amps DAC

Price:

CD Player £2490
Amplifier £2 759



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NAIM Superuniti All In One Audio System

By John Scott

The £3785 Naim Superuniti is an all in one box streamer, DAC and amplifier, but is it a Jack of all trades and master of none? John Scott finds out for Hifi Pig

NAIM SUPERUNITI

If I was asked to
sum up the
appearance of the
Superuniti in three
words, those words
would be: solid,
understated and
classy



After thoroughly enjoying Naim's all-in-one Mu-So player at the end of last year, I thought it would be a good idea to try out their Superuniti streamer/DAC/amplifier combo. The Mu-So is a great piece of kit but it's not quite a replacement for a "proper" hifi setup. The Superuniti, however, does set out to provide a high quality system in one box – just add your own speakers. I had heard the Superuniti doing its stuff in a couple of shop demos in the past and had been pretty impressed and so I was keen to put it through its paces at home.

UNBOXING AND APPEARANCE

The Superuniti arrived well protected in a large Naim branded box. As a previous owner of a Naim 250 power amp, I was unsurprised at the weight of the box but I was grateful that I did not have to carry it far before laying it gently on my living room floor. Accompanying the Superuniti inside the box were a power cable, wifi and Bluetooth aeras, a comprehensive instruction booklet and a remote control.

If I was asked to sum up the appearance of the Superuniti in three words, those words would be: solid, understated and classy. It is available in a Henry Ford choice of colours – any colour you like as long as it is black – and that is just as it should be.

The Superuniti weighs in at 12.8kg. Its front panel is reasonably minimalistic; the left hand side features a large, smooth volume control, mini toslink and USB inputs and a headphone output. The centre of the panel contains a Naim logo which glows green when the unit is powered up and functions as a mute button when pressed. Immediately to the right of this is a small multi-function display, featuring green text and this is flanked by an arrangement of 9 backlit – guess which colour – buttons that control input and a host of other functions. While the display panel and the buttons provide flexibility in allowing the user to control the Superuniti from the front panel, as well as from the remote control and an iOS app, I personally never found the need to use them and arguably the Superuniti could be made to look even more classy if they were omitted.

The back panel is where all the action is with more inputs and outputs than you can shake a stick at. These are listed in the specifications below so I won't go into great detail here but they include S/PDIF, RCA, and toslink. HDMI is not catered for, however. Other outputs include a preamp out so that the Superuniti can be used with a separate power amplifier and a subwoofer out. Aerial connections for FM and DAB radio are also provided. Surprisingly, there is no phono input.

The supplied remote control is Naim branded and clearly designed to be specifically used with the Superuniti. It is intuitive to use but, for me, was rendered redundant by the iOS app. As this is the same app that controls the Mu-So, I was already familiar with it but first-timers will get to grips with it quickly, and it will soon become your default means of controlling the Superuniti.

If you have read my Mu-So review you will know that it was a piece of cake to set up. Unbelievably, the Superuniti was even easier. All I had to do was connect my speakers, plug in the Ethernet cable and the power cable, switch it on and use the app to select the UPnP input and we were off and running.

THE SOUND

Before I really get into how the Superuniti sounds, indulge me, if you will, while I get all philosophical for a second or two. It is a well established truism that hifi equipment needs some time to run in before it sounds at its best – indeed the instruction manual that accompanies the Superuniti states that this is the case. When the Superuniti arrived I was informed by Naim that this particular unit had been run in and aside from a short period of settling in should be good to go. So, I left it switched on for a day and when I did listen to it, it sounded horrible. There was an unpleasant stridency in vocals and the soundstage seemed non-existent. I retired to bed with a headache and exactly the same thing happened the next night. This was worrying and was completely at odds with the sound I had experienced on the other occasions that I had heard the Superuniti do its stuff. What I need to point out now though is that at this particular point in time I had just recently recovered from a bad bout of man-flu and although I was feeling to all intents and purposes okay, I did have to wonder whether the fault lay with the Superuniti or with me. I had certainly been

NAIM SUPERUNITI

I found that my feet and fingers were constantly tapping along to the music and that I was moving in my seat

feeling run down but did I now need to be run in as well? After all, if hifi products are extremely complex then hifi reviewers – and other normal humans – are infinitely more so. I'm glad to say that within the week the Naim or I – perhaps a bit of both – had got back “on song” and the Superuniti was sounding much more like I had expected it to. So the next time your hifi isn't thrilling you the way it usually does, stop and think for a while: is it maybe you that needs a bit of a tweak?

PRAT is a term that is often used in relation to Naim equipment – it has occasionally also been used in relation to our esteemed Editor [*Oi, I do read this stuff you know – Ed.*] Where Naim is concerned, it refers to Pace, Rhythm and Timing. Throughout the time I spent with the Superuniti, I found that my feet and fingers were constantly tapping along to the music and that I was moving in my seat. If I were the kind of person who gets up and dances, I'd have got up and danced. This sense of rhythmic engagement is where the Superuniti really shines.

Some systems are edgy and exciting but result in fatigue after an hour or so of listening. The Superuniti is not one of those. Hour after hour of enjoyment is guaranteed. And it's not just about excitement: While Diana Ross' Love Hangover is like an edge of your seat white water raft ride as the tension builds relentlessly, Shelby Lynne's Just A Little Lovin' is like luxuriating in a warm bath as her vocal envelopes and caresses you. There is bags of excitement when the music calls for it but plenty of elegance and refinement as well.

I paired the Superuniti with my own Linn Keilidhs as well as a pair of Audio GE Sincerus 80 floorstanders that I had for review. Both speakers retained their individual characteristics while sharing an open, detailed soundstage. Playing Stravinsky's Rite Of Spring (Antal Dorati, Mercury Living Presence), with my eyes closed, it was easy to imagine the orchestra spread out in front of me and all of that pace, rhythm and timing was out there in full force. Whatever kind of music you throw at it, the Superuniti opens it up for rediscovery.



NAIM SUPERUNITI



CONCLUSION

Paired with a good pair of speakers, the Superuniti really does offer high-end hifi as a single box solution. The absence of a phono stage is a missed opportunity though and maybe something that Naim should reconsider given the vinyl resurgence since the unit was originally released. You won't get a lot of change out of £4000 so it's by no means a cheap option but if space, aesthetics or just personal preference dictate that a collection of boxes and wires are not for you then the Superuniti needs to be on your short list.

AT A GLANCE

Sound Quality: The trademark Naim sound is present and correct with pace and excitement to the fore.

Build Quality: Reassuringly solid and built to last – it's a Naim, and that says it all.

Value For Money: Not cheap by any means but could you put together a separate streamer, DAC and amplifier system of this quality for less? I don't think so.

Pros:

The precise, lively and dynamic sound you expect from Naim, without the hassle of individual components

Anything easier to set up would be hard to imagine

Understated good looks ooze quality

Cons:

Would be even better with a phono stage

Not a con as such but this is not one for the box swappers – if this is right for you, you might never need anything else

Price – £3,785



SPECIFICATIONS

Audio Inputs

- 1 x coaxial BNC – up to 24bits/192kHz
- 1 x coaxial RCA – up to 24bits/192kHz
- 3 x optical TOSlink – up to 24bits/96kHz
- 1 x front panel mini-TOSLINK – up to 24/96kHz

Analogue – 2 x RCA, 1 x front panel 3.5mm jack (combined optical), 1 x DIN

USB – 1 x front panel Type A socket

Input Sensitivity – 270mV at 47kΩ

Wi-Fi – (802.11 g or n at 2.4GHz), F type (plus PAL adapter)

Antenna – 802.11 b/g at 2.4GHz

Spotify Connect, Tidal ,Bluetooth (SBC, AAC and aptX Classic, aptX Low Latency)

Audio Outputs:

Digital (S/PDIF) – 1 x BNC (75Ω)

Analogue – Speaker output, preamp output (RCA)

Power Output – 80W per channel into 8Ω, 120W per channel into 4Ω (0.1% THD both channel driven)

Frequency Response – 10Hz-20kHz, +0.1/-0.5dB

Signal-to-Noise Ratio – W85dB A-WTD ref 1W 8 Ω

Output Impedance – 22Ω

Load Impedance – 10kΩ min

Sub Output – 1 x RCA pair

Headphone Output – 1 x 3.5mm jack

Remote Control – Infra Red (RC5)

Audio Formats

WAV (up to 24bit/192kHz)

AIFF (up to 24bit/192kHz)

FLAC (up to 24bit/192kHz)

DSD (single rate DSF64 & DFF64 only)

ALAC (up to 24bit/96kHz)

WMA (up to 16bit/48kHz) must be WMA 9.2

Ogg Vorbis (up to 16bit/48kHz)

M4a (CBR and VBR up to 320kbit/s)

MP3 (CBR and VBR up to 320kbit/s)

Playlists – (M3U, PLS)

Internet Radio Provider – vTuner 5* full service

Internet Radio Formats: Windows Media-formatted content,

MP3, ACC, Ogg Vorbis streams and MMS

Multiroom

Master: Will stream WAV, FLAC and AIFF (up to 24bit/48kHz),

ALAC (up to 16bit/44.1kHz), AAC and MP3 (up to 16bit/48kHz) files only as MP3 320kbps quality.

DAB Tuning Range – Band III and L Band, F Type

FM Tuning Range – 87.5 – 108MHz, F Type

User Control

Handheld remote handset included and optional Naim app for iOS and Android.

Power Supply Voltage – 100V, 115V, 230V; 50 or 60Hz

Power Consumption – 400VA (max)

Dimensions (HxWxD) – 87 x 432 x 314 mm

Weight –12.8kg



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Minute EL34 SE Valve Amplifier

By Ian Ringstead

At £885 the Minute EL-34 valve certainly looks to offer good value for money with its separate power supply. Add another £150 and you get a full compliment of cryo'd valves. Ian Ringstead takes a listen

MINUTE EL34 SE AMPLIFIER



I came to be reviewing this amp by chance as I saw it on Intimate Audio's website when I was checking out the D-108 speakers I have just reviewed. I spoke to Duncan Saul of Intimate Audio as soon as I saw it because he recently decided to import it and distribute it here in the UK.

The Minute is made by SAC of Thailand, a company I hadn't come across before so I decided to investigate. SAC make quite a range of interesting valve equipment and design and manufacture their own transformers. Other products in the range are an all valve phono stage, headphone amp, passive pre, powered pre amp and power amps. An interesting company that deserves to be heard more of over here I feel.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

The Minute as its name suggests is not a big heavy valve amp but a compact two box affair of power supply and main amp. This makes locating the amp easier on a rack and is not back breaking, unlike the recent Primaluna integrated I reviewed which was 34Kg. The power supply connects to the main amp by an umbilical cable and can be placed on a separate shelf if you so wish. The front

panel control layout is neat and simple with just a selector switch for the five line level inputs and a volume control. On the back are five sets of RCA inputs sockets, the locking power socket for the umbilical lead from the power supply and a stereo set of good quality gold plated multi way binding posts. The power supply simply has an on/off switch in red on the front and an IEC power inlet socket and the power out socket on the back. The units are in black and have a nice perspex front panel on the front making a neat styling touch.

The philosophy of SAC is that the Minute SMART Amplifier delivers a great tube amp sound with stunning dynamics, accurate rhythm and pace, incredible transparency and great ambiance, all of these being in a remarkable compact package and affordable price.

The Minute EL-34SE uses a "Super Cathode Feedback" circuit. This circuit greatly reduces harmonic distortion and is a different approach to the more conventional "Global Negative Feedback" improving sonic performance without disturbing other circuit parameters. By having the output transformer with a dedicated cathode

The Minute as its name suggests is not a big heavy valve amp but a compact two box affair of power supply and main amp

MINUTE EL34 SE AMPLIFIER



feedback coil that's connected directly to the cathode of the output tube, the feedback current path is totally isolated from the other components. The cathode feedback coil is virtually free from back EMF induced by loudspeakers or any other kind of spurious noise, phase shift from any network circuit; therefore, only a pure feedback signal is applied back to the cathode of the EL-34. This technique reduces THD by the factor of 10 times. Total Harmonic Distortion of the Minute is less than 0.3% at 1 watt RMS while most conventional SE amp like 300B will start producing more than 1~2% of THD at the same output level. SAC fine tune the circuit and output transformer so that the combination will produce a very pure signal which is absent of higher than 4th Harmonic distortion at regular listening levels.

SAC design and make the output transformer so it isn't affected by any grounding issues and is a big improvement on their previous designs. The stereo image also improves with their new output transformer since both loudspeakers are totally isolated from one another because they are floated in respect to each other (in conventional SE design the grounding path of each loudspeaker shares the same path and signal can be mutually coupled causing weak stereo separation).

Besides the use of all high quality power supply parts like an Ultrafast recovery rectifier, Electro-static shield hand wound power transformer and high quality capacitors, SAC decided to use a separate power supply unit. The concept is very simple; by keeping all noise generators away from the main amplifier unit and shield all noise within the power supply casing. This new radical design for such a small amplifier has proved to be a great way of reducing hum and noise to a very low level, and also improves the tonal characteristics and clarity of the main amplifier to exceed that of a tube rectifier.

Additionally, by separating the power supply unit from main amplifier, SAC are able to reduce the heat exchanging between the two sections. When heat is reduced, both units run cooler and can be operated for extended period of time without the need for forced air-cooling or air-conditioning. This also greatly extends the life expectancy of all elements in the amplifier.

Another improvement in the design was to make the circuit perform best at any given volume control setting. A conventional integrated amplifier will have insufficient bandwidth at low volume control setting. This problem can be easily observed as "a less detailed sound when listening at low volume levels". With the Minute EL-34, SAC use a special proprietary circuit and layout together with tube adjustment to totally eliminate this problem. At any given volume control setting, the amplifier will have the same frequency characteristic (no HF roll-off) displaying full detail and transparency.

SOUND

Duncan not only sent me the standard set of valves as supplied by SAC but also a set of cryogenically treated valves to play with and tube roll. I started with the standard valves and after 30 minutes or so warm up listened critically. I was presented with a vibrant sound stage that was certainly entertaining and with the Intimate Audio D-108 speakers there was plenty of power on tap. I also tried the amp with my Triangle Esprit EX speakers with excellent results, so unless you have inefficient speakers or

Biassing is
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no fiddly set up
is required
either

MINUTE EL34 SE AMPLIFIER

a large room then system compatibility should be fine. As SAC say in their design philosophy the amp works well at lower volume levels and the sound field doesn't collapse like a lot of amps where you have to turn the volume up again to provide some life and impetus to the sound. My recent experience with modern valve amps is that they are a different beast to those of yesteryear. Careful component choice, thoughtful circuit design and excellent output transformers all have a huge effect on the end result.

Also when I tried the cryogenically treated valve set it was instantly noticeable the improvements wrought by the superior valves. Detailing improved and the overall sound was even more satisfying, with excellent depth and top to bottom range with sparkling treble, lovely midrange and good bottom end. I would definitely consider buying the better valve option over the standard set as the cryogenically treated valves are all electronically tested and matched as sets to guarantee quality and consistent performance. Not cheap, but worth it if you like what the Minute does anyway.

This amp can rock no doubt about it, as any good modern amp should. Valve amplifiers have certainly come of age now; you only have to go to shows to see how popular they are again. The beauty of the SAC Minute is that it doesn't cost an arm and a leg unlike some more famous makes out there and offers fantastic value for money if you want to dip your toes into the valve world. It is also very practical and won't take up loads of shelf space or require a weightlifter to handle it. Biasing is automated so no fiddly set up is required either.

So there we have it, for just over a grand you can have a compact, very well made, great sounding valve amp that I am sure will give long reliable service. Don't be put off by the lowish power output rating at 10 watts RMS per channel, as valve watts in my experience always sound a lot louder than transistor watts.



AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Well made, minimalist layout and a neat simple design

Sound Quality: Excellent with all types of music.

Value for Money: Very good compared to the competition

Pros:

Compact very nicely made two box amp ideal for beginners

Great sound with the ability to tube roll with cryogenic tubes and upgrade easily

Great value for money

Cons:

Low power may put loudness addicts off or those with large rooms or inefficient speakers

Price:

£850.00 + £35.00 insurance & 48HR courier to mainland UK.

Upgrades: 2X EL34 Svetlana Winged 'C' CRcryogenic valves and 2X matching Harma 6N1P Cryogenice valves: - £150.00 inc. VAT

SPECIFICATIONS

5 selectable RCA inputs, EL34 output tube operating with Super Cathode Feedback circuit running in pure Class-A in all stages.

Output Power: 10watt/RMS per Channel

Total Harmonic Distortion: Less than 1.0% at 6 watts/RMS, less than 0.3% at 1 watt/RMS

Intermodulation Distortion: Less than 0.3% SMPTE

Frequency Response: 15-30,000Hz (-1.0dB) at 1W/RMS power, 30-30,000Hz (-1.0dB) at 10W/RMS

Cathode Feedback: Super Cathode Feedback

Circuit Gain: 42dB

Damping Factor: 3.2

Output Impedance: 2.3 ohm

Signal to Noise figure (SINAD): below -87dB, Hum less than 2.5mV

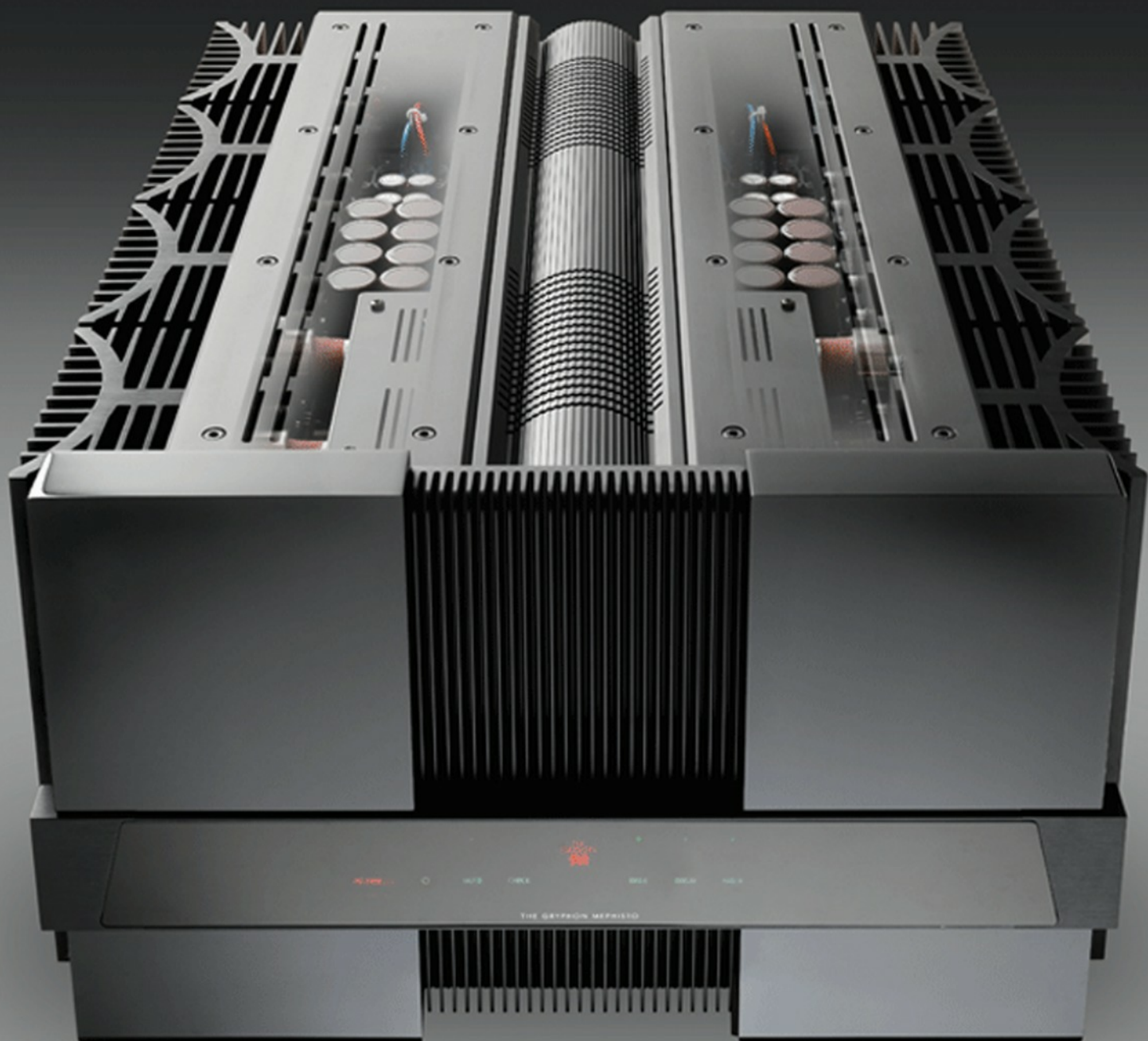
Power consumption: 100 watts

Power requirement: 220-240V at 50/60Hz (stock version), 110-120V at 50/60Hz (special order)

Power Supply Unit Dimension: 19 x 26 x 10 cm. (W x D x H) **Weight:** 4.5 kg.

Amplifier Unit Dimension : 19 x 29 x 19 cm. (W x D x H) **Weight:** 5.5 kg

THE GRYPHON



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ATC SCM19A Loudspeakers

By Dan Worth

The ATC SCM19A active loudspeakers have onboard amps and active crossovers more often seen in pro audio, but these £4990/pair speakers are designed most specifically for the home environment.

ATC SCM19A LOUDSPEAKERS

The Acoustic Transducer Company, ATC for short, is one of a handful of pro-audio companies to have crossed over successfully into the Hifi arena, winning many fans in the process. Its latest product, the SCM19A, introduced to me by ATC's Technical Sales Manager Ben Lilly at the Bristol Show in February, is here for review today.

Imagine a passive SCM19 monitor with the footprint of the SCM40 floor standing system, complete with onboard bi-amplification rated at 182W: 150W for the low frequency/midrange Super Linear (SL) driver, and 32W for ATC's wonderful SH25-76 tweeter, which, if you've read any of our previous ATC reviews, is a revelation for the brand.

Be prepared for a double trolley ride from store to car or delivery truck to listening room. The boxes that protect the 19As are large for what essentially is a 19 litre speaker. There must be at least six inches of packaging around the cabinets and a huge chunk of shock-resistant foam top and bottom. Remove the outer and inner boxes and the protective packaging and a more modest floorstander is revealed, having cabinet dimensions of (HxWxD): 980x370x344mm (spikes add 25mm to height, grill adds 34mm). Weighing in at just over 30kgs they are easily manageable when unpacked.

Also worth noting is that, according to ATC, the 19A's magnetically-fixed grills have virtually zero effect on overall sound performance. My own reference loudspeakers have fixed metal grills that similarly have no obvious effect on sound reproduction - a feature which is very important to me and I'm sure many others. Cloth grills collect dust, fade in sunlight, are a constant attraction to little paws, and their flexibility can lead to driver damage. A metal grill, especially one that can enhance design elegance such as the 19As, means there's one less thing to worry about in our busy domestic environments.

The 19A review samples are finished in ATC's trademark cherry veneer finish but there's also a black ash alternative. At the bottom of the speaker is a black fixed plinth, which requires the installation of an underside outrigger board with

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ATC SCM19A LOUDSPEAKERS

a simple two allen-screw fitting. Also supplied are M8 spikes. I opted to use Soundcare Superspikes in order to protect my granite surface and I like what they do.

ACTIVE DESIGN

Here's what ATC has to say about the electronics: 'the 19A's proprietary two-way on-board amp pack design has been revised to reduce noise and distortion (a further -10dB @ 10kHz), while achieving a lower operating temperature for improved reliability. The design includes protection circuits for both DC offset and thermal overload. Mid frequency THD is vanishingly low at 93dB/0.002%, and a very wide bandwidth of 200 kHz ensures the accurate reproduction of musical transients. ATC's Grounded Source output stage modules are fed by a newly developed two-way active crossover section featuring 2nd order modified Butterworth circuitry with phase compensation for each crossover point. The advantage of active crossovers is that their response remains unaffected by variable voice coil impedance, while the use of phase compensation enables phase coherency at the crossover points, improving the 19A's tonal balance and enhancing imaging for a pin-point stereo field. As usual system input is via balanced XLR.'

