

Hifi Pig EXTRA & GadgetyNews

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OCTOBER
2016

HIFI REVIEWS

MUSIC FIRST AUDIO BABY REFERENCE V2
PREAMP
CREEK EVOLUTION 100CD CD PLAYER & 100P
POWER AMP
AUDIOLAB 8300A AMP & 8300CD CD PLAYER
ETALON SUPRA INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
CONVERT TECHNOLOGIES PLATO CLASS A
CYRUS STREAM XA STREAMER/DAC & PSX R2
PSU
VIVID B1 DECADE LOUDSPEAKERS
PEAK PT1 TURNTABLE
STUDIO CONNECTIONS CARBON POWER CABLE
QUADRASPIRE X REFERENCE RACK
MEZE CLASSIC 99 HEADPHONES
FROM THE VAULT (McIntosh MA 5200)

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REPORTS AND
PHOTOGRAPHS
FROM NATIONAL
AUDIO SHOW,
WHITTLEBURY

BEHIND THE
BRANDS
WITH CONRAD MAS
OF AVID HIFI



Tellurium Q®

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"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.



Stereo Times
The Complete Audiophile Magazine

BEST PRODUCT 2015 High Fidelity.pl

HI-FI WORLD



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WELCOME

It's been another busy month here at Hifi Pig and the size of this e-mag is testament to this – 170 pages of great reviews, news, comment, interviews and more!

The highlight of the month was our first official visit to the National Audio Show in Whittlebury, UK where we had the opportunity to meet up with old friends and meet new ones. The Hifi Pig team was out in force and we heard some pretty great sounding gear at the show. There seemed to be a good few people in the media talking the exhibitors and the show down, but we at Hifi Pig applaud the organisers, the exhibitors that take so much trouble to carefully prepare their stalls and rooms and most of all we applaud the hordes of people who turned up over the weekend to enjoy some great company and great music.

Hope you enjoy this month's bumper issue!

HIFI NEWS & REVIEWS

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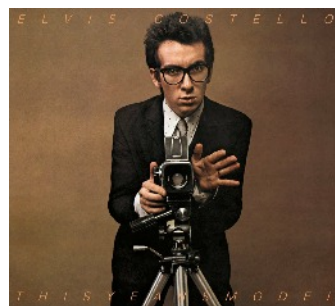
MUSIC

ALBUM REVIEWS

LIVE MUSIC ((Roy Harper, Eska and Fraser Anderson / Callahan Morrison and Eli West))



CLASSIC ALBUM (Elvis Costello And The Attractions - This Year's Model)



CLASSIC BAND (Leaving Blues: The Story of Taste)



COLUMNS

BIRDS EYE VIEW - A day in the life at Hifi Pig Towers

BIRD'S EYE VIEW
AUDIOPIG AND MORE FROM THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY LINETTE SMITH

READERS LIVES - A fascinating DIY turntable build with Hifi Pig reader Stuart Armstrong

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

RETRO BITES -Janine focuses on the Philips Motional Feedback loudspeakers

RETRO BITES
CLASSIC AND MODERN AUDIO...BY JANINE ELLIST

FIDELITY MATTERS - Ian Ringsted, inspired by the success of Team GB, looks at some of the Great British Hifi brands

FIDELITY MATTERS
A LIFETIME OF MUSIC AND AUDIO EXPERIENCE AND COMMENT...BY IAN RINGSTED

INTERVIEW -
Hifi Pig goes Behind The Brands with Conrad Mas of AVID Hifi



NATIONAL AUDIO SHOW 2016 - 23 pages of comment and photographs

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Leema Announce Tucana II Anniversary Edition Integrated

PRICE: \$4995

AVAILABLE: NOW



Leema Acoustics has launched the Tucana II Anniversary Edition integrated, a significantly upgraded version of a much-loved amplifier. The new model, which has been improved and updated by Leema's Lee Taylor, celebrates 10 years since the original Tucana amplifier, Leema's first electronics product, was introduced.

The Tucana II Anniversary Edition benefits from a number of aesthetic enhancements to include a new front panel with a machined and chrome-plated solid billet Leema Delta logo and 'ANNIVERSARY EDITION' badge.

Internally, the new amplifier features upgraded printed circuit boards with twice the amount of copper to further reduce the resistance of PCB traces and improve power delivery. All relevant capacitors have been upgraded to Nichicon's high-quality audio-grade MUSE Series and the PCB-to-speaker-terminal wiring is now Leema's new Reference 2 cable which features 16 woven cores plus multi-strand high-purity copper with individual strand silver-plate.

Each amplifier will be supplied with an innovative 'passport' integrated into the manual, where the three key stages of production are signed off by the engineer responsible along with measurement results.

Amplifier Technologies Inc Launch AT5XXNC Amplifier Range

PRICE: \$1,895.00 - \$3,995.00

AVAILABLE: NOW



Amplifier Technologies, Inc. today added a new series of amplifiers. The AT5XXNC amplifiers use Hypex N-Core Class D output modules with ATI designed input buffers and linear power supplies and are available with two power configurations. The AT52XNC amps are rated at 200W RMS per channel at 8 ohms with 300W RMS at 4 ohms and are available with 2 to 8 channels. The AT54XNC amplifiers use two N-Core modules per channel in a differential bridged output configuration delivering 500W RMS per channel at 8 ohms and 900W RMS at 4 ohms. The AT54XNC amplifiers are available with 2, 3 or 4 channels

They are the first ATI amplifiers to use micro-processor control for turn-on delay and feature automatic AC power recognition and configuration. The amplifiers not only recognise whether they are hooked up to 117V or 230V nominal power, they automatically self-configure. The amplifiers also incorporate a new and novel "sleep" circuit. When the amplifier receives no input signal for a period of 10 minutes, power is removed from the output modules and a front-panel LED begins to flash. As soon as an input signal is detected on any channel, normal playback operation resumes instantaneously.

Rockna Wavedream DAC Firmware Update 4.01



Rockna DAC is available from £3950 for the single ended 'edition' model with balanced and 'Signature' versions also available. Released today is the latest firmware for existing customers and naturally new units will ship with Firmware 4.01 enabling DSD512 compatibility.

Release notes for 4.01:

- enabled DSD256 (you need to set ASIO driver as output)
- enabled DSD512 (same)
- enabled dither option (not active in previous version)
- enabled clock option (same)
- brand new upsampling filters

Rockna Wavedream Dac and NET player is available in the UK at BD Audio.

Russ Andrews YelloPower Cable Is Back



For 30 years Russ Andrews has been supplying accessories for hifi and AV systems. To celebrate this occasion the company is releasing an updated version of one of its most successful products from the past three decades, and is making it available to the mass market with a special anniversary price.

The Russ Andrews YelloPower™ mains cable shares its name with a cable that sold in its thousands when first introduced in the 1990s. Setting it apart from the original cable is over 20 years' of additional research and development by the leader in this field, chairman and technical director, Russ Andrews, into the effects of 'dirty' mains on the performance of hifi systems.

The YelloPower is manufactured using eight individually insulated pure copper Kimber Kable conductors, arranged in the famous Kimber weave configuration. The 13 awg (2.62mm²) cores for live and neutral ensure excellent current handling and pure PVC insulation is employed. The UK built cable is finished off with a 13A Russ Andrews fuse, black Tecflex sleeving and robust IEC and UK three pin plugs. International plugs are available at no extra cost. The YelloPower branded heat shrinks, in yellow, add a reference to the original all yellow cable.

Bowers & Wilkins P7 Wireless Cans Available In US



P7 Wireless builds on the original P7 and the P5 Wireless.

P7 Wireless combines this with aptX™ Bluetooth®. Within seconds, P7 Wireless can be paired with any of the most popular Bluetooth-enabled devices such as a phone, tablet or computer. Once paired, it's as simple as switching on and pressing play.

Centre Speakers And Multi-Channel Systems From ATC

PRICE: £680 - £3925

AVAILABLE: NOW

ATC has developed two new centre channel speakers for multi-channel system applications. Available in two sizes and emulating their SCM7 and SCM11 loudspeaker counterparts, the new C1C and C3C designs "will deliver dynamic wide-bandwidth accuracy and outstanding vocal intelligibility" at the centre of compact 5.1 channel ATC systems for audiophile film and music devotees.



5.1 channel systems

Two new compact ATC 5.1 channel speaker systems combine the C1C and C3C with the SCM7, SCM11 and ATC 'C1 sub' active subwoofer to energise multichannel applications. Deploying identical high performance, low distortion acoustic design throughout, the C1 System comprises four SCM7s, the C1C, and the C1 Sub. The C3 system unites the C3C with matching SCM11s in the front, and for 'family-friendly' installation, the SCM7s in the surround positions

Sony Launches Signature Series Audio Range

Celebrating its 70 anniversary year, Sony has taken a look back at its audio heritage, like the world famous Walkman®. Using the very latest technology, the design and engineering teams have created this series to give 'the highest quality, pure audio sound; this is Sony's signature for sound quality.'



The MDR-Z1R (£1,700 / €2,249) headphones have a wide frequency range with up to 120kHz playback in High Resolution Audio and feature a 70mm HD driver unit. Sony have used luxury materials such as genuine leather ergonomic ear pads, lightweight beta titanium headband, and a stainless steel wire mesh housing protector.

The iconic Walkman® has been revamped with the flagship WM1 series, including NW-WM1Z (£2,500 / €3,299) and NW-WM1A (£1,000 / €1,299). These digital music players that can handle any music file from the High Resolution Audio end of the scale to low quality mp3. They feature new DSEE HX™ technology which gives five modes that you can select based on the type of music you are listening to; Standard, Female Vocal, Male Vocal, Percussion or Strings. A newly developed FT CAP□High polymer capacitor□has been built into the power supply of the amp section plus they feature Bluetooth®, LDAC™ so you can play your audio files from multiple sources. The WM1Z has a gold plated oxygen free copper chassis. The cable used inside the WM1Z is four wire braided cable engineered with KIMBER KABLE® used as the wiring material

from the amp to the headphone jack. For those who prefer an aluminium finish on the chassis there is also the NW-WM1A.

The TA-ZH1ES (£1,600 / €2,099) headphone amplifier will deliver the sound of High Resolution Audio (Up to DSD 22.4MHz/PCM 768kHz/32bit) The D.A. Hybrid Amplifier Circuit gives the combination of Sony's full digital amplifier S-Master HX™ together with analogue amplifier. The newly developed Frame/Beam/Wall (FBW) chassis combines Wall structure with the familiar FB chassis that has been cultivated in the ES series. The Wall is created by shaving extruded aluminium and realises a ridged body that can suppress unnecessary vibration. The TA-ZH1ES also has new DSEE HX and DSD Remastering Engine which converts PCM source to DSD 11.2MHz..Sony say 'Compatibility is key with the ZH1ES and although this product is best enjoyed with a combination of the new Z1R headphones and WM1Z/WM1A, it is compatible with other models. With various inputs and a wide range of balanced outputs, plus unbalanced connections, you can enjoy music in very high quality with variety of headphones, without any compromise'.

Audeze Launch First Planar Magnetic In Ear Monitors

PRICE: \$399 & \$599

AVAILABLE: NOVEMBER



Audeze have launched the world's smallest planar magnetic headphones, their in ear iSINE range. Audeze say 'The iSINE 10 sounds and looks like no others, an innovative design without a care for the same old status quo of balanced armature or dynamic driver designs. The Fluxor Magnets and large 30mm planar magnetic diaphragms deliver precise control and fast response times without distortion so music always sounds alive. Add the included Lightning cable with DSP and there's no other in-ear headphone that even comes close to its performance.' Of the iSINE 20 they say 'The iSINE 20 is one step up from the iSINE 10 featuring an even longer Uniforce voice-coil that covers the ultra-thin diaphragm to a greater extent, enabling better control and responsiveness for better bass, clarity, and improved imaging.'

They have miniaturised their planar and the iSINE series weigh barely 20g. Both the iSINE 10 and iSINE 20 are hand crafted in Audeze's California factory and the company have worked with DesignworksUSA, a BMW Group Company, in the design and development of the new IEMs.

Meze 12 Classic IEMs

PRICE: €69

AVAILABLE: NOW

Meze have launched another new in ear monitor, the Meze 12 Classics. They say that they are 'conceived to hide the high-end audio tech beneath a sense of style. Design should be like a great performance: you have to make it look easy!' They feature a mic and remote compatible with all 3.5mm port smartphones, tablets and audio devices, copper-clad aluminium voice coil, titanium coated driver membrane and a



walnut wood housing. Includes 4 sets of silicone ear-tips and a set of Comply foam tips



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For more details and a full list of exhibitors www.indulgenceshow.com

Taga Harmony Platinum V40 SE V2 Loudspeaker



TAGA Harmony has unveiled its Platinum SE series reference bookshelf speaker in a deeply revised version: Platinum B-40 SE v.2.

Features

TLIE (Taga Low Interference Enclosure) – handcrafted enclosure is now more rigid and neutral to vibrations and colouration. Increased MDF walls thickness from 15 mm to 18 mm.

The 3rd generation TPTTD-II (Taga Pure Titanium Tweeter Dome) utilises a differently shaped and lighter titanium cone.

The 2nd generation TWCD-I (Taga Woolen Cone Driver) with different composition of cone materials. The redesigned voice coil utilizing thicker and purer flat wire offers even higher power handling and longer operation time without increased temperature.

New configuration of the drivers: the tweeter is positioned closer to the mid-woofer than in the previous version.

The dramatically upgraded crossover.

The Platinum B-40 SE v.2 is available in an additional new finish: natural Real Wood African Walnut Veneer with high-end clear gloss piano lacquer.

YG Acoustics Announce Sonja XV Loudspeakers



Sonja™ XV is an extreme, four tower version of Sonja™, created to celebrate YG Acoustics™' upcoming 15 year anniversary (2002-2017). It combines everything that YG Acoustics™ knows about speaker design, and incorporates several next generation technologies that cannot be found elsewhere.

The bass, mid bass and mid range units are made in-house using YG Acoustics™' proprietary BilletCore™ technology: the drivers are precisely machined out of massive slabs of aircraft grade aluminium. A pair of Sonja™ XV utilises a total of 18 BilletCore™ drivers. The brand new BilletDome™ tweeter is YG Acoustics™' most complex mechanical invention to date: a resonance free soft dome is supported by a stiff, light airframe machined from aluminium billet. The air frame weighs a mere 30 milligrams, but its critical sections are up to 14 times thicker than a typical hard dome. Finally, a tweeter that combines the best of both hard and soft The tweeter's motor is YG Acoustics ForgeCore™ system: in-house CNC cutting introduces 3D geometries into the magnet system. YG Acoustics™ crossover circuits are all created using proprietary software developed entirely in-house. DualCoherent™ technology provides the best frequency response and relative phase available. Sonja™ XV's bass crossover uses a brand new technology: ViseCoil™ inductors are CNC wound in-house, then encased in a vice-like milled structure to eliminate vibration and tighten tolerances. Residual loss is reduced by 24%, and linearity is improved by 60%. Sonja™ XV's mid and tweeter crossover uses ToroAir™ technology: in-house CNC wound toroidal air-core inductors eliminate cross talk. Sonja™ XV's cabinet is constructed of precision machined aircraft grade aluminium alloy. The multi layered structure is optimised for each module's specific frequency range. FocusedElimination™ anti-resonance technology keeps mechanical losses low, by combining the minimised turbulence of a sealed design with the low friction otherwise associated with enclosure free concepts.

Existing pairs of YG Acoustics™ Sonja™ can be expanded to Sonja™ XV, without the need to replace the speakers. Sonja™ XV, in addition to its two channel (stereo) performance, is also fully compatible with multi channel audio and home theatre systems.

Shipping weight of a pair is 1.3 tons!

McIntosh Launch MHA150 Headp

PRICE: \$4500

AVAILABLE: NOW

McIntosh has announced the launch of the new MHA150 Headphone Amplifier made in their Binghamton, NY factory, they say 'the MHA150 Headphone Amplifier is a worthy successor to the critically-acclaimed MHA100. The MHA150 contains the same feature set and performance standards but adds our new 2nd generation digital-to-analogue converter (DAC) that provides support for DSD and DXD files to give access to the latest in digital music.' McIntosh's Autoformer technology found in their large mono and stereo amplifiers has been adapted to produce three headphone impedance ranges of 8-40, 40-150 and 150-600 Ohms so that 'every headphone will receive the legendary McIntosh sound quality and performance'.

For enjoying DSD and DXD files, the USB input accepts PCM signals up to 32-bit/384kHz and supports DSD64,



DSD128 and DSD256 along with DXD 352.8kHz and DXD 384kHz.. Their proprietary MCT input has also been added to the MHA150; when paired with the MCT450 SACD/CD Transport, it offers a secure DSD connection for playback of the high definition audio on SACDs. For connecting digital devices, an optical and coaxial input are included along with the USB and MCT inputs; two analogue inputs are also available. They have also included Headphone Crossfeed Director (HXD®) The MHA150 is smaller than McIntosh's other amplifiers, it's the same width as the MB50 Streaming Audio Player and the two can be combined to start building a complete system as the MHA150 can drive a pair of quality desktop or small bookshelf speakers via its 50 watt stereo speaker outputs.