Being an active speaker the crossover is placed before the amps rather than after, allowing the amplifiers to work accurately within the frequency response designated by the design team and making for a more efficient drive of the transducers with lower distortion levels. Even though the 19A is a floor-standing system, the acoustic design remains the same as the passive 19, retaining the 2.5kHz crossover point from mid/bass driver to tweeter and the frequency range of 54Hz to 22kHz.

USING A PRO/HIFI CROSSOVER SYSTEM

Although gear with a pro heritage has not always had the greatest following in Hifi, it's been proven again and again that a product which achieves this balancing act can bring extraordinary results. For this review I've put together a system which could live in either world and is also very minimalistic and family friendly.

As a source I'm using a Mac Mini, with the ability to play music from iTunes,



ATC SCM19A LOUDSPEAKERS



I also think that the rigidity of the extended cabinet contributes to a sense of greater confidence

performance was simply stunning. Newton and his guitar did something for me I didn't think I'd feel with these ATCs. Their ultra-transparent midrange imparts a subtle fluidity to the vocal and even the softest guitar notes sound slightly liquid on the leading edges whilst retaining speed and authenticity.

All home-orientated stand-mount passive ATCs have good punch with a spritely nature, but the addition of what is effectively a veneer-lined floor stand to passive 19 cabinet adds a good deal of solidity to the lower most frequencies with beat-driven Dance and Electronica music. Of course this may be the active crossover of amp and drivers working its magic again, but I also think that the rigidity of the extended cabinet contributes to a sense of greater confidence and composure. If I owned a pair of standard 19s with the best matched stand I could test this idea objectively, but I have a pretty good memory for sound and it hasn't failed me yet - *I think...*

Hooking the ATCs up to a computer and DAC of lesser quality immediately showed in their performance, so I'd suggest treating the 19As with some good source electronics in order to bring out their awesome abilities. There is more potential for even greater performance from the 19As, but whatever front end is used, the core system is already ready and waiting to spring into action.

CONCLUSION

I believe that this system demonstrates that there are huge opportunities in mixing products from a range of manufacturers beyond the traditional Hifi brands. The sound I obtained from the Mytek/Studio Connections/ATC combination is transparent and accurate, non-fatiguing or over analytical, truthful and honest: a very engaging listen that would give some of our most highly regarded Hifi only systems some serious competition.

I am accustomed to ATC's abilities, but listening to the transformation of a speaker from a passive stand-mount design to an active version has been truly informative. Although ATC has removed the choice of amplifier and stand away from the listener in the 19As, they have also solved the problem of finding the ideal combi-

ATC SCM19A LOUDSPEAKERS

nation of driver/amp/stand with an outcome that always delivers music which is exciting and engaging.

If you're looking for a no brainer approach to high fidelity sound at a reasonable cost with great looks and build quality, and one that lowers the box count I'd strongly recommend a demo of the SCM19As. Any reasonably sized domestic space will be confidently filled by their ability to offer a bigger and finer performance than their size would suggest. ATC has a range of speakers that in my experience steps-up in audio scale but retains its revealing character. In short, and as demonstrated by the 19AT, it's simply honest and insightful.

...simply
honest and
insightful

AT A GLANCE

Sound Quality: very engaging, exciting and honest

Build Quality: strong solid build, nice veneer and amp pack integration

Value For Money: in the grand scheme of finding a great sonic match amplifier and stands, ATC take away the burden of wasting money and time with the designs synergy

Pros:

Honest and insightful sound
Incredibly transparent midrange
Confident stable soundstage
Lovely design and finish

Cons:

Low quality recordings are exposed

Price:

£4990/pair



SPECIFICATIONS

Drivers:•HF ATC 25mm dual suspension Tweeter, Mid/LF ATC 150mm SL

Matched Response:• \pm 0.5dB

Frequency Response (-6dB):•54Hz-22kHz

Dispersion:• \pm 80° Coherent Horizontal, \pm 10° Coherent Vertical

Max SPL:•108dB

Crossover Frequency:•2.5kHz

Connectors:•Male XLR

Input sensitivity:•1V

Filters:•2nd Order critically damped with phase compensation

Overload Protection:•Active FET momentary gain reduction

Fault Protection:•DC fault protection and thermal trip. Fault indication on rear panel mounted LED

Amplifier Output:•150W LF, 32W HF

Cabinet Dimensions (HxWxD):•980x370x344mm (spikes add 25mm to height, grill adds 34mm to depth)

Weight:•31kg

THEY DON'T FEEL
WHAT YOU FEEL
THEY DON'T SEE
WHAT YOU SEE
THEY DON'T HEAR
WHAT YOU HEAR
THEY DON'T HAVE
LEEMA
ACOUSTICS



NEW WEBSITE:-WWW.LEEMA-ACOUSTICS.COM
AND NOW, YOU CAN FIND US ON FACEBOOK 

We believe that

LESS IS MORE



HIGHLY
Hifi Pig
RECOMMENDED

intimateaudio

We believe that
LESS IS MORE



Chartwell LS3/5 Loudspeakers

By Janine Elliot

There are classic loudspeakers and there are classic loudspeakers. Janine Elliot takes a listen to the Chartwell LS3/5 Loudspeakers by Graham Audio costing between £1650 and £1800. The creation of a classic?

CHARTWELL LS3/5 LOUDSPEAKERS



Mention BBC LS3/5a's and my eyes light up. As a child I got excited every time I saw these or other speakers that used the infamous Kef B110 and T27 drivers, the numbers based on the size of the bass and treble drivers in millimetres. Whilst I eventually worked at the BBC itself and even bought the iconic late 70's Meridian M2 powered speakers based on two B110's and a T27, I still always wanted to buy my own LS3/5a. When Jim Rogers set up company at the top of my road in St. Albans for his JR149 rounded versions of the LS3/5a's I almost bought a pair

though, even as a teenager, could hear it wasn't as good as "the real thing", so didn't. A shame, as its clever bracing and near cylindrical shape gave it apparent enormous advantages over traditional rectangular boxes. To fill the gap I bought the well-respected, cheaper and smaller Videoton Minimax, and it was many years later that I finally got to buy a pair of original Rogers 11ohm and more importantly the 15 Ohm Chartwell's, often argued as the very best of the various companies producing them under licence from the BBC. It was the extended bass that particularly set this speaker on a

CHARTWELL LS3/5 LOUDSPEAKERS

(loudspeaker) pedestal. Now, for the first time in 38 years, the name Chartwell has been reborn in this new Graham Audio LS3/5, at £1650 for Cherry and £1800 for Rosewood, modelled on the very first version of the great speaker before the “a” was added. This is the holy trinity, Graham Audio having already brought out the bigger LS5/9 (reviewed last year) and then the very large LS5/8.

History

Now, to understand this speaker, we really need to go back in time. The story begins where studio managers at the BBC listened to music and speech. From the date I joined the Corporation in 1983 I was treated daily to BC1's, LS3/5a's, LS3/6, LS5/2, LS5/5's, LS5/8's and

many numbers in between. The LS5* full frequency series of speakers were the largest and designed for far-field, large studio and particularly for music. The LS3's were for OB (outside broadcast) situations such as in mobile van where headphones (in those days horrible Bakelite BT type phones) were impractical, but were also common for speech recording or office editing and recording areas where space was very tight and therefore “near-field” monitors needed. Just to confuse you, the LS5/12a, was the last near-field OB BBC speaker – the size of an LS3/5a. This was intended to be a monitor speaker just like all the other 5's with surprisingly good bass and treble extension, and whilst it has been successfully reborn by Harbeth, it never quite made it as a competitor to the 3/5a

musically, sounding a bit “disjointed” and painful at times. More importantly, and regrettably it was the last ever BBC-funded design before they axed the department and many of the brains. Sad days, and having already closed the BBC Radiophonic Workshop (the reason I really wanted to work at Aunty), that unforgiving mutilation of what had made the Corporation so great, was party to my decision to leave with 5000 other professionals in 2007. Sensibly or sadly, great BBC engineers have left to set up PMC, Trilogy, Leema Acoustics and numerous others, and of course long before that to set up Spendor (SPENcer Hughes and wife DORothy), Harbeth (Dudley HARwood and wife ElizaBETH), etc. For this review, the important names for the LS3/5 were BBC Research Department headed by H

This is the holy trinity, Graham Audio having already brought out the bigger LS5/9 (reviewed last year) and then the very large LS5/8



CHARTWELL LS3/5 LOUDSPEAKERS

D (Dudley) Harwood and Spencer Hughes, and a team of T Sommerville and D E Shorter, those for LS3/5a were Harwood and Hughes again with Maurice Whatton and R W Mills from the Design's department, and finally the name very much associated with this new Graham Audio speaker up for review here is Derek Hughes, whose dad was of course Spencer Hughes.

The original LS3/5, of which there were only 20 or 21 pairs produced, began their design process at the BBC from 1968 and utilised the iconic Kef B110/T27 combination that had been available since 1966. At this time the BBC were looking at studio designs working at 1/8th scale modelling and included designing speakers that could climb to 100kHz, managing to create a pair of 110mm Bextrene bass cones that could get as high as 15kHz, then adding a large number of 25mm diameter electrostatic transducers in an omnidirectional array looking like a disco mirror ball to fill the rest of the frequencies. To get those high frequencies for the test they used specially built condenser microphones and adapted tape recorders running at 750mm/sec (30ips – which is 8 times 3¾ ips) creating top-end frequency response of, wait for it, 105kHz! Mathematically dividing the target 400-105,000Hz by 8 comes out at the important broadcasting frequencies of 50-13,125Hz. During tests the findings were assembled to not only help in the designing of studios, such as Maida Vale 1, but also to create the very first LS3/5 built to pick up the important frequencies from 400Hz to 15,000Hz, though their final design actually managed better than 100Hz, something unthinkable at that time for such a small box. Early photos show the original LS3/5 design with the tweeter below the woofer; something particularly taken up by Mission many years later. Interestingly I actually prefer my own Chartwells that way round, largely to get the tweeters at the correct height! Whether they were actually intended to be that way round is speculative, with many “in the know” saying that this theory is a white elephant. There are even photos showing a small hole that has been filled in, suggesting quite a different ported design concept turned down in favour of the more “controllable” infinite baffle. The original was 9 ohm, though a Rogers advertisement in the 1970's suggested it was 8ohm and again showing the tweeter below the woofer. It also had a ‘routed edged’ wood cabinet making it look much thinner than 12mm as specified. This was probably a pre-production flier, so just how accurate it is, is for another discussion.

When even more LS3/5's were needed by the Corporation the Engineering division at Kingswood Warren in Surrey discovered that the B110 and T27 drivers had since been modified by KEF. The BBC Engineering department was therefore left to redesign the speaker to get back to the original specification, a design noted with its slight hump at around 1.5-2kHz, despite the Bextrene cone coated with a damping compound to minimise colourations. This wasn't easy; the Mk2 B110 bass unit needed to be decoupled from the baffle as it was now interacting with it, changing the frequency response characteristics. Similarly the T27 tweeter gave a more coloured sound. To control these the familiar rectangular felt pad around the tweeter was added to “focus” the sound and stop secondary waves reflected by the cabinet, since the T27 radiating surface is small and the radiator itself nearly Omni-directional. Also, it was suggested that the infamous front Tygan cover grille should remain on in playback, and in contact with the felt pads around the tweeter. The 12mm birch plywood cabinet walls were braced, Bostik sound deadening panels and foam and deadening pads all added to make the “box” acoustically inert, unlike most speakers before that.

As well as the later batches of B110/T27 drivers being different to the first lot, there were also a lot of discrepancies between each individual tweeter, meaning that the crossover had to be designed in such a way that if a tweeter needed to be replaced, the BBC engineers could do adjustments to ensure it matched another speaker. Therefore the original design used an autotransformer inductor at L3 with different tapings, so the engineer could set it to the appropriate connection to get the sound just right. The later 11 ohm version had no less than 26 elements in the crossover, doing away with the transformer-type inductors. It is estimated that the design of the LS3/5 and then the LS3/5a cost for the BBC around £100,000, which in 2016 would equate to almost £2M, enough to really annoy many licence fee payers. Unfortunately.

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CHARTWELL LS3/5 LOUDSPEAKERS

To allow conveyer-belt access to their little speaker when needed the BBC allowed the LS3/5a's to be produced by a number of UK manufacturers. This initially included four major suppliers; firstly Rogers, then Watford's KJ Leisuresound owned' Audiomaster, Chartwell, and KEF. Then Goodmans, Spendor and others that included Harbeth. Apparently also JPW and RAM had licences, the latter producing perhaps a hundred before being taken over by Goodmans. Whilst most LS3/5a's were produced by Rogers and Spendor it is generally considered that the 15ohm Chartwell are the very best, though the infamous June 2001 HiFi News listening test headed by ex HiFi News colleague

Ken Kessler and also Paul Whatton (son of Maurice) put Harbeth 11ohm versions slightly ahead, though still not as good as the original 001/002 LS3/5a lent to them for the shootout. When Chartwell went into receivership in 1978 before the 11 ohm versions of the icon were manufactured, their cabinet maker sold approximately 100 pairs of the plywood cabinets to Linn which were used to make the first batch of Kans.

Spencer Hughes, Derek's father, had designed the Bextrene cone at the BBC, as was used in the LS3/6, otherwise known as the Spendor BC1 (Bextrene Cone 1). When Dudley Harwood



CHARTWELL LS3/5 LOUDSPEAKERS

left the BBC in 1977 to start Harbeth, he took with him the discovery and patent for the application of polypropylene driver. Modern day LS3/5a's such as from Harbeth and from Sterling Audio use polypropylene. The original B110, designed (as was the T27) by Malcolm Jones, was made from Bextrene and he left KEF to start Falcon Acoustics (and Nightingale Acoustics) where the company continued manufacture of identically constructed B110's and T27's, designed all the crossovers for LS3/5a's, and even make their own 15ohm LS3/5a's – which I have to say look exactly like the original LS3/5a specification as published in 1976, though having the 25% thinner wall 9mm birch plywood cabinets.

Derek Hughes took over from his dad at Spendor, producing the S3/5, a great little monitor in its own right. When the company was taken over again he left to work with Alan Shaw who took over at Harbeth in 1987, and then helping Doug Stirling with their LS3/5A V2 (the “V2” to show that, whilst offering the same sound as the KEFs, it has drivers made by SEAS and Scan Speak). Now he is behind the Graham Audio LS3/5, the only version of the very first speaker.

My not so brief history circle is very important in this review, and left me with lots of questions about driver materials, inverting drivers and why the baffle of the new Chartwell hasn't been made to look like the original apart from positions of the screws. Luckily, the weeks I had to listen gave me lots of excitement and it all started to make sense. Ultimately the sound would be the most important argument here. Like the Stirling model, Graham Audio don't bother with the glued rear panel, rather using screwed-on front and rear panels with differing processes of keeping it all rigid and damped. Unlike the LS3/5a, this new model is designed (as with the original 3/5) to be used with the grille off, looking as smart as any 21st century mini monitors. This speaker would be wrong with the ‘a’ version's rectangular felt in place, and matt black painted baffle as with most 70's and 80's speakers would look dated.

When I initially compared the new with the old, I found my aged Chartwells to have a much brighter top, and less impressive bass (even though it was actually pretty good anyway!). At that point I realised of course the LS3/5a should have its grille on, which

immediately focused the sound and reduced that top-end shout. After correcting, the similarity between the two started to come into place. Whilst my aged speaker was more efficient (despite being the higher impedance) the sound from the new icon was definitely as I remember the BBC speaker during those late evenings of editing for Radio 3 and 4. That peak at around 1.5kHz was just as I remembered it. Only the bass on the Graham Audio model was further extended, which was as much a shock for me as the original speaker would have been for those back in the 1970's.

Graham Audio didn't need nor want to make another version of the LS3/5a, like other companies mentioned above. They wanted to go back to the model that started it all over, and create the master. Even the use of Bextrene was chosen for the bass/mid, as Derek told me, because “We felt that to use Bextrene was more authentic”. And, as well as this driver looking like the original, the sound was particularly representative of the bass-mid I knew so well. Wanting to go back to the very original speaker this meant there was also no need to try bi-wiring terminals – something which only appeared in the very last of the original LS3/5a's. What was needed was a perfectly original LS3/5 sound, and Derek is perhaps the very best person to help create this. Only the word “Chartwell” looked slightly different on my home speaker with a weird italic “w”, though this was not seen in any adverts in hifi magazines in 1977-78. Whilst Derek and the team at Graham Audio are very pleased with the end result, after immense listening from me, the conclusion from me was also in the affirmative.

SOUND

Initial listening was through my Quad 303/33 duo, which itself dates back to 1967, fitting quite appropriately with the beginnings of the LS3/5. The pairing made for a surprisingly musical performance, especially warm bass and mid, if a little tame. Bass end was surprisingly strong for the diminutive size, though top wasn't quite as clear. Only when changing for the 25W Class A Proprius monoblocks from Graham Slee, himself with a BBC background and also designing the Audionics mixing desks at Bush House, did the sound really open up and I could hear just how good these speakers were. The authoritative rhythmical bass toms that

open up proceedings in ‘The Big Band Spectacular’ with the Syd Lawrence Orchestra (produced by Mike Valentine, Chasing the Dragon) showed just how much these little speakers want to make a big sound, plus the higher brass shouts that follow, just in case the toms hadn't already got your attention, show that these are all-round speakers. Overall bass, mids and tops were all clear, detailed and enjoyable. Only the sound pressure level limited these from being powerful enough to grab my attention as much as some larger speakers will be able to do, and certainly not as good as the real thing in Air Studios, London, where it was recorded. The focused attacks at the beginning of “Begin the Beguine” were exceptionally vivid, showing just how good this speaker was for the BBC vans, offices, and smaller studios and why I feel infinite baffle speakers should today make a comeback.

Depth of soundstage was particularly enjoyable front and back as well as left and right. Having stood in the live area at Air Studios for their new album (out soon) I could tell there was a lack at the very highest frequencies, but if you want bite, tension, and a speaker that will tire you out, this isn't it. BBC speakers were designed to be accurate, but also so that you could listen to them for many hours without going off-sick the next day with a headache. I didn't want to stop listening. As a child hearing my father playing Glenn Miller I was carted off back 40 years, and didn't want to end my dream. The fun in “In the Mood” just made me smile. Each soloist, especially the saxophones that made Glen Miller sound so unique and the piano, too, was detailed and very authentic, and I never once felt that the lack of bass below 60Hz a problem. Indeed the pounding bass at 2'35” of “The Hunt of Baba-Yaga”, Pictures at an Exhibition, Mussorsky, would put to shame many speakers at double the size. Turning to jazz, “Walking on the Moon”, The Yuri Honing Trio, had power and detail that allowed each instrument to breathe amid the furor. Only in Wynton Marsalis epic New Orleans Bump did I feel the need to partner up the bigger brother, LS5/9, though this was still a good performance.

Turning to Pink Floyd Endless River “Anisina” the clarity from cymbals and guitars, strings, vocals, digital sax and synths, et al, were refreshingly clear in

CHARTWELL LS3/5 LOUDSPEAKERS

the mix with the drum skins adding enough grunt and power to make this a diminutive monitor of epic proportions. Even the thunder at the end had enough grunt to be believable. I was back at the BBC, back in the van, the cupboard and the small studio. Even heavy rock and synth managed with a relatively stiff (British) upper lip. If I had to criticise it at all it would actually be in the top end rather than the bass, finding it not giving as much detail as some modern day here-today-gone-tomorrow monitors. I might possibly have heard an original LS3/5 in my early days at the BBC, though my experience is with the LS3/5a, and this speaker brought back those memories. What Graham Audio has done is recreate the original master but at a much smaller cost than the BBC spent in making the replacement. No one really knows where all those original 3/5's ended up. I can only assume the BBC threw them out or they 'disappeared'.

Back at Aunty, it was important that soundstage and sound level didn't 'jump' in music edits or mixes, and the BBC speaker was ideal for this, showing every nook and cranny but in a warm and musical way. Top frequencies were not quite so "shouty" as my ancient thoroughbred, but much of that is due to age related changes in the drivers and crossover, and also perhaps just that the 'a' didn't get as good as the original. The thing about the LS3/5a was its modesty and musicality, despite that infamous "hump" at around 1kHz-1.5kHz, which made listening to speech so good. In terms of overall musicality and balance of sound the Graham Audio goes even better, and all the better when considering the price of £1,650.

CONCLUSION

Graham Audio didn't need to make an LS3/5a. They wanted to create the sound that began it all, and succeed they certainly have. What Graham Audio have done is join two of Hifi's iconic names in one great product, recreating the LS3/5 and bringing back that star name Chartwell. If you want warmth, musicality and detail of soundstage, and don't mind missing out on lowest bass, then I really do suggest you take a listen. And what is so important to stress here is that you also get both detail of sound and long-listenability, which are rarely combined in a single speaker, especially one so small.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Good looks and wood quality, well built.

Sound Quality: At least as good as the second generation LS3/5a. Compared with my Chartwells these have an extended bass which is hard to imagine for the size of the speaker, just as those in the 1970's would have been amazed.

Value For Money: With a price of £1,650 this is a very small price to pay for a big sound and a part of hifi history.

Pros:

Immense musicality

Exceptional bass for the size

Detail that doesn't tire you out

Detailed soundstage

Cons:

This is trying to match the original 3/5, so if you expect 30-38,000Hz you should be looking elsewhere

Input limited to 50Watts

Price:

£1650 for cherry and £1800 for Rosewood



SPECIFICATIONS

Finish: Real wood veneer

Dimensions (w/h/d): 19cm by 30cm by 17cm

Weight: 5.3kg

Frequency response: 70Hz to 20kHz, ± 3 dB

Nominal impedance: 9 Ω

Sensitivity: 83dB SPL (2.83V, 1m)

Maximum output: 95dB for a pair at 2m

Bass/midrange: 110mm Bextrene

Tweeter: 19mm Dome tweeter

Recommended amplifier power: 25 to 50 watts unclipped programme

Project VC-S Record Cleaning Machine

By Ian Ringstead

Project have a well deserved name for producing great products at great prices, but £299 for a vacuum record cleaning machine really does seem to be very good value, at least on paper. Ian Ringstead puts a few of his grimmer charity shop finds through the VC-S to find out if it sucks or not!

PROJECT VC-S RECORD CLEANING MACHINE



Project are a no nonsense company who have taken the hifi industry by storm since their humble beginnings back in the nineties with the Debut turntable and now command a major position in the budget to serious audiophile sector. The range of products now produced by them is amazing and I love the fact they champion value for money.

Just before the Bristol show it was announced that Project were bringing out a record cleaning machine which used a vacuum pump system. Now this isn't a new idea by any means but what staggered me was the price £299, yes you read it right £299. How can this be true I thought as all other machines I had seen with that technology cost a good deal more. Seeing the VC-S in action at Bristol intrigued me and I was offered the chance to review it there and then.

As we all know anyone who has been brought up with records or recently

discovered their allure can't avoid one of the formats biggest enemies, dust. We all take dust for granted in our lives and when you have to keep cleaning your system regularly if you take a pride in it, you know it's always there. What is dust made up of? Dust consists of particles in the atmosphere that come from various sources such as soil, dust lifted by weather, volcanic eruptions, and pollution. Dust in homes, offices, and other human environments contains small amounts of plant pollen, human and animal hairs, textile fibres and paper fibres, minerals from outdoor soil, human skin cells, burnt meteorite particles (Really? – Ed), and many other materials which may be found in the local environment.