Von Schweikert UniField 2 MkIII Loudspeaker

PRICE: \$10,000/PR

AVAILABLE: NOW



Von Schweikert Audio has announced their newest loudspeaker, the UniField 2 MkIII. First introduced in 2006, the stand-mount designed UniField 2 proved very popular. So much so, it's earned the distinction of being the highest selling model of any Von Schweikert Audio design since its introduction.

The design concept for the UniField Line is about delivering the highest level of sonic performance and build quality in the smallest footprint for music lovers with limited space. Not only does it enjoy a new cosmetic style, the UniField 2 MkIII is a dramatic improvement over its predecessors says the Californian company's press release. The three way design sp incorporate trickle down proprietary low-distortion network technology from their VSA flagship

The Longdog Audio Quartz Mains Regenerator



PRICE: £895

AVAILABLE: NOW

The Longdog Audio Quartz Reference Regenerator is designed to remove the

limitations of the standard mains power supply, specifically designed for use with idler driver turntables such as the Garrard and Lenco types. Most

turntables powered by AC voltage will benefit from using this.

The LDA Regenerator is designed to supply a power requirement of 80W or less at 230v AC 50Hz. Ideally one Regenerator per component should be used, but as long as the total consumption is less than 80W they can power more than one device. The output supply is provided from a Neutrik powerCon socket and is protected from overload by a time delay fuse. The unit

Atlas Announce Zeno For IEMs

PRICE: 1.00m £ 280.00, 1.50m £ 290.00

AVAILABLE: NOW



Atlas Cables has added to its range of Zeno replacement headphone cables with the launch of the Zeno IEM – a light and compliant yet durable upgrade cable for those who use in-ear monitors. Zeno IEM combines Atlas Cables' unique cable technology with its latest range of dedicated solder-free connectivity options called Metik.

Compatible IEMs from launch include Sure, Beyer Dynamic, Fit Ear and Ultrazone, with many more available upon request.

Zeno IEM features Ohno Continuous Cast (OCC) copper conductors, which are covered in FEP (Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene) low temperature deposition dielectric to protect the integrity of the OCC material. Wrapped within a protective soft PVC inner liner and finished with a tangle-free fabric outer jacket, Zeno is extremely durable and ideal for any level of usage.

Developed specifically for Zeno and covering a wealth of connection options, Atlas' Metik non-solder crimp plugs provide signal consistency from socket to socket. Available in 3.5mm, 6.3mm and 4-pin XLR for the source end, Metik plugs provide a direct, airtight metal to metal contact.

Ground Control From CAD

PRICE: £1,650 (incl. VAT) including one cable

AVAILABLE: NOW

Audio engineers typically put a great deal of effort into making sure that the positive rails of their DC power supplies have, among other things, low ripple and noise. However, considerably less thought tends to go into the negative rail and the signal ground plane, say Computer Audio Design in their latest press release.

The purpose of CAD's GC1 Ground Control is to reduce high frequency noise on the signal ground plane.

Like any electrical signal, this high frequency noise will always seek the path of least resistance and flow around the system searching for a place to ground. The GC1 provides a simple and effective route for it to do so and then converts the noise into heat.

The GC1 Ground Control's methods for achieving this are something of a closely guarded secret, but involve a highly complex combination of proprietary materials, borrowing technology from aerospace engineering and featuring an ultra-precise internal configuration and construction. Being a passive device, it does not plug into any mains power. Considerable attention has also been paid to its cables and connectors, since it is essential that the route from signal ground into the GC1 is the easiest one that the high frequency noise can take.



The GC1 Ground Control can be connected to any audio component that has an unused input or output connection. Whether a DAC, streamer, computer, CD Player, NAS, router, phono stage, preamplifier, amplifier, etc – if it has a spare input or output connector (RCA, XLR, spade, USB or Ethernet) then you can plug in the GC1 Ground Control.

Each GC1 sports two connectors – allowing you to hook up two components, to use both connectors for a single component or to daisy chain more than one GC1 to a single component. A choice of cables with various connectors is available; one cable is included with each GC1 while additional cables are available for trial and for purchase.

The GC1 Ground Control can also be attached to earth. If you have any type of earth connection on your audio system or power distribution, CAD can supply a cable with an appropriate connector that will fit. And since any audio component with a conductive case must have the case connected to earth, the results of reducing high frequency noise on earth and therefore on your audio component can be breathtaking, Berry claims.

The Bohemian Rhapsody Experience



Google Play and British rock legends Queen have teamed up to create The Bohemian Rhapsody Experience, a virtual reality experiment powered by groundbreaking immersive audio and interactive technologies that aim to push the boundaries of creative expression and evolve the way we experience entertainment. Soundtracked by a remixed 3D spatialized version of the quartet's iconic hit "Bohemian Rhapsody" that reacts sonically to the user's movements, the app gives users the opportunity to travel through an interactive visual narrative developed by VR pioneers Enosis VR along with a team of world-class animators and designers.

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The SMS1 speakers.

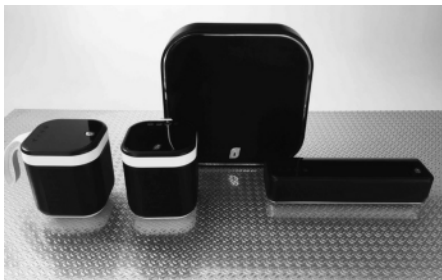
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Damson Announce S-Series Home Entertainment System



Damson Audio have introduced the S-Series Home Audio Entertainment System including the S-Bar (Soundbar) + S-Woofer (Subwoofer) and the S-Cube (portable Bluetooth speaker). You can start your system with the S-Bar + S-Woofer and expand your system to connect to up to eight speakers over time. The S Series allows you to stream and play music throughout the entire house, or play different tunes on each speaker. Speakers connect easily to streaming services like Apple Music, Deezer, Pandora, Spotify with no need for any additional apps or downloads.

Chord Electronics Release Cable Accessory Pack for Mojo

PRICE: £59.99

AVAILABLE: NOW



Chord Electronics has launched a comprehensive Cable Accessory Pack for the Mojo DAC/headphone amp, to include cables, adaptors and a USB adaptor block.

The new USB adaptor block module makes connecting Mojo with an OTG (On-The-Go) Micro USB cable or Lightning-to-USB Camera Adaptor cable much simpler. The module attaches directly to the Mojo's inputs as an extension of the device and a hollow recess houses the bulky end of Apple's Lightning-to-USB cable and Android-type OTG cables

The Chord Company Announce Clearway Analogue With ARAY Tech

PRICE: \$100/m

AVAILABLE: NOW

The Chord Company, has introduced a new ARAY-technology analogue interconnect to its Clearway range. The Clearway Analogue, which is hand-built at Chord's Wiltshire headquarters, has been designed "to show music lovers just how good the new wave of entry-level DACs, turntables and streamers really are".

Clearway Analogue features the ARAY conductor configuration used on the Chord C-line, with a raft of critical upgrades. Chord's technicians have improved the conductors by using high-purity oxygen-free copper, upgraded the insulation to FEP and used a higher density foil to improve the shielding.

Clearway Analogue is fitted with the high-performance Chord VEE 3 direct-



silver-plated RCA plug and is also available terminated with DIN and XLR connectors.

Typically, cables that use oxygen-free copper as a conductor material will use either polyethylene or PVC as an insulating material. What sets The Chord Company's Clearway cable apart is its use of FEP, a derivative of PTFE with very similar performance characteristics.

New MC Cartridges From Gold Note

PRICE: €650 & €950

AVAILABLE: NOW

Gold Note has announced the release of Donatello, the new MC cartridge available in two models: Donatello Gold (low output level) and Donatello Red (high output level).

Donatello features a solid body of machined Duraluminum, a rigid Aluminum cantilever and a Micro Elliptical diamond exclusively developed in collaboration with Adamant-Namiki.

"The idea was to bring some of the premium features introduced on our flagship lines into a lighter, smaller body in order to create a cartridge compatible with a wide range of tonearms, without compromising the design and the build quality" – explained Gold Note's Maurizio Aterini – "for instance, to



ensure structural perfection the diamond tip is locked in a stiffened aluminum cantilever that is supported by a titanium telescopic pipe."

Donatello also features long gold-plated pins for better connection and both models can be matched easily with any MC and MM phono pre-amplifier.

Maurizio added: "I really wish to offer to audiophiles the cartridge they deserve, with great audio performances, superior build quality and irresistible aesthetic appeal."

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

Erzetich's Headphone Amps Under The Knife



Three of Erzetich's headphone amplifiers (Bacillus, Bacillus Tilia and Perfidus) have gone under the knife. While their entrails are mostly untouched, the most obvious difference is now their appearance. Acrylic front panels have been replaced by 7 mm thick aluminum that demanded a different graphic approach, along with some other tweaks and upgrades on their exterior.

LAMM Announce L2.1 Reference Preamplifier

PRICE: \$22000

AVAILABLE: NOW



The L2.1 Reference employs a pure class A operation from input to output, with no overall feedback at any stage; all stages, including high current output buffers, are single-ended.

The preamplifier's power supply features a choke contained filter, a full-wave vacuum tube rectifier and vacuum tube voltage regulator. Other features include 3 inputs; one tape/home theatre processor loop; output signal phase switch; balanced and single-ended outputs; protection circuitry designed to enable manual muting of the output signal; and built-in remote on/off for LAMM power amplifiers.

Reloop Announce £350 Turntable For Domestic Market

PRICE: £350

AVAILABLE: NOW

Reloop HiFi has announced the introduction of their first record player. With decades of experience in the DJ and Professional Audio industry, Reloop have rapidly become a market leader in the supply of DJ turntables and accessories. But during the German company's twentieth anniversary year, they have decided to transfer their skills and experience to a new task; producing a turntable that's been designed for music enthusiasts and sound purists. The result is TURN 3.

TURN 3 is a precision-engineered belt-drive record player with a heavy MDF construction and clever anti-vibration feet, which ensure a stable platform for the turntable. The sleek gloss black plinth houses a low-noise DC motor that keeps un-wanted noise and resonance to a minimum. The motor is connected to the acoustically-treated aluminium die-cast platter via a drive belt that loops around the main platter's inner-ring. The platter then sits atop a smooth-yet-sturdy spindle system.

The straight tonearm was specially designed for TURN 3, and offers optimal tracking. The arm's premium finish also complements the turntable's quality aesthetic, while the clearly



labelled counterweight and convenient anti-skate dial make set-up effortlessly simple. TURN 3 is supplied with the Ortofon 2M Red cartridge (SRP £89.00), and the use of a special curved headshell makes for easy changing between cartridges with different types of music or vinyl records (i.e. stereo or mono records).

TURN 3 is operated by a master switch on the back panel, and a three-point speed control on top of the plinth. The controller allows for effortlessly simple switching between 33 1/3, 45 and 78rpm speeds with tight accuracy and reliable stability. Then, for further convenience, there is a switchable Semi-Automatic Auto Stop function, which allows the turntable to automatically start when the tonearm is placed in position, and stop again at the end of the record.

Taga Harmony's New Amplifiers



The TA-400MIC is a CI A/B speaker stereo amplifier with MIC mixing with 2 x 60W RMS @ 8ohm and 2 x 90W RMS @ 4ohm. Power is delivered by an oversized, audiophile grade toroidal transformer. It has a built-in headphone output plus a built-in microphone input with a mixing and echo control. There is a USB input to quickly and easily play music from USB flash drives (supports MP3 / WMA / WAV / APE files) for almost endless playback and connection of smartphones, tablets and laptops is possible via MP3 (3.5mm stereo jack) input on the front panel. Two RCA stereo inputs at the rear to hook additional equipment like a CD player, radio tuner or other analogue devices and it features an REC output for an external recording device (e.g. Tape or CD recorder). It also comes with two speaker outputs (A and B).

The TA-25Mini is a 2 x 25W 8ohm, Class D, CI mini stereo amplifier with a frequency response of 30Hz – 18kHz.



MC Step-Up Transformers
Phono Amplifiers
Pre Amplifiers



Linn Announce New Klimax DS

PRICE: DS £15800, DSM £18900
AVAILABLE: NOW

“**K**atalyst takes an unprecedented level of control over the critical elements that lie at the heart of the analogue signal’s creation, to deliver the most accurate reproduction ever from a digital source” claims the Scottish brands recent press release.

In 2007 Linn launched their original DS player and in 2016, the five key aspects below have been improved utilising Linn’s investments in R&D:

Reference Level – Now completely isolated from noise to produce a high-stability input Reference Level that generates the signal’s amplitude without variation.

Independent Power Supplies – Independent, isolated power supplies are tailored for each process, so feedback from one process cannot influence the performance of another.

Data Optimisation – Linn-designed data optimisation stage that prepares the



digital signal for conversion with greater accuracy, minimising errors right at the start of the process.

Master Clock – A single high precision clock with its own independent power supply ensures greater timing accuracy throughout.

Output Driver – The new ultra-low distortion analogue output driver prepares the analogue signal for transmission out of the device, making it less susceptible to noise and degradation.

Every aspect of the original DS design was carefully drawn from first principles in order to optimise performance, from the electronics inside to the clamshell enclosure, machined from a solid billet of aluminium.

PMC Rocks With Ross Halfin At The Indulgence Show



PMC will be providing the music at an exclusive exhibition that features the photographs of Ross Halfin, the world’s leading rock music photographer, during The Indulgence Show in London on 14-16 October.

Using its studio reference loudspeakers, the MB2 XBD-A (Active), as used at Metropolis Mastering, Abbey Road and many other studios around the globe, PMC will provide the aural backdrop to the exhibition. Music from the legends of rock, whose images will be gracing the walls, will be played on a Bryston BDP2 digital player, connected to the BDA3 digital to analogue converter and a BP26 pre-amplifier.

Taking place in the 120m2 Chalon Room, part of the Champagne Suite on the main show level, the exhibition will feature many never-before-seen photographs by Ross, including those from his time on the road with Iron Maiden, Metallica, Def Leppard, Kiss, and Motley Crüe. Also featured will be photographs from his stints as tour photographer for Paul McCartney, George Harrison, The Who and many others.

Ross will be in attendance for a period of time each day and will be presenting a talk about his life on the road with the world’s biggest rock acts.

Zesto Audio Andros Téssera Phonostage

Téssera means 4 in Greek. This newest product from Zesto Audio is aptly named as it is designed to work with up to 4 different tonearms or turntables.

The Andros Téssera designed with 100% tube circuitry and no solid state devices anywhere in the signal path and all switching is done with reed relays.

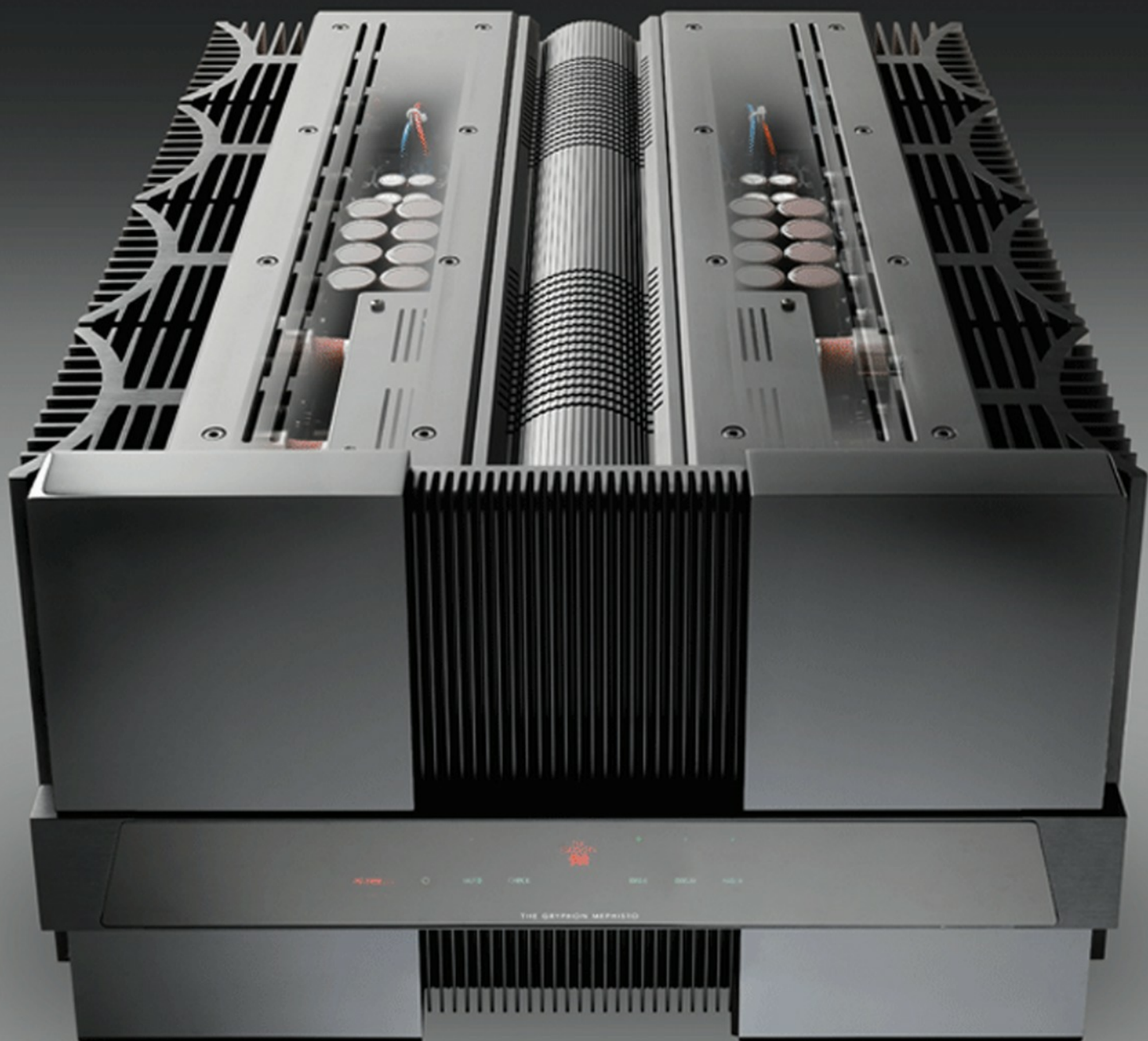
Some of the new features include true transformer balance outputs driven by dedicated output tubes. The Andros Téssera has a new circuit design that is partnered with significantly upgraded larger MC step-up transformers to



capture the most delicate signals in the grooves.

The Téssera is designed with 2 completely independent dual mono channels that can accommodate 1 MM and 1 MC per channel.

THE GRYPHON



GRYPHON MEPHISTO

www.gryphon-audio.dk

Raidho Speakers Make UK Debut At Hifi Show Live 2016



High-end hifi distributor Decent Audio has announced a new exclusive UK distribution agreement with Danish loudspeaker brand Raidho. On 29th-30th October a selection of Raidho's speakers will make their UK debut at this year's Hifi Show Live in Windsor.

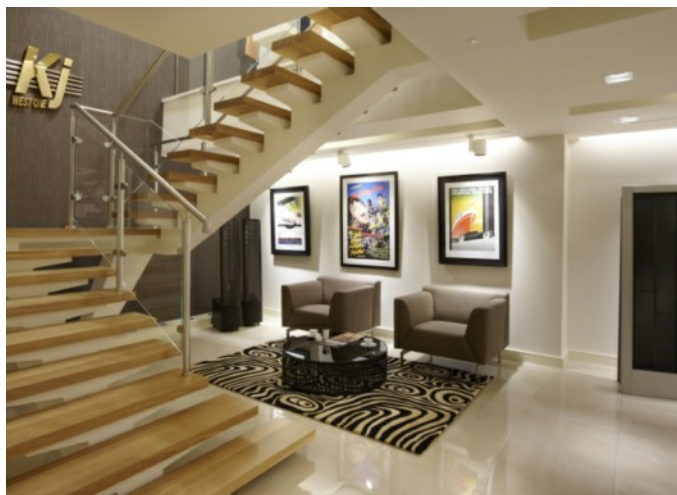
Roon Ready Merging Technologies



Merging Technologies will display a pre-production version of the Merging+NADAC Player at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. The result of a dynamic partnership with Roon Labs, On a Higher Note, Merging's US distributor will be demonstrating the product in Long Peaks on the Mezzanine floor of the Denver Marriott Tech

Center. The concept of Roon's ground breaking player program being offered in integrated solutions is not new; there being many existing partners with products available, but this will be the first time that the focus will shift to a complete turnkey and networked solution offering stereo as well as multichannel capability up to DSD256 and DXD.

KJ West One Appointed A Key Retailer For McIntosh In London



McIntosh Laboratory, along with its UK distributor Jordan Acoustics, has joined forces with exclusive central London audio dealer, KJ West One, to bring flagship models from the iconic New York marque's range to the capital. KJ West One will now become the capital's biggest McIntosh dealer, offering the widest range of demonstrable product.

Located just off London's exclusive Marylebone High Street, KJ West One has been at the leading edge of hifi excellence for over 50 years. The store, which has an enviable clientele, has three purpose-built studios providing world-class



demonstration facilities for London as we found out when we visited earlier this year. Spread across two floors and measuring 3,000ft², KJ West One also has a large open showcase area, specially designed to exhibit and demonstrate its luxury audio equipment.

KJ West One now has London's biggest range of McIntosh equipment, including a number of flagship models, such as the award-winning MA8000 integrated amplifier, MCD550 CD/SACD player and the C1100/MC 1.2KW pre/power amplifier.



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OPPO's Latest Headphone Amp and DAC

PRICE: \$299

AVAILABLE: NOW

OPPo Digital today introduces an updated version of the HA-2 portable headphone amplifier and DAC, HA-2SE.

Aesthetically, the HA-2SE continues the HA-2's design – genuine leather casing with contrast stitching and bevelled aluminium edges. Inside, the digital-to-analogue converter (DAC) chip is upgraded to the ES9028Q2M, the top-of-the-line from ESS Technology's SABRE32 Reference series for portable designs. The headphone amplifier is further optimized for very sensitive In-Ear Monitors, with a lower noise floor and higher signal-to-noise ratio over the HA-2.

Featuring hybrid class AB amplification and a USB DAC, the HA-2SE offers high performance digital-to-analogue conversion for Apple's iPhone/iPod products, a wide range of Android devices, PC and Mac computers. Equipped with a 3000mAh internal battery and OPPO's patented safe rapid charging technology, the HA-2SE may be conveniently used to charge mobile devices on-the-go and can itself be efficiently charged in 30 minutes.

Being a "Made for iPhone" certified device and coming with a Lightning



cable included, the HA-2SE can charge the iPhone and play music at the same time. When used with the right apps, the HA-2SE supports bit-perfect playback of high resolution music, exceeding the 48 kHz sample rate limitation of using the phone's built-in headphone output or headphone adapter.

In addition to the USB DAC inputs, the HA-2SE provides a 3.5 mm line-in jack for portable music players that do not have a USB-compatible digital output. The same jack doubles as line-out when the HA-2SE is used as a DAC. The headphone amplifier has two gain level settings. The High Gain mode is capable of driving large power-hungry headphones, delivering up to 300 mW into 16-Ohm headphones. The Low Gain mode is intended for sensitive In-Ear Monitor type earphones. For users who like a bit more punch and impact with their music, the HA-2SE offers a Bass Boost function that is implemented purely with analogue audio circuits.

ETAL Announce Tiny Class D Amp Module



ETAL Group today unveiled a Class D amplifier in a format smaller than a business card – opening the way to highly compact lifestyle electronics, networked audio and battery powered applications.

With overall dimensions of just 68mm x 33mm x 18mm, the ETAL Anaview ALA Series delivers 2 x 45Wrms into 6 Ω . It is designed for board to board mounting and can be powered by a single voltage of 12-25V DC making it easy to integrate.

MUTEC At RMAF 2016



MUTEC got in touch with us to let us know that they are exhibiting at Rocky Mountain Audio Fest 2016 which is running from the 7th to 9th of October this year, in Denver, Colorado.

MUTEC will be presenting their audiophile products like the MC-3+ Smart Clock USB, alongside YourFinalSystem and Sonic Distribution, in Room 7010 of the Denver Marriott Tech Centre. You can meet MUTEC CEO, Christian Peters, and get an exclusive preview of their yet-to-be-announced, brand new high-end product that they are going to release before Christmas.

Pro-Ject Pick Up More Awards For Turntables

At the end of August Hifi Pig reported the news that the Pro-ject Classic Turntable had won the EISA award and way back in 2012 we also reported their Debut Carbon won the same award. Last year the company's RPM 3 Carbon won last year's EISA Award and it's also been awarded prestigious Red Dot Award for its outstanding design this year...it also won a Hifi Pig Recommended Award.





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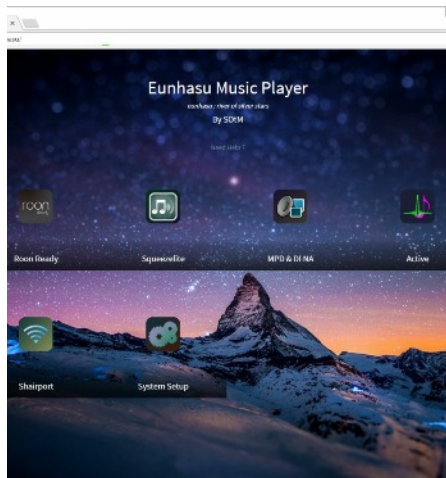
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THE ONLY TRUE HI-RES AUDIOPHILE SOURCE

SotM To Introduce New Products At RMAF 2016



SotM is exhibiting at RMAF for the first time and will demo their music server and player, SMS-1000SQ Windows Edition controlled by Roon, the combined DAC/PRE, sDP-1000EX, the stereo power amp, sPA-1000, and the ultra low noise linear power supply, sPS-1000, as a main demo system with Boenicke speaker.

They will also announce their upcoming products:

sMS-1000SQ Eunhasu: The new Linux OS, Eunhasu, based network player & server! It supports Roon, Squeezelite, MPD/DLNA, HQplayer and Shariports.

sMS-1000SQ Wins 10 : The Windows 10 Pro and AudiophileOptimizer are loaded, and Roon is used as a main player but other players such as Foobar, Jriver, HQplayer and etc can be used as costumer's need and variety options are

tX-USBUltra : New design concept series as SMS-200, it is a USB audio signal regenerator for Ultra High-End USB audio system, it reduces jitter generated from USB audio host device by the USB audio signal clock, sCLK-EX12, and reproduces good quality power of USB output port by Ultra Low Noise

sPS-500 : New design concept series as SMS-200, it is the ultra-low noise hybrid power

sCLK-EX : In a digital audio system, the clock is the most important element and the sCLK-EX is the one which can be used for all digital audio system.

Hifi Pig 'Wheelchair For Ricky 2' Fund Raiser – Win a VPI Turntable



A massive thank you to all who helped and donated prizes and money to our first fund raiser we raised a total of £2142 which is around 2800 US\$. We fell a little short, but, we had the offer of a prize that did not arrive in time to be added.

Mat Weisfeld of USA based turntable manufacturer, VPI Industries, has had a busy month. He has got married twice, in China and the USA, to the same lady I must add! However when he heard about our appeal he really wanted to help out.

The turntable is a Special Edition VPI Player in Black with 9 inch gimballed yoke tonearm, pre-mounted Ortofon 2M red cartridge, built in headphone amp, phono stage, and MDF platter on an oil bath Jacob's tapper bearing. You can't buy the turntable in this finish, so it is very special indeed. The retail version sells for 1200\$ in the USA. The TT will be made for you and adapted to whichever country you live in.

The raffle is the same format. Donate a minimum of £5 to be entered into the raffle. If you donate multiple £5 you get multiple entries.

The more we raise the better as we can get extras added to the basic wheelchair to help Ricky have a more comfortable life.

Visit our [Just Giving Page here](#) and let's hit out £1500 target!

IMPORTANT: please leave your full name to make it easier to contact the winner, we can't enter you if you leave your donation as anonymous, keep your confirmation email as this will be needed if you win



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Music First Audio Baby Reference V2 TVC Preamplifier

By Stuart and Linette Smith

The Baby Reference V2 is the latest incarnation of this British company's TVC preamplifier and costs £6120 in standard form. Stuart Smith tries it out for Hifi Pig

MUSIC FIRST AUDIO BABY REFERENCE V2 PREAMP



The Baby Reference is a frill-free component that is simply there to do its job

First of all I should stress that this is my own personal unit and not a unit that has been sent out solely for review purposes. I bought the V2 on the back of being loaned the V1 unit for a couple of months and have had opted for the 31 position volume control over the standard 24 position control – a 46 position control is also available. I also opted for remote control on the unit that controls just the volume.

Fit and Finish

The Baby Reference V2 arrives well packed in a plastic Gator case. Taking it out of the box the unit looks and feels well finished. I'd opted for the front panel to be powder coated a burgundy red to match the loudspeakers in our system but you can have other colours. The preamplifier has a good weight to it and sits firmly on the rack even with lots of heavy cables coming out the back.

You can specify the inputs and outputs to an extent and I went for four unbalanced RCAs and two balanced XLR inputs and one of each for the outputs. There is a pair of switches for ground lift and an input for the remote control power supply.

Round the front there's the volume knob and source selector switch. At 25cm width the Baby Reference V2 is less wide than a standard hifi component but it looks great on the rack. Simple and understated elegance is how I'd sum up the appearance. The knobs on the front feel solid and purposeful. Looks-wise there's not a lot of difference, if any, between the V1 and V2.

The V2 designation uses RX63 transformers from Stevens and Billington who have been making audio transformers since 1963, indeed Jonathan Billington is the owner of



MUSIC FIRST AUDIO BABY REFERENCE V2 PREAMP

When you put the Baby V2 into your system its a bit of a 'new glasses' moment

Music First Audio. There's a new shielding can and combination of lamination materials, a new system of vibration isolation and "improved left/right channel isolation".

I took a look inside the box and everything is nicely laid out with neat and very tidy wiring throughout.

£6000 seems a lot to demand for what is essentially a volume control and source switch, but there's clearly a hell of a lot of work goes into the winding of the transformers and the actual putting together of the unit which goes a long way to justifying the pricepoint. The Baby Reference is a frill-free component that is simply there to do its job...

though the remote control is a useful feature I feel.

Regular readers will know I'm not all that interested in the science or engineering behind a product – they either do their job in the system or they do not. If you want to know more about how TVCs work then the internet is your friend.

Sound

For the last few months since the Baby reference arrived I've been using it with a pair of Merrill Thor Class D power amplifiers, our Avantgarde Duo XD loudspeakers with the front end being the Lampizator Big 7 DAC being fed by files from the computer. Cables have



MUSIC FIRST AUDIO BABY REFERENCE V2 PREAMP

been a mix of Tellurium Q, Vermouth Audio and Chord Company, with power conditioning via a Lab 12 gordian unit.

My needs are a little different to the normal audiophile in many ways and what I am looking for in the reference system is transparency so that I can put new gear in there and hear what its effects are immediately and this is where the combination of the Baby Reference V2 and Class D power amps really come to the fore. That said, we do a LOT of our listening purely for the satisfaction of listening to music and whilst the reference system needs to be a tool, it also needs to be enjoyable and musical.

My previous preamplifier was the excellent Coffman Labs G 1A, a valve based pre which, whilst being a great performer, certainly added a healthy dose of its own flavour to proceedings. I remember when I first reviewed the Thors that I said I was pleased to have something that added a little of its own character, but then once I hooked up the Baby Reference I realised I'd been missing out on a whole layer of detail and accuracy that is there in the music.

With acoustic instruments and simply recorded music the baby Reference V2 allows the music to flow with a naturalness that is uncanny. There is a real feeling for the recording space and a depth to the soundstage that is organic, precise and uncoloured. If you are looking for a preamplifier that adds fireworks, bells and whistles to make it appear like it is doing something special to your system, then you need to look elsewhere I'm afraid. The Music First preamplifier is one of those products that slots into your system and just lets

the music flow through it without adding or taking anything away.

I'd like to talk about sparkling highs and beautiful midband tones, but that would be missing the point I think. What you are hearing is what is coming out of the DAC (which does add a little of its own flavour it has to be said) and little more.

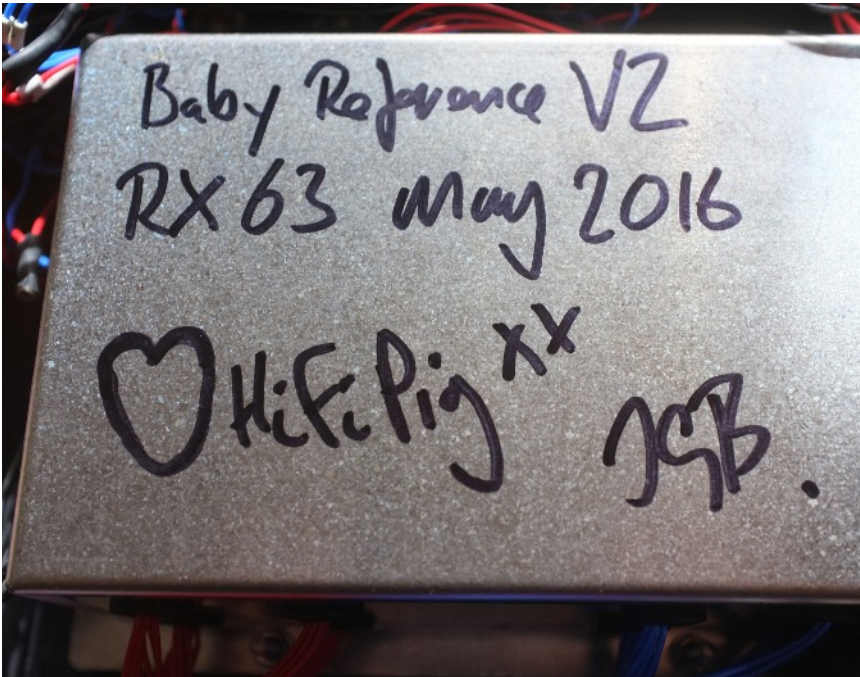
I plugged in the hORN Mummy speakers we have here and played loads of different genres from Jazz to Techno and again the effect of the Baby Reference is to add nothing. Bass is reproduced as it is on the recording and that is really what I'm looking for in a product.

On poorly recorded or reproduced music you certainly know about it.