You will tend to find that the vast majority of dust we encounter in our homes is probably human skin cells. We shed them constantly and are surrounded by an invisible cloud of them, so we only have ourselves to blame for dirty

records. I have tried just about every type of record cleaner over the years from the dust bug you used to put on your turntable and track your record whilst it was being played, to what I use now which is the Spin Clean wet cleaning system. I opted for the Spin Clean because it was far cheaper than the machines I would have loved to own but I couldn't justify the expense of. But now I think Project have answered my prayers and yours.

The VC-S as the title suggests is a Vacuum Cleaning System. Heinz Lichtenegger decided that this was the only viable system that would effectively clean our precious vinyl quickly and easily, but he wanted to make it affordable so he commissioned his design team to come up with a no nonsense solution. Has he succeeded? Let's see.

CONSTRUCTION AND USE

PROJECT VC-S RECORD CLEANING MACHINE

To look at the VC-S is a plain black rectangular box which houses the motor, pump and associated electronics along with a storage chamber for the dirty solution sucked off the records. On top of the unit is a motorised sub platter onto which you place your record. You then screw a top clamp onto this which just covers the record label so that it doesn't get wet and damaged. You then apply some cleaning solution to the record surface whilst switching the motor on which causes the sub platter to spin in either a clockwise direction or anticlockwise. Using the excellent brush provided spin the record once or twice in each direction with the motor rocker switch and then swing the vacuum cleaning arm over the record lower it onto the record surface and switch the pump on. After just a revolution or two the dirt is magically lifted off the record and you are left with a pristinely clean record. Repeat the process for the other side of the record and you are done. It

only takes about a minute or so to do this and once you get into a routine you find you can clean a whole batch of treasured or newly acquired charity shop vinyl in an hour or so. The great thing is the records are dry straight away so you can place them back in their anti static record sleeves or play them immediately.

What's not to like. The VC-S comes with a record brush to apply the solution and a 100ml bottle of Wash It that is diluted by a ratio of about 10:1 to 20:1 with distilled water. The solution should clean about 135 records. Of course larger bottles are available if you have a large collection. Also supplied are a spare set of the cleaning bristles that attach to the underside of the vacuum arm assembly that touches the record and aids the effective collection of the dirty solution out of the record grooves.

After just a revolution or two the dirt is magically lifted off the record and you are left with a pristinely clean record



PROJECT VC-S RECORD CLEANING MACHINE

If you collect a lot of vinyl or have a large collection already this is a no brainer

Project has an online demonstration video on how to use the VC-S and it really is easy.

CONCLUSION

I cleaned a fair few records old and new and some recently acquired ones from a charity shop that were rather dirty and they came up like new and played brilliantly.

If you collect a lot of vinyl or have a large collection already this is a no brainer product you must have. You spend a small fortune on your system and if like me your cartridge costs £650 and my collection is worth thousands, then £299 is pocket money for enhancing your listening experience and extending the longevity of your stylus considerably. Even if your system is more modest I would still recommend thinking about investing in a VC-S or similar cleaner. My Spin Clean does a good job but it is a tedious process to manually clean my records and dry them. Stroll on; in the time I have taken to prepare the Spin Clean for use I could have cleaned several records on the VC-S. This is not a criticism of the Spin Clean as for £80 it is great value, but if you are prepared to invest in an easier quicker solution then do it. If you have a group of friends who are into vinyl but like you don't have a large collection or are reluctant to spend £299 then why not all club in to buy one between you and share the benefits.

There's a saying we have which is "suck it and see". Well the VC-S certainly sucks it and you end up seeing a pristine record as if it had just been manufactured.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Not classy, but functional, very solid and well put together.

Sound Quality: When thoroughly cleaned the records tested were all like new bar any scratches or faults in the original recording.

Value for Money: £299 is a very small price to pay for such a superb easy to use cleaner. Compared to the competition it's a no brainer.

Pros:

Fantastic value

Easy to use and quick

Excellent cleaning results

An optional lid can be purchased to keep the dust at bay when not in use

Cons:

Noisy, so I suggest using in another room. Don't clean too many at a time to protect your hearing. This is not to scare anyone, just a health and safety warning as the vacuum is loud, just like most domestic vacuum cleaners are. I found doing about ten at a time was ample.

Price:

£299



Vermouth Audio Rhapsody Power and Speaker Cables

By David Robson

David Robson takes a look at Indonesian company Vermouth Audio's Rhapsody loudspeaker and mains cables costing £200 for a six foot pair for the former and £150 for a four foot cable for the latter

VERMOUTH AUDIO RHAPSODY CABLES



Rhapsody Speaker Cable

It's refreshing to know (or is that surprising to know) that after a few years out of our hobby, things have changed in the world of Hifi. In my youth Hifi was mainly Japanese, with a bit of crusty old fashioned British stuff with no whizzy lights or twiddly knobs. This in the mind of a young naive teen, who's mind had been swayed by movies and media. A few years back into the hobby and the universe of Hifi has opened up to world markets. Apart from our local European cousins we now see great products from afar as China, India and new to me, Indonesia. Vermouth Audio, hails from Bali, Indonesia. Specialising in high quality Hifi audio cables, mains cables and speakers, and I'm the lucky ducky who has been given the job of perusing and reviewing their Rhapsody range of cables.

This is a new style and type of cable to what I'm used to. First of all, let me tell you of the packaging and how it arrives. The cables are carried in a nice printed linen cloth bag, with "Vermouth, Hand Crafted in Bali", proudly emblazoned on the front, it also comes with a certificate of authenticity. This a virtual birth certificate of your new product. Having its own manufacture date, serial No. model name and who actually constructed your cable. A nice touch!

This cable and its sheathing is very thick, around 1.8cm in diameter. The blue interwoven nylon style outer sheath terminates into an anodised collar, this leading to the two 12awg black and red speaker wires, again terminating in two beautiful quality anodised banana plugs which are high grade copper with gold plating. A first for me on these plugs is that the "sprung" bit of the plug actually spins around; I'm sure this gives good contact with the 4mm banana socket of your speakers. Although initially in my mind it had more of a chance of losing contact due to the possible movement of the connectors due to external vibrations, but I have been reassured this type of banana plug locks firmly into place. These cables are weighty so any chance of this being an issue is very slim anyway, but on reflection I think I would prefer a standard style "fixed" 4mm banana. The cable feels a little stiff, but this is the first time I have encountered one of these big gauge sleeved cables. It's a bit like wielding a garden hose as it only wants to turn and move where it wants to. A bit of twisting and coiling and things are fine. The whole cable feels tough and durable.

The soundstage from the opening tracks are wide and deep enough to have Mr Knopfler's voice in its own space, with other instruments defined yet again in their own single space

VERMOUTH AUDIO RHAPSODY CABLES

The speaker cables have 257 strands in total and 12AWG Hybrid UPOCC conductor per channel. There are multi-sized & multilayer conductors in two different groups. The non-woven fabric is there for extra dampening and protection and there is something Vermouth call “air tube spacer & suspension” with an 18 mm high-flexibility design allowing easy installation. Anodized sandblasted aluminium cable stoppers, cold forged Copper with Gold Plated terminations and anodised Aluminium shell connectors complete the package.

Vermouth recommends up to 150hrs for the cable to fully break in and settle. Time to hit the CD storage shelves!

After letting the cables run for several days I’m happy to throw a bit of Dire Straits into the slot and let their debut, self-titled album spin. The soundstage from the opening tracks are wide and deep enough to have Mr Knopfler’s voice in its own space, with other instruments defined yet again in their own single space. Six Blade Knife has a good regular drum beat accompanied with nice clear bass guitar, the Rhapsody cables bringing a deep smooth moodiness out from the track. There is a slight roundedness to bass lines and drum strikes, not exactly turning snare drums into bongos but there is a slight loss of the outer definition of bass and drum notes. Vocals don’t seem to be affected by this and come across clear and well presented.

Switching to Nils Lofgren, Acoustic Live, (my new favourite record of the moment). A very well recorded album and a “must have” for those liking Joe Bonamassa etc. I’m happy at the amount of detail the Vermouth cables are picking up. Nils guitar strings having a good weight attached to each strike or pluck. Even when playing gets frantic the instruments are conveyed correctly and uncluttered. On “Little on Up” the simply started tune builds into a full on crescendo of guitar and vocal, the Rhapsody plays out the big scale with ease, albeit just once again losing out on the very extreme of the scale. The deeper tones just getting a little rounded or possibly smeared and the treble just not hitting that very crispy zing of metal strings, it doesn’t spoil the music because it’s both bottom and top in equal measure. That doesn’t make these cables a dull listen, far from it, as other details

and qualities within the soundscape keep you well entertained.

Heading to a bit of pop and Roxy Music’s Best Of. A little try out of Bryan Ferry’s vocals and classic tunes to see how these Vermouth Rhapsody speaker cables cope with some of the 70’s & 80’s dancefloor fillers of my youth! And very well they sound too. I find some of the lesser quality recording can sound very average and even painful at times, these give a good rendition of the music, neither falling into the dull muddiness or overly bright harshness that can befall some music of days gone by. The classic late night last slow dance of Avalon comes across with oodles of detail, instruments once again in their own zones, finger strikes on small bongo drums clear as a bell; the female accompanying vocals are sweet and hang up high, giving a big sense of scale. “Dance Away” sees Mr Ferry’s vocals seep beautifully from my Russell K Red 50’s, projecting feeling and emotion into the room, accompanied by the rhythmic beat and good foot tapping timing too boot!

Rhapsody Power Cable

The Vermouth Rhapsody Power Cable, looks identical in appearance to the Rhapsody Speaker cable, being of a thick tough sheathing at about 1.8cm thickness covered by a blue nylon woven outer. Like the Rhapsody speaker cable the power cable arrives packaged in a linen embossed bag, with a certificate of authentication. The thickness and construction again can be

a bit difficult to route around corners as it will only bend and move in the direction it wants to. Either end of the Power cable is a Wattgate plug. Very nice, and well-made connections – these having an IEC and a Shuko plugs. Being picky I’d have liked some sort of tape or liner where the thick cable enters the plugs themselves, as irregular gaps at this price point look a little less classy. This probably offering no sonic benefits at all, but there is a rubber sleeve midway along the cable which if positioned just into the plug, would look a tad nicer. Not that these cables look cheap by any margin, but that extra attention to detail goes a long way.

I attached the Power Cable to my Schiit Bifrost DAC. I usually use after market power cables instead of the manufacturers own, but I had replaced my own cable with the standard one a few days before to judge this power cable against a standard.

A new artist to me, Sandy Denny, was spun on the laser player first. The Rhapsody power cable immediately sounded open and clear, thus allowing Sandy’s vocals to emerge from the soundstage showing her heartfelt talents. Her rendition of “Who Knows where The Time Goes” (1973 Live BBC recording) is just so very sweet, the guitar strings timbre and weight are portrayed in a manner which allows the music to flow and not get congested or dull or interact negatively with the vocal by being too forward but accompany Sandy Denny’s singing within this fine recording. This is also very apparent on



VERMOUTH AUDIO RHAPSODY CABLES

"No End", the Vermouth power cable giving a clean presentation, to the point where it becomes a difficult task to look for criticisms as the tunefulness takes me away from my task of reviewing!

Switching CD's to something a little more soul/blues oriented. Keb' Mo's album "Just Like You". A more modern recording than Sandy Denny's, but still vocally driven.

"I'm On Your Side" has drum driving rhythms, with the occasional crash of cymbals, the timing and dynamics are well controlled, the snare drum has a full sprung sizzle and not an ill-defined slushy sound. Cymbals have a properly portrayed metallic crispness. Bass lines and drums do not stray into overblown boominess, neither do they sound weak or dull. The Rhapsody gives a very polished performance and doesn't seem to interfere with the music in any negative way. If anything the lower bass registers seem quite enhanced.

"More Than One Way Home" has a more upbeat pop sound, the pace picks up, and again the instruments are set out and are clearly defined. There are plenty of detail and layers on offer. The depth of music in the listening room has bells and percussion pinging and tingling in and around my head showing that a good 3d performance is apparently available from the Vermouth power cable. I believe you only have to lose a little detail and dynamic ability and you can lose this soundstage. The Rhapsody keeps it all there, boogying rhythms and all.

And now for something completely different! From the folk, blues and soul sounds to a bit of one of my hometown hero's, Frankie Goes To Hollywood. Probably not the last word in audiophile chic but top 80's pop.

Using the Vermouth Rhapsody's deeper punchier lower end to good effect, driving out the beat, leaving me wanting to find a good laser show and a warm beer. Classic tracks like "Relax", "Two Tribes", "Welcome To The Pleasuredome" and "War" bang out the speakers with metronomic rhythms. Little bits of details that you don't hear on lesser audio equipment are apparent and bringing a new level of appreciation to not only the bands efforts, but the Power cable too – never muddling the tunes or becoming too sibilant at the top treble reaches. "The Power Of Love"

keeps its atmospheric air, but this track does let slip into a little acidity, but that I'm sure is more down to the recording itself and not the Vermouth Power Cable.

Rhapsody Speaker and Power Cables

The inevitable conclusion of my reviews to combining both Vermouth Audio's Speaker and Power cables as a one brand bundle brings about some surprises. Playing Steely Dan's "Gaucho" CD I found percussion which before had either lost its top crisp edge or had had its upper treble reaches rounded off are now back in balance somewhat. Detail is yet again pulled from the CD and fed to the speakers with some sparkle and zest. Bass lines are easy to follow this time, with both the power and speaker cable being of the same camp and offering good synergy. On "Glamour Profession" some of the vocal content can appear, with some cables in place, to have an artificial "fizz" to some of the trailing S sounds in the vocal if the treble is too hardened or harsh but I'm glad to say this isn't the case here with this pairing. There is a definite forward presentation but not being portrayed in an overly bright or offensive high frequencies manner. Time Out Of Mind trips out of the Russel K Red 50's with the bass drum kicks and its accompanying piano in party mode, this style of forward sound could become irritating if not kept in check, happily though there is enough smooth controlled bass, being tuneful, and carrying the rest of the music along for the ride in correct perspective.

Moving onto Supertramp and It's A Hard World from their Some Things Never Change album. This track to me is a superbly recorded and produced piece, as is the whole CD. Fine detail and some production tricks making the full height, width and depth of the soundstage work hard. Add in well placed sound effects and this track really highlights if anything is lacking. Here though everything is where it should be and nothing is missing from the scene. Listening through this album it's clear that the pairing of the cables has a benefit over either in their own right. Not that either has any bad traits, just that together they shine, and feel a bit more accomplished and value for money.



AT A GLANCE

Rhapsody Speaker Cable

Pros:

Neutral sound

Hold up well to their price point

Their neat bags with certificates are a very nice touch too.

Cons:

The cables lose a tiny amount of bass detail at the lower end and just missing out on having a super crisp top end

Their size and construction may put some off, but if size matters, these are your boys as they look meaty and impressive

Rhapsody Power Cables

Pros:

A good tuneful presentation with plenty of detail and drive

A definite contender within its price point

Cons:

May stray into the "too bright" category in an already bright or harsh system

The short length of cable is a little stiff and may prove a little difficult to route in tight spaces

Combined

Sound Quality: Bringing the two cables together in the system brings the best out of them. There is an overall slightly forward presentation that may not suit those preferring a warmer presentation.

Build Quality: Well put together and with good quality connectors and plugs.

Value For Money: Both cables offer up pretty good value for money given their construction, materials used and their performance.

Pros

Together this pairing from Vermouth Audio have a real hand in hand friendship with the best attributes from both cables being allowed to express themselves

Cons

Size and stiffness of the cables

Slightly forward presentation

Price: Speaker cables: £200 for 6ft pair

Power Cables: £150 for 4ft

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Soundcare Spuperspikes

By Dan Worth

Soundcare Superpikes, coming in at around £35-£40 for a set of four have been a long time staple of the audiophile world. Dan Worth screws some into his speakers' outriggers and tells us what he thought of this inexpensive tweak.

SOUNDCARE SUPERSPIKES



The Norwegian company Soundcare has been around for many years now and well known in the Hifi community for their Superspikes. They are a spiked footer with or without threaded rods for isolating equipment racks, speakers and equipment alike. Their design incorporates a spike with an encapsulated base which allows for surface protection and the added ability to protect hard surfaces, for instance when repositioning speakers or the main rack.

The exact product for review here is the M8 threaded version which I have attached to my Ayon Seagull Ceramic loudspeakers' outriggers, which are seated on a very thick slab of granite which in turn sits on two layers of floating wooden floor and a concrete base floor.

The spikes do come as an option with M8 threaded inserts to fit into the base of loudspeakers if they do not already have the inserts available, but in my case my outriggers do so I had no need of the inserts. Also included are self adhesive felt pads to add to the bottom of the spiked enclosure for added manoeuvrability and protection.

THE SOUND

After installing, levelling and tightening the nuts to hold height position with the included wrench I went straight for my favourite music which I know inside out.

Playing Fink's 'Trouble' from the 'Wheels Turn Beneath Me' album greeted my listening experience with additional spatial awareness and clarity throughout the entire frequency range. The bassline on my speakers is already very controlled, but with the addition of the Superspikes it lifted from the floor to reveal more layers of detail and gave perceived overall height increase to the entire soundstage, unravelling what was a more condensed sound into a freer and more open musical picture.

I worked my way through this entire album with joy. The top end had more clarity and sparkle to it in a slightly sweeter way which was unexpected from the

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SOUNDCARE SUPERSPIKES

all ceramic drivers and accuracy gained a more definitive musicality and timing giving a soundstage that gained more depth as the layers were freed. The overall picture of the music retained my systems tonality and scope but it had a bit more pizzazz and razzle dazzle.

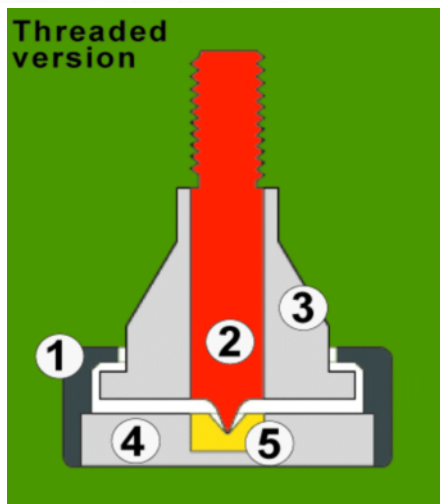
My excitement grew as I analysed the vocals which were already projecting effortlessly with great tone throughout the upper mid range and deep into the midrange. Joss Stones 'I Put A Spell On You' accompanied by Jeff Beck brought more timbre to her vocal and relieved me of a little shine which I had previously had with many other footers I had tried on my loudspeakers. Installing the Superapikes gave me the ability to really give the Ayons a truly solid stance. The rocking backwards and forwards test left the speakers absolutely level and without any ability to resonate negatively with poor ground interaction. I believe this solidity, which has never seemed firmer, has really enhanced the quality of sound and allowed the cabinets to behave as the designer envisioned.

Soundstage width as well as height had a perceivable increase in size although closer inspection revealed that the added air and space around instruments allowed for harmonics to become freer and the overall openness although on first look was greater. The general lack of distorted areas in the sound was truly key to the overall ability to retain a lot better timing and correction of the image.

I could delve deeply into many types of music from many artists, but all material had the increased attributes of the aforementioned qualities. I will touch on acoustic guitar slightly.

Newton Faulkner, Jeff Beck, Nils Lofgren and Derrin Nuendorf to name a few artists who give me huge enjoyment have a very dynamic way of playing strings. The purity of the strummed strings was more immaculate and pure in its presence, once again decaying harmonics in each acoustic setting was marvelous. Each new note overplayed the previous' decay, layered and untangled, which in turn culminated in more speed and accuracy to the sound and releasing more natural timbre into the presentation.

CONCLUSION



The Soundcare Superspikes are a real triumph in design for protecting hard surfaces and increase the overall sonic ability of any well constructed system. I often take time out between reviews to work on my system, whether it's significant box changes or small tweaks and the Superspikes are a tweak I now will not be without on my speakers.

They enhance the space around instruments and vocals by removing distortions and allow for a freer, more natural and believable soundstage which gives more excitement to material, whether a slow emotional piece of jazz or acoustic music, or give the ability to separate busier tracks in order to release the congestion of details they get my sincere seal of approval.

AT A GLANCE

Sound Quality: Allow for a freer and more natural soundstage

Build Quality: Well thought out and well engineered

Value For Money: Offer very good value for those looking for an inexpensive and effective tweak

Pros:

Price/performance

Protection for hard surfaces

Sonic characteristics allow for more space, clarity and better timing

Cons:

Absolutely none

Price :

Varies between £35-£40 per set of four



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Flare Audio Isolate and Isolate Pro

By Janine Elliot

Janine Elliot is keen to protect her hearing so she can continue listening to hifi and playing music for years to come...she think you too should be passionate about this too and so takes a “listen” to the new Flare Audio Isolate and Isolate Pro inner ear defenders priced from £23 to £46

FLARE AUDIO ISOLATE & ISOLATE PRO



Normally on HiFi Pig, we like to tell you what you can hear, particularly really good hifi components. So, to be sent a pair of earphones that aim to stop you hearing anything is a first. However, there are three reasons why this review is particularly important to everyone reading this. Firstly, we all really need to value our hearing whilst we have it. I am very lucky to still hear up to 15KHz through my ears (you also hear through your bones, and I believe top end improves if you take off your glasses!) Whilst a youngster might get up to that CD-important 20KHz, by the time you get to 70 that might well have dwindled down to just a few kilohertz. Therefore protecting your hearing throughout your whole life is so very important. Secondly, as a musician I am often placed in situations where the noise levels could well do damage, but all the inner-ear defenders I have tried have trade-offs, making their use more hassle than they are worth. Either the sound becomes muffled, with bass end still passing through, or else the sound is confusing. More than often they are just uncomfortable or impractical and I end up taking them out which is obviously not the best thing to do. What Flare has done is quite unique.

The Flare ISOLATE® looks almost identical to their miniscule R2 and R2Pro IEMs which I and other magazines have commended in reviews. The isolators are 1mm wider at 8mm diameter. And, just as there were various versions of the R2, the Isolate come in either the basic Isolate (solid aerospace aluminium that is turned on a robotic precision lathe) or the heavier Isolate PRO (Solid Titanium), with Kick-Starter prices of £23 and £46 respectively. For the technology and good solid looks, these are extremely good value. I tested them out in the home and at rehearsals with my own band, and was quite shocked at just how effective they were. The patent-pending technology inside each minute metal capsule isolates, blocks and then reflects sound, whereas all other ear protectors try to adsorb it. I have spoken before about the beauty of reflecting sound ‘out of the listening area’; at the BBC in the old B12 basement studio at Broadcasting House before it was all demolished for the new broadcasting site, rather than absorbing sounds as in most studios and anechoic chambers, the sounds were reflected away from the listening area to give a clear unfettered sound where the monitoring mattered. My listening area at home does the same, sending reflections into a dead area of the room. In the case of the Isolate and Isolate PRO this enables more direct sound to be blocked from entering the ear so that you can only hear sound via bone conduction. Sound is not able to transfer into Isolate, and therefore it forms a barrier that is an ideal ear protector. What I heard in my tests whilst rehearsing with my band of 5 musicians in an 8 foot x 12 foot room was just everything, from deepest bass guitar to ride and crash cymbals, was reduced to miniature, as if all I had done was turn the volume down to almost zero. Now, as a musician that is very important, because I need to be able to hear what I and everyone else is doing so that I know that levels are correct as well as playing the right notes at the right time! In fact, the bass seemed slightly recessed, which in normal ear defenders is the opposite. Normally it is that bass-boom that gets through to your eardrums. Even the distorted ECC83 guitar sound became clearer. To give an insight into just how good they are at blocking sound I put them on whilst watching my 20” Teac TV at low level 8 feet away. After 5 minutes of wearing and then taking them off my ears, the sound from the 1W amp appeared shockingly loud until my own in-built automatic level adjustment brought it back to what I would normally hear it at. All I was hearing whilst they were in my ears was through bone vibration, which narrowed the “stereo” that my ears would have produced, proving just how effective they are. Also, by removing so much of the excessive bass that transpires at gigs and concerts, it means you can effectively improve the sound by wearing them! I also found that

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if I didn't quite isolate the Isolates in my ears, the sound just got louder rather than changing its tone completely, meaning I was able to rehearse with one fully in and the other allowing a bit more audio in to my ear to hear a quieter instrument. Amazing! Official measurements for noise reduction from these Flare Isolates will be available from the end of July, but in my own testing I could not make out any sound from my ears, unless I turned up the hi-fi to levels that would annoy my neighbour, and worry my cat.