I could bang on about a million different tunes we listened to and how they sounded with the Baby Reference in place, but I don't think I need to as I'm sure you're getting the general feel for this preamp from what I've outlined thus far. We do listen to music a lot here at Hifi Pig Towers and it seems that we're listening to an awful lot more purely for pleasure since the arrival of the new Baby. And that's the crux of it really I think; If a product connects you with the music and the musicians on a level that is emotional and inspiring then you know you've found the product for you. Being so transparent, quiet and open allows you to fall into a recording and



MUSIC FIRST AUDIO BABY REFERENCE V2 PREAMP



experience the full effect of what the musicians and engineers are trying to get across and whilst it may sound that I'm saying that the Baby Reference V2 is cold and analytical that's to miss the point a bit. The preamp is just letting through what your source is putting into it and feeding that through to your amplifiers.

Conclusion

This review could have been a lot longer, but it doesn't need to be to get across to readers what the Baby Reference V2 brings to the table. Imagine looking through the windows in your home. Yes you can see the landscape and everything that is going on out in the garden, but now clean the windows inside and out and whilst there is still the same things out there, the view is better somehow...and that's sort of what this preamp does. It allows you to experience the finer details in a recording like no other preamplifier I've yet heard.

I've mentioned the Class D amps we use in this review quite a lot and I reckon that the Baby Reference V2 with this technology is a match made in heaven, though there is no reason it will not work with other classes of amplifiers.

£6000 or so is a lot of money for a preamplifier of course, and especially one that is so basic in its functionality, but if you are looking for a preamplifier that opens up your music collection and allows you to experience the full intention of the musicians then I can't think of a better one. Music First Audio will offer you a 30 day trial too.

Sometimes the simplest things are the most beautiful to use and look at and, for me, that is what the Music First Audio Baby Reference V2 is all about. Essentially, all it has to do is be a switch and a volume control for your amplifier(s) and that's what it does. Perfectly. It has the classic 'form follows function' kind of styling that I love in electronics.

Simple to use, it has a very satisfying feel to it. Quality components, put together well, by someone that wants everything to be as it should, delivers a high quality product. The only frills I guess are that you can have it in a range of

colours or a shiny chrome finish so that your Baby looks good on the hifi rack.

When you put the Baby V2 into your system it's a bit of a 'new glasses' moment. It does nothing to alter your music so you hear exactly what you are meant to hear. This may sound like a simple thing to achieve but we have all heard systems that make things sound just wrong. As Stuart said, with our Merrill Audio Thor Class D amps and super-sensitive Avantgarde Acoustic Duos the baby V2 works wonderfully. There is no colouration of the music at all and when things are meant to be silent, they are completely silent, no hiss, no hum, nothing!

Yes, £6k is a lot of money but, to be fair, with the revealing quality of this little Baby, you are not going to put it with anything other than high quality equipment of a similar or even higher end price band.

The Baby Reference V2 is thoroughly deserving of its Outstanding Product Award for doing exactly what it is supposed to do, perfectly.



AT A GLANCE

Sound Quality: A highly transparent tool that lets you hear the recording as it was meant to be heard without adding a flavour of its own

Build Quality: Good looking on the rack and well enough put together. This is a no frills design where the emphasis has been put on the sonics and internal components rather than the box they come in

Value For Money: Not at all cheap by any stretch of the imagination but pound for pound sonically it offers good value

Pros:

Transparent

Adds little or nothing to the sound

Silent

Cons:

Not cheap

Needs suitable partnering equipment before and after the pre

Price : £5100 GBP plus VAT, \$6885 USD plus local taxes

SPECIFICATIONS

Weight: 5Kg

Width: 250mm

Height: 96mm

Depth (inc connectors) = 300mm

4 pairs RCA inputs

2 pairs XLR inputs.

2 pairs outputs. Any combination of RCA and XLR

Ground lift switch

31 position volume switch 0dB - 60dB of attenuation plus mute

Attenuation unit RX63

Optional remote control and headphone output

Paint It Black

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

Tony Bolton

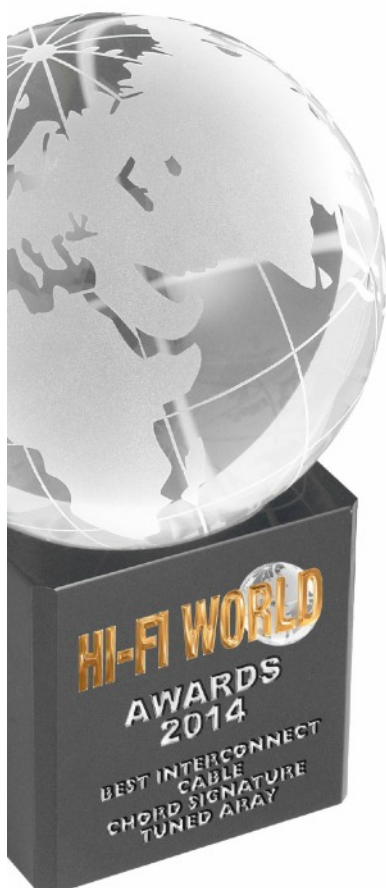


"OUTSTANDING"

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HI-FI WORLD November 2014

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Creek Evolution 100CD CD Player & 100P Power Amplifier

By Lionel Payne

Creek Audio Systems have recently introduced their Evolution 100 range and here we have two of the line-up for review – namely the Evolution 100CD (£1350) and the 100P (£1350) which Lionel Payne will review for Hifi Pig

CREEK EVOLUTION 100CD CD PLAYER & 100P POWER AMP



The Evolution 100CD is a multi-faceted unit incorporating a CD transport, a digital to analogue converter (DAC), a digital pre-amplifier and also included is a headphone amplifier so you can use it as a preamplifier as well as a CD player...which is very convenient and keeps box numbers down. The 100P is a power amplifier which matches the Evolution 100CD in looks and proportions although it's brushed aluminium fascia carries only one button – for on/off duties. The Evolution 100CD, on the other hand has the on/off button and a further 9 soft-touch buttons plus a volume dial, quarter inch headphone socket, OLED display and a slot for loading your compact discs. It also comes with the requisite remote control unit which will also control other units within the range.

The units both come in black pressed steel cases with brushed aluminium fascias in a choice of black or silver. My

units arrived, double boxed, in the black variety and I would describe their appearance as having an understated elegance. They both have identical dimensions and are a standard width of 430mm and a depth of 280mm and a rather diminutive height of only 60mm. Placed onto the top two tiers of my 5 tier Mana Acoustics amp stand they looked particularly attractive. The OLED display on the 100CD is very impressive. It can be dimmed or completely turned off and even someone like myself with less than ideal sight can clearly see the information provided in both dimmed light and daylight.

The 100P has two pairs of speaker terminals and inputs for unbalanced RCA connections and balanced XLR connections. There is a small button on the rear which you can use to change the inputs on the fly.

Creek Evolution 100CD

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CREEK EVOLUTION 100CD CD PLAYER & 100P POWER AMP

The Evolution
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When I first hooked up the Creek Evolution 100CD with my system I was mildly impressed but far from blown away. Some players that arrive for review will do this and some are “growers” – i.e. they grow on you throughout the audition process. Others may impress you immediately but often this is a short-term thing where what initially impressed can become tiring over the longer term. The Evolution 100CD definitely grew on me throughout its time with me and I will be sorry to see it depart.

I have listened for many hours to both the CD and my Windows 10 PC streaming Tidal in hifi quality through the USB port to the unit’s DAC and the differences in sound quality between the two are fairly insubstantial. If I had to pick out one area that the 100CD really excels in, it would most certainly be the way it deals with voices. It has an uncanny ability to get the very best from all singers of either sex. Listening to Eva Cassidy’s cover version of Sting’s Fields Of Gold produces a silky rendition of organic quality which equally captivates and thrills. However if you move over to some classic rock – namely Deep Purple and Child Of Time from their studio album Deep Purple In Rock, Ian Gillan’s

delivery is captured with every nuance and the performance is equally captivating. Changing over to Bob Marley’s simple but superb Redemption Song left this reviewer in awe of the great man and so impressed with the voicing of this player.

Time after time not only the voicing but also the tonality of the recordings that I was listening to would really strike me to how the 100CD was portraying the perfect harmony of sound where all the instruments can be followed individually and each sounds perfectly correct. Indeed the reproduction of pianos, drums, violins, cellos, clarinets, flutes, etc. are all recreated with great authenticity. This is no easy feat but one the 100CD achieves with aplomb.

Of course the Evolution 100CD is not just a simple CD player, it’s a whole lot more too. It is also a DAC of excellent quality and my attempted description of the sound quality of the CD player stands true for the DAC too, with the variation of the quality of digital input of course.

There are two coaxial inputs via RCA connections plus two optical inputs via Toslink as well as a USB type 2 input all



CREEK EVOLUTION 100CD CD PLAYER & 100P POWER AMP



supporting up to 24Bit 192kHz conversion. I briefly tried the Bluetooth connection which was a doddle to install and link to my Samsung S7. I was suitably impressed that the sound quality was pretty much identical to the streaming quality I could get from my PC and the USB connection, both of which were utilising Tidal Hifi quality. I should also mention that as I use a PC I had to download the additional driver software, but this was an easy process and I was up and running in minutes.

Listening to my Denon TU-1800DAB tuner through a digital connection to the DAC was also a joy. On Radio 6 Music I found Iggy Pop introducing some of his favourite David Bowie tracks and the DAC definitely improved the overall sound and again highlighted how good its mid-band was, especially reproducing Iggy's tremendously gravelly voice with true veracity.

I also had a late evening session listening to one of my all-time favourite live albums with my Audio Technica AD1000 headphones. I know this double CD probably as well as any in my collection – it's Gil Scott-Heron And His Amnesia Express and my previous comments about the 100CD stood perfectly true while listening through this medium. All areas of the sound were extremely true to life – so much so that I ended up going to bed a lot later

than I anticipated. I'm not going to tell you that I heard new things in the mix, but that night I was astonished at the clarity and extreme low noise floor that I heard. Gil Scott-Heron's "The Bottle" includes a couple of solos, allowing his band to show off their respective talents and the track kept my head bobbing and toes tapping right the way through. The solos of the bass player and the percussionist were a joy to behold. I think it's probably the best presentation I've ever heard of this track and I've heard it many, many times. The following day I couldn't wait to play the same track through my speakers and the result was equally sublime.

Creek Evolution 100P

Unlike the Evolution 100CD that slowly grew in my affections, I fell under the spell of the Evolution 100P almost immediately. Hooked into my system and driving my Impulse H2 loudspeakers I was beguiled by the speed, clarity and precision that was portrayed before me.

I auditioned the 100P mostly on its own within my system, but also with the 100CD as the source and preamplifier. The 100P performed consistently well throughout the auditions giving an even-handed approach to whatever I threw at it. Listening to Sting's excellent Live In Berlin CD with the Royal Philharmonic

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Concert Orchestra really showed how good the amplifier is at painting a realistic soundstage, as well as reproducing so many different instruments within the orchestra with such veracity. The tracks with Branford Marsalis playing saxophone were a real stand-out, although the CD as a whole really impressed, highlighting the excellent work Deutsche Grammophon carried out in the recording process.

Playing Dead Can Dance In Concert is a good work-out for the lower registers and the 100P showed it can do bass with the best in class. Children Of The Sun is a track that needs firm control from an amplifier to not allow the bass to become overblown within the mix and the 100P passed with flying colours. The bass is quick and controlled, if a touch dry, and overall, the densely layered track is driven on wonderfully with the clarity of vocals from Brendan Perry never getting congested even when I dialled in extra volume to concert levels.

The 100P has a smooth and detailed top end which has not a hint of grain. There is no suggestion whatsoever that this amplifier would become tiring in the longer term. It had me reaching for one CD after another to feed into the slot-loader, and it never failed to impress and entertain. Much like the 100CD I would say its outstanding characteristic is the way it is voiced. Bands and performers that I have played regularly for years have had their lead singers thrown into a brighter spotlight, to the point where I have felt I could almost reach out and touch them.

Everything sounds so natural that it seems petty to look for any drawbacks at all in this price range, but the one area that I feel could be improved is the amps detail retrieval. That is not to say there is anything greatly amiss with the detail offered, but I have heard better, albeit from amplifiers costing far more than a measly £1350.

Conclusion

Ever since the early eighties when Mike Creek brought the legendary Creek 4040 integrated amplifier to market, Creek Audio Systems have been known for producing items with innovative design and good value for money. The Evolution 100P power amplifier is certainly an innovative design with its class G topology and also represents excellent value for money. It has the ability to conjure a wonderfully deep and wide soundstage and has that great ability to simply sound natural. I can heartily recommend it to any prospective purchasers. It also makes an excellent partner to the Evolution 100CD which, to me, is the star of the show. I have completely enjoyed my time with it and have been thoroughly impressed with, not only its CD playback qualities, but also its abilities with everything directed through the DAC.

It even has an excellent built-in headphone amplifier to boot



AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Solidly built and surprisingly small for such a big sound. They have a sleek under-stated elegance.

Sound Quality: Both have very special voicing abilities and sound natural and unconstrained.

Value For Money: Very good indeed. Both units have to be pushing towards the top of any potential purchaser's list at this price point.

Pros:

Excellent voicing and natural un-forced sound

Powerful sounding power amplifier

Excellent OLED display readable in all conditions

Cons :

Perhaps a lack of analogue inputs to the 100CD

Not much else

Price :

Evolution 100CD £1350

Evolution 100P £1350

SPECIFICATIONS (100CD)

Digital Inputs: 2 x SPDIF, 24 Bit 192 kHz, transformer isolated. 2 x Toslink, 24 Bit 192 kHz, optically isolated. 1 x USB, 24 Bit 192 kHz

No additional software drivers are needed for OS X

Windows PCs require additional drivers

1 x Bluetooth input

CD Transport: Custom designed, ICE quality, CD slot-loader, externally clocked

SNR: > 110dBA unbalanced

Digital Output: 1 x SPDIF and 1 x Toslink optical output, pass-on all input signals

Digital Filters: Optional digital filters are selectable via the remote

Analogue Output: 2 x RCA un-balanced, 2.0V RMS. 2 x XLR balanced 4.0V RMS

Headphone Output: 1 x 6.35mm or 1/4" Jack socket Output Impedance

Output Impedance: 47 Ohms

Power Supply: 30 Watt toroidal mains transformer with 3 separate secondary voltage windings, with multi-cap power supply decoupling and multiple ultra-low noise discrete power supply voltage regulators.

SPECIFICATIONS (100P)

Power Output: >110 Watts into 8 Ohms

Power Output: >170 Watts into 4 Ohms

Continuous Current: >8.5 Amps (sine wave)

Max Current : >26 Amps, current burst into 0.5 Ohms

Output Impedance <0.05 Ohms @ 1KHz

THD: < 0.02% 20Hz – 20KHz

SNR: > 102dB

Frequency Response: 10Hz – 100KHz +/- 2dB Line

Gain: 33.3dB (x46)

Input Sensitivity: 650mV

Crosstalk: - 80dB at 1KHz

DC Offset: < +/- 10mV

Slew Rate: > 30 V per uS

Inputs : RCA unbalanced – XLR balanced

Outputs: 2 pairs of binding posts

Operating Voltages: 110V / 230V Switchable

Consumption (at idle): < 20 Watts (no standby)

Consumption: 500 Watts (at full power)

Weight: 9kgs

Dimensions W/H/D: 430 x 60 x 280mm



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Audiolab 8300A Amplifier and 8300CD CD Player

By Ian Ringstead

At £900 for the amplifier and £995 for the CD player these two units from Audiolab are relatively inexpensive but well specified. Ian Ringstead plumbs them into his system and rather likes what he hears.

AUDIOLAB 8300A AMP & 8300CD CD PLAYER

The
8300CD is
a
deceptively
complex
unit under
the clean
and simple
exterior



Those of you who are old enough to remember the original Audiolab 8000A and 8000CD player from the 1980's will have fond memories of what a highly regarded pairing this was. I sold many of them and remember excitedly awaiting delivery of the original 8000A amplifier when Philip Swift told us about it and brought a demo model to try out. The rest as they say is history. I even went on a factory tour in the eighties to see them being made in Huntingdonshire.

TAG McLaren then came along in the nineties and decided to buy Audiolab out and develop the brand further. With mixed success TAG pulled out after a few years and so it was IAG who came along to rescue the brand name and resurrect a great product with a proud background. What I like about IAG is that they are a company who understand the hifi business very well and they were

adamant that the Audiolab brand name would not be besmirched and the brand would be brought back to the fore.

The 8300A amp and 8300CD player/processor/pre amp are an evolution of the previous 8200 series that has proved popular over the last few years, but as Audiolab state in their promotional video they didn't want this series to be just a tweaked and cosmetic change. A lot of research and development has gone into this new series and Audiolab have listened to customer feedback to provide new useful facilities and improvements.

Fit and Finish

I received the review pairing in the very smart and clean looking silver option, but you can buy them in black if you prefer. The units were very well packaged in good strong boxes and



AUDIOLAB 8300A AMP & 8300CD CD PLAYER

come with a good instruction manual, mains lead and a quality remote control each which will work with both the amp and CD as it is identical. The build quality as you would expect from a company like IAG is excellent and both the amp and CD are beautifully put together looking very clean and simple on the eye. The front panels are kept straightforward and although the back panels are busy they are clearly and logically laid out with excellent connections.

The 8300A amp only has three controls on the front for input selection, mode of operation and volume. To the right of these is a standby power switch. The centre of the front panel is dominated by a smart looking oval OLED display panel which tells the user what is selected and the various settings.

On the 8300A Engineers have developed a new phono stage catering for the resurgence in vinyl records with MM and MC configurations accessible via the front panel controls. This was very useful as I major on vinyl use and having facilities for MM and MC was great.

As well as standard RCA unbalanced connections the amp also has a set of balanced XLR's which I used with the 8300CD to great effect.

12V remote trigger loop feature on all units so as one device is switched on, paired units are switched into or out of standby mode – working as one system for quick operation.

The 8300CD is a deceptively complex unit under the clean and simple exterior



with a new slot loading motorised disc mechanism as you used to get in car players. The new mechanism also reduces the occurrence of disc rejection and it was able to play CDs that other CD players may reject for being imperfect from dirt or damage. Its digital buffer circuit is a perfect mate to the asynchronous input of the DAC, improving even this area of performance. A final benefit is increased disc stability and reduced susceptibility to resonance, which additionally contributes to the overall improved sound quality.

Connectivity options have been further expanded on the 8300CD with the addition of an AES/EBU digital input and XLR digital output. These join a full complement of inputs/outputs retained from the 8200CD: 2x coaxial digital inputs; 2x optical digital inputs; 1x asynchronous USB input; 1x coaxial

digital output; 1x optical digital output; single-ended RCA and balanced XLR analogue outputs.

The 32-bit ESS Sabre DAC used inside the 8300CD continues to have a reputation as the best-sounding DAC chip available, and most CD players that use it are much more costly designs. In terms of the way it measures, its distortion figures are extraordinarily low. Around the DAC there are extensive measures to reduce jitter to very low levels. The new 8300CD can accept and process data up to 32-bit/384kHz; this is a far higher specification than that required even by current hi-res music formats, ensuring the 8300CD is fully equipped for future advances in ultra-high-definition digital sound.

The USB input now also accepts DSD data, as well as PCM.

The uprated digital processing associated with the increased resolution at the USB input delivers additional sonic benefits, for both CD replay and other connected digital sources, whatever the resolution of the file. As digital audio reproduction technology has progressed, the importance of the characteristics of reconstruction digital filters has become more appreciated. The Audiolab 8300CD features user-selectable digital filters for optimal listening. These filter settings allow the user to tune the 8300CD's performance to suit their preference, depending on system configuration and musical taste. These filters are available for CD and PCM audio via digital inputs.



AUDIOLAB 8300A AMP & 8300CD CD PLAYER

- Optimal Spectrum
- Optimal Transient
- Optimal Transient XD
- Optimal Transient DD
- Sharp Roll Off
- Slow Roll Off
- Minimum Phase

The 8300CD also adds four DSD filters that progressively attenuate the out of audio bandwidth noise floor.

As you can see an awful lot of design and technology has gone into these two products, but that would all be wasted and irrelevant if the results weren't good.

The Sound

Fortunately, the sonic outcome is excellent.

I used the amp and CD as a pair for my review purposes as I felt the synergy between the two was spot on. The designers would have spent many hours honing their skills to perfect this pairing and although you can of course use them separately, my instincts tell me they are a marriage that works best as a couple. I have read elsewhere criticism of this pairing with complaints that the previous models, the 8200 series, had more magic about their sound. I am in no position to be able to compare with the older series, but what I heard over the couple of months I had this pairing impressed me mightily. Let's be honest, all opinions are subjective and I as a reviewer make my views on personal experience. Having spent the last 40 years in the business as a retailer, and now as a reviewer, I respect the hard work and passion that is put in by companies and designers to create a product they are proud of. Audiolab is no exception and have done a fine job here.

The 8300A is certainly muscular in its sound portrayal and although its rating is only 75 watts per channel it easily exceeds that on peaks. I tried the amp with several pairs of loudspeakers I had for review at the time ranging from £400 a pair right up to £4000, and it worked very well with all of them. I know many listeners and dealers find certain combinations of electronics and speakers can either work brilliantly or be a disaster as a pairing, and I for one agree with them. As it was with the 8300A when it had run in over a few weeks and I had got my thoughts settled on its performance, I was happy with its overall sound.

As always I used a wide variety of musical genres to test the amp and was particularly keen to try the phono stage with my resident Project Extension 9 and Ortofon Quintet Black cartridge. I'm pleased to say it worked very well with no gain issues and low hum, giving a good solid sound with plenty of depth and detail over the entire frequency range. This was the case with all three speaker pairings I tried and the detailed layering in recordings was very well portrayed. Now the



Project and Quintet Black are rather good in my humble opinion, but they still require a good phono stage and amp to show what they are capable of. A case in point was a Joe Sample MFSL record "Rainbow Seeker" which I have owned and cherished for over thirty years. This type of contemporary jazz (later known as smooth jazz) is a favourite of mine and I know this record inside out, but whenever I try it out on a new component it intrigues me when I hear something new or had missed on a previous listening session. The detailing was all there and the brush strokes on the cymbals and nuances of Stix Hooper's sublime drumming were easy to pick out and a joy to experience. Although purists may well prefer a separate phono stage, the built in one does a great job for the money.

The same was true when I tried the 8300CD which I chose to run via the balanced XLR inputs as my preferred option. The single ended inputs are fine and what you would find on most amps, but I liked the solid sound that the balanced input gave. The 8300CD has the option as mentioned already of being used either as a plain CD player or a sophisticated DAC with several input options and finally as a pre amp where you can use it directly with a power amp. I ran the CD player as an integrated unit with the 8300A and the combination performed really well. Again I tried all types of music and they all sounded clear, detailed and the soundfield had a good depth to it. As mentioned earlier, the 8300CD has several filter options which I scrolled through on the menu via the handy remote, but like my resident Sony CD player that has switchable filters this all comes down to taste, musical type and one's mood, so I stuck to the optimal spectrum rather than constantly experimenting as I was happy with the presentation.

The CD mechanism worked flawlessly with all my discs and I must admit I liked it as most drawer trays can be flimsy unless expensively engineered (I owned a Yamaha CD-S1000 some years ago whose drawer and mechanism were sublime in build and operation, but that was an expensive machine). I confess I didn't experiment with the DAC inputs due to lack of digital files and sources as I major on CD and still think there is life in the old dog yet. I wasn't disappointed as the CD player was excellent with the 8300A and over the time I used the combination felt no need to change it. Yes, a more expensive machine may well outperform the 8300CD but at what cost?

AUDIOLAB 8300A AMP & 8300CD CD PLAYER

As you will have gathered I rather liked this combination and for the asking price they are great value.

AT A GLANCE

8300A

Build Quality: Excellent for the money.

Sound Quality: Detailed, muscular sound.

Value for Money: With a price of £900 this is excellent value.

Pros:

Great musicality and detail

Minimalist good looks and ease of use

Good built in phono stage with mm/mc options

Remote works well and easy to use

Cons:

No headphone output, but with so many good external units on the market I don't see this being a problem.

Price: £900

8300CD

Build Quality: Excellent for the money

Sound Quality: Detailed, musical sound

Value for Money: With a price of £995 this is great value

Pros:

Musicality and detail

Minimalist good looks and ease of use even though it is a sophisticated unit under the hood

XLR output as well as RCA

Nice slot loading mechanism

Pre out option to drive an external power amp directly

DSD and most of the latest digital formats covered to a good level

Remote works well and easy to use

Cons:

CD maybe less popular as a format now and nearly a grand isn't cheap, but there is a lot on offer here and the build is excellent

Price: £995

SPECIFICATIONS

8300A Amplifier

Design philosophy and core technology: Dual Mono Power Amp Design

Display: OLED 128x64 pixels 2.7"

Controls: Logarithmic Ladder Volume Design

Finish: Fine Textured Aluminium (Black / Silver)

Standby Features: Yes

12V Trigger: Yes

Phono: MM/MC

Balanced XLR Input: Yes

Pre-amplifier Section

Inputs : CD, Video, Tuner, Aux 1, Aux 2, XLR (Balanced) & Phono

Outputs: 2 x RCA

Input sensitivity (Phono RIAA): 50K // 100pF

Input impedance (line inputs): 50K // 100pF

Input impedance (phono inputs): 47K // 100pF (MM), 100R // 1.5nF (MC)

Output voltage: 2.3V max. (< 0.02% THD)

Output impedance: 120 ohm

Frequency response (Line): +/- 0.1dB (10Hz - 20kHz)

+/- 3.0dB (1Hz - 100kHz)

Frequency response (Phono RIAA): +/- 1.0dB (20Hz - 20kHz)

Channel Imbalance : < 0.2dB (10Hz - 20kHz)

Total harmonic distortion (THD) Line: <0.001%

Total harmonic distortion (THD) Phono: <0.002%
Signal-to-noise ratio (Line) dB

>109dB(A-weighted)

Signal-to-noise ratio Phono (MM): > 73dB

> 78dB(A-weighted)

Signal-to-noise ratio Phono (MC): > 68dB

> 73dB(A-weighted)

Crosstalk: < 80dB (L-> R & R->L @10KHz)

Power amplifier Section

Gain: 29dB (20Hz-20KHz)

Input Sensitivity: 840mV (Power Out = 70W into 8ohm)

Input impedance: 15K // 100pF

Rated max power output THD: < 1% 2 x 75W RMS (8 ohm) , 2 x 115W (4 ohm)

(V mains = 230V , THD < 1%)

Peak output current: +/- 15A

Frequency response: +/- 0.1dB (10Hz - 20KHz)

+/- 3.0dB (1Hz - 100KHz)

Channel Imbalance: < 0.2dB (10Hz - 20kHz)

Total harmonic distortion (THD): <0.002% (Power Out= 50W @ 1KHz, BW = 20Hz - 20kHz)

Signal-to-noise ratio: > 107dB (BW = 20 - 20KHz)

>109dB(A-weighted BW = 20 - 20KHz)

Damping factor: >100 (8ohm Load @ 1kHz)

Inputs: 1 x RCA

Outputs: Speaker Binding Post Terminals

Dimensions 80 x 444 x 330.3mm

8300CD Player

General Description: CD Player, Digital-to-Analogue Converter

Finish: Fine Textured Aluminium (Black / Silver)

Display: POLED 128x64 pixels 2.7"

Standby Feature: Yes

12V Trigger: Yes

CD Mechanism: Slot-Loading

DSD Compatible: Yes (DSD64 / DSD128 / DSD256)

Disc Compatibility: CD/CDR

DAC: ESS Sabre32 9018 chip

Resolution: 32 bits

Sampling Frequency: Optical, Coaxial, AES: 32kHz - 192kHz

USB: 32kHz - 384kHz (PCM) / DSD64, DSD128, DSD256

Maximum Sampling Frequency: Optical, Coaxial, AES: 192kHz

USB: 384kHz (PCM) / 11.2M (DSD256)

Digital Input: 2 x Coaxial, 2 x Toslink Optical, 1x AES/EBU, 1 x USB for PC USB,

Digital Output: 1 x Coaxial, 1 x Toslink Optical, 1 x AES

Output Voltage: 4.2Vrms ±0.1 (Balanced)

2.1Vrms ±0.1 (Unbalanced)

Output Impedance: 10Ω

THD (1kHz 0dB 20Hz - 20kHz A wtd): <0.002%

Frequency Response: +/-0.2dB 20Hz - 20KHz (± 0.2dB)

Signal-to-Noise Ratio (S/N) A wtd: RCA:<-98dB ,XLR<-100dB

Dynamic Range (A wtd.): RCA:>98dB ,XLR>100dB

Crosstalk @1K: RCA:<-120dB , XLR <-130dB

Gain Error: <0.5W

Dimensions (H x W x D): 80 x 444 x 317mm

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
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Etalon SuprA Integrated Amplifier

By John Scott

John Scott is a fan of integrated amplifiers and so when Hungarian manufacturer Etalon asked Hifi Pig if we would be interested in reviewing their new SuprA integrated amp he was the obvious man for the job. The SuprA is a dual mono class A/B design outputting a nominal 70 watts per channel into 4 ohms and retails at €1980

ETALON SUPRA INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



The Supra was delivered in an ordinary cardboard box, well-protected internally by slabs of polystyrene and with a smattering of those little packing “peanuts” to fill any gaps. Seasoned Hifi Pig readers will no doubt recall the occasion on which my illustrious colleague Dominic Marsh carelessly impaled himself on the supporting spikes of an Etalon DAC while unboxing it. This was, unsurprisingly, at the forefront of my mind as I reached inside the box to remove the unit from its snug surroundings. I need not have worried though; rather than spikes, the amp rests on a trio of rubber feet – two at the front and one at the rear – and so no blood was shed.

The first thing that struck me about the SuprA was its build quality; its metal casing exudes solidity and at 12kg it is a weighty beast. My second impression was that it is deeper than the typical shelf mounted amplifier. Measuring 360 x 100 x 470 mm, it is deeper than it is wide and the front and rear feet only just fitted on my shelf, slightly overhanging at front and back. If it is at all possible for Etalon to move the feet even slightly inwards then this might be worth considering.

The amplifier is faced in a rather lovely slab of solid wood. This will not be to everyone’s taste but in my opinion it adds a touch of class and sophistication and very much enhances the feeling that this is a quality product. The wood facing is available in a range of colours

and Etalon can produce additional colours on request. The review model came in Walnut and, luckily, fitted perfectly with the furnishings in my listening room.

Accompanying the amplifier is a good quality power cord and a rather generic remote control. I need to say a quick word about this. The remote is perfectly serviceable and is certainly far from the worst I have seen bundled with a bit of kit. It is a pity though that the remote does not mirror the quality of the amp. László Sallay, Etalon MD, told me that he was keen that purchasers to get the best sounding amplifier for the money and that providing a more expensive remote control would simply increase the cost to the customer with no corresponding audible benefit. While this is understandable, and admirable, I do feel that potential purchasers would consider a remote that reflects the SuprA’s own aesthetics to be added value and would probably be prepared to pay a premium. I have to stress, however, that the supplied remote is definitely not a deal breaker. In fact, if you can control volume through your DAC via a tablet or smartphone as I did, then you will hardly ever use it. It’s also worth mentioning that the SuprA has no controls on the unit itself so if the dog buries the remote in the garden you will have to buy another one to replace it – another remote, not another dog – although if a dog interfered with my hifi it probably would find itself getting replaced.

With almost every track I threw at it I came away with some fresh insight, whether it be in the details of the recording or the complexity of the interplay between the musicians



ETALON SUPRA INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Setup

You wouldn't expect an integrated amplifier to present any difficulties in setting up and so it proved with the Supra. It was simply a matter of connecting the power cord, the speaker cables to the high quality binding posts and my DAC to one of the four sets of inputs, powering up and we were good to go. The Supra has no phono stage so turntable users will have to provide their own.

Sound

I was advised to give the SuprA at least 100 hours of burn in time, which I did. Naturally, though, I couldn't resist having a quick listen straight away and my initial impressions were extremely favourable. Following burn in, the serious listening begun. And went on, and on, and on. The SuprA is so involving and engaging that whenever I sat down to listen I simply didn't want to stop. In fact after a few weeks when László emailed me to check if I was having any problems I had to confess that I had done loads of listening but very little writing. I partnered the Supra with a variety of DACs and streamers and the basic qualities of the amp remained unchanged. The sound is warm when warmth is required but never unfocused, almost a valve-like quality. The soundstage deep, open and solid. This is important because the Supra has been designed to be as simple as possible, any elements that might

interfere with the signal have been removed so there is no balance control and no tone controls. The sound of the amp, therefore, needs to be intrinsically right, and the Supra is.

In the wrong hands Van Morrison's Astral Weeks album can be muddled and a little shrill. On Madame George, the Supra placed the backing instruments into their own positions with Van taking centre stage in front of them and it was clear to hear that Van's vocals had been recorded in a different acoustic environment to the backing musicians.

In France They Kiss On Main Street from Joni Mitchell's Hissing Of Summer Lawns Album is a track I know really well but I felt that the SuprA revealed more texture in Max Bennet's bass and the whole song just hung together and made more musical sense than in previous listenings. This ability to get to grips with the various element of the music and then present them cohesively is the SuprA's key strength.

With almost every track I threw at it I came away with some fresh insight, whether it be in the details of the recording or the complexity of the interplay between the musicians. From the swaggering rock of Led Zeppelin's Since I've Been Loving You through the laid back country soul of Amy Speace's Nothing Good Can Come Of This to the delicacies of Khatia Buniatishvili's solo piano rendition of Mussorgsky's Pictures At An Exhibition, the SuprA lays the

music out in front of you as it was recorded.

Conclusion

The Etalon Supra gives you everything you need from an integrated amp. Well, everything except a phono stage. Oh, and tone and balance controls, but you really shouldn't need those anyway. Its classy, elegant appearance is more than matched by its revealing, euphoric sound and I would highly recommend that if you are looking for an integrated amplifier then the SuprA should be added to your shopping list.



AT A GLANCE

Sound Quality: Transparent, open and detailed.

Build Quality: Solid, stylish and elegant. Perhaps a little old fashioned for some tastes.

Value For Money: A great sounding amp for the money but if you are looking for bells and whistles, this isn't the amp for you.