Ear protection is vital. You shouldn't listen to greater than 91dB (lawn mower/hover) for more than 2 hours, 94dB (London Underground train) for 1 hour, 97dB (diesel truck) for 30 minutes and 100dB (motorcycle riding) for more than 15 minutes. Bearing in mind a rock band is typically 100dB and weighing in at 115dB is the noise of a police siren, which is dangerous for more than 30 seconds, you get my point! Listening to music too loud could mean permanent tinnitus (ringing in the ears) or premature hearing loss. Indeed, most will experience some ringing in their ears after listening to loud music which

is a warning sign that they may be damaging their hearing. I firmly believe ear protectors should be provided by the NHS to everyone, since most won't be bothered to read the literature that comes with headphones and earphones, or even realise just what damage loud music can do, including the 17 year-old who drives his Vauxhall Novus Bomblastus past my house, every night! What makes these Isolates unique, then, is not only the fact that it blocks sounds so well, and I have tried numerous inner ear protectors, but that it doesn't act as a tone control! Bass was blocked which is impossible with traditional earplugs, and



FLARE AUDIO ISOLATE & ISOLATE PRO



which therefore gave for a much better, flatter EQ when listening to music. As Davies Roberts, Flare Audio CEO, told me;

“Isolate’s patent-pending technology uses the hardness of metal which is suspended into, and three quarters of the way through the soft memory foam tip, so that it breaks the conduction of sound travel. There’s been a lot of physics work on these as to break the connection of sound with such a small device and make it work”

I remember as a child listening to the sound of a train arriving at a station by listening to the weird noise coming from the rails. If there is a total gap in the rails, that noise no longer gets as far as the station (forget that the train derails!) The Isolate is like that gap, or as Davies put it, like double glazed windows, where that air gap acts as an impedance change. Traditional earplugs or defenders try to stop the sound by absorbing it rather than, in the case of the Isolate, blocking it.

Both versions of Isolate use the companies own brand of ear-tips called EARFOAMS®. They are rather like Comply tips but of a much denser

material, and obviously with no hole in the middle. They will be available in small/medium/large size and replacements available when required. Flare have had to create their own memory foam composition that is really comfortable and soft, yet at the same time blocks your ear canal and is very strong, unlike Comply tips which can “disintegrate” after much use.

The Kick Starter campaign kicks off on 13th July and will include a number of variants of colours and special high end gold and platinum plated versions. The pre-production sample I had for review was the Solid Titanium Isolate PRO, and arrived as two discrete units. As a musician used to having the two earphones attached together via a length of plastic or string (so they can be worn around your neck when not in use, and so that you don’t lose one of them!) I am informed that a similar idea will be employed in the final product, which will clip onto the recessed part of the Isolate.

I have listened to many different ear defenders over the years, from the vices you put over your ears to the cheap foams that look like Haribo sweets. Only very expensive inner ear protectors come

close in terms of comfort and isolation, but nothing has got this good. Their very small size and solid construction means that once fully inserted and with the metal end sitting against the flap of skin called the Tragus on the ear they will not dislodge, even with you jumping around or dancing (as I sometimes do when carried away with my music!) For the price they are a serious investment for your hearing, and I strongly recommend them, and maybe one day even your GP will prescribe them. Oh, and I almost forgot that third reason why this review is important, and that is if your partner snores in bed. Just a thought.



AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Very solid feel and not likely to break, even with musicians using them. Solidly built memory foam EARFOAMS®.

Sound Quality: A no-brainer if you want to protect your hearing. These isolate better than other ear protection earphones/headphones I have used. They also reduce bass to a greater extent, meaning effective blocking of sounds

Value For Money: From £23 to £46, they are not cheap, but these ones do actually work, and will last considerably longer than most ear defenders.

Pros:

Amount of noise reduction

Equal decibel reduction across whole range with greater roll-off at bass

It could mean you enjoy your hifi for longer

Cons:

That you don’t think protecting your hearing is worth the expenditure



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Behind The Brands

With Steve Halsall Of KEF



BEHIND THE BRANDS

Steve Halsall heads up KEF in the UK. Hifi Pig gets Behind the Brands with him, find out about his past and current systems and what he makes of the state of the Hifi industry

Your History

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

I was working for Wharfedale on the Pro Audio side after 10 years working in design of sound and lighting systems in the leisure industry when I got a phone call from GP. I assumed it was Celestion Pro but it was actually for the job as KEF marketing manager.

Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?

Probably the loyalty to stay where I am as long as I am challenged. Otherwise I would be somewhere else after 20 years.

Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?

Several successes but probably the KHT2005 'egg' of 2000 which was developed very quickly by a small team but which became a massive success

You and your system

What was your very first system?

Garrard GT20 deck, Amstrad amp, Celestion Hadleigh speakers at university. It was poor but all I could afford. Summer jobs changed it quickly to Rega Planar 2 (6 months waiting list) and NAD 3020 plus AR18s. This was 1979.

Tell us about your system history.

Rega replaced by Linn, many pre-amps including home made, many power amps, many speakers. Notable items AE1s and stands.

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

NAD 3020 (still have the AE1s). Still have the 4020 NAD tuner also. Wish I had owned/could have afforded at the time the A&R Cambridge A60.

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

Ben Duncan's Hi-Fi News preamp (I own one). Op amps can work well.

Tell us about your current system(s).

Linn LP 12, Electrocompaniet pre power, Marantz SACD, KEF LS50s, AE1 stands (still great today).



The state of the industry

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

Like all technology, good and bad examples exist of all types. I hear good and bad valve amps, good and bad bipolar class A

BEHIND THE BRANDS

amps, good and bad FET amps, good and bad class D amps.
All can be made to work well with a designer who knows what he is doing.

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

Separates audio will polarise into two audiences :
hobbyists/enthusiasts that understand it and richer folks who experience it via custom installers.

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

Certain cables where the tech story is incredulous and so called high end speakers where the MF cone breaks up at 1kHz meaning that the 1-3kHz region where the ear is most sensitive is really just distortion yet some magazines review products well even when they are just distorting in this region.

The way you work

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

The fact that a piano and a drum kit sound like the real thing.

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



The last one as long as a piano and a drum sound real.

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

Sadly mini monitors no sub (my room).

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

What is your favourite recording?

So many but MFSL version of 'A quarter moon in a 10 cent town' by Emmylou Harris is pretty good.

Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings.

Lyle Lovett , North Dakota (male vocal, piano, guitar) ,
Keiko Lee, Beautiful Love (female vocal, sax) , Brian
Bromberg, 3 views of a secret (bass timing and even level of
the notes from the double bass)

What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures?

Anything by Slade or Smokie from the '70s.

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

Free – Fire and Water on the Island label.

Thanks for speaking with with Hifi Pig, Steve.



Paint It Black

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

Tony Bolton

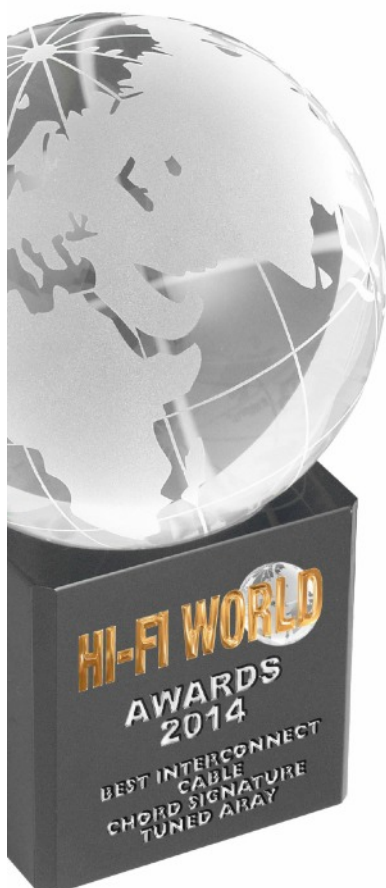


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Beauty Is In The Eye Of The Beholder

With Stuart writing extensively about taste recently, and, having touched on the subject of hifi looks and beauty myself in previous articles, I got to thinking about how a hifi's looks have a bearing on how it sounds, or how we perceive it sounds. For me, hifi systems fall into three main categories looks wise.

Discreet, Sleek and 'Home Friendly'

This is the kind of hifi that blends in seamlessly into its environment, small boxes, 'hidden' speakers (perhaps built in) and possibly even wireless. This kind of system will keep you on your toes as you hunt it down, 'where IS your hifi exactly?' but fits in with busy modern homes and lives. There may not even be a collection of music present, other than on an equally discreet hard drive. Some might say that this type of hifi has no soul, but for many audiophiles and music lovers it is a happy compromise between loving to listen to music and actually having to fit that into a normal life and home.



'I Am Hifi, Hear Me Roar'

This is the type of hifi that all non-audiophiles think audiophiles own. We are talking great big monoblock amps, lots and lots of boxes, huge, towering loudspeakers that have multiple drivers, and cables like pythons that have just swallowed a goat. There will also be collections of excessive proportions of CDs, tapes and records (plus probably some obsolete formats) these will quite probably have taken over an entire room by them selves. This kind of hifi makes

you think it is going to sound amazing because it is all so complex, 'audiophiley' and out of the grasp of mere, non-audiophile mortals.

Form Follows Function

For me, this is the best kind of hifi. There is nothing unnecessary going on, but, by the same token, there is no self consciousness about how it looks, the beauty is derived from the fact that it has to look that way to sound good, in true Bauhaus fashion. There may well be



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several boxes, but they all serve a purpose. Form follows function hifi is just as likely to feature a vintage reel 2 reel machine as it is a streamer and hard drive. The music that is played on this system will also be carefully filed so it fits with the owners lifestyle.

So when we first see a system, even before it is switched on, we are immediately and subconsciously judging how we think it is going to sound. This may be down to the type of hifi it is, for example a hardcore, dyed-in-the-wool audiophile may look at a pared back, streaming based system and have already decided that they don't like how it sounds before a note is played. The variety of speaker is a great example of this. I am a sucker for horn loudspeakers, I love how they look and sound, so when I see a system with a beautiful set of horns, I am immediately expecting great things. For other people, they may be left cold by the mere thought of horns, so their expectations of the sound are coloured in a negative way.

Brand recognition throws even more confusion into the mix. Many audiophiles are fiercely brand loyal and will be drawn to components from their favourite brand over and above any other, the badge of their 'chosen one' is the mark of reliability and quality. This works both ways though. How many times have you heard a whole brand derided as being 'too bright', 'too bass heavy' or 'too shouty'. These 'brand wars' can develop into just that, full scale war between the supporters and the haters, both sides influenced as to what they expect to hear when they listen to that particular brand. The brands themselves spend a lot of time and money creating the right image, whether they be high end or much more affordable they carefully craft the image that they want to present to the world and to you, their potential customers, but as the saying goes, 'you can't please all of the people all of the time' and there will always be some who mentally 'switch off' when ever they see and hear a particular brand. Just like sexual attraction, if there is no spark when you first set eyes on a particular component,

then chances are there may never be. If however you are head over heels in love/lust at first sight, then the 'rose coloured headphones' could be firmly in place and you hear something to be more amazing than it actually is. Whether we want to admit it or not, we are programmed to judge based on looks whether that is in our choice of partner or clothes, car or hifi. Certain things will float our collective boats and certain things will sink them faster than the Titanic. The beauty of it is though, because we all have different tastes and preferences, there is 'somebody out there for everyone' just as there will be a hifi out there for everyone.

So how do we stop what we perceive from what we see influencing what we think of how a particular system performs? Is a 'Pepsi' (other carbonated cola drinks are available) challenge the way forward? Listen without seeing first so we have no idea what the kit looks like or what brand it is before we hear it, would that avoid prejudice and influence? Or are we missing the point,? There is a lot of design effort that goes into how hifi components looks as well as how they sound, it's part of the whole package so why should we omit how the looks of a system or component influence us? Would it just be like constantly going on blind dates? And imagine if you fell in love with the sound but then saw a hifi that, to put it kindly, 'only a mother could love'. Could you live with your decision based on sonic attributes alone, or would you feel the constant need to apologise for your system's visual shortcomings?

For me personally, the visual aspect is vital, like a fine meal that has been plated to look stunning and appetising, rather than just splodged out carelessly, a system appeals to me more when it looks beautiful as well as sounds beautiful. As we eat with our eyes I guess we listen with them also. The experience should appeal to as many of our senses as it can. So long as the meal tastes delicious and the music on the hifi sounds incredible, then the visual aspect only heightens and adds to the enjoyment.

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THE VIEWS OF STU!

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



In Association With



Why Hifi Pig ? Why ? The truth behind the name and origins of Hifi Pig.

OK, we're all aware that Hifi Pig is a bit of an unusual name for a website and magazine that shares news and reviews about a good deal of high-end audio and we're forever getting questions as to why we chose such an odd-ball name for the site and how we started out in the first place. The truth of the matter goes back in the annals of time and is a tale of rave culture, high times, great music and more great music and even more high times.

And so dear reader, if you are sat comfortably, here is the real reason Hifi Pig is so called and why we launched such a site.

Cast your mind back if you will to the late 1980s and the explosion of the dance music scene. It was a time of illegal parties and needless to say yours truly was at the heart of it all having procured a set of decks, a load of early house and techno twelve inchers and a bit of a sound system. I'd also managed



to secure a spot on the local radio station and was passionate about sharing this

new found music with all and sundry and so inevitably, living by the sea, we

"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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VIEWS OF STU

were eager to put on a few beach parties. Now, Sunderland in the North East of England is no Bora Bora; it is invariably cold, wet and windy and many of our parties were enthusiastic wash outs – how we never electrocuted ourselves dealing with all those generators and cables in the rain I will never know. Of course we also attracted the attention of the local constabulary keen to make sure this acid house nonsense didn't infiltrate on their particular patch. Anyway, for the first few parties we threw we didn't have a name, we just announced the events on the radio, printed up some flyers we'd made using Letraset (this was in the days before computers of course), hired a generator and carted the amps, speakers and decks down to the seafront – "beach" really was pushing it a bit but it sounded good on the flyers!



One of the guys who helped out at the parties had a dog he called Liberty. It was a greedy beast of an animal and would eat whatever it could get its chops round and predictably got the nickname Pig. So there we are putting the flyers together, stuck for a name for the event when I looked up from my artwork, saw the dog and The Big Pig Sound System was born. The name stuck for a good few years, we expanded operations to include a vinyl only record shop selling house and techno (Mr Music Man) and we flourished attracting an enthusiastic following. The sound system was

painted a luminous pink in keeping with the pig theme!

Spring forward a few years and I'd got a proper, if stressful, job managing sales teams at Yorkshire Post newspapers and every year we would take a Zen like couple of weeks off from the rat-race to go camping with our young family in the rural idyll that is Brittany, France. Like many we'd get back to England following a blissful couple of weeks and utter the mantra "we should move to France" but never, like most folk, did anything further than dream about the possibility of packing up and shipping out. That is until the late summer of 2005. We'd had our couple of weeks in the sun and returned to a dull and dismal Blighty and straight back onto the hamster wheel that is corporate life. Both Linette's and my careers were flying high but both felt trapped in a world where we had little time to enjoy the fruits of our labours and our family. Shortly after returning to work I went on the internet, found a little restaurant for sale, copied the URL, sent it to Linette with the message "shall I buy it?" and getting an immediate response of "yes!". So I did and by December 15th we were in a new country and with a new career

And so we potted along with the restaurant. If you've never worked in the hospitality industry then let me tell you that it's not an easy career choice. The hours are long and the rewards relatively pitiful and so after three years of reasonable success we decided to close the restaurant and turn it into a house for the family...after all it was bought for cash and we owed nothing on it and if the worse came to the worse we could always pack up and ship back to our house in the UK. Around this time I'd managed to pick up a full Linn system for a pittance and the hifi bug of my teens and early twenties was once again rekindled. Never one to do things by halves the Linn system was upgraded and upgraded and I was even re-buying vinyl I'd long since got rid of. We were both working from home in sales and ticking along very nicely until one day I got a call out of the blue from a company in Bordeaux (six hours drive South of here) saying they'd heard about

Hifi Pig is serious but we don't take ourselves too seriously, who else in the audio world would choose PINK as their corporate colour?

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me and could they meet with me to discuss them offering me a job. The interview was attended (I even put a suit and tie on) and they gave me the job there and then! All this went swimmingly, the money was very good, there was a company car and I worked from home for the most part. The only fly in the ointment was to become apparent about thirteen months into my employ when, at a meeting with the head of the company, I told him what I thought of his customer service and attitude to staff. I got the boot a couple of weeks later, which was a bit of a relief if truth be known.

Yes, yes, Stu, this is all very interesting and that but what has this got to do with hifi and Hifi Pig I hear you ask. Well, here in France when excused from your employment for whatever reason you are put on a system called chomage whereby for a given period (mine was fifteen months) you are given 80% of your salary for doing nothing. I'd turn up at the equivalent of the job centre only to be told I shouldn't take a position that paid less than what I was getting in the UK – a joke given the state of the jobs market in these parts! So fourteen months pass, I'm listening to tunes all day, playing with hifi but in the main getting right royally bored out of my tiny little mind and so I thought I'd start writing a little blog. But what name could I use and what could I write about? I'd been asked to write for a worldwide expat' site about my experiences of being vegetarian in a foreign land, but the obvious choice, thinking back to my misspent youth, was of course audio, music and so Hifi Pig was born...what else? After all, this blog was only for my amusement and to keep me from going nuttier than a fruit cake through boredom. However, Hifi Pig was attracting readers and so a proper site was built and hosting and domain names bought. I remember in the first few weeks having Google



analytics set up and getting ever so excited should more than a couple of people be on the site at any one time. We grew and we grew and we're still growing and it's a bit late to change the name to anything sensible now.

We've toyed with the idea of changing the name to something a bit more formal and bit more level-headed and corporate, but you know what, I love the name. It reminds me of a time gone by and the fact that I have always felt destined to do something in my working life that is allied to music. Hifi Pig is serious but we don't take ourselves too seriously, who else in the audio world would choose PINK as their corporate colour? But what other colour could we have taken up? Who else would have "snoofling out what's hot in hifi" as a slogan? Actually we got a good deal of flack for that catchphrase from some of the tired (read boring) old men of hifi who seem intent on sucking the joy and pleasure from the hobby.

And so there you have it. It's perhaps not the most interesting story in the world but it's how it happened. Yes we could put a spin on it and what not and get all clever and corporate but that's just not the way Hifi Pig is. We are what we are and, for whatever reason, we seem to have struck a chord in the hifi world. We're growing, we're evolving and we're getting up the snouts of a good few of the aforementioned old guard and long may we continue to do so.

The future's pink!

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There's More Than One Way To Skin A Cat

Now before all you cat lovers and anti-vivisectionists try to lynch me, let me explain. Loudspeaker design has fascinated me for almost as long as I have been on this planet (60 years if you really want to know!!) and from my earliest days in retail I spent a lot of time not only listening to many designs but repairing them too.

Of all the components in a hifi system, loudspeakers have arguably evolved and shown more diversity than any other piece of electronics. For many people loudspeakers were considered the most important component in a system and were what influenced the sound so much. Now it is accepted all the components in the system have an influence on the fidelity of the end result, but speakers still have a large influence both visually as well as sonically.

That's why my title is so apt; I marvel at the way designers come up with so many designs to try and achieve the impossible – perfect sound. My experience in the last couple of years has cemented my admiration for designers both old and new. Reviewing for Hifi Pig has brought me into close contact with a lot of talented, committed and passionate people.

Horn Loudspeakers

The oldest form of loudspeaker design dates back to the 17th century with the advent of the megaphone. How horns manage to amplify sounds without any additional power is a miracle of basic physics.

The fact is, most drivers of sound do a poor job of converting the mechanical energy in the surrounding air into acoustical energy. Attaching a horn to the front of a sound-driving element, however, drastically improves this so-called coupling efficiency, by allowing the source sound to better engage all of the air present inside the slowly widening area of “the throat.”

Powered horn designs leverage this effect much in the same way, to squeeze impressive sonic results from very low levels of amplification. This makes them often an intriguing option for pairing with acoustically superior but comparably underpowered valve based amp systems. Unfortunately, horn loudspeakers must be very large in order to provide adequate levels of bass response, making many designs highly impractical for anyone who can't afford a private warehouse to put them in.



The Dynamic Driver

The dynamic driver is by far the most popular design found in the world of audio today. In fact, it's what most of us imagine when we think of a speaker. Their basic design consists of a suspended lightweight cone attached to an electromagnet (usually a coil of copper wire), which itself is placed permanently in front of another magnet. When an amplifier applies electricity to the coil, it creates a magnetic field that grows and contracts in relation to the frequency of the audio signal. These directional changes in the field cause the coil to alternate between being attracted and repelled by the permanent magnet behind it. The resulting pull-and-push forces make the coil vibrate, which are in turn amplified by the connected cone to create sound.

The popularity of this type of driver stems from several notable advantages, including its relatively simple and rugged construction. It's also highly sensitive, handles power in its stride and is quite capable of outputting a wide dynamic range. The heavy nature of its components, however, does make the dynamic driver somewhat slower in responding to changes in audio frequency compared to other alternatives. Other acoustic downsides stem from the enclosure it's mounted in.

Crossing Over

Crossovers, in an audio context, are a set of filters that split an incoming audio signal into two or three bands of frequency (think high, mid and low) so that different types of drivers – such as tweeters, woofers and subwoofers – can each handle the respective section of the audio spectrum they are optimized for reproducing. So-called active crossovers differ from passive crossovers by

splitting an audio signal before it is amplified.

Most dynamic speaker drivers are built into airtight boxes to stop the emanating sound waves they invariably generate from distorting the output of the main cone. Ironically, trapping these undesirable sound waves creates a catch-22 known as resonance. Thicker walls, unique shaping and internal bracing can all help reduce the distorting effects of cabinet vibration. But too much rigidity can also cause these sound waves to simply reflect back – recreating the very problem cabinets are intended to prevent. Plenty of innovative solutions have been designed to minimize these influences, but none are perfect.

That's not to say all that sonic influences created from a speaker's cabinet are unquestionably bad. On the contrary, many listeners feel some level of "boxiness" provides a richness to music that's missing in other speaker designs.

Magnetostatic & Planar-Magnetic Loudspeakers

Part of the confusion around this speaker type (among other leaps of intellect) revolves around naming conventions. So-called planar magnetic loudspeakers are variations on the magnetostatic drive concept. To make things worse, Yamaha also promoted the term orthodynamic in the headphone world as a way to brand their planar-magnetic headphone technology.

A magnetostatic driver ditches the copper voice coil and cone used in its dynamic counterpart in favour of metal strips bonded directly to a membrane. Magnetic strips are then placed behind this membrane to create a static magnetic field. As audio frequency currents are run through the conducting

I marvel at the way designers come up with so many designs to try and achieve the impossible – perfect sound



No one has all the answers or exclusive rights to what is the best sound/design, as there isn't just one



metal strips in the membrane, the forces of attraction and repulsion between the metallic bands and the permanent magnets cause the entire membrane to move, creating sound.

The physics behind this method mean that magnetostatic loudspeakers and related variations are quite big and thin compared to traditional dynamically driven options. This awkward form factor presents an obstacle for many looking for an audio setup that blends nicely with the rest of their home. They also require amplifiers capable of matching their low-impedance demands.