Pros:

Great sound

Good looks and build quality

Cons:

The remote control lets the side down a bit

No phono stage

Price – From €1980.00 depending on finish

SPECIFICATION

4 line inputs, RC volume control, DC output protection, metal cabinet, wood front

Channel balance: 0,2dB

Nominal output power: 70W at 4 ohms load

Frequency response: 20 Hz – 20 kHz +/- 0,2dB at 30W output

Input sensitivity: 0,7 Vrms at 30W output

Input impedance: 10 kohm

Remote control code: 155

Cabinet size: 360 x 100 x 470 mm (W x H x D)

Mass: 12 kg net, 13 kg packed in standard paper-box



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Convert Technologies Plato Class A

By Janine Elliot

The Convert Technologies Plato Class A costing £3999 will digitise your vinyl, store your films and tunes, has a digital phono stage and now runs in Class A. Janine Elliot takes this modern day music centre for a whirl

CONVERT TECHNOLOGIES PLATO CLASS A



As a child I was always intrigued by the Waltham all-in-one music centres available in Tesco. A turntable complete with amplifier, tuner, cassette deck and 8-track player in one box looked great with its complexity of buttons and knobs. Only the sound quality stopped me from finally dishing out months of pocket money.

When I first caught sight of the Plato a few years ago I was amazed at just how simple it looked; no buttons and switches apart from the single modest on/off button next to the USB socket. But this device was really clever. Now I could assemble all my music and video onto a single hard drive and play it controlled from a separate Android or IOS tablet, and more important, that all my vinyl could be recorded and stored on the device.

Using Android engine and Gracenote it will automatically 'top and tail' each track and have it all named and numbered without me having to raise anything other than a smile. Only at the Bristol hifi show when I asked if the amplifier stage of this all-in one unit was Class A was I slightly disappointed. Until now. As well as ground-breaking ripping technology and facilities, using

Gracenote to get album cover and titles as well as track durations so it can edit them accurately (and cleverly allowing a bit extra if necessary if your aged Garrard SP25iv is not quite playing at the right speed), this unit now plays your 24/192 FLACs or 16/44.1 WAVs as they should be, with precision and musicality to make them deserve that centre place on your hifi cabinet.

Using the Android operating system this all in one unit is a marvel of engineering and features. Since moving magnet and particularly moving coil cartridges require significant amplification, it was imperative that the design of the Plato didn't mean amplification of noise and interference. Consequently the unit is well shielded between the power supply to remove the worry of EMIs and RFIs. The digital design allows for a very quiet phono-stage with plenty of presets to alter the sensitivity, plus adjustments in 0.5dB steps either side; small enough to not be noticeable if adjusting whilst you are recording. You can also choose loads of 100Ω, 200Ω or 47kΩ, and 100pF or 200pF, plus select a rumble filter (>18dB at 5Hz) if your turntable needs it.

Ian Ringstead's fine review in 2015 covers the how and what of the

The digital design allows for a very quiet phono-stage with plenty of presets to alter the sensitivity, plus adjustments in 0.5dB steps either side

CONVERT TECHNOLOGIES PLATO CLASS A

The product now has a Class A amplifier stage to play music you have stored on it

technology so I won't repeat his findings in this review. The product now has a Class A amplifier stage to play music you have stored on it, or streaming from the internet. Unlike the standard model using Neutrik Speakon output sockets the Class A model uses conventional 4mm speaker sockets. There are 4 analogue and 4 digital inputs with analogue and digital pre-outputs. Adding another £1000 on top of the standard Plato, I wanted to establish whether this newly upgraded all-in-one machine really should be the centre of your hifi system. In my review here I connected the Plato using an RJ45 cable to my Virgin network, and playing the great team of Avid Volvere/SME/Benz with playback through the excellent Graham Audio LS5/9 speaker.

The choice of the name Plato is easy to understand as it equates the writings of the 420BC philosopher Plato and his 'The Allegory of the Cave'. In the allegory, people are chained in a cave so that all they can see are fuzzy shadows representing their existence cast on the walls of the cave reflected from a fire that is behind them. This parable also shines the light of truth of our relationship with music, with memories of our past becoming reality in our minds through the use of music. It might

have been fuzzy in the cave but with audio up to 24bit/192kHz the Plato is pin sharp, and playing back some of my 1970's LPs took me back to my own youth. The choice of 'Entotem' as the company name is less easy to understand, though Development Director Dave Belcher who delivered the Plato to me explained to me that the word "Ent" is short for entertainment and "Totem" meaning a form of worship (as in the word Totem Pole). I am pleased to say the company producing the Plato is now known as Convert Technologies, an appropriate name for a company using technology to convert from one medium to another and allowing them to ask me and purchasers "Are you a Convert?"...I certainly am.

Dave Belcher has himself spent a life dealing with digits, not only designing the Plato but originally working for Philips designing software for CD transports. In 2001 he then joined a fledgling company as one of development team, producing high capacity digital storage which grew to around 70 workers before it was sold to mega storage device manufacture Imation. Using capital from the sale he started Entotem in 2013 as one of 4 directors. The company has now grown to 26 with all building work done at its



CONVERT TECHNOLOGIES PLATO CLASS A



I was in a
sea of
ecstasy
playing this
through
what is
effectively a
£1600
power amp

factory in Derby, and R&D work in Newbury, Berkshire.

As a musician I am always amazed at how many different programs are running along in my brain at the same time. Firstly, my eyes decode the dots on the music staves and translates them into note names which then runs a program to convert them to finger movements to press the corresponding notes on the piano, with a separate program checking that I am actually playing the correct notes and another listening to make sure that the frequencies relate to the notes I see in front of me, and doing error checking and correcting my fingers as appropriate. There are lots of things going on at the same time in split second accuracy. Similarly with the Plato, not only can I play and record an album, monitoring the input or listening to what is now on the hard-drive (a bit like a 3 head tape machine of old with the inevitable slight delay), but the program will be busy editing tops and tails of this whilst you are recording the album, and whilst recording the next album, and so on. All recordings go onto the 1 or 2 terabyte SSD or standard HDD hard drive. If at a later date you discover you

need to edit the start or end of a track you can do so for a period of time, as the recording process is similar to the SD card in your car camera, continually recording until it gets to the end of the hard drive and starting all over again. The editing system is very easy to navigate and accurate in use. The only problem I found was that if the screen goes blank (as it will after a set time) then if it needs a command from you, such as deleting two versions etc, then until you see the request it won't do anything. Convert Technologies are presently working on simplifying the technique of exporting your recordings onto a USB stick, if you want to put them on a portable hi-def player, for example. Only the album thumbnails can't be exported, due to copying politics, though I have in the past copied jpegs of albums and inserted them into the album folders, which gets over that issue. Only once when asking it to export recordings onto a USB stick connection on the minimalist front panel did it show any signs of confusion whilst playing different music at the same time, though the company assure this minor glitch is now sorted. Also, as someone used to knobs and buttons, using

CONVERT TECHNOLOGIES PLATO CLASS A

technology such as this can be a little frustrating. If you suddenly get that phone-call and need to hit the pause or turn the volume down you will need to first refresh the Android and get to the correct page to turn the volume down, and by that point the phone might have gone to 'missed call'. A separate miniature remote for refresh screen, volume and mute would be my pennyworth of ideas, though I guess I am just showing signs of old age.

Sound

Whilst my suggestion of creating a Class A amplifier at that hifi show might not have been heard, I am so glad that this is what they have now done. Plato Class A is essentially a Class A/B design with class A operating until 8W (8Ω), which is more than you need, and the class B stage will allow those peaks up to 50W. Some Class A/B amplifiers only go a few watts before switching over, so this was a good plus. If the internal temperature surpasses the normal operating range then the amplifier will automatically operate in class B mode until returning to normal operating temperature. Signal to noise is a respectable >110dBa (45W/8Ω) with total harmonic distortion less than 0.0008% at 1kHz/1W. The design is meaty enough to play my LS5/9s with gusto, especially in the speed of the bass and extreme clarity on top.

David Gilmour 'Rattle that Lock' is one of my favourite albums, not least because of the great production and clarity of the music. Bass lines are extended, tom toms are meaty and guitar solos are effortlessly transparent and treacle to the ears. "In Any Tongue" might be one of the weakest tracks on the album, but David squeezes emotions with his guitar that I found I could well understand what all the fuss was all about. "Beauty" had effortless piano and string beauty about it that seemed consistent with much of the music I played. The Class A amplifier was very musical and still quick in delivery and open in sound. It wasn't lethargic like many amplifiers at this price point. Then when the Gilmour track starts to liven up, the added cymbal rhythms showed just how quick and clear a digital phono-stage could actually be. The Gilmour album has an extremely wide range of gain, but the phono-stage allowed even the quietest point of the music to be crystal clear.

With a range of adjustment for input that would embarrass even the most equipped conventional phono-stage, and which could be altered on the fly, there was plenty of room to ensure your recordings didn't hit that overload point, as digital distortion is much less forgiving than analogue. Ray Davies 'Working Man's Café' was particularly clear, and showed some of the kinks in the elder's singing voice that might have worked in the 60's, when he was lead singer in the band called the Kinks. "The Real World" is a weak track, but the Plato gave the music so much depth and space that I could start to understand Ray's vocal and his concern about a girl with a Harvard Degree who decided to waste it all by working in a bar in New Orleans. He sang about her getting reality in her life, reliving Plato's Analogy in the cave. The music was in charge now.

London Grammar 'If You Wait' is an exceptionally well recorded and mastered album on 45rpm. "Stay Awake" showed the extended and powerful bass with Hannah Reid's voice calm and controlled; a mixture of Florence and the Machine, Judie Tzuke and Goldfrapp. The trio produce sparse music with plenty of reverbs and effects over her voice and the Benz cartridge on SME iv arm gave a very detailed and

painless performance that showed just why vinyl cannot be beaten, admirably transferred to 24/96 in my Plato recording. David Gilmour "The Blue" (from 'On an Island') was an effortlessly sublime multicolour pastiche, with deep bass and crisp ride cymbals with clear singling out in the soundstage of harmonica and Hammond organ sounds and distorted guitar. I was in a sea of ecstasy playing this through what is effectively a £1600 power amp.

Conclusion

Whilst you can pick up the 2T HDD Plato Pre for £2400, the addition of the Class A amplifier within the single box is a very attractive proposal. Whilst class A amplifiers cover a vast multitude of prices and specification, this modest set up is highly rewarding and the fact it means you can have everything you need (apart from the turntable) now in one attractive box means the days of the music centre are well and truly back.



AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Minimalist, well-built design, with solid aluminum curved fascia and modular design, available in any colour if you add £300.

Sound Quality: Detailed and well controlled audio with good headroom for peaks

Value For Money: This is a unique product, and now with a good class A amplifier meaning you can have all your musical eggs in one basket at a very reasonable price.

Pros:

A unique product

Accurate, musical and quick Class A performance in terms of clarity and musicality significantly improving over standard amplifier

4mm speaker binding posts

Runs Android and can be controlled via Android or IOS tablets

Effortless copying of vinyl or cassette to WAV or FLAC as well as digital audio/video storage

Cons:

Just wish there was a volume control and headphone socket!

Price:

Plato Class A 2TB HDD £3999.00

SPECIFICATIONS

Output: Speaker L & R (x1)

Output Power (230V AC in): >50 Watts, into 8Ω

THD (20-20kHz, Line In to Speaker out): <0.0008% 1kHz – 8Ω, 1W

<0.0008% 1kHz – 8Ω, 50W

<0.001% 10kHz – 4Ω, 1W

<0.001% 10kHz – 4Ω, 10W

Signal to Noise Ratio (PGA 0dB): >110dBa (45W/8R out)

Signal to Noise Ratio (PGA 0dB): >90dBa (1W/8R out)

Frequency response (20Hz-20kHz): +/- 0.1dB



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CyrusStream Xa Streamer and DAC plus PSX R2 Power Supply Unit

By John Scott

The Stream Xa is a combined streamer/DAC, retailing at £1,295. The PSX R2 power supply is an optional upgrade and retails at £695. John Scott takes them both out for a test drive.

CYRUS STREAM XA STREAMER/DAC & PSX R2 PSU



I was
immediately
impressed
by the
sound of the
Stream Xa
on its own

Both units arrived in cardboard shipping boxes. Within each of these boxes, the individual units are further protected by another internal box, secured by substantial polystyrene mouldings that keep the units firmly in place during transport. The supplied power cables and accessories are also well packed and secured.

Cyrus are a well-established audio manufacturer, their first products having appeared on the market in 1984 with the Cyrus 1 and Cyrus 2 amplifiers. Over the years, the Cyrus brand has developed into a distinctive style, into which both the Xa and the PSX R2 seamlessly fit. If you are putting the Stream Xa into a non-Cyrus system then you might find its looks to be a little dated compared to something like the Lumin A1 streamer but I didn't find this to be a major concern. The Stream Xa comes in either Brushed Black or Silver Quartz. The supplied model was Brushed Black which would be my preferred option. Both the Stream Xa and its external power supply are sturdily built – the casing is die-cast metal - and they exude a feeling of quality and craftsmanship in line with their price tag.

Setup

The Stream Xa is supplied with a generic information leaflet that seems to

be designed to apply across the whole Cyrus range so I gave it a quick look over and then ignored it. A CD containing an instruction manual is also supplied and I ignored that as well. I did, however, download the PDF of the manual which proved to be a lot quicker than messing about with a CD. I guess it is good to have options though. The Stream Xa comes with 5 digital inputs (2 optical SPDIFs and 3 coaxial SPDIFs) and 3 outputs (1 coaxial SPDIF and 2 RCA analogue outputs). Using The Cyrus MC-BUS system, it can be completely integrated with other Cyrus products. A remote control is not supplied but if existing Cyrus users have an iR14 remote then this will also work with the Stream Xa.

The Stream Xa can be connected wirelessly to your home network or via a wired Ethernet connection. Setup is relatively straightforward once you get used to the navigation of the menu on the front panel display which is controlled by a rotary/push knob and a back button.

I have said this in other streamer reviews in the past and I will no doubt continue to do so in the future: a streamer is only as good as the app that controls it. Streaming music files should be all about simplicity and versatility. If using



CYRUS STREAM XA STREAMER/DAC & PSX R2 PSU

your streamer's app makes you want to throw your tablet or smartphone through the window, then something is seriously wrong. I'm happy to report that no tablets, smartphones or windows were damaged during the period of my review. Cyrus' Cadence app does everything you need it to, including access to Internet radio, although not quite with the elegance and sophistication of the best apps that I have used. Currently, the Android version of the app has slightly better functionality than the iOS version but Cyrus have assured me that further development of the app is ongoing and new releases will be forthcoming very soon.



Sound

Over a period of several weeks I auditioned the Stream Xa with and without the PSX R2 power supply, switching this in and out regularly. I was immediately impressed by the sound of the Stream Xa on its own. Well-known recordings revealed subtle textures and nuances. I've often found solo piano recordings to be tricky to reproduce realistically but the Xa took Gina Bachauer's version of Brahms' Variations On A Theme By Paganini (Mercury Living Presence) in its stride. The instrument retained a stable position in the soundstage with the ambience of the recording space being faithfully reproduced.

Adding the PSX R2 to the equation simply made an already good performance better, allowing the Stream Xa to give its all, like adding a drop of water to a cask strength whisky to allow its complex flavours to open up. This was demonstrated time and again over the review period.

The Stream Xa is genre agnostic; equally at home with the taught rhythms

of Fragments In Time from Daft Punk's Random Access Memories album as with the delicate syncopation of Nick Drake's acoustic guitar on River Man from Five Leaves Left. The complex interactions between tabla and vocals on The Conference from Nitin Sawhney's Beyond Skin were easily untangled and practically demanded repeated replaying. This is a piece of equipment that will have you revisiting your whole digital music collection.

Conclusion

The Stream Xa can be readily recommended, whether as part of an existing Cyrus system or as a stand-alone component. It can also be recommended with or without its accompanying power supply upgrade but if your budget can stretch to cover the additional £695 then it would be silly not to include it. You can of course start with the Stream Xa and add the PSX R2 when funds permit.



AT A GLANCE

Sound Quality: Revealing, detailed and involving. And with the PSX R2 even more so



Build Quality: Solidly built and exudes an air of reliability

Value For Money: A very good streamer/DAC combo for the money. Deserves to be auditioned

Pros:

Terrific sound quality
Space-saving compact design may be an advantage for some

Cons:

The Cadence app could be more refined
Space-saving compact design will not be to everyone's liking
No DSD compatibility

SPECIFICATIONS

Stream Xa

Outputs:

SPDIF coaxial
Stereo RCA analogue
PSX-R upgrade port
MC-BUS

Inputs:

Optical SPDIF
Coaxial SPDIF
USB A

Ethernet

File/Signal Compatibility:

WAV, FLAC, ALAC, AAC, MP3, WMA, AIFF

Maximum signal resolution:

24 bit 192 kHz

Dimensions (mm):

Height 73
Width 215
Depth 360
Weight 4.7kg

PSX R2

Dimensions (mm):

Height 73
Width 215
Depth 360
Weight 7kg

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Hi-Fi News Review September '15

Vivid B1 Decade Loudspeakers

By Janine Elliot

Laurence Dickie was the man behind the B&W Nautilus with it's instantly recognisable design. Janine Elliot takes a look at the Vivid B Decade loudspeakers retailing at £18500 and also designed by Dickie.

VIVID B1 DECADE LOUDSPEAKERS



This reverse
horn
philosophy has
now been
adopted in
both the
tweeter and
midrange units
in Vivid
loudspeakers

One of the most important speakers of all time was the distinctive B&W Nautilus. Where almost everything before was a square box, Laurence Dickie and the team at B&W looked at speakers from the ground up, with form following function in order to create the nearest to a perfect speaker with the lowest distortion. The end result, after five years development, was the distinctive snail-shaped Nautilus structure.