Those who can accommodate their design are rewarded, however, with incredibly accurate sound that's free of the resonance issues that colour the output of traditional loudspeakers. Because of this, most speakers of this type on the market today offer hifi performance at costs that are significantly lower than their comparable dynamically driven counterparts.

Electrostatic Loudspeakers

Like magnetostatics, electrostatic loudspeakers are large and flat in design, but operate according to different principles – relying on high-voltage electric fields over magnetic fields to generate sound.

A thin plastic membrane, usually made from polyester (mylar) film, is coated with a conductor to form a diaphragm in this case. This diaphragm is then sandwiched equidistantly between two conductive grids, often made of perforated metal sheets framed with wire. Sound is created from this setup by sending electricity to the central membrane while an identical audio signal is sent to both conductive grids in an anti-phase roughly meaning positive on one side and negative on the other), creating a uniform electrostatic field.

This field puts a “push-pull” force on the diaphragm and in turn the moves air on either side. The Martin Logan Neo's pictures use electrostatic technology with dynamic drivers for the bass.

This design has the distinct advantage of reducing sonic distortion by an order of magnitude compared to basic dynamic cone drivers. Because they're so light, they also exhibit exceptional frequency response. However, the restricted movement of the membrane limits the amount of air volume that can be pushed, a shortcoming that manifests in the form of poor bass reproduction. Playing close consideration to where electrostatic loudspeakers are placed in a room is also critical, since the physics of sound reflection has a major impact on their sound quality.

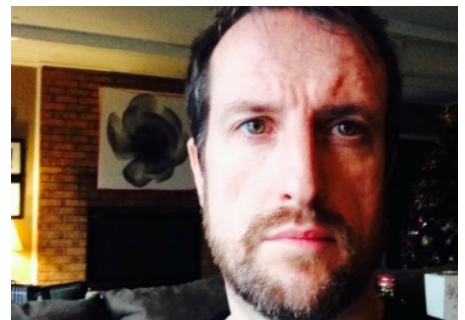
There are many variations on the above designs with a huge amount of experimentation with different materials, drive units and all this is only limited by the designer's imagination. The beauty of this all is that every day is a new day for designers and we as reviewer's or consumers will have many more opportunities to experience their aural delights or possible disasters, dependent upon the individual listeners taste or preferences. Variation is the key factor here. No one has all the answers or exclusive rights to what is the best sound/design, as there isn't just one. You the reader have that choice to decide if you're brave enough, or like me it all depends from day to day. I am just thankful that we have so much choice, as they say “variety is the spice of life”. Oops, there I go again with sayings.



READERS LIVES

HIFI PIG READERS' ADVENTURES
IN AUDIO

How I Judge A Hifi System - Hifi Pig reader Michael Howell was born in England but now resides the good old USA. In this Readers' Lives article he tells us how he personally goes about evaluating a system.



Firstly, let me start by saying that when and if I am asked for my opinion on a particular component or system, there are a few factors involved that I may take into consideration.

- Is this my friends hifi, that he /she saved for weeks and weeks, if not months to purchase, and didn't go on vacation just to be able to afford it?
- Am I attending a special unveiling of a new line of components or a

separate, where my refreshments are kindly taken care of?

- Am I passing a trade show booth and making polite conversation with vendors?
- Am I in the market for myself, and about to spend money that could absolutely be put to better use?

The fourth bullet point will always win in my experience. Not that with the other considerations I'm not fully immersed into the experience, but whether you're spending your own/or someone else's

green – you're not going to be setting your "phasers on stun/polite"!

One instance I remember was back in the late '80's. Naim were releasing the "SBL" into the European market, and my brother had scored two tickets to the event. He had just spent approx. \$12,000 (was about 6000 pounds sterling) on a Linn/Naim 2 -channel masterpiece, and had been put on the list as a potential buyer perhaps? Who knows?

So we dressed a little more socially acceptable as we normally did, caught the number 52 bus into Birmingham's

City Centre, and enjoyed an evening of free beer and great music.

Did the Speakers deliver their promise? Kind of I guess. We had just auditioned a pair of Linn's Isobariks not too long before this event and our ears wanted more of that. However comfortable I may have felt, that last sentence would not have passed my lips if I had been asked about the SBL's performance that evening. I would have strung together some choice buzzwords perhaps – timing, pace.....etc, thanked them profusely for the opportunity to be involved in their release in Europe and that I would look into them if I was in the market for such.

Now I'm not saying that I can't be critical, there's nothing worse than having an "Emperor's New Clothes" stand point where I'm too scared to say anything, but I'm not going to flat out crap on anyone's parade. I do try to stay positive with this hobby.

If I'm auditioning for myself, I'm almost always by myself, in my house with my other components. If it doesn't work out with the audition I will have kind words for the vendor, keeps things positive. I'm not going to burn a bridge; it could always be synergy that's causing the issue. I am not a fan however of "burn in times", that has always been a cop-out in my opinion, for you just actually forgetting how your old component sounded before this new one was transplanted in. (I disagree – Ed)

Review positively, unless an unfiltered clinical view is requested.

Now that all of that is out of the way...phew.

This is what I personally do:

I find recordings that I am most familiar with – ones that you can air guitar, air drum, air violin...whatever, but at the best resolution you have.

Having "Bohemian Rhapsody" in a lossy mp3 format, like it was engineered by Ronald McDonald on crack, just won't cut it. Just make sure it's a high enough resolution – I prefer 24/96 personally, and it's the same resolution as the one you're used to listening too on your own system. Apples for apples as it were. You will only really listen to about 20-30 seconds anyway, my

particular personality cannot handle much more...I'll start to drift away!

Having an actual experience with multiple instrument types also aids in any review of sound. I play guitar – so I can tell if new strings are being used on an acoustic piece by their particular sound, also how a Strat' sounds different from Gibson. I have grown up with drums around me, whether they be marching band, the band I was in, or the ear piercing sensation of my 7 year old smacking the skins like a "whack-a-mole" game and I have a pretty good idea how they sound. I use a cymbal's decay frequently as a good starting point in assessing a system's performance.

My friend played saxophone (alto, and tenor) when I was younger, I would go to his house and sit for hours listening to him and trying to help him practice. He would play a pretty good rendition of Courtney Pine's "Sunday Song" which would promptly make me fall asleep and to this day whenever I hear that particular song I start yawning and craving coffee.

So basically the more instrument and sounds experience you have, the easier it is to find moments in a system's or component's ability to reproduce the music, and keep your foot tapping. Adversely, your brow may furrow as your ears have a quick conversation with your brain...eine minuten bitte!

Lastly, but maybe firstly – be aware of speaker placement and room acoustics.

Manufacturers vary in the preferred distances from side-walls and back-walls for speakers. I know that my Linn's aren't hurting too much when they are within the minimum distance from walls, some people like to have their speakers WAY out into the listening area, toed-in slightly too. Horses for the proverbial courses. You just have to talk to the person giving you the audition on what positions the speakers best perform. Be aware of acoustic treatments that are employed too, if it's looking like a marquee tent from the movie "Lawrence of Arabia" then there's a good chance that whatever you are auditioning sounds natively bright, and won't transfer very well when you have them setup in your living room. (And I reckon room treatment is imperative to getting the best out of any system – Ed)

Fun stuff!

Having
"Bohemian
Rhapsody"
in a lossy
mp3 format,
like it was
engineered
by Ronald
McDonald
on crack,
just won't
cut it

RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY
JANINE ELLIOT



Things are afoot in the world of reel 2 reels. Not only are there now at least 4 major companies producing reel to reel copies of famous master tapes, but very importantly after a long gap the Swiss tape recorder manufacturer Revox are bringing back the medium with a player based on the A700

Like so much 21st century manufacturing it won't be in the company's home town, but this one will be made in Slovakia. The company had already set up an internet shop to sell high quality copies of original studio masters. At €298.00 for a single 10½ inch reel or two for €398.00 they are not cheap, but as serious audiophiles are beginning to realise that the 'convenience' of small discs or mini-SD cards don't necessarily mean better

sound quality, the format is making a striking recovery.

I began my expedition into reel to reels at the age of 10, buying an aged Fidelity 'Play Master' tape recorder, with 5 ½ inch reels at 3.75ips in mono. My bedroom morphed into my own radio station "Abbey Audio" where I relayed, using bell wire, radio programmes I made to my parents downstairs. Even my parents had speaking parts in radio plays I

created, or requested their favourite music. My interest in reel 2 reels was influenced by Kenny Everett's recording antics and working for a local talking newspaper. By the time I got into senior school I knew I wanted to work for the BBC, which as many of you know I finally achieved, where I could now get paid for playing with tape recorders. I am pleased to see the format gaining a new lease of life. The fact that only a tape player is planned is a

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shame, but as we have become quite lazy humans in recent years I guess a recorder is unlikely, certainly for the moment. Though rumour has it that the new player will be in part modular and a recording module will be made available.

However, all is not lost, as with eBay and other sources, getting your foot (or 10½ inches?) in the door with second-hand machines is very easy. The names 'Revox' and 'A77' are two of the most known in the hifi and professional audio world and the A77 is one of the most sought after machines, something I so, so wanted when I was young, though took until middle age before I finally got two of them. I now have a collection of 16 reel-

to-reels of different makes and sizes.

Set up by Willi Studer in 1948 it began life making high-tension oscilloscopes, but in 1949 branched out into audio by modifying imported tape recorders from the USA, and developing their own tape recorder, named the Dynavox series. In 1951 ELA AG was founded by Willi Studer and Hans Winzeler, creating the Revox brand and the T26 tape recorder (based on the Dynavox). Given a choice between Studer or Revox tape machines is just like choosing between Teac and Tascam or Toyota and Lexus. Where Studer would win every time, Revox made every effort to ensure that the brand was the

most sought after by the amateur audio recordist, generally having lower tape speeds, (wired) remote controls, no XLR connectors, and less utilitarian looks. Where the Revox brand still resides in Switzerland and Germany, Studer was absorbed into the Harman Soundcraft group in Potters Bar, near London, England in 2004 to specialise in mixing desks, including the very successful Vista series, as used by major broadcasting companies around the world including the BBC. Soundcraft itself is owned by Harman International Industries, an American company who also own brands such as the automotive division of B&O, AKG, Infinity, JBL and Mark Levinson.

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Those new reel 2 reel tapes being sold at €298.00 are usually produced on the wonderful A80 and A800 machines, but my favourite is actually the smallest Studer machine, the A807, with features such as return to zero or “go to” memory locators.

Until the 1970’s home recording on reel 2 reels was a very common occurrence, with magazines such as “The Tape Recorder” showing you things like how to record the best sound from your blue tit at the bottom of the garden. Competing with Truvox, Brenell, Ferguson, Elizabethan, Akai and Sony, and professional companies such as Ferrograph and Telefunken, Revox was still seen as the best tape recorder to buy with your

hard earned guineas, though often the most expensive. They began their famous “36” series with the A36, B36 and C36 and then their first stereo machine the D36. This coincided with the “37” series from Studer, just as the T26 did with the Studer A27. After the Revox G36 came the A77 in 1967, the latter largely based on the older machine though all-transistor rather than having 13 valves, and allowing 15ips for the first time. More noticeable it had a much more modern “box” shape with less “aged” rounded edges. This new machine also gave much more choice for the audio fan, available in 186 different permutations over the next 10 years of its production, with 400,000 units being produced. After the A77 would

come the B77 (1977) and semi-pro PR99 (1982), both based on the A’ series. The very last Revox tape machines to be made were the C270 series in 1988.

What make the A77 so special are not only the good frequency response, low wow and flutter and good signal-to-noise level, but also its good design and bullet-proof build. It is a 3-head (erase, record, playback “ERP”) 3 motor machine, with both the capstan and reel motors being direct drive. The capstan motor was the excellent synchronous Papst motor used in the G36 which drives the tape at constant speed, and the two further motors provide back tension from the feed (left) spool and a constant take-up tension for the take-up



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(right) spool. Being direct-drive means that the only belt in operation is for the tape counter, connected to the take up motor. This not only makes maintenance easy (as someone who has regularly had to repair disintegrated and broken belts in lesser old machines, a process often requiring removal of numerous components and PCBs in order to get to them), but means performance and reliability is improved. Indeed, Revox strived to give good performance and reliability rather than offering bells and whistles such as things like auto reverse and memory location, etc.

The A77 came in quarter track (similar to that on a cassette tape, allowing two sides of tape recording) or half-track, giving better audio quality though at the cost of one-direction playing. The latter meant that you could edit your tape using spicing tape if there were sections of music or speech you needed to remove. For the perfectionist or professional sound recordist you could now store the tape “tail out”, meaning that it would need to be rewound in order to play from the beginning. The reason for doing this is because of inevitable low level print-through of the magnetised tape from one

layer of the tape to the next which would now effectively be “after” the start of a sound rather than the silence or low-level sound before it. Imagine silence followed by a loud chord on the organ (eg Saint Saens Organ Concerto last movement). Any low level print-through of that chord would be hidden under the initial attack and

Dolby on/off button and calibration controls mean there is no room for NAB/IEC switches, meaning it is only NAB. The high-speed versions are the most sought after. If you buy an A77, make sure you check headwear and the condition of the rollers and tape guides. Also check the brake hubs, and the incandescent bulb for the optical auto stop, which sometimes burns out.

The A77 came in four ‘makeovers’, with the Mk iii (1971-1974) being the most common and desirable with its more reliable electronics and precision mechanics. The relay controlled feather-touch push buttons give precise and quick

decay of the music rather than sounding just before, which would be more audible.

The A77 could be ordered with various speed configurations, the most common being 3 3/4 ips (9,5 cm/sec) and 7 1/2 ips (19 cm/sec), though machines with 1 7/8 ips (4,75 cm/sec) or 15 ips (38 cm/sec) capability were also made. Models gave choice of NAB and IEC equalisation for playback from switches hidden under the long retractable panel below the tape path and the heads. You could even buy a version with Dolby B noise reduction, which I actually have in my own collection, but the

action, and separate preamplifiers for record and playback, special circuitry to get rid of clicks and pops and regulated power supply were features we see regularly 40 years later. Whilst every budding tape fan would love a Studer or perhaps buy a Revox B77 or even PR99 with their more modern look and improved electronics, the A77 is still a very able and reliable machine that from the 1960’s secured the Revox name as the brand for quarter inch tape. I still use mine and expect it to last for another 40 years to come. The A77 will always remain the most important reel to reel of all time.



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Syd Lawrence With Clare Teal – Mike Valentine, Chasing The Dragon

By Janine Elliot

Hifi Pig's Janine Elliot is invited along to world famous AIR Studios where BBC Radio 2s Clare Teal joins the Syd Lawrence Orchestra for a direct to disc recording session. Read on, it's fascinating!

IN THE STUDIO



I wrote about Syd Lawrence 'Big Band Spectacular' album produced by the flamboyant Mike Valentine earlier this year. The album had two heavyweight vinyl discs; one devolved from the master reel-to-reel tape and the other a direct cut disc from the master vinyl, so you could compare the two for quality. The direct cut disc (which omits the master "tape" stage) was for me and everyone else who listened by far the better quality.

Now Mike has done it again. This time the Syd Lawrence Orchestra is joined by Clare Teal, BBC Radio 2 presenter and an excellent jazz singer. The new album is to celebrate the 100th anniversary next April of the greatest jazz singer of all, Ella Fitzgerald. And yours truly from Hifi Pig was invited along to see it all happen. On a typically rainy British Summer's day the orchestra assembled itself at Air Studios, Hampstead, London, to record the album, spending the morning to set up to get the best sound, rehearsing and then recording the two sides of 4 tracks each. The first side was to be recorded before lunch and the second in the afternoon.

As an ex BBC sound engineer I was on home territory here, with a Calrec analogue desk in Studio 1 similar to the (later) Neve 66 desks festooned in the basement of "old" Broadcasting House back in the 90's that I used on a daily basis. This vintage desk is one of three unique boards designed solely for AIR Studios. The first of the consoles was designed in 1977 and destined for AIR's new facility on the Caribbean island of Montserrat. The legendary Beatles producer and founder of Air Studios, George Martin (1926-2016) was heavily involved with Rupert Neve in the design process of what was a radical new desk at the time. For the technical amongst you this 56 channel, 24 track desk has toroidal wound transformers, instead of the standard audio Neve transformers,

just as toroidal transformers are favoured by many audiophiles, especially me. Sound quality was the key aim here, as it always should be.

The origins of this album came after Mike Valentine appeared with Chris Dean, Leader of the Syd Lawrence Orchestra, on Clare Teal's Radio 2 Big Band Show, with Clare suggesting they perhaps do an album together. With Clare's great singing voice, as Mike said later, it was like a "dream come true". Having set the date and the studio for recording the orchestra and Clare, the next decision was to decide what to perform, and with Ella's centenary in 2017 and Clare's voice so suitable for this repertoire, that was an easy choice to make. Selecting the best 8 songs was perhaps not quite so easy.

Being a Direct Cut Disc this meant that performing would need to be done all in one go without any post-editing. In my career I have often found that musicians, narrators and actors perform better knowing that it is "as live"; often the 'security' of having the facility to edit any mistakes at a later date prompts haphazard performances. The vinyl masters are not cheap at £50 a throw, so it was vital that musicians performed to their best and without error. Indeed, during recording I was probably as nervous as Mike, Clare and the musicians! Similarly, the recording needed to be done as accurately as perhaps Sinatra or even Ella herself would themselves have done it, so a dated, though iconic, valve condenser Neumann U47 microphone for Clare, a product manufactured between 1949 and 1965 was chosen for its vocal warmth. Very few microphones could sound as good as this, even 50 years later. Interestingly a U47 was the chosen microphone of George Martin for his recordings of the Beatles, reputedly his favourite microphone. For Mike the choice was obvious;

IN THE STUDIO



"If you look at photographs of many of the old sessions recorded in the era, you will see a big fat sexy valve powered microphone, the ubiquitous Neumann U47. I have used this beautiful old mic on many sessions and even though its design is over fifty years old, I have really found nothing to touch its quality in the modern world."

Mike also decided to use an aged EMT plate reverb unit, rather than more modern AMS, Lexicon 224 or Yamaha SPX digital units, which don't give that same analogue warmth that was particularly audible in 60's-70's recordings. I remember in my early BBC days at Bush House that if you wanted to add reverb you "buzzed" the control room and got them to connect the source to a loudspeaker in a room with a microphone placed many feet away creating the reverb which was then fed back to your studio. David Gilmour's famous 4 notes in Pink Floyd "Shine On You Crazy Diamond" from the album 'Wish You Were Here' were recorded at a different studio to the rest of the album with a microphone placed meters away from a guitar amp to create that warm 'live' reverberant sound. Continuing the theme of originality, Mike placed Clare in the studio with the orchestra, and not in a separate cubicle. All that was between her and the orchestra was a glass screen and a single-ear Beyer DT102 headphone. Being a live recording, with no stops between the tracks, any rustling of pages or noises from trumpet and trombone mutes being picked up for quieter sections, or even vocal injections from the leader, Chris Dean, only add to the "liveliness" of the album. Mike likes them as well;

"I loved the shuffling sound of the band turning the pages of the score, and if you listen carefully you can almost hear Chris as the leader counting everyone in"

Indeed, right back to my early days of recording live concerts from Radio 3 onto cassette tape in my bedroom, I always think there is a charm and naturalness from live recordings, often lost in multitrack studio editing. Hearing the orchestra turning the pages between each track made the recording that more human. Clare stood in front of the microphone singing her heart out often with a drink in her left hand though, being the professional that she is, it wasn't ever picked up by the microphone. For this recording the 2-

IN THE STUDIO

channel output from Rupert Coulson was sent along wires up two floors to the cutting room where John Webber ensured that the mix was cut into the vinyl master using the Neumann VMS 80 cutting lathe. When the needle started to cut into the acetate, a red light went on and Chris Dean started to conduct the orchestra. There was no stopping now. And, at the end, all was quiet until that red light turned off.

A test disc was initially cut to ensure that the loudest sounds didn't get cut too "deep" so that they joined to the next groove, or inversely that the music wasn't recorded too quiet. Playing back

that recording would mean that the disc could never be used again because the soft acetate disc is immediately ruined as soon as you first play it, bearing in mind a needle is used for both "etching" and playback. So, after the original test acetate was cut and played to check all was OK, the next discs would only be used to make the master discs from which the 180g vinyl would be created. Each groove is separated by a demarcated distance, rather than varying that distance depending on whether the music is loud or soft, common in most record production. If the grooves are not etched with enough depth/detail, then the music would be too quiet. This

So, after the original test acetate was cut and played to check all was OK, the next discs would only be used to make the master discs from which the 180g vinyl would be created



IN THE STUDIO

process is therefore as much an art as the sound engineering itself in the studio, and John Webber is amongst only a small number of engineers able to do this well.

Whilst in the 1980's the thought of vinyl even lasting as far as the 21st century was anathema, it is estimated that there are now 20-30% more cutting lathes in UK in operation than there were at the launch of the CD. The renaissance of vinyl is one of the biggest talking points in the hifi industry. With perhaps 50 cutting lathes still in the UK, most are from the Berlin based company Neumann. They include the VMS80, 82, 70 and 66, and even a few earlier ones including two AM32s and one AM31 – the original model from 1931. Their SX84 was the last cutting lathe they made, though the VMS80, as used for this recording, is regarded as the best.

Having arrived at 9am to set up the studio with microphones for the instrumentalists and soloist, a rehearsal of the music began. Once Mike and engineer Rupert were happy with the overall sound and confident when to bring up levels of soloist trombones on the right or saxophones on the left, the first four tracks "I've Got You under my Skin", "Begin the Beguine", "I Get a Kick Out of You" and "Ding Dong the Witch is Dead" were set to disc. Mike also used an American Ampex ATR 102 ½ inch reel-to-reel recorder at 30ips as a back-up and Nagra VI digital recorder running at 24/192. Interestingly, the latter wasn't used in the end as Mike preferred the sound from the reel-to-reel source being transferred to 24/192. This is not a surprise to me; digital recordings can sound so harsh but improve if they have started life as analogue reel-to-reel. And the good news is that with the rise of reel-to-reel playback amongst audiophiles (see this month's RetroByte), 15ips tape copies of this album will also be available if there is a demand for them. Count me in!

The first four tracks were recorded, though I personally felt track 2 was a little staid in performance. Luckily for me it was decided to re-record these four tracks, though it was because the first take over-modulated when the orchestra got loud. In the second take the performance was much more animated, though levels were kept more under control, and even better singing if that was at all possible. Using compressors and limiters make engineers lazy and



spoil the urgency and feel of the music. As Mike told me; "Compression Leads To Depression!!"

After lunch and a short rehearsal, the B-side acetate disc was made. This included some of my favourites, "Night and Day", "Anything Goes", "That Old Black Magic" and finally "Too Darn Hot". Two takes were made for this acetate as well; levels for trombone solos in "Anything Goes" could perhaps have been more prominent. As a result a second recording was made. This B-side was particularly well performed the second time, with much foot tapping from me, sitting in the second best seat in the house behind the sound engineer. The best seat was of course in the studio itself, where the power and detail of sound, particularly from the brass section, and warmth and passion from the saxophonists was better than any hifi could ever be, if a bit too loud for comfort. The speakers in the control room are bespoke, and didn't do justice to what was the other side of the glass, but even in the control room the music overflowed with energy, gusto, and

passion. We all smiled. Luckily your vinyl-based hifi should bring back that foot tapping experience in your living room, and whether or not you like Ella Fitzgerald, you will enjoy this album. Ella might have died in 1996 but her music certainly lives on.