Much of what was learnt in creating the iconic Helix Aspersa was passed down to later B&W 800 series loudspeakers, such as rear mounted drivers so that the speakers are disjoined from the front baffle, something I cited in the revised

“a” BBC LS3/5, though this time there are no screws at the front. Also passed down from the Nautilus are the tapered rear ends of the tweeter. What became clear when designing drivers was that as well as general worries over resonance and reflections from the drivers, cabinet resonances now needed to be dealt with as well and tapering the rear of the tweeter is a way of absorbing the rear sound emissions. Originally B&W came up with the idea of just a long tube filled with a fibrous filling, but the length would need to be really long, around 10 times the diameter of the driver, so the next thing was to taper it down, meaning it could be a third of the length - hence that famous external tweeter housing appearing in B&W Nautilus and 800

This model might be related to the original B1, but it isn't just a Mk2 version

series. Think of a horn made of paper; if you shout through the small end the sound is amplified at the other, but if you reverse the cone...well you get the idea. This reverse horn philosophy has now been adopted in both the tweeter and midrange units in Vivid loudspeakers.

Laurence Dickie might have left B&W with an award winning monster, but he has for more than twenty years been evolving and refining the Nautilus at his own company, Vivid Audio. The top of the range Giya series has the tapered rear-ends of the tweeter and midrange speaker positioned either inside the shaped cabinet, or as in the G3 and G4 an art-form protruding into the beautiful

circular design, the speakers looking like giant earring.

Vivid use aluminium rather than Kevlar diaphragms, and neodymium magnet powered drivers rather than the ceramic magnets in the Nautilus. As well as Dickie there are two other major players at Vivid; Robert Trunz, a majority shareholder in B&W until 1996, and Philip Guttentag, who was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, and who met Dickie whilst in Durban, joining the other two players in a venture making loudspeakers. Vivid Audio is often thought of as a South African company (indeed, their top model the 'Giya' means a type of Zulu dance), but whilst ideas and personnel (Trunz & Guttentag) and manufacturing is based in Durban, it



VIVID B1 DECADE LOUDSPEAKERS

is actually a British company with the base in West Sussex, where you'll find Ray Rowles (himself an ex stalwart of B&W) who works on UK sales, and more often than not, Laurence himself. Delivering the two speakers in coffin sized boxes for my review was Ray and the enthusiastic Arif Huseyin representing Vivid Audio in the UK, with his background at KJ West One, Audio Lounge and Devialet.

Dickie has a lot in common with me; both born in the same year, and both took an interest in taking things apart to see how they work at a very young age. I remember being thrown across the room playing with the HT unit in an old valve TV. That scared me off for a while. Whilst he built his first loudspeaker driver at the age of 10 and his loudspeaker enclosure at 11 I didn't try loudspeaker cabinets until woodwork lessons in Year 7. He went on to great things, working at a Nottingham company to work in electronics design making, including amongst other things, turntable drive system. In 1984 he joined B&W, taken on to develop MOSFET based active speakers and contributing to the lattice structure "Matrix" system inside the speakers which support and strengthen the interior, including damping of sound inside the structure. He went on to work on professional B&W products, but when boss Robert Trunz left and he was requested to move back to domestic hifi, he decided to quit, first setting up Blast Loudspeakers Ltd, developing the D26, D50 and C125 drivers that would then appear in Vivid Audio, a company he later set up in 2004.

Fit, Finish and Technology

The Zulu shield-shaped B1, part of the "oval range", was the first speaker marketed by the company. The B1 Decade, being reviewed here, is a 10 year anniversary celebration of the company and an overhaul of their first product. This model might be related to the original B1, but it isn't just a Mk2 version. There are very many differences. A three-and-a-half way loudspeaker, it retained largely the main cabinet shape, but with some changes to the original. For example, the front and rear baffles of the B1 Decade are now slightly convex allowing for better diffraction, with the drivers themselves now slightly recessed in the front and rear baffles. The lower-midrange and woofer drivers are different, with

differently shaped ports, and also a revised crossover. There is a port front and back, meaning you can see right through the unit, just as in the original B1. Looking like something out of a science fiction movie, the upper half of the loudspeaker is now made of a vacuum infused mixture of glass fibre reinforced resin sandwich with a balsa core (as used for the top-end GIYA series), rather than the mineral resin filled composite, which was in the original B1 and now the choice for the lower (stand) half of the Decade. The point at which the two halves join is brilliantly disguised. The choice for the composite material is because it has a high resonant frequency, meaning cabinet resonances are even less likely to be heard. The bi-wireable binding posts are at the bass of the unit, meaning unsightly wires can be kept out of sight, and out of the teeth of my cat.

The B1 Decade, launched at the end of 2015, is a Limited Edition, Oval, 3.5-way 4 driver speaker, ported front and back. Being a cross between a stand mount and floor-stander, Vivid have here quite a unique product, though at a full-size price of £18,500, with a limited run of 400; half of them in piano black and the other 200 in the Rosso Red that I review here. Any other colour is available with a premium of an additional £2000. Whilst the product might be financially out of the reach of many audiophiles, its looks could easily be considered as a work of art, or else perhaps a creation of H.R. Giger. Visitors to my house during the review all thought it was like nothing they had ever seen. If only I could have been reviewing the Giya G1; that iconic floor-stander is no less than 1.7 meters high and considerably more expensive. If, though, you consider the B1 Decade as a floor-stander, then that price appears much less daunting. It comes with an attractive magnetically attached metal grille, rather than the cloth type included in the original B1

With a Frequency range at -6dB from 34 to 36,000Hz and a nominal impedance of 4 ohm, it comprises the D26 1" (26mm) aluminium alloy dome tweeter (which has its first break up mode much higher at 44,000Hz, making for a very clean sound), D50 2" (50mm) aluminium alloy dome midrange and two coupled C125d 5" (125mm) aluminium alloy cones as the front and rear bass drivers. These new drivers have their magnet moved from the rear,

There is a
port front
and back,
meaning
you can see
right
through the
unit, just as
in the
original B1

VIVID B1 DECADE LOUDSPEAKERS

as in traditional drivers, to surround the voice coil, improving efficiency and increasing magnetic reluctance around the voice coil, claiming to improve upper frequency performance. The rear woofer operates below 130Hz, whereas the frontal woofer works crosses over with the midrange at around 880Hz. The tweeter and midrange drivers are attached to the aforementioned energy absorbing tapered tubes which in turn are connected at the rear of the speaker enclosure with a single bolt. The front and rear woofers are connected to each other with a thick metal rod, creating a force cancelling effect, holding them together securely and independent of the cabinet, reducing resonances from reaching the cabinet. As a final means of decoupling all of the drivers, a silicone 'O' ring is positioned between the drivers and cabinet, ensuring chassis vibrations are not transferred to the cabinet. The unit comes supplied with selection of spikes or rubber feet and cotton gloves, all arriving in two coffin-size boxes. The cabinet itself is designed with no sharp edges or areas for re-radiation of waveforms; just as the curvy 1970's USA B1 bomber has a 'radar signature' just one per cent of that of its more conspicuous predecessor the B-52.

Sound

Whilst I shouldn't compare Vivid with B&W, where the latter could have a distinctive "separation" of sound between the drivers making (for me) a less than single-point vertical soundstage, the Vivids have an excellent correlation between the drivers, giving a musical performance that got my interest right from the start. Where the original B1 that I heard many years ago had deficiencies at the extremes, giving a more than slight upper bass and midrange 'sad face' waveform, a Decade

has given me the chance to turn my own expression into a big smile. That bass end is so much better, with no interaction with the cabinet, giving a tight and extended frequency response.

Kitaro's "Live in America" is an especially moving and atmospheric performance recorded in 1990. The bass end from the through-ported B1 Decade was exceptionally clear and extended now, with the distant drum beats being crystal clear and the even more distant audience applause giving me a very ambient image of me lying in a field on a star lit evening gazing up at the stars with a bottle of chardonnay whilst listening to the Japanese ensemble performing on flute, drums and Tangerine Dream inspired synthesisers. Recorded at the amazing open-air Fox Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia, I might just as well have been.

The Big Band Spectacular, The Syd Lawrence Orchestra (Chasing the Dragon, Mike Valentine) had power and authority that made me wonder if my Music First passive Baby Reference preamp had a Loudness button hidden inside the autotransformer. Whilst bass oomph was spectacular (and switching to spiked feet from initially listening without spikes or rubber feet brought more accuracy and behaviour in the bass), I did find that it took away some of the tidy ride cymbal rhythms from drummer Dave Tandy. What is noticeable, though, were the clean lines of the brass section, influenced by the low harmonic distortion, quoted at 0.5% for second and third harmonics. Indeed, whilst I found that width of sound was reduced, compared to my choice Wilson Benesch and particularly my Chartwell LS3/5a, the amount of detail drawn out is exceptional. The rear bass enabled the music to fill the room, though could sometimes interfere with precise instrument placements, but moving the speaker forward from the wall did improve things somewhat. Where I was perhaps apprehensive about reviewing Vivid in the past due to that upper-bass emphasis, the amount of improvement in all aspects of sound and enjoyment level warranted the 50% price increase on the original B1. This was far better than I could have imagined. Bass was excellent, and detail from the aluminium drivers was as polished as the metal fronted drivers themselves.

Sibelius Symphony No 5 (Berliner Philharmoniker, 24/192) was very engaging and showed the originality of this composer that Sir Simon Rattle so brilliantly shows off in anything he conducts. This set of recordings was made to celebrate the 150th year since Jean was born. The positional space between instruments was clearly defined and each phrase of music was allowed to breathe, giving a truly musical encounter into the austere Nordic folklore it portrayed, and I felt close to audio Valhalla. Whilst this recording itself has a significant mid-range emphasis, the Vivid speaker was careful not to make it OTT.

Moving to Wagner Preludes and Overtures (The Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra Krieberg 24/192) and the 'Rienzi Overture' the Vivid's gave all they could from the quiet recessed start to the emotion and build up in various points during this very flamboyant piece. The B1 Decade sounded quite forgiving as well as a determined speaker when needed, particularly at the end of the piece. Where Wagner could often give me a headache, I found the Vivid was accurate and entertaining and I just wanted to keep listen, which is always a good sign.



VIVID B1 DECADE LOUDSPEAKERS



As a final test Bach BWV565 Toccata and Fugue in D minor (Helmut Walcha, Archiv 2565 002) is an excellent recording, and the bass pedal 'D' at 33Hz showed no signs of lacking. Very impressive!!

Turning to Muse Drones, the power and determination of 'Dead Inside' gave these speakers a chance to show their meat and their delicate precision at the same time. These speakers were carefully worked out to offer an accurate and entertaining musical expedition that on most speakers is hard to get this good.

Conclusion

£18,500 is never going to be a cheap price for any pair of speakers, but considering that you get many hours of craftsmanship, good looks, and design philosophy and heritage, plus a fully detailed soundstage from lows to highs, then this makes the B1 Decade even more special.

With distinctive looks this is a fully fledged and great sounding limited edition. Ten years have given Dickie time to learn considerably more about speakers, and the Decade owes much of its design to the Giya and is therefore a big improvement on its predecessor. With that in mind, the B1 Decade is not so expensive after all.

AT A GLANCE

HIGHLY
Hifi Pig
RECOMMENDED

Build Quality: Beautiful solid build quality and looks to kill for

Sound Quality: Accurate, full frequency sound with excellent bass

Value For Money: At £18,500 this is not a basement price offering, but bearing in mind the heritage and intense design philosophy, the full-band detailed soundstage that is not attainable without serious outlay. And this is a limited edition of just 400 pairs.

Pros:

Excellent bass
Detailed soundstage covering all frequencies accurately
Effortless musicality

Cons:

Looks might be too advanced for some square-box-loving audiophiles

Price: £18500

SPECIFICATIONS

Nominal impedance: 4Ω

Frequency range (Hz): 6dB points: 34 - 36,000Hz

Frequency response: 38 - 33,000Hz +/- 2dB on reference axis

Harmonic distortion: < 0.5% over frequency range (2nd and 3rd harmonics)

Cross over frequencies: (Hz) 130, 900, 3500

Power handling (music program): 300 watts rms

Loudspeaker dimensions: 1095mm (H) x 265mm (W) x 375mm (D); Base: 420mm (D)

Net weight: 36kg.



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Peak Hifi PT1 Turntable

By Ian Ringstead

The Peak PT1 turntable has a natural slate plinth and comes complete with an arm for £599. Ian Ringstead takes it for a spin for Hifi Pig

PEAK PT1 TURNTABLE



The PT1
benefits
from a
superbly
machined
real slate
plinth

Peak Hifi who make this new turntable have been around a few years and was formed in 2004 by owner Shaun Daniels. I recently went to see Shaun in order to collect the PT1 to review as they are only based forty minutes drive from me near Barnsley, on the edge of the beautiful Peak District. I always like to talk to the manufacturers/designers at length if possible about any product I review, and if I can do it face to face then that's even better. I spent a very pleasant couple of hours talking to Shaun and his wife at their beautiful home which also doubles up as their business premises. Shaun does a wide range of quality hifi components from the budget to the serious audiophile enthusiast kit to suit all tastes and pockets.

Shaun's background was originally and for many years in high quality engineering in Sheffield and when the

opportunity arose for him to change direction and semi-retire he was only too glad to pursue his passion for music (he has a great collection of electric guitars on the wall of one of the dem rooms) and start a bespoke hifi business from his home. As an engineer Shaun wasn't content to just sell other manufacturers products, he inevitably wanted to produce his own and turntables were an area where his expertise could come to the fore.

The resurgence of vinyl in recent years has seen a plethora of new turntables arrive on the market from the budget to the eye wateringly expensive super models. Shaun is involved in SMD Acoustics who make superb idler drive turntables costing from £5900 for the real enthusiasts with deeper pockets, but the PT1 came about as a serious attempt to provide a quality budget and easy to use turntable for the wider market of



PEAK PT1 TURNTABLE

What we have here is a cracking budget turntable that deserves to be auditioned by anyone interested in a new sub thousand-pound turntable

newcomers to hifi or those with limited funds.

Design

The PT1 benefits from a superbly machined real slate plinth. Back in the seventies I had a JBE slate turntable which at the time was unique in having a slate plinth and was highly regarded. (What let the JBE turntable down was that the finish wasn't half as good as the Peak PT1, but cnc machining wasn't around then). Slate is a natural material and every plinth has its own unique markings. Slate is also a great audiophile choice for a plinth as it is high mass and naturally damped due to its multiple layers. The Peak PA1 tonearm is a hand assembled, precision made component with low friction levels and minimum mass and performs well above its price point (note the PA1 not available separately and is only available on the PT1). Four genuine Sorbothane feet for improved decoupling. The motor has an advanced decoupling system to minimise transmitted vibrations and the main bearings and motor all benefit from oversized aluminium mounts to provide stability in the drive system. All the electronics are bespoke Peak Turntable components and hand assembled and soldered in the UK.

The bespoke switch is an attractive feature of this British made turntable and the high quality dust cover (optional extra) is made from 4mm thick acrylic, with high quality cnc machined hinge sockets. I have to say I don't normally get excited about the look of budget end products, realising that manufacturers have a tough job when budgets are limited to provide quality, but Peak have done a fabulous job of manufacturing an elegant design. The fit and finish is first class with the cnc machined slate plinth a work of art with a faultless finish. The optional lid is well worth buying as not only will it protect the PT1 from dust and possible little fingers, but is superbly made and with the Peak name proudly embellished on top and really sets the deck off with nice friction hinges.

The PA1 arm is an OEM design (based on a Rega RB250 I reckon) made to high tolerances and worked flawlessly. Shaun kindly supplied it with an Ortofon 2M red, a great little budget moving magnet cartridge that sells for £89.

The PT1 sits on four sorbothane feet that along with the natural dampening properties of the slate do an admirable job of suppressing vibration. The deck is compact and with its clean simple



PEAK PT1 TURNTABLE



design looked very smart on my wooden equipment rack. The setup is extremely quick and easy, and I had music playing in minutes of unpacking. (as slate is a heavy and fragile material if dropped, Shaun has designed superb strong packaging to protect the PT1 fully whilst in transit. A nice touch and not to be underestimated).

A good easy to understand instruction manual and cartridge alignment protractor are supplied just in case you need to make any adjustments or change the cartridge. Mains is supplied by a plug in DC wall wart of good quality and speed change is manually done by lifting the outer platter off the subplatter and moving the belt on the stepped motor pulley for 33 or 45. Operation was very easy and quiet with the power switch feeling assuredly smooth, and the noise level from the PT1 whilst rotating was very quiet. (a sign of good motor isolation and the slates damping ability).

The PT1 comes with a simple felt mat that worked well and although I would have liked to experiment with other mat types, the fixed height of the PA1 arm meant this wasn't really possible without affecting the cartridge's stylus rake angle too much, so I kept it simple with the supplied mat.

Sound

So how did it sound? Once I had let the Ortofon 2M red run in for a few hours I set about some serious listening. What really impressed straight away was the noise floor of the PT1 was very quiet. Of course you had the records surface noise, but with a good quality pressing the results were surprisingly good for a sub one-thousand-pound package. Music

had great detail and all the musicians could easily be picked out in the sound stage.