It didn't matter that the weather wasn't good that day, because for me spending a day in a studio again brought back many wonderful memories and it showed me just how hard work it is to set up, rehearse, record and produce a complete album in just one day. You can relive my experience in studio 1 in two weeks' time with a CD version of the album and then the vinyl a few weeks later. At the Whittlebury Show in September Mike Valentine will demo the vinyl direct-cut-disc alongside the reel-to-reel tape. If past experience is anything to go on, this will be a room you most certainly need to visit.

Vinyl cost is £36 including VAT + P&P, and CD is £18 including VAT + P&P from Chasing The Dragon.

William S. Burroughs – Let Me Hang You

Choose a word from the following: Warped, debased, putrid, twisted. And one from these: Brilliance, originality, ingenuity, inventiveness. And there you have this album pretty much reviewed and condensed into two words. For the record I'd have gone for "Twisted Brilliance" for this is what you have here. Let Me Hang You is not for the faint of heart or those easily offended, but then William Burroughs reading some of his most outrageously degenerate but simultaneously entertaining and unsettling passages from his Naked Lunch novel of 1959 was never going to be. If you don't know Naked Lunch then look it out and devour it before it consumes you!

Its musically disturbing backdrop adds texture and understanding to Burroughs drawl that revolts and provokes as well as excites and inspires

Burroughs died in 1997 but made the recording used here shortly before his demise at 83. Now 83 is a good innings on anyone's scorecard, but given Burroughs proclivity for a lifestyle that was clearly going to do you no good at



all, eight decades plus three years is nothing short of phenomenal.

Producer Hal Willner of Lou Reed and Marianne Faithfull fame and Burroughs' manager James Grauerholz recruited a team of world class musicians including Grammy winning guitarist Bill Frisell, pianist/keyboard player Wayne Horvitz and violist Eyvind Kang to add a touch of their experimental brilliance over the course of several sessions to the guttural spoken word recordings of Burroughs. However, these recordings were abandoned and left to putrefy on some forgotten basement's shelf until 2015 when Willner revisited the recordings.

Not content to release the original recordings further degenerate input to proceedings was sought from the unconventional Canadian punk/soul frontman King Khan. Willner had originally met King Khan in 2010 when he performed as The King Khan and BBQ Show at Sydney Opera House as

part of a festival curated by Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson. Khan in turn looked for contributions from vocalist/composer M Lamar (creator of the Negrothotic manifesto and the identical twin brother of transgender actress Laverne Cox) and Australian psych/punk act The Frowning Clouds.

So what of the content? What can you say? It's musically disturbing backdrop adds texture and understanding to Burroughs drawl that revolts and provokes as well as excites and inspires. Is it easy listening, well of course it isn't! Let Me Hang You is twelve unsettling and unpleasant aural assaults on the senses and imagination that has you picturing the scenes of depravity that are laid before you in glorious debaseOvision.

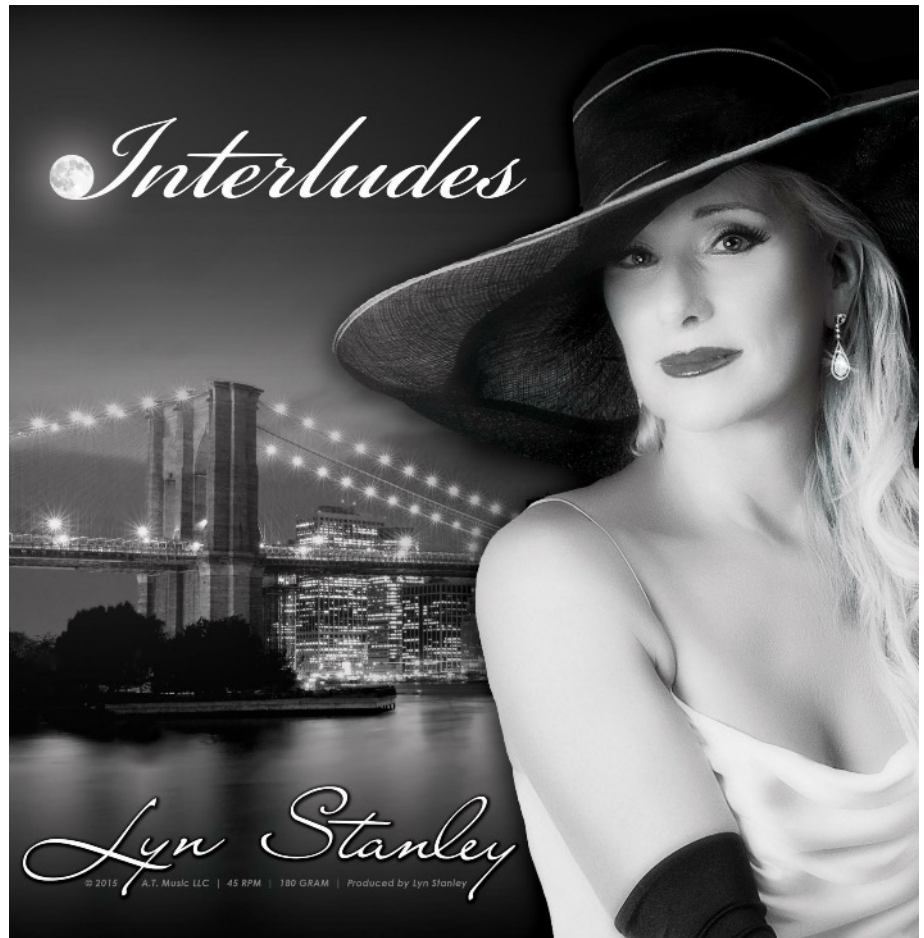
'Let Me Hang You' was released by Ernest Jennings Record Co/Khannibalism on 15th July 2016 and is essential!

Lyn Stanley – Interludes

Lyn Stanley is the darling of the audiophile community and she certainly knows how to press our collective buttons to get us all in a lather over her recordings. Not content with just releasing her music on CD, she also releases her output on Reel2Reel and very high quality vinyl too – you may have even caught one of her live performances at High-End Munich (Lyn featured on the front cover of Hifi Pig's coverage of High End 2015) and other audio shows.

Laidback, beautifully produced jazz is the order of the day of course, but the arrangements and production herein really set *Interludes* apart from the pack

Interludes is Lyn's third offering and came to life in January 2015 at a jazz conference hosted by her publicist Jim Eigo where she was introduced to the harmonica player Hendrick Meurkins who plays on four of the tracks on



Interludes. The album is recorded at United Recording Studios in Hollywood by Al Schmitt and is a collection of songs that “express the many facets of love’s entrances and exits, pieces that struck a chord”. Interestingly Lyn uses, as she has on previous work, a Neumann U47 tube microphone that is over sixty years old and called Telly – this very microphone was Frank Sinatra’s favourite and it is kept in a special box at Capitol Recording Studio with the name “Frank” on it... there you go, that’s one of the buttons pressed already!

Interludes opens with Lyn’s voice alone singing the opening bars to Gershwin’s *How Long Has this Been Going On?* Before the band join her and this tune sets the tone beautifully for what is to follow. I was expecting an album of jazz standards but Lyn has really thought about the tunes on *Interludes*. Yes you have Billie Holiday’s *Don’t Explain*, Sinatra’s *I’m a Fool To Want You* and Duke Ellington’s *In a Sentimental Mood* plus Cole Porter’s *Just One Of Those Things* and the album’s opening tune by Gershwin, but there’s also an absolutely

sublime version of *Black Velvet* and a fabulous adaptation of Led Zeppelin’s *Whole Lotta Love*.

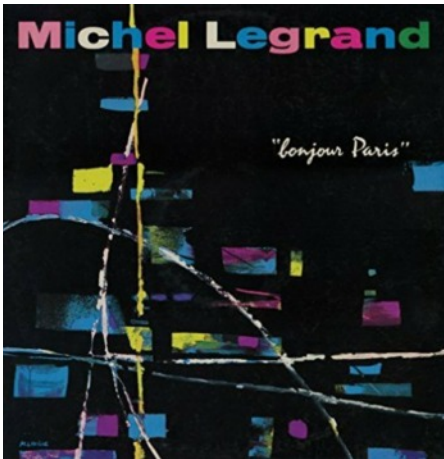
Laidback, beautifully produced jazz is the order of the day of course, but the arrangements and production herein really set *Interludes* apart from the pack. Lyn’s vocal delivery is gloriously rich and the musicianship on *Interludes* is second to none making it a must buy for anyone that enjoys this genre. However, there is enough on this record to hold the interest of those with only a passing interest in cool jazz and personally I’d buy it just for the aforementioned *Whole Lotta Love*...

So, you have the sultry vocal, great song choice and arrangements, plus amazing musicianship, but add to that pot a healthy dose of brilliant production and you have an album that will get your average audiophile hot under the collar and itching to play *Interludes* to anyone that will listen as it will really make your system shine. Expect to hear this record played at lots of the audio shows!

ALBUM REVIEWS

Michel Legrand – Bonjour Paris (él)

This months offering from él records was recorded in 1956 and is Michel Legrand's homage to the French capital where he was born in 1932. You may not necessarily know the name but you are sure to know some of his tunes as he's got around 200 film scores to his credit and if you're still struggling you will certainly know Dusty Springfield's version of Windmills Of Your Mind which is another of his tunes.



In France and further afield, Legrand's name is synonymous with cinema and his music was the anchor for many of the New Wave of French film. This album contains not only the album Bonjour Paris but also Le Joli Mai and selections from Rendezvous a Paris.

The cinematic connection is clear in the music

The cinematic connection is clear in the music herein; with the main order of the day being big production numbers that conjure lazy Sunday afternoons from my youth sat in front of whatever black and white film was on the idiot box. This album is Paris on a 12cm silver disc and whilst it may not be the kind of thing that will be on constant rotation here at Hifi Pig Towers it certainly has enough interest to hold my attention for the duration.

The Parisian connection is highlighted perfectly when Yves Montand sings Joli Mai and all you need to complete the illusion is a Pastis or a coffee and for all intents and purpose you are there on the Champs D'Elysee watching the world go by

Eyes Of Blue - Crossroads Of Time (Esoteric Recordings)

The sleeve notes for Eye's Of Blue's Crossroads Of Time opens with a bit of an odd one "Sometimes a band can anticipate history to their own detriment. There is such a thing of being too far ahead of the game and finding everyone else is still playing by the old school rules...The story of Welsh band Eyes of Blue is such a case in point".

Crossroads of Time was first released back in 1969 but this is a new, expanded and remastered version out on Esoteric Recordings.

Originally formed in 1966 Eyes Of Blue won Melody Maker's "Beat Contest" the same year and signed to Decca's Deram label, which the band claim was not as much of an opportunity as it may have seemed with Deram wanting to turn them into "a bubblegum act" and after the 1967 single "Supermarket Full Of Cans" was released they parted company.



The band cites the Yes coming to their gigs, standing at the back and taking notes

The band say they were essentially a soul act playing with groups like The Who, The Small Faces and Steampacket with Rod Stewart...but then they heard the doors which "changed everything". Around this time they caught the attention of Lou Reizner who was working for the A&R department of Mercury records and so they signed to the label via a licensing deal.

Crossroads Of Time was recorded at Olympic Studios in London between March and July 1968 and finally released in 1969. It's mix of original tunes and covers (7 +7 Is (Love) and Yesterday (The Beatles)) with the songs Love Is The Law and Crossroads Of Time being penned by Graham Bond (Graham Bond Organisation) who with the band had formed a close relationship.

As the opening sleeve note quote suggests, the album is "progressive" before prog' became huge...the band cites the Yes coming to their gigs, standing at the back and taking notes. The album is a mix of rock, a smattering of West Coast influence with classical feel thrown in for good measure.

It was a sales flop! But don't let that put you off getting yourself a copy of this album, there's lots on here to commend and whilst musically it feels a bit confused, falling as it does between the bands soul roots and melodic rock, it's a record that is relevant and enjoyable and, perhaps more importantly, it paved the way for the much more proggy In Fields Of Ardeth.

ALBUM REVIEWS

Various - Let's Go Down And Blow Our Minds (The British Psychedelic Sounds of 1967) (Cherry Red)

When I was a youth I had the door to my bedroom painted with all psychedelic patterns, dragons, mushrooms and the like. Somewhere on the door I also had a poem that started "I am Bufo bufo, not yet rested from the great work" and on the frame over the door I had "It's an ill wind that blows no minds". I'm sure my parents must have been very proud, if not a little concerned about my mental wellbeing. The year the tunes on this collection came out I was born, but I've always been drawn to the whole hippy vibe...man, and love the music of this era; mostly it has to be said the music that came out of the US scene.

We all know the story of Haight Ashbury, the acid tests and the bands that came out of that Summer Of Love but this side of the Atlantic also had its scene, though not quite as extreme and somewhat diluted and very British. So it was that psychedelic pop moved out of the hip and underground joints and into the mainstream consciousness and everyone was jumping on the paisley painted bandwagon. And this is where Let's Go Down and Blow Our Minds comes in.

Yes you've got the names you'll be well aware of on the track list; The Crazy World Of Arthur Brown, Procul Harum, Spencer Davis Group and John's Children, but then there's a whole load more that are new to this cat. (See I'm even picking up the groovy lingo). Geranium Pond, Crocheted Doughnut Ring and the Riot Squad featuring David Bowie anyone.... though that last one rings a bell for some reason.

The titles of many of the tracks sort of give you an idea of what to expect: Eiderdown Clown, A Day In My Minds Eye and Granny Takes a Trip. This is not, in the main, the harder edged electronic psychedelia of Hendrix, rather it is a little more genteel and, as I said, really very British, you know, stiff upper lip and all that, although by 1967 the stiff upper lip no doubt had a Lord Kitchener 'tache over the top of it. That's not to suggest that the music on here isn't often very good indeed, it's more of a suggestion that the people involved in making the majority of it weren't really living the life of full time acid-heads and perhaps thought the epitome of getting turned on and being a groovy hipster was to sit in a darkened room in front of a lava lamp smoking dried banana skins, though Donovan's Mellow Yellow (also from 1967) is absent. Let's face it, the

words psychedelic and pop are two words that just don't seem to gel very well for me. Yes, there are some folk on here who are clearly aware of what five hundred mics of high quality Owsley feels like and you can hear it in the music... Arthur Brown's "Give Him A Flower" being a case in point, though this is still a very English tune. The most "English" tune on the whole album is The Uglys' The Squire Blew His Horn which is a brilliantly kitsch tune.



Louise's Look At The Sun is another stand out track with fabulously distorted guitar and these guys clearly know where it's at and what's what and the tune itself is an absolute gem. It's moments like this that this kind of compilation really come into their own! Yes there is the clearly cashing in on a scene stuff to listen to and it stands out a mile that these guys weren't kosher and only in it for the money, but who cares. Most folk who make records and join bands do so not for some higher cause but to get rich, lay groupies and generally avoid real work at all costs. That said Cliff Ward and his path Through The Forest is most definitely the product of a mind that has

been thoroughly tuned in and turned on. Really, another brilliant, imaginative and very psychedelic tune. Elmer Gantry's Velvet Opera's Flames is another tune that stands out from the crowd as does The Pretty Things' Defecting Grey. Big Jim Sullivan's Flower Power is another song I've never come across before despite him having played on over 750 charting singles and 54 UK number one hits – this track is taken from his own Sitar Beat album - think Ravi Shankar but from Uxbridge.

I've read that lot back and it comes across that I don't really like this record but that's really not the case at all. I love it. It's of its time and there is perhaps more pop than acid soaked psych in evidence but it's all pretty damned enjoyable if it is taken in context. Then of course you get those tunes that shine out from the crowd like a freak at a straights convention. We're coming up for fifty years since that first great Summer Of Love, a year that changed music and a whole lot more and it's rather fitting to have an album from that one year and showcasing what the British take on it all was.

Released September 30th

ALBUM REVIEWS

The Tomcats – Running At Shadows : The Spanish Recordings 1965 – 1966 (RPM)



Whilst Running At Shadow may certainly a throwback to a different era it represents a collection of tunes that are interesting and a back story that beggars belief

The Tomcats were a British R&B/Mod band formed in Ealing in 1965 but it is in Spain they were most well known. The story goes that just before they were about to make it big on the R&B scene in London the band jumped in a van (bought by one of the band's mum) and headed for Madrid.

They were booked for some gigs at Club Consulado but whilst sightseeing they had hordes of people following them around; primarily for the fact they had long hair. This caught the attention of a local newspaper who popped along to take some photographs of this British oddity who told the hacks they were "as famous as The Beatles and sold more records than The Rolling Stones"...their fate was sealed. They had hordes of fans, played radio and clubs and released a handful of EPs before returning to the UK to become cult psychedelic favourites July.

This compilation boasts all the band's EP releases as well as other rare recordings and some tunes by The Second Thoughts, an earlier incarnation of the band. There's a few tracks in Spanish, a handful of covers, including a great version of the aforementioned Stones' Get Off My Cloud, Satisfaction and Paint It Black and all in all it's very good indeed. The recordings are mainly very basic and in mono, but don't let that put you off as Running At Shadows is a time capsule of the mid-sixties R&B sound on disc. My favourite tune on the album is La Neurastenia which is another Stones' cover...this time it's 19th Nervous Breakdown but there's also a great cover of The Beatles' Yesterday.

The CD comes with extensive sleevenotes featuring quotes from band members (including Tom Newman who would later engineer Tubular Bells) and lots of photos of the band whilst in Spain.

Whilst Running At Shadow may certainly a throwback to a different era it represents a collection of tunes that are interesting and a back story that beggars belief.

Recommended.

PiL – The Liquid Room, Edinburgh

Forty years have passed since the summer of 1976, that long, hot summer when punk's adrenaline rush threatened to sweep away anything and everything that threatened to get in its way. The Sex Pistols were punk rock's leading lights and singer Johnny Rotten was punk's poster boy, although whether the band were a credible threat to the establishment or simply puppets – the punky Monkees – of manager Malcolm McLaren's situationist art project has become a moot point. "Ever had the feeling you've been cheated?" sneered Rotten to an audience the Pistols reached the point of self destruction. I've never been too sure whether he was addressing the audience or himself.

The Sex Pistols ran their course and then some, Rotten bailing out and leaving the others to wallow in the death throes of self parody. He quickly returned under his real name, John Lydon, with a new band PiL (Public Image Ltd) mixing punk with dub reggae and experimental influences from Krautrock pioneers Can. The band's first album was a critical success and the second, *Metal Box*, an instant classic. PiL has continued over the years as an ever-changing cast of musicians with Lydon at its core, popping up every so often to release a new album or go out on tour.

Lydon also regularly appears as a television talking head where his permanently sneering, cynical demeanour had led me to fear that a PiL live show would see him merely going through the motions and having a laugh at the expense of the audience. My expectations were not raised by the presence at the front of the stage of a music stand containing song lyrics in a font size normally reserved for the top line of an optician's eye chart.

Tonight's venue has a nominal capacity of 800 and is filled to at least that capacity. The band, Bruce Smith on drums and vocals, Lu Edmonds on guitars and vocals and Scott Firth on bass, keyboards and vocals take to the stage, Smith and Firth immediately locking into a tight groove. From my position immediately in front of one of the PA stacks, every thwack of Smith's bass drum threatens to part my hair in new and interesting ways. Edmonds teases out the familiar riff to *Albatross* from *Metal Box* and Lydon takes to the stage to the expected rapturous reception. Lydon delivers his vocals with a mixture of stentorian bellows and falsetto yelps and I'm happy to say that any concerns that I had about going through the motions are quickly extinguished, he is giving this his all. As the set develops I also begin to suspect that Lydon's cynical persona is sham and that he secretly might be a bit of a sweetheart.

The set list covers the band's history but a few more *Metal Box* songs wouldn't have hurt – *Death Disco* is the only other to make an appearance. At one point Lydon breaks off to shout "Oi, you – fuck off!" as a front of stage bouncer moves in to settle down a couple of enthusiastic fans. After the song ends, Lydon speaks directly to the bouncer. "We know you've got a job to do" he says in almost conciliatory tones "but these people have come here to dance. Leave them alone." Being Lydon, he spies an opportunity for mischief. "Come to think of it" he baits the audience "I'm sick of all this fucking dancing, I'm off home. Three quarters of you don't know how



to dance anyway." An announcement that today is Firth's birthday leads to a rousing chorus of *Happy Birthday To You* from the crowd, resulting in Lydon looking genuinely touched. "Fucking nice," he says. "That's proper." The centrepiece of the gig is an extended version of *Religion*, Lydon railing against Angela Merkel and organised religion. "Turn up the bass, turn up the bass, turn up the bass, turn up the bass" Lydon chants, looking in his draped shirt and trousers like a cross between Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and the Pilsbury Doughboy. The bass is turned up, and up, and up until it seems likely that my kidneys might liquefy.

Rise provides a brilliant singalong finale and encores *I'm Not Satisfied* and *Shoom* bring the gig to a joyous close. Ever had the feeling you've been cheated? Not tonight, John. It was proper.

Rickie Lee Jones – Edinburgh

When Rickie Lee Jones toured her *Pirates* album in 1981, she comfortably filled Edinburgh's 3,000 seat Playhouse Theatre. Tonight, The Queen's Hall, at less than one third of the size, is somewhat less than half full. The lack of seat sales is undeniably disappointing but is perhaps unsurprising. Jones is an uncompromising musician who has followed her muse through a variety of musical journeys but has never gone out of her way to court the mainstream – her sole chart single hit, 1979's *Chuck E's In Love*, struck a chord with the record buying public without bending its LA boho jazz style to the fashions of the day.

This evening's show is billed as "An intimate evening with Rickie Lee Jones" and if the fans tonight are few in number, there is a buzz in the room that suggests a keen anticipation to share that intimacy. To the left of the stage is a collection of items that could almost, but not quite, be described as a drum kit. To the right a piano and in the middle a guitar. Rickie takes to the stage accompanied by Mike Dillon who settles in behind his array of instruments as Rickie straps on her guitar. Opening with *Weasel And The White Boys Cool* from her debut album, Dillon deftly embellishes Jones' guitar work and vocals. The pair have been playing together for a while now but you get a real sense of creativity here as Dillon keeps one eye on Jones as he coaxes accompaniments from xylophone, cymbals and a variety of hand percussion. The occasional stick

may be dropped as Dillon flits between instruments, but the beat is never lost.

We are treated to a selection of songs from across her career – Jimmy Choos from her new album *The Other Side Of Desire* is a standout. These are interspersed by slightly rambling between-song banter – Rickie Lee Jones' laugh is something that you will never forget once you have heard it. Jones removes her guitar for an extemporised version of *Bye Bye Blackbird* before moving to the piano. Although she is a capable guitarist, Jones seems more comfortable at the piano, her playing is inventive and subtle and her vocals come across more clearly in this section of the show. Highlights include the title track from *Pirates*, *It Must Be Love* from 1984's album *The Magazine* and *Infinity* from the new album which features stunning interplay between Jones and Dillon. Jones brings the performance to a close with a version of Julie London's *Cry Me A River*, which she mistakenly attributes to June Christie. Surprisingly, despite sustained applause, there is no encore, no outing tonight for *Chuck E's In Love* which has appeared elsewhere during the tour.

Tonight's audience were promised an intimate evening with Rickie Lee Jones and that is exactly what we got. Sometimes, smaller is better.

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The Great British Recording Studios – Howard Massey



Howard Massey knows a thing or two about the music industry and is a long-time music journo and consultant to the pro-audio side of things. He's been a touring/session musician, songwriter, recording engineer and producer, not to mention having written a dozen or so books used in recording school curricula including *Behind The Glass* and *Behind The Glass Volume II*. So his credentials for putting together *The Great British Recording Studios* would seem to be well and truly in order.

he foreword for *The Great British Recording Studios* is by none other than George Martin (he of *The Beatles* fame) and this sort of gives us a taste for what's in store for readers. First up we have a broad introduction into the way in which recording studios in the UK first developed and how the sound produced differed from their American counterparts – as someone keen on the whole reel2reel “scene” that seems to be burgeoning at the moment, there's a really interesting section on NAB versus CCIIR/IEC equalisation.

However, the chief focus of Howard's book is, as the title would suggest, a detailed look inside the better known recording studios of Great Britain: Abbey Road (EMI), Decca, Philips, Pye as well as the early independent studios: IBC, Lansdowne, Advision, CTS/The Music Centre. Then there's the infamous studio of Joe Meek (304 Holloway Road), Olympic, Trident and AIR (highlighted this month in Janine's visit to the studio) and then other, perhaps less well known but important studios and finally some of the mobiles, not least The Stones' RSM used to record many hours of tracks for *Exile On Main Street*.

Each of the studios featured gets a similar treatment from Massey. Readers are given an introduction to the history of each, what physical facilities were available to artists, what outboard gear was present, what desks were used, the monitors in place, the tape machines utilised and even the microphones to hand. This may seem all very technical and a bit OTT, and I must confess to having skipped much of the information about microphones and outboard, but to

many interested in the whole recording process this will be fascinating. Personally I found the background and information about desks, tape machines and monitors the most interesting!

You'd be forgiven for thinking, given my outline of *The Great British Recording Studios*, that this is a bit of a trainspotter's guide to equipment and kit (and to an extent it is), but there is much more to this book that makes it eminently readable and enjoyable. Yes, you have all the technical information and kit lists, but you also have fabulous soundbites from people present at the recording of some of the biggest hits of our time and often amusing “Stories From The Studio” pull outs that give you a nice break from the tech-fest. There's photographs galore in the book too that give the reader an insight into what recording studios were like – one of my favourites is a shot of The Tornados taken at Joe Meek's Holloway Road studio where the whole band is huddled in a corner of a room with just four microphones to record them. Another favourite is a picture of Frank Oglethorpe sat in the control room at the AIR Montserrat studio.

Given that almost anyone can now have access to computer modelled effects and laptops that can give you as many recording channels as you could ever wish for, it may seem a little anachronistic to focus on analogue recording studios from “the old days”, but, lest we forget, this is how most of the truly great records ever produced were made and Massey manages to make what could have ended up being little more than a long and detailed list both informative and entertaining.

If you are interested in how the greatest records of all time were made, have a passing interest in studio technology or just want a bit of an insight into the lives of recording artists, then *The Great British Recording Studios* is a must read book. Yes there are bits I skipped, primarily the lists of microphones and outboard effects, but there is still enough in this book to keep you hooked... personally I couldn't put it down.

Pink Floyd - Saucerful Of Secrets

This month, John Scott revisits the 1968 classic from Pink Floyd, Saucerful Of Secrets

The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn had very much been the vision of founding band member, guitarist, vocalist and principle songwriter Syd Barrett. While The Beatles has introduced psychedelia into mainstream pop music with tracks like Tomorrow Never Knows from their Revolver album in 1966 and with much of the Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band album the following year, Piper At The Gates Of Dawn was Britain's first fully-fledged psychedelic album. It combined a timeless, childlike, bucolic whimsy with what would eventually come to be known as space rock, taking pop music into previously uncharted territory.

During the recording of Piper, Barrett's use of LSD increased

During the recording of Piper, Barrett's use of LSD increased and producer Norman "Hurricane" Smith found him increasingly difficult to work with. Following the album's release, Barrett's erratic behaviour began to manifest itself during the band's live performances, Barrett often standing motionless as the band played around him. Gigs and tours had to be cancelled or curtailed; during a show at Winterland on the USA tour, Syd slackened his guitar strings until they fell off and when recording a performance of their single Apples And Oranges for The Pat Boone Show he perfectly lip synced the rehearsal then remained tight lipped during the whole of the actual take.

Realising that they could not continue as things were, the band recruited guitarist David Gilmour in December 1967. Gilmour had played with Barrett in bands at Cambridge Technical College and had busked with Barrett around the south of France and the initial idea was that Floyd would perform as a five piece



with Gilmour covering Syd's guitar parts. Barrett's behaviour made that unfeasible however, and Syd became a non-performing member of the band to allow him to concentrate on songwriting. Unfortunately, even this solution was untenable and Barrett left the band in January 1968.

In the midst of all this disarray, the band had begun recording the follow up to Piper, firstly with an abortive session lasting just two days in August 1967 with Barrett, and then with Gilmour from January to May 1968. The ensuing album, Saucerful Of Secrets is a transitional one for the band – but then, Pink Floyd were a band for whom musical transition would be par for the course for much of their career – as they retain their psychedelic style but cast off much of Barrett's whimsy. Syd appears on three of the album's seven songs but

only contributes one of his own, Jugband Blues in which he seems to acknowledge that he is not existing in the same reality as the rest of the band.

The album opens with Roger Water's Let There Be More Light. This takes the space rock of Piper's Interstellar Overdrive and Astronomy Domine to new levels. The music, pulsates; the vocals are a whispered chant. The lyrics reference Lucy In The Sky but this is a darker trip than Lennon's world of plasticine people and marmalade skies.

The mood is lightened by Richard Wright's Remember A Day. Over the next few years, Floyd would excel at producing a particular kind of blissed-out English pop song and this is the first, and perhaps best, of them. It is lazy and woozy, Syd contributes acoustic guitar and an almost bird-chirping slide guitar

CLASSIC ALBUM

– a perfect summer song. Set The Controls For The Heart Of The Sun is another Waters space rock song. Space was, of course, in the forefront of popular culture at the time as the public eagerly awaited the launch of Apollo 11 and the subsequent moon landing by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin on 19 July 1969. The moon, or at least one side of it, would feature large in Floyd's mythology a few years later but for now Waters had his sights set on the sun. As with Let There Be More Light, the lyrics are opaque but the title says it all; the music blasts us off on a journey towards our home star and, it would seem, certain destruction. It is the only Floyd track on which all five members of the band appear. Side one of the album closes with Corporal Clegg, another Waters song but very much in the Barrett style. The jokey music with its jaunty kazoo belies the story of a disabled and troubled ex-soldier struggling to cope with civilian life. War and the consequences or war on its participants and their families was a theme that would almost consume Waters in a later phase of the band's career and perhaps the seeds of that obsession are sown in this seemingly innocent ditty.

Side 2 of the album opens with the title track, a twelve minute experimental, impressionistic instrumental in four parts – Something Else, Syncopated Pandemonium, Storm Signal and Celestial Voices. This proved to be pretty much the last straw for Hurricane Smith who was again producing and was determined to steer the band towards shorter more commercial material. Anything less commercial would be hard to imagine; Saucerful is closer to the contemporary classical work of the pioneering composer Karlheinz Stockhausen than anything ever produced by a British beat group. It is not inaccessible though – although as a fourteen year old who had just discovered Pink Floyd through Dark Side Of The Moon, it took me good few plays to appreciate this. The versions from the Ummagumma album and the Live At Pompeii film show what a powerful, moving and uplifting piece of music it was when performed live.

The album moves towards a close with See Saw, another lazy-sounding summer song from Richard Wright before ending with Barrett's Jugband Blues. "It's awfully considerate of you to think of me here" he sings, "And I'm much obliged to you for making it clear that I'm not here." He was very much a member of the band at the time this was recorded and yet he seems very much aware of his own absence. The song, and the album, ends with the sombre lines "And what exactly is a dream? And what is exactly is a joke?"

Sadly, Barrett would never recover sufficiently to be able to re-join the band. Gilmour and Waters assisted on his first solo album, The Madcap Laughs, and Wright and Gilmour helped out on his second, Barrett but Syd withdrew from public life, garnering semi-legendary status as an acid casualty, something that was almost certainly unhelpful to his attempts to reintegrate himself with the outside world. He remained an influence on the band – the inspiration for Shine On You Crazy Diamond- and Gilmour's inclusion of Astronomy Domine on the band's live album Pulse, and of Barrett's Dominoes on the deluxe version of his Live In Gdansk album ensured a continuing flow of income for Barrett and his family both before and after his death in 2006.

Saucerful Of Secrets stands as a bridge between the old Floyd (all one album of it) and the new. Syd was gone but he would never be forgotten.

AT A GLANCE

Released 29 June 1968

Recorded 7–8 August 1967, and 18 January – 3 May 1968 at EMI Studios, London

9–11 and 19 October 1967 at De Lane Lea Studios

Genre Psychedelic rock, progressive rock, space rock

Length 39:25

Label EMI Columbia Tower

Producer Norman Smith

SIDE 1

1. Let There Be More Light
2. Remember a Day
3. "Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun"
4. "Corporal Clegg"

SIDE 2

1. "A Saucerful of Secrets"
2. "See-Saw"
3. "Jugband Blues"

Roger Waters – bass guitar, percussion, vocals

Richard Wright – piano, organ, mellotron, vibraphone, xylophone, vocals, tin whistle on "Jugband Blues"

David Gilmour – guitars (except "Remember a Day" and "Jugband Blues"), kazoo, vocals

Nick Mason – drums, percussion, vocals on "Corporal Clegg", kazoo on "Jugband Blues"

Syd Barrett – acoustic and slide guitar on "Remember a Day", guitar on "Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun", vocals and guitar on "Jugband Blues"

TP-Link AV1200 powerline starter kit

Powerline adapters seem to be getting ever popular – and it's easy to see why. Today GadgetsNews has the TP-Link AV1200 Powerline Starter Kit (TL-PA8630P Kit) to review.

The TP-Link AV1200 Powerline Starter Kit (TL-PA8630P Kit) is the third kit to get the GadgetsNews once over. Previously we have checked out the Devolo dLAN 1200+ and the Netgear Powerline 1200.

The current favourite at Gadgets HQ is the Devolo as, not only has it got a pair of Ethernet ports, it has the all-important passthrough plug socket. This means that plugging in the device does not remove a power socket from being available.

Now, if you don't know what a powerline adapter is, these things aim to make it easy for you to bring lovely wired Ethernet connectivity to any area of your home without having to run cables through walls and upstairs.

"How is this done?", you might ask. Well, by using the wires already in the walls that make up your home's electricity mains loop.

TP-Link AV1200 design

The TL-PA8630P Kit comes with the two powerline adapters, two Ethernet cables, and a Quick Start Guide. The kit is actually the TL-WPA8630 and TL-PA8010P, should you want the separate model names. The plugs measure 5.5 x 2.7 x 1.8-inches and 5.2- x 2.8- x 1.7-inches (HWD) respectively. If you have a double outlet, you can have either of the

AV1200 plugs plugged in and still use the one next to it.

They are neither small, nor inconspicuous, but they are packing in quite a lot of tech.

Not only does the second plug feature a trio of Gigabit Ethernet ports, but it also dishes out dual band Wi-Fi. Yes, the plug can juggle 2.4GHz, 5GHz Wi-Fi as well as the three cabled connections!



Above the pass-through socket are LED status indicators for Power, Ethernet connectivity, and powerline connectivity, and there's a Pair button on the right edge that can be used to create or join a secure powerline network, leave a network, or reset the adapter.

The adapters are HomePlug AV2 compliant and use 128-bit AES encryption for security. They also use Multiple In Multiple Out (MIMO) technology for enhanced throughput with speeds of up to 1,200Mbps.

TP-Link AV1200 performance

Installation

As with all powerline devices, the TP-PA8030P adapters are plug-and-play and a snap to install.

Simply plug one adapter into a wall outlet within close proximity to your router and connect it to the router using one of the included Ethernet cables.

Then, plug the second adapter into an outlet in the room where you

want wired Ethernet service, and that's it.

To create a secure powerline network, press and hold the Pair button on one adapter for one second, then do the same on the next adapter (within two minutes).

I have the base powerline adapter downstairs where my router lives and the satellite is upstairs in my office with two PCs plugged in to the ethernet ports. With the TP-Link AV1200, this means there's a spare port for a networked printer or another NAS.

The plug even extends the reach of your Wi-fi thanks to the handy Clone feature. This copies your existing network SSIDs and passwords. This means your

TP-Link AV1200 powerline starter kit

connection will be seamless as you move between areas.

In use

As you can see in the image below taken from the TP-Link software utility, I am getting a steady 462Mbps right now. Granted, not quite the 1200 boasted but it's



better than the Devolo's 436Mbps.

The speed increase may be due to the clever MIMO (Multi-input Multi-output) use of the Ground or Earth wire in the mains. Before, Powerline adapters only utilised the Neutral and Live.

The best thing is that there is no discernible loss in performance when my girlfriend is working on her machine next to me – even when I am gaming!

Bouncing chunky HD video files around didn't hassle the connection either. Streaming videos and FLAC files are all done smoothly.

As a bonus, if you find the blinking LEDs on the plugs distracting, these can either be switched off at the plug or you can use the tpPLC utility above or even the free smartphone app.

TP-Link AV1200 review conclusion

The TP-Link AV1200 Powerline Starter Kit is fast, stable and offers three 1 Gigabit ethernet ports. This means you can have a wired connection to your AV set up without trailing wires across your

room.

Alternatively, as I have done, keep your modem and router downstairs and have your computers wired in upstairs.

Need more connections? Well, you can

add up to 254 nodes (adapters) on a single TP-PA8030P network.

The TP-Link AV1200 Kit not only has the most ports on any

Powerline adapter we ever have had at GadgetsNews, but it has also been the fastest.

I have been really impressed by the TP-Link AV1200 Kit and am now using it as part of my own network. I am even considering adding more.

TP-Link AV1200 kit price and availability

The TL-WPA8630P Kit is available now from Amazon.co.uk for £120.

Overall score: 8.3

Build quality: 8.5/10

Design: 8/10

Ease of use: 8.5/10

Performance: 8.5/10

Value: 8/10



Geek Out V2 Infinity portable DAC/Amp

LH Labs has rolled out numerous Geek Out products since their first foray in to crowd-funded audio tech. Their latest product, the Geek Out V2, is the company's first pre-order campaign on Indiegogo which scored \$345,000 in advance orders. I promised you a review back then, so here it is.

the foam is covered in velour and in the centre is a cutout where you'll find the V2. That's it. No owner's manual. No additional cables, connectors, or carrying case are included.

Either end of the box have useful bits of information on stickers though. At one end a friendly warning not to plug in single-

fluff can the V2 take before nastiness happens?

Ventilation slots for even more heat dissipation populate almost the entire backside of the V2.

At one end of the V2 sits a standard USB 2.0 connector while, at the other, there are single-ended and balanced mini-plug output ports.

Along one side of the V2 Infinity are two buttons. The top button switches between three gain settings: White LED indicates the 100mW output, pale violet (blue and white together) indicates 450mW, blue LED indicates the 1,000mW output. The regular V2 loses the 450mW stage. The bottom button switches between three user-selectable digital modes. These are also marked by LED – more on that later.



Light Harmonic (LH) Lab's Geek Out V2 has some audio shoes to fill as the previous Geek Outs have been well received overall – even to the point of winning awards!

GadgetsNews has never been swayed by popular opinion, mostly because we don't do any research before reviewing products. This also means that all opinions on here are our own.

Is the Geek Out V2 Infinity the bomb or a damp squib?

Geek Out V2 Infinity design

Packaging

The V2's packaging let's you know what to expect with the rest of the Geek Out experience. It's simple, does the job and has everything that matters. In the box's case you have a cellophane-wrapped, open-ended carton that holds a piece of foam. The top of

ended and balanced headphones in at the same time. The other carries the link for the user manual: <http://support.lhlab.com>

V2 Infinity

The Geek Out V2 DAC/Headphone amp measures 78mm x 37.5mm x 13mm thick (LxWxH).

The case of the V2 is made of 3D-printed high-temperature resin. This helps keeps the production costs down, no doubt, and it doesn't look that bad for it.

Naturally, I would prefer a nice slab of metallic goodness but the finish of the V2 I have here is nice enough. There are no rough edges or poorly finished joins.

The swirly pattern on the top side is ornate enough without being flamboyant and the open design allows for great airflow. My only reservation is that, not having a carrying case, how much pocket

Geek Out V2 Infinity performance

Digital modes

The three digital mode I touched on earlier are Time Coherence mode, which uses a minimum phase filter to remove pre-ringing from the signal; Frequency Response mode which uses a slow roll-off digital filter; and Stable Streaming mode which is optimised for streaming sources.

TCM (Time Coherence Mode) – Uses LH Labs **minimum phase digital filter** and time optimisation algorithm, which removes all PRE-ringing from the converted signal and realigns the impulse response. This presents the listener with a more well-defined and natural soundstage.

Geek Out V2 Infinity portable DAC/Amp

FRM (Frequency Response Mode) – Uses a slow roll-off linear digital filter and frequency domain optimisation algorithm to provide a smoother and clearer sound with even lower THD+N in the high frequencies.

SSM (Stable Streaming Mode) – this digital mode has been optimised for streaming music through services like Tidal. Its THD performance is further improved by -3 dB.

An LED beside the DM marker denotes which mode is selected. The blue LED shows that you are in TCM (Time Coherence Mode), Green to denote FRM (Frequency Response Mode), and red indicates SSM (Stable Streaming Mode).

The Geek Out V2 is powered by your computer via USB and has no pesky batteries. This makes it lighter, which is always a good thing for portable gadgets.

Input and output

The V2 will play nice with all PCM (Pulse-code Modulation) formats up to 384/32 and DSD (Direct Stream Digital) up to 128x.

As mentioned previously, the headphone amp is equipped with both balanced and single-ended outputs. The V2's digital circuitry is based around the ESS SABRE9018AQM DAC chip.

The analogue section of the V2 utilises a pure class-A design amp which, like all Class-A designs, generates substantial amounts of heat. The board-mounted heat

sinks and extensive ventilation on the V2's chassis are there to mitigate this possible issue.

Set up

Here we have the usual operating system double standards. If you run Mac OS, all you have to do is plug it in. Your Mac will recognise the device immediately. From there just select the V2 as your audio output via Apple's Midi Control Panel and you're



ready to rock.

If you're a PC owner there's just that extra step of downloading the driver from LH Labs' website and installing it. Then head over to your Playback Device menu and select the Geek Out V2.

Don't bother looking for any volume controls on the DAC. You get that gain control and that's it. Well, apart from the volume control on your computer. But don't fear my lovely audiophiles. Although you adjust the volume via digital controls, the volume is not attenuated by your computer. The Geek Out V2 itself has a 64-step lossless volume control so even at the lowest output levels no data is lost. Phew!

Sources and cans

Sound quality. That's the real point of any DAC/amp isn't it?

I have a fair range of digital tunes that I am slowly migrating over to a dedicated NAS now that I have a decent hard drive. These include 128kbps MP3s (I know – don't judge me! It was a long time ago), OGG, to full fat FLAC and WAV files. Thanks mainly to technology and careful choices, I don't own any difficult to drive or power

hungry headphones.

But, given the power capabilities and gain choices of the V2, I can't imagine it not being able to attain good levels of volume in any case.

I have tested the V2 Infinity with Oppo PM-1, Oppo PM-3, NAD VISO HP50 and some Pioneer SE-MHR5 headphones. Review to follow on the latter set, but they

did come bundled with a balanced cable.

Sound Quality

Opera

Kicking off the testing with my computer audio cans of choice, the Oppo PM-3, and Vivaldi's 'Griselda' from the naive collection.

Through the PM-3s this album was presented with a big sound from a small orchestra. Dynamic range was big, right from the opening piece. The soundstage through the SE-MHR5 and standard cable wasn't as big as the PM-3 but swapping over to the balanced cable and output on the V2 remedied some of that.

Geek Out V2Infinity portable DAC/Amp

With the PM-1s plugged in the soundstage spanned from ear to ear. The frequency range is wide, with plenty of detail evident in both voices and instruments. Arias, such as Act 1. Scene IV “Brami le mie Catene”(Griselda) and Act II. Scene III “Dal Tribunale d’Amore” (Roberto) are presented with an energetic and spirited performance. There is an abundance of dynamics when moving from female to male voice too. In Act II. Scene X: Recitativo (Gualtiero, Constanza, Griselda) the clarity from the lead’s contralto vocals (Marie-Nicole Lemieux) to the rich tones of Steffano Ferrari’s tenor keeps you on the edge of your seat through this exchange.

Frankly, I could listen to Verónica Cangemi’s aria performance as Costanza at Act 1. Scene VII ‘Ritorna a lusingarmi’ on loop through the V2 and the PM-1 cans. The V2 Infinity presents this with such elegance and style. Through the NAD headphones I got similarly wide sound as the Pioneer cans although slightly diffused.

Goat Rodeo

‘Quarter Chicken Dark’ from the Goat Rodeo Sessions; featuring Yo-Yo Ma, Chris Thile, Stuart Duncan and Edgar Meyer is a great angular test for the DAC. This mixture of Bluegrass and Classical shouldn’t work, and some amps and DACs seem to get confused. Not so the V2 Infinity.

Through the Pioneer cans using the balanced output, the violin, cello, mandolin and bass were distinctly and realistically depicted. The PM-1 and the V2 Infinity really produced the most vivid portrayals of the instruments though. The V2’s accurate speed reproduced this almost faultlessly

in my opinion. I realise that some of you might baulk at using £1100 headphones through a £300 DAC/amplifier but then you’ll be missing the point: The V2 Infinity at no point embarrasses itself when in such highfalutin company.

Modern

Dominic Miller’s ‘Tokyo’ was so rich and spatial through the V2 and PM-1 combo. There was plenty of detail throughout without being peaky. The bass is nice, rounded and weighty. The percussion was realistic with a well-defined leading-edge.

Getting something more with a pound – Boris Blank’s ‘Big Beans’ thuds away before percussive stabs hands off to panning synth sounds. The soundstaging is such a wow factor all the way through the ‘Electrified’ album. Just take the jet and horns intro of ‘Key Largo’, for instance. So cool.

Organ

Big sound was produced when Symphony No. 3 in C Minor “Organ”: II. Maestoso came on, as performed by the Chicago Gargoyle Brass and Organ ensemble. The V2 Infinity even opened up the HP50s. I could sense the scale of the room and the instruments were nicely separated. Naturally, the PM-3 improved on this and the PM-1 gave an even more pure, natural sound.

Overall

On the whole, even though the headphones all have their own characteristics, the V2 Infinity performed well. Granted, the lower res MP3s showed themselves for what they were. But, Red Book CDs/rips, WAV,

FLAC and streaming from Tidal were all handled perfectly.

Conclusion

Let me get my niggles out of the way first. Whilst using 3D printing is great, and I have no real issue with the fit or finish, the writing on the case is almost illegible. The other minor point is that the Geek Out V2 Infinity doesn’t feel the sturdiest of devices out there. I have not attempted to flex it, as I have to return it, but I am not sure how much time on the road it will take.

Using the V2 Infinity in my laptop was a great experience overall. Having so many vents did help with the heat quite a bit. Although, as you can see in the picture below, there’s not much clearance for airflow underneath the unit but, as heat rises, it should stay coolish after a few hours play. I was also thankful that the DAC/amp didn’t encroach on my Ultrabook’s charging port.

The LH Labs Geek Out V2 Infinity certainly is a powerful portable DAC/headphone amplifier and, as a result, I am in no doubt that it will be able to handle even the most challenging headphones.

Price and availability

The Geek Out V2 is available now in the UK from Audiobility for £299.

Overall score: 8.2

Build quality: 7.5/10

Design: 8/10

Ease of use: 8.5/10

Sound quality: 8.5/10

Value: 8.5/10

ViewSonic VX2776-SMHD monitor

I have been living with the new 27-inch monitor from ViewSonic that has just been released today – the VX2776-SMHD. This monitor is so skinny I just had to take a sneaky video to share when I got it home.

The ViewSonic VX2776-SMHD is certainly a looker. It's also surprisingly affordable.

Having a 27-inch monitor makes things such as editing and even browsing your socials even more enjoyable.

ViewSonic is an extremely well known monitor maker, so this IPS Paneled, 1920×1080 resolution screen should be pretty good. But is it?

VX2776-SMHD monitor design

I've said it once, and I'll say it again, this monitor gorgeous looking.

The most striking thing is that this monitor has an extremely slim profile. In fact, it is only 6.6mm thin. At its widest point, not including stand, it is still only around 3.5cms. This, matched with its equally skinny bezels, makes the VX2776 not only wonderful eye candy but also ideal for using in a multi monitor setup.

That said, this monitor lacks VESA mounts which might be a stumbling block for some. But, as its stand is quite compact, I can't

see any reason why you couldn't still use it in a dual or triple monitor setup.

About that stand. ViewSonic has chosen a triangular stand for the VX2776 and it looks good from every angle in my opinion.



The business end of the monitor is a Full HD Super IPS panel – a class of IPS panel that's fairly new to the market. They offer great colour quality and viewing angles as well as a good price point.

Around the back you'll find a selection of ports: DisplayPort, HDMI and VGA. There's also a pair of 3.5mm jacks, so you can connect speakers or plug in headphones.. Not an amazing variety but enough for most users I should imagine.

On its stand the VX2776-SMHD measures 621 x 462.6 x 209mm (WxHxD). That's 24.5 x 18.2 x 8.2-inches. The whole thing tips the scales at 3.71Kg.

VX2776-SMHD monitor performance

Specifications and comfort

The new ViewSonic monitor has Full HD resolution with a 4ms GtG average refresh rate. Perhaps not speedy enough for competitive gamers but, saying that, Project Cars is still very playable and first person shooters (Black Ops, Counter Strike, Left 4 Dead, etc) seem fine to me.

Although, when tweaking the settings to get a faster response time, I just succeeded in increasing the ghosting on the panel I have.

On the subject of comfort, the stand is not height adjustable, and nor will it pivot. What you do get is a fair degree of tilt (5 degrees forwards and 17 degrees backwards) so, at least you can get a decent viewing position.

Viewing angles on the VX2776-SMHD are pretty great though with a claimed 178 degrees. This monitor has features such as Flicker-Free and blue light reduction technology that help put less stress on your eyes – although it is always advised to take regular breaks. I know that's easier said than done, especially when gaming.

This monitor also comes with dual integrated stereo speakers. The 2 x 3watts noise slingers aren't going to impress gamers or audiophiles.

ViewSonic VX2776-SMHD monitor

Let's face it though, few integral speakers will.

They are fine for notification pings or to use when nothing else is available though.

On-Screen display

The On-Screen-Display (OSD) buttons live in the bottom right-hand side of the monitor. The buttons themselves are a bit fiddly to find and need a firm press. They aren't really labelled so you'll need to click on one of the buttons in order to reveal the quick access

which helps bring down input lag. There are also options to customise its 'Black Stabilization' (used for customising the black levels), 'Advanced DCR' for more dynamic colours, 'Blue Light Filter' used to reduce eye strain, 'Response Time' which helps reduce the monitor's response time.

These presets enhance gamma curve, colour temperature, contrast, and brightness to deliver an optimised viewing experience for different screen applications.



menu display.

Once you've got the hang of it, the OSD is quite extensive. By pressing on any of the OSD buttons, you'll be presented with a quick access to the view modes: contrast/brightness, input selection and to enter the monitor's menu.

Within the OSD, you can change the input, adjust or mute the audio (this includes changing the audio input), changing the view mode, adjusting the colour, contrast, brightness among other display settings. Through the 'setup menu' tab, you can customise various settings such as disabling the power indicator.

Through the 'ViewMode' tab, you can enable Low Input Lag mode,

Colour accuracy

Colour accuracy is very impressive. I found the colours pretty spot on although slightly under-saturated for my tastes. Again, thanks to the OSD, I could poke around and fine-tune the colour temperature and image quality so that the colours 'popped'; a bit more.

The only common drawback with IPS monitors tends to be the 'IPS glow' which can hamper the contrast ratio. The VX2776 is not immune to this and the glow around the edges can be spotted during darker scenes. Saying this though, the same can be said for monitors three times more

expensive than this from ViewSonic.

Overall though, a very decent showing.

VX2776-SMHD review conclusion

The ViewSonic VX2776-SMHD looks great and has decent colour accuracy. It is also quite well priced for such a stylish 27-inch monitor. There are cheaper alternatives if you're happy to put up with more pedestrian-styled screens though.

Brightness, contrast and response time could be better but these can be tweaked a little through the OSD.

The ViewSonic VX2776-SMHD shows that you can still get all the high-end things such as great design, good colour accuracy and fair response times for low-midrange money.

If you are looking for a great workhorse to fit in your contemporary office, you really need to check out the ViewSonic VX2776-SMHD.

ViewSonic VX2776-SMHD price and availability

The ViewSonic VX2776-SMHD is available from today for £199. There is also a quad HD version, the VX2778-SMHD QHD for £350.

Overall score: 8.1

Build quality: 8/10

Design: 8.8/10

Image quality: 8.5/10

Sound quality: 7/10

Value: 8.5/10

MiVue 658 Wi-Fi dashcam

Dashcams are becoming ever more commonplace these days, with some SatNav systems having them already built-in. I have been taking a look at the Mio MiVue 658 WIFI dashcam.

There's an extremely obvious reason why dashcams are popular, and that's to have a record of an accident you are involved in. This is why the insurance companies might even offer you a reduced premium as having a live video recording of the incident will cut time, and therefore money, should someone contest your claim.

If you get a decent dashcam they might record incidents even when you're not in your car. These clever cams will activate if they sense your car being hit. Very handy should someone knock in to your pride and joy and just drive off without leaving you a note. I feel the days of someone owning up to that kind of mistake have sadly gone.

There's also the much undersold bonus of capturing a particularly scenic drive. Imagine cruising the coast roads on a clear day. You can have video ready to edit or even share straight to your socials, depending on what your cam's capabilities are.

MiVue 658 WIFI design

The MiVue 658 WIFI is fairly chunky but very compact to say that it comes equipped with a 2.7-inch touchscreen on the back and a wide-angled lens taking in a 140° view.

The camera is also loaded with GPS and Wi-Fi, not to mention the ability to capture 'Extreme' HD thanks to its 2304 pixel sensor.

Video is recorded in H.264 format so it's high quality but also space saving. This helps you capture more footage on to your SD card.

There's not much else on the body of the camera, save a pair of

will need to be connected at all times. There is even a kit to hardwire your MiVue into your car's electricity supply.

The end of the cable needs to run through the mount, which took



metallic red buttons.

One is the power switch.

The other is for 'Event' recording and sharing. Kind of a quick capture mode.

On the base of the camera is where you'll find the SD card slot.

Everything else is accessed via the clear touchscreen menus.

MiVue 658 WIFI performance

I passed the camera to my almost domesticated driver (the arrival of my car had been delayed) so that he could take it out on the road.

MiVue power

His first point, he even text me to say this, is that the device's internal battery is close to non-existent. This will be why it comes with an in-car power cable which

him a bit of trial and error to work out. This might be down to the 'men ignoring instructions' default though.

As long as you have it powered, your dashcam will spring in to life as soon as your turn your ignition key.

Now, he didn't comment on this but some of you may have noticed that the mini USB port is on the front of the camera. This is where your power source goes in. So, depending on where your plug point is, you might find the cable trails in front of the lens. Perhaps a rear or side-mounted port would have been the way to go here?

MiVue video performance

I must say that I am impressed with the MiVue 658 WIFI's optics through its F1.8 lens. There is a great field of view and the footage taken in low-light was really good.

MiVue 658 Wi-Fi dashcam

Being able to view the footage on a smartphone via the unit's Wi-Fi is pretty slick. Not only are you able to ping it straight off to YouTube or Facebook, it's a great way to back up the data to review later. I used a USB cable to transfer the captured video on to my PC so I could see it on a big screen. I am guessing this is where having the option of HDMI, even micro HDMI, would be an advantage for TV playback.



Using Mio's MiVue Manager software, you can plot your video recording on Google Maps too. This app also gives you a variety of telemetry gathered during the recording.

The MiVue's GPS gives speed camera alerts and tells you if you're driving over the legal limit in that area. These were all pretty darned accurate with my friendly vehicle owner commenting that the speed read out was practically bang on.

You'll get free updates on the speed cameras as well, so you shouldn't get caught out. Not that you'd drive over the limit, of course.

The 2.7-inch touchscreen makes navigating the unit's features considerably more intuitive than the screens on some more expensive rival dashcams.

MiVue sucker and SmartBox

The supplied suction-cup screen mount that comes bundled with this dashcam seemed to cause my tester some grief. In the clip

above, at the end it looks like he and his car came to a violent end. I am happy to say that this is not the case; it was the suction-cup ping-pong off and throwing the cam on to the dash. I have tested the suction myself using my bedroom mirror with the cam attached and all seemed fine.

Perhaps his car

has a super-curved screen or something.

When you park your car, your dashcam can offer further protection from harm. Put it in to parking mode and connect it up to a 'Smartbox' for power (an optional extra that hardwires a power supply to the camera). It will then detect any impact motion and start recording while you're away.

MiVue 658 Wi-Fi review conclusion

The Mio MiVue 658 Wi-Fi is a feature-rich dashcam, there's no argument about that.

The images it produces are impressive, as is the wide-angled lens. Audio quality is something I have not mentioned as I see that very much as a secondary thing. Well, unless you love uploading footage of your own car karaoke. Saying that, the MiVue 658 Wi-Fi's mic is darned fine too.

The two stumbling blocks that I have to raise are that: 1) You can only use parking mode if you buy the extra Smartbox to provide the power when the ignition is switched off. 2) The positioning of the USB port.

Apart from that pair of points there is very little to complain about the MiVue 658 Wi-Fi. In fact, it definitely has the most important areas covered.

The quality is top notch and the fact that it not only timestamps the footage, but includes speed and GPS coordinates are all great selling points.

Perhaps just as important as its entire technical prowess is that the MiVue 658 Wi-Fi is incredibly easy to use.

MiVue 658 Wi-Fi price and availability

You can buy The MiVue 658 Wi-Fi now for around £160 from most online retailers. Amazon.co.uk has it for £154 right now.

Overall score: 8.2

Build quality: 8/10

Design: 8/10

Image quality: 8.5/10

Sound quality: 8/10

Value: 8.5/10

WD Red 8TB NAS Hard Drive

I've been itching for an excuse to get a real NAS system for a while. Western Digital (WD) has handed it to me on a plate thanks to the release of their 8TB Red hard drives.

Anyone familiar with the Western Digital Red hard drives will already be aware that these are specially designed for network-attached storage devices or NAS.

WD implements their NASWare 3.0 firmware in the Red range which optimises your drives for maximum compatibility and reliability.

To combat known NAS issues like vibration, reliability and temperature. WD designed the WD Red drives with 3D Active Balance Plus anti-vibration technology. This tech mitigates any reduction in performance or drive degradation caused by excessive vibration and noise.

The drives are also intended to operate with lower temperatures and reduced power consumption. WD Red drives are rated with an MTBF of 1 million hours.

This all makes the Western Digital Red drives the perfect solution for SOHO (Small Office/Home Office) and SME (Small/Medium Enterprise) environments. This is because they allow larger storage for growing demands e.g. 64TB

for 8-bay NAS devices, giving you more data real-estate in single appliances. These new WD 8TB drives feature HelioSeal helium-technology, allowing for much larger capacities.

But what does all that mean?

WD Red 8TB in the home

Both me and my partner work from home quite a lot and having a central repository that we can access from anywhere via a web

want to transfer to NAS. With a movie being able to take up more than 8GB of storage space, having room is a must. With a WD Red loaded NAS we should be able to store plenty on a single, fast, reliable and secure hard drive.

WD NASware 3.0 is integrated with the WD Red drives extending their compatibility and functionality up to 8-bay NAS systems. I have opted for the 2-bay QNAP TS-251 as it matches what our requirements are but the one thing I was sure of, it was going to be loaded with WD Red.



The WD Red drives offer significant advantages because they were designed to operate with less heat, compensate for vibration and maintain significant read improvements over their vanilla desktop counterpart.

HDD Vs SSD

These days everyone is loading up their machines with

browser is important to us. As is having a reliable back-up of anything we are in the process of doing.

We have a fair mixture of images, text documents and video; so, having a decent amount of storage space is also important.

As well as work, I have a digital movie and music archive which I

SSDs (Solid State Drives) and I am one of them. In my PC tower, as well as my faithful 1TB spinner, I have 3 SSDs. I have one 120GB that is purely for the computer's operating system and then a pair of Corsair Force 250GB for my games and video editing.

WD Red 8TB NAS Hard Drive

SSDs are great because they're ultra fast and can squirt the data through like nobody's business. The thing is that they're still relatively expensive if you want larger capacities. Traditional hard

drives can still trump SSDs at cost per gigabyte but usually at the expense of performance. HDDs also have to work with limited platter density and that 3.5-inch form factor. It might be larger than SSDs, but hard drives have to pack quite a bit of machinery into that shell and still try to keep them cool.



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Western Digital's new Red 8TB platters are filled with helium and then sealed. This helps it in all matter of ways.

Why helium?

Helium is a 1/7 the density of air and is used to cool such things as MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imagine) machines in hospitals – I knew my 13 years in medical imaging would come in useful one day!

Having the discs sealed in a helium atmosphere reduces power consumption. It also produces less heat, produces fewer vibrations, makes less noise, and allows for greater drive capacity.

This all adds up to a much lower total cost of operation. The drives are expensive to manufacture, but that cost is recovered in energy savings and performance gains.

WD Red 8TB design

OK, it looks like a hard drive.

It is a standard 3.5-inch drive which is clearly labeled with all you need to know.

You only really notice the difference when you pick it up. It's very heavy.

This is due to the fact that, unlike 6TB models which boosted aerial density to achieve their higher capacities, the 8TB version has a total of seven platters stacked into its chassis.

Now, this is where that helium cleverness comes in. This helps

Western Digital be able to cram seven platters inside a chassis that's really only meant for six.

The platters are stacked closer together and, since helium is lighter than air, there's less turbulence as the platters spin. This allows them to spin closer together without the additional worry of the individual disks slamming into each other. This use of helium is why, when you flip the 8TB RED over, you'll notice no air hole. This is a completely sealed unit.

WD Red 8TB specifications

If you need more facts and figures, here are some interesting specifications.

Finding the 8TB Red we can see that it uses the SATA 6Gb/s interface with a formatted capacity of 8TB.

The form factor is the standard 3.5-inch spinner with Advanced Format and Native Command Queuing support.

Looking further down into the performance section: the internal transfer rate is listed at 178 MB/s featuring a 128MB cache and a 5400 RPM Class spindle speed. Load/Unload is listed at 600,000 while the MTBF is at one million hours.

I am sure that all will be excellent news to some of you, whilst others may have moved on shortly after you saw the chart. For the latter group of people, I feel your pain. Suffice it to say, this is an impressive hard drive.

WD Red 8TB NAS Hard Drive

WD Red 8TB performance

If you already have a NAS at home or in your small business then you probably would rather not have to buy a new appliance in order to increase storage.

Thankfully, then, with the new WD Red 8TB a 2-bay NAS device like my QNAP TS-251 could store 16TB with only 2 drives. Previously you would be looking at spreading that over 4 x 4TB drives. This fact alone brings with it reduced power consumption and less vibration with less drives. Not only that though, but an increase in capacity and, depending on your RAID configuration, you can have increased performance as well.

In terms of performance, the drive delivers excellent raw numbers for both read and write.

At an average of 178MB/s its got an excellent transfer rate especially for something that packs so much data across those sardined platters. WD has obviously made great efforts in keeping the WD Red within a certain power and heat envelope; as well as improving capacity and performance.

WD Red 8TB hard drive review conclusion

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WD Red 8TB hard drive price and availability

The WD Red 8TB (Model: WD80EFZX) is available now direct from Western Digital's website for £339.00 incl. VAT.

WD backs the WD Red 8TB with a 3-year warranty.

Overall 8.9

Build quality: 9/10

Design: 9/10

Ease of use: 9/10

Performance: 9/10

Value: 8.5/10

Pioneer SE-MHR5 headphones

You may have read on the Hifi Pig site that Pioneer recently released their new SE-MHR5 headphones aimed at those who enjoy Hi-Res streaming. Well, I've been living with some of these cans for the last couple of weeks and I am ready to tell you about them.

The Pioneer SE-MHR5 is the latest addition to the company's Pure Audio headphone range which currently tops out with the SE-Master 1.

These headphones are equipped by robust drivers that capture a wide 7Hz-50kHz frequency range. The SE-MHR5 headphones also features a lightweight copper-clad aluminium wire voice coil which promises

crystal clear, hi-res audio throughout the frequency range.

You also get a dual-baffle back chamber that serves two purposes. One, to control the balance between the mid and low frequencies. Second, the noise is isolated for greater listening enjoyment.

With all that, Pioneer are making a definite effort to win over the audiophile crowd. I really liked their personal digital audio player, the XDP-100R, and now the company have released the SE-MHR5 headphones. These cans

have been designed to suit the mobile listener.

Let's see how they do in this Gadgets review.

Pioneer SE-MHR5 design

The SE-MHR5's are a good looking, well-built pair of headphones.

The metal headband connecting the two cups is reassuringly solid

The parts that looked like they were going to be metal, are all plastic. This obviously keeps the price down as well as the weight. Unfortunately, this does also have the knock-on effect of making them feel a little less than premium.

The SE-MHR5 are on-ear, rather than over-ear cans but still manage to be about the same size as their larger brethren. This might be a style thing, or a necessity to cater for the drivers.



The headphones fold up to be packaged away in the bundled compact carrying case. This is a nice touch which a surprising amount of headphone makers seem to overlook.

Cables – balanced and unbalanced

A huge plus point is always

beneath its plastic case. It doesn't lose any of that with the adjustable band all the way out either.

This solidness extends to the ear cups which have a hard edge on them as opposed to the more rounded designs.

Between the cups and headband is a small rose-gold accent which is likely to divide opinion but, even I like them. In real life they look, tastefully bling – if that's possible.

A simple silver-coloured Pioneer logo adorns each cup. The cups themselves are black and finished with a raised spiral pattern that is incredibly tactile.

the detachable cable. Thankfully, that is all present and correct here. Not only that, the headphones come bundled with a balanced cable too!

The leads are keyed on the headphone end which means you need to plug and twist it in to the headphones. This means no accidental unplugging from the headphone end at least.

The included cables are easily differentiated by the number of black lines on the plug at the end of the lead. Two black lines is the standard cable, while three can be found on the balanced one.

Pioneer SE-MHR5 headphones

Balanced headphones are generally considered to offer superior sound quality through doubling slew rate and voltage swing power, reducing THD distortion, and almost eliminating crosstalk.

That's a lot of technical information, but all you need to know is that when correctly used balanced headphones result in a clearer, more focussed sound, with a more expansive soundstage.

If you have the option of using the balanced headphone cable then you should do, but you'll need a balanced headphone amplifier.

If you don't know whether your headphone amplifier is balanced or not, or if you're using the standard headphone jack on your phone or laptop, then you probably can't use balanced headphones and should stick to using the cable which has just two black lines on its jack.

Isolation

These headphones are closed-back, meaning sound has a tough time leaking out and disturbing those around you. Conversely this also means you are able to drown out the noise of your commute or co-workers.

The thick memory foam padding on the cups adds to the headphone's great isolating characteristics.

Pioneer SE-MHR5 performance

Kit used

As the Pioneer cans can be used balanced, I took advantage of

using them with the Geek Out V2 Infinity portable DAC/ Headphone amp while it was here through my laptop. Other sources were my Musical Fidelity V-90 HPA which is plugged in to my main living-room system, and the Astro

ramps it up there seems to be some clashing around the low mids and bass frequencies.

Throwing on something a little more acoustically driven, 'Last Night of the World' by Bruce



MixAmp Pro through my PC (in core mode – no added EQ). They were also put to the test through my NVIDIA Shield tablet via an Oppo HA-2 portable DAC/ Amp. Last, and by no means least, my trusty Nexus 6P was used daily on the commute. Files used were either TIDAL Hi-Fi, CD, FLAC or LP tracks.

Performance

In the home

Modern tunes

The Pioneer SE-MHR5 are powered by 40mm drivers and starting off my listening test using my PC rig and Queensryche's 'Jet City Woman' was fairly favourable. The picked bass laying the foundation for the guitar intro came through nicely balanced. When Geoff Tate comes in with his vocals things are still sounding good. It's when the whole band

Cockburn. Again, the bass seems too forward – even for this bass player. The guitar is still lovely and lively and the vocals clear. It just seems that the bass comes through a little too pronounced, flat and lacking personality.

Joni Mitchell's 'Just Like This Train' fares much better. Vocals just forward of the backing band. There's the right amount of space around the individual instruments. The rim shots are snappy and the acoustic guitar nicely jangles away.

The intro to 'Devil You Know' by Jesus Jones swirls away and the sequenced array is defined. The vocal layer is clear. When it kicks in it feels like this is more the kind of tune that the SE-MHR5 have been designed for. The bass pounds confidently, punctuating the rhythm of the tune. Staccato samples pan between the

Pioneer SE-MHR5 headphones

headphones. This is perfect for shutting out the world.

The preference for bass could well be due to both of the SE-MHR5's drivers are within a ported driver housing. This creates a dual chamber to increase the bass performance. You can see the vented ports at the base of each cup. To my ears this means a slightly biased sound.

Classical

Stravinsky and Beethoven, amongst other classical/operatic composers, fared better than I imagined they would.



The former's 'L'oiseau de fue – Suite (1919) – Berceuse' starts with the oboes opening rich and mellow. The harps shimmer and the reedy bassoons are all faithfully reproduced. The strings are placed perfectly and the timpani cuts through nicely.

'12 Contredanses, WoO 14 – No.12' by Beethoven is a lively piece and isn't slow to whip round to full flow. This being dance music of its time, the bass end is well represented. Again, the Pioneer seems to get a bit carried away on this side of things to the detriment of some of the mids.

On the road

This is where the SE-MHR5 excels. The slight bass bias seems to level out as the ambient hubbub increases. This makes the

headphones particularly great on the tube. Usually the bass end struggles against carriage noise on the underground. Now, the slightly scooped EQ of these cans is working in its favour.

Mew's 'Apocolypso' cuts through with guitars and vocals taking care of the upper register and the rhythm section holding it all together.

'10:15 Saturday Night' by The Cure is deliciously lo-fi and I would normally not use this track as part of a review but, as all the detail remains presented to the listener even on a busy Oxford Street, I think it worth mentioning.

Arctic Monkeys and 'I Bet You Look Good on the Dancefloor' keeps its Northern swagger and attitude intact. Again, everything seems on an even keel on the commute.

Balanced

The bass leaning characteristics found in home listening through my Hi-Fi and PC evened themselves out when using the headphones in balanced mode. The soundstage also seemed to widen.

I would not say that it was a night and day transformation but if you do own an amp with a balanced headphone output then I would heartily recommend using it with these headphones.

Pioneer SE-MHR5 review conclusion

The Pioneer SE-MHR5s are well made and feel like they're built to last – even with their plastic-feeling outer construction.

A detachable cable will always win me over, and the option of using them in balanced mode with a compatible headphone amplifier is a definite bonus.

I found the fit of the headphones perfect for my head and the leather-look ear cups were comfortable. Saying that, over the last few days of the London heat-wave, sweaty lobes were an issue – but you'd get that with any similar cans.

The headphone's sound, with its strong emphasis on treble and bass, is more suited for the commute. In a more quiet environment the bass is too noticeably forward for my liking. If you like your dance, techno, hip hop tunes, however, you may well welcome that flavour (flava?) of tuning.

The SE-MHR5 do look great and do impress when out and about. For home listening, if I didn't have a balanced headphone amp, I'd opt for headphones which have a more even response.

I would definitely advise an audition if you're in the market for headphones in this price range.

Pioneer SE-MHR5 price and availability

The SE-MHR5 are available now for a RRP of £199. You can currently nab some on Amazon for £189.99.

Overall score: 8.2

Build quality: 8/10

Design: 8.5/10

Portability: 8.5/10

Sound quality: 8/10

Value: 8/10