Nils Lofgren's "Keith don't go" from his Night after night double live album was portrayed really well and showed what a superb guitarist he is. I saw him do this live at the City Hall in Sheffield back in the seventies and I was taken back to that time.

Jazz, progressive rock, classical, female vocal all sounded vibrant without being wearing on one's ears. I spent a whole day auditioning the PT1 through some Ophidian P2 floorstanders at £4000, and the PT1 did not disgrace itself. My resident Pro-ject Extension nine deck with Ortofon Quintet black moving coil definitely has the edge in performance with better detail and depth of sound stage, but given that as a package this is three times the price of the PT1 one cannot help but admire the PT1's performance. As the PT1 can be upgraded with the aluminium platter and a moving coil cartridge the results would have been even closer.

Conclusion

I could go on and on about the different records I tried, but that would be boring and I played so many on the PT1. What we have here is a cracking budget turntable that deserves to be auditioned by anyone interested in a new sub thousand-pound turntable, or who want to dip their toes into the water to find out the magic of vinyl.



AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Superb fit and finish with quality parts throughout.

Sound Quality: Detailed and well controlled sound that for the money is excellent

Value For Money: Excellent and strong competition for turntables up to £1500

Pros:

A simple to use quality product that looks great

Clear musical sound with a good low noise floor thanks to the slate plinth

Can be upgraded with the aluminium platter and a moving coil cartridge

Cons:

Fixed arm height makes cartridge choice a little limited, but spacers can overcome this issue.

Price:

£599 without lid or cartridge

Optional Extras

Dust Cover £60

High Mass Aluminium Platter extra £150

Cartridge (choice from £35 upward).

SPECIFICATIONS

Real solid slate plinth

12" platter (choice of steel or aluminium)

High quality tonearm

Quality motor with suspension system

Rounded drive belt for reduced resonance

Robust motor and bearing mountings.

British Made

Speed: 33,45 RPM (Manual Speed Change)

Wow & Flutter: +/- 0.12%

Speed Drift: +/- 0.80%

Signal to Noise: - 65dB

Effective Arm Length: 9"

Power Consumption: 2W

Outboard Power Supply: 16V/500mA AC

Dimensions (WxHxD): 415 x 120 x 320mm -

Optional Lid Closed

Weight: 12.5kg

Notes:

If using a moving coil cartridge Peak Hifi recommend that the aluminium platter is selected.

The PA1 does not have adjustable VTA and is designed to work with cartridges having a dimension from stylus tip to the top of the cartridge mounting of 18 - 20mm (virtually all Ortofons) if your cartridge varies significantly from these dimensions you may need to use a spacer.



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Studio Connections Carbon Power Cable

By Dan Worth & Dominic Marsh

Studio Connections are based in the UK and produce a wide range of cables for home audio use. In this review Dan Worth and Dominic Marsh take a look at the company's Carbon Power cables retailing at £190 for 1m

STUDIO CONNECTIONS CARBON POWER CABLE



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

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

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

System Efficiency and General Implementation

High performance power distribution is not just about providing energy to components in my opinion, but also bonding components together to form a single, cohesive system. This demands providing a stable common reference ground between components and preventing stray voltages and noise occurring between different parts of the system.

All electronic and electrical circuits create electromagnetic fields and noise. If these are not managed in a system then they will propagate throughout the system and cause disturbances. Most equipment and power conditioners use filters to reduce noise emissions. However, noise is rarely nullified into non-existence, and usually residual noise

is reflected or sent to a ground connection or to a chassis.

There is an assumption a system ground has the infinite ability to absorb noise; in reality it is a wire network. Because it connects chassis together, it can minimise noise voltages between components, but it equally transfers noise energy between components as eddy currents¹. An increase in noise levels always degrades stereo image.

The only way to truly remove all noise from a system is, instead of trying to hard block² it or send it somewhere else, is to ensure there are no circuit loops that current can travel around and all the components share a common reference ground. To ensure any interference is dissipated as heat.

Installation

As mentioned in the previous paragraph strapping the earths to a common location is essential in appraising any power cable and really obtaining the best electrical solution for the components. Known as star earthing, designers have been implementing this technique for many years now within their electronics and distribution mains blocks. My own system a period of time ago consisted of two separate radials for front and back end equipment, with each having a balanced power supply and a filtered block for the front end and a passive for the amps.

Although the sound was terrific and all the equipment fed by seemingly capable and competent products, I could from time to time find myself with a soundstage that didn't produce as accurate an image as I believed should have been presented to me. I had instances of overtones in higher frequencies that had a lack of body and lower notes which felt crumpled and crushed.

When listening for acoustic air and space in live venues I felt that the sound I was hearing was definitively truer and more representative

Accuracy was
at the
forefront of
the
characteristics
I was now
presented
with

As Michael Whiteside, owner and designer of all Studio Connections products is as obtainable to the public as he is to industry personnel and is responsible for really honing down the wiring of some of our best known studios and theatres, I gave him a call with my concerns and he was as always ready and willing with advice.

We sketched out the systems wiring and immediately his suggestions were to remove the use of one of the radials in the circuit along with one balanced power supply. 'Less is more in this case' Michael stated. I naturally hesitated at this prospect as I believed that keeping the two balanced supplies in place would in fact eliminate crosstalk. Our first step in this case was to take a preliminary approach by strapping the two grounding points inside the balanced supplies to each other. This did not yield any ground breaking results (excuse the pun).

So next I went with Michael's initial plan and removed one of the balanced supplies and negated one of the radials.

The new chain of power was one radial feeding one balanced power supply, two feeds from that supply, one to the front end filtered extension block and the other to my all star wired (neutral and live lines included) passive block for the amps the results were really staggering. Phase and timing was considerably more accurate and instrument tone and timbre was more natural, fluid and dynamically true.

Bring in the Carbon Mains Cables

The installation of the Carbon Screened Mains Cables into my system began as straight forward as any other power cable review. I initially added one to each of my Reference Mono blocks. My first inspection on the sound was that over my previous far more expensive cables from various companies the sound gained solidity in the bass. I felt that initially I was hearing more bass, but during more intense listening it wasn't the levels of bass which increased but more so the timing and accuracy of the bass line which had better energy and more natural dynamics allowing me to ascertain better separation of kick drums over bass and the extension of lower bass was freer and more substantially apparent.

I then proceeded to replace my existing cables back into the amplifiers and

changed the one in the DAC for a SC Carbon. Most notably I understood the vocals better. What I mean is I could feel more emotion and realism in the artist's rendition of the given music. When watching a live band, eye contact from the singer is essential in conveying the emotion that is felt in the lyrics, but we cannot have that with Hifi, as we strive to ascertain the emotion from the description of the vocal and with the SC Carbon in place in my DAC I really felt a good connection with the singer. Not to degrade my other cables at all I could say that at a staggeringly cheap cost I felt that I was retaining a palpability that I had worked so hard to achieve which cost a great deal more previously.

Leaving this cable in place and adding another to the Paul Hynes power supply which keeps my modified Mac sustained. I actually achieved what was a more fleshed out and rich top end. The combination of the two was marvellous and the previous cable in this position being an all silver design was chosen as it gave a fantastically airy feel to the upper registers that I preferred over copper variants previously. The SC Carbon did two things for me, one it gave me a denseness to the frequency extremes in the top end allowing them to become more prominent and articulate and secondly the more natural timbre suddenly exposed to me that the top end previously was in fact over airy and almost overly dispersed. When listening for acoustic air and space in live venues I felt that the sound I was hearing was definitively truer and more representative, almost as if the other silver cable was a bit artificial in its sonic approach.

Of course the next step was to combine the results with the power amplifiers and the front end. Accuracy was at the forefront of the characteristics I was now presented with, accuracy in terms of tone and timbre, with a soundstage which produced dynamic depths and stage placements that made terrific sense. I had achieved a lot of this previously by honing down the grounding and layout of the power circuit chain but this was some time before having the ability to work with several of the SC mains cables. Energy, tactile responsiveness and subtlety combined for a ponderous listen and it was a good 10 days to a week before I remembered that I had yet not installed one of Michael's power cables in the preamp. Up until now I haven't found

STUDIO CONNECTIONS CARBON POWER CABLE

any faults with what I was hearing and my listening joy had taken on a different dimension which was extremely satisfying.

Placing another Carbon cable into the preamp had similar results to adding one to the DAC initially, I felt that from the upper mids to the upper bass I had more dimensionality to the soundstage and band member placement was more sustainably accurate. Dominic popped over for a listen and immediately said that he felt that there was more presence to the overall imaging and that I had achieved a richness in tonality that only comes from good copper cabling which he felt may have always been overshadowed by the flaws of my ceramic tweeters. We swapped different power cables of his and mine in and out a few times and although pronunciations of certain frequencies were adorable with some of the other cords used we both agreed that the full internal loom of the SC power cables had an unforced and naturally energised sound that didn't highlight anything in particular but rather lent its hand to overall frequency expression and simply great timing, which I'll add I didn't think could be achieved by a power cable and especially one at this price.

I contacted Mr. Whiteside again and briefly told him that I was achieving some favourable results from the power cables he had sent me, as we like to keep our reviews close to our chest until release and asked him for some additional cabling which could be hard wired from the balanced power supply to each of the mains blocks and for another from the wall to create a full loom.

On arrival of the extra cables for the full loom, I had my engineer reconfigure the balanced supply to incorporate the additional cables, one for the passive amp extension block and one for the front end filter extension. Results were very favourable indeed. I did lose a little punch in the upper bass in comparison to the previous cabling, but what I lost in punch was substituted with great extension in the bass and better spread of lower waves throughout the room. Better, well, a bit of give and take really, things were slightly different.

The entire loom made complete musical sense to me and flow and sculpture of the soundstage was fantastic, leaving nothing in the mist of background

hashes, with ambient harmonics retaining great stature throughout the soundstage and micro details, maybe a little more rounded but contacting the music and the listener with full ranged articulation. I do like a bit more of a slapstick sound overall, but arguments could easily be raised for both alternatives, especially when concerning myself with the wide range of musical taste I have.

The ever crucial midrange in my system which for me needs to project vocals with absolute tonal balance and clarity, with plenty of transparency and spacial awareness took on a very slightly more natural role in the mix. The upper midrange with female vocalists was a touch calmer and the chestier deeper tones of a males vocal had more grunt and body with the very lowest of their range being slightly more tempered due to the rounder upper bass characteristic of the additional cables in this particular place in my system.

Conclusion

An F1 car is a piece of engineering greatness, but it's the culmination of its smaller parts which allows the whole unit to run at its very finest and extract each little piece of performance gains from the overall package. Cabling is very much the same; a good system with poor interconnecting cables will not reveal its true performance and like the F1 car, if all the component parts are not just right, overall performance is degraded. Using the Studio Connections Carbon Screened Power Cables in my system hasn't dramatically changed its ability but it's made the whole package more tactile, has better handling of frequency extremes, has increased image performance extremely naturally and has defined the tonal balance of the overall music in a way that comforts me greatly.

In any high-end system all the small tweaks we make for the better usually add a little bit here and a little bit there to the overall sound and when describing these tweaks and changes it can be perceived that some may overstate the claims. We have to be realistic and understand that a review such as this needs to always be kept in context. Yes, but what is context in today's age of high-end audio, a power cable that costs £3000 or more that adds definition, clarity and body to the sound or a cable that does nearly as well that costs £200, so you decide.

I am pleased to inform you that I found a very low noise floor which didn't intrude into the musical performance, the width, depth and placement rendered accurately and silently

I was also called upon to evaluate these Studio Connections Carbon power cords for Hifi Pig and was supplied with enough cables to completely wire my system from wall socket to all IEC inlets throughout, including the input socket to my MS Audio 6 way mains distribution block. Usually we only get submitted to us a single power cord to review, so it was both refreshing and indeed very welcome that Studio Connections made available a whole set which gave a sort of "completeness" to the review, rather than a mere snapshot in total isolation of one cable alone.

Dan hasn't mentioned the Studio Connections power cord's appearance so I will here. It is a refreshing change to see a power cable's outer coat that isn't the ubiquitous expandable mesh sleeving, or some form of squashy rubberized jacket, instead we see what is undoubtedly designed in-house and not bought off any peg, being a smart "candy stripe twist" design in black and silver, so it is instantly recognisable as a Studio Connections product.

STUDIO CONNECTIONS CARBON POWER CABLE

Sound

As Dan has already done a pretty comprehensive breakdown of the specifications and build parameters, I will take the opportunity to crack on without further ado to give you my perceptions of how these cables performed.

As with any power cord evaluation, my first task is to listen out for any boom or bass overhang that poorly specified and built power cords are prone to. After many hours of listening with real bass heavy music selections I couldn't detect either bass boom or overhang at all, so that tells me there is sufficient gauge of wire within the cable to meet transient current demands. I then focus my attention on the treble regions for noise floor problems, hiss and smearing because that again is a signature trait that poor power cables demonstrate. Treble was clean, clear and free of any congestion or smearing, in fact with these cables installed it made listening to Fink's "Wheels Beneath My Feet" live album a real pleasure because the venue ambiances distinct within each track that was recorded in different venues during one of Fink's many European tours and there was no ambiguity at all that was embedded into the recording of this album and delivered with sweet airy crispness. I listen very carefully to the drummer's rim shots on the snare drum and in addition to the sound of wooden drumstick to the 'skin' of the drum, the body or shell should also be heard in true fidelity – it MUST sound dynamic and taut with natural reverberation decay, which is very hard for a system to be faithful to. With these cables I found Fink's enunciation a good deal more lifelike, with a distinct gruffness to his voice.

Any level of noise floor to me trashes any musical nuances to a large degree and also clouds up the imaging, taking away width, depth and spatial placement qualities of artists and instruments within the sound stage. I am pleased to inform you that I found a very low noise floor which didn't intrude into the musical performance, the width, depth and placement rendered accurately and silently.

Of course, just like Dan I too have a boxful of other assorted power cords to compare with and that gives me an idea where in the great scheme of all things power cord they fit into the marketplace and what competitors if any are there to rival it, so I can form an idea on whether or not they offer good value. At circa £190.00 for a standard 1 metre cable I couldn't find any cable that could directly compare with the Studio Connections Carbon power cord, in fact I was looking at close to four figure priced products that even came close.

To prove that point then I took out all the Studio Connections power cords and fitted a right old mish-mash selection from the spares box, ranging from a £40 cable to a £1,500 cable and it was very obvious the ensemble I put together just didn't have the crisp organic fluidity to the sound the Studio Connections power cords complete set had imparted.

Conclusion

The Studio Connections Carbon power cord set has acquitted itself very well, with honour too I might add. They are still to this day installed in my system and I am in no rush whatsoever to uninstall them, because for the first time in many years I have a set of power cords that I don't feel the impetus to ask questions about and simply let them get on with the task I have set them, happy in the knowledge it would cost a lot of

additional cash for any kind of tangible improvement over what these cables do, so they really are a fit and forget product so my spare cables box will have an emptying session soon.

I concur wholeheartedly with Dan that these cables offer tremendous value for money considering the returns in sound quality they provide, so I herewith add my endorsement to them.



AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Unmistakable external appearance, well built

Sound Quality: You would have to spend considerably more to best them

Value For Money: At £190.00 for a 1 metre cable it really is a no brainer purchase

Pros:

Unforced natural sound

Excellent detail retrieval

Very quiet noise floor

Very flexible and visually very appealing

Price to performance ratio is fantastic

Terrific sound quality, an exceptionally low noise floor and great with fast transients. Great performance at sensible money(DM)

Cons:

Very difficult to fault at this price or even multiples of it

Price at time of review: £190 + £30 every additional 0.5m

I spent a very long time in thinking of an "against" argument, so let's just say I drew a complete blank here (DM)

SPECIFICATIONS

Conductors: 1.5mm cross sectional area, 47 x 0.22 strands ultra high purity Nordic Copper.

Insulation : Brown, Blue, Green/Yellow

Insulation diameter: 3mm over dielectric

Bedding and Primary screen : 100% coverage, semi-conductor loaded

Outer Jacket: Clear PVC

Drain element: 0.46mm cross sectional area, 3 x 9 x 0.147 strands tinned copper wire

Resistance: Each core: 6.98 ohms/km

Capacitance: Core to core: 100pF/m

Inductance: Each Core: 26mH/km

Rated voltage: 500Vac

Overall diameter; 9.75mm



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Quadraspire X Reference Rack

By Stuart Smith

A somewhat sceptical Stuart Smith takes a listen to his kit sat ontop of the Quadraspire X Reference hifi rack costing £1000 per level

QUADRASPIRE X REFERENCE RACK



The perception here is that because of this sharpening you can hear more fine detail in the music you are listening to

I'll be honest here and say that the whole concept of reviewing a rack really doesn't sit well with me at all. I remember a few years ago watching a video made by a Greek audiophile group in which one character says "The rack is 50% of the sound" (or words to that effect) and oh how I chortled. A rack is a rack, but recently we were given a very heavy rack for our listening room and it really killed the sound we were getting and I'm sure that this was down to the combination of a heavy rack being used on suspended wooden floorboards. Somehow the rack was having a negative effect on the overall performance of the system. So, when the guys at Quadraspire offered us the

opportunity to have a play with their X Reference rack, I thought why not.

Build

The X Reference is 720mm wide and 590mm deep and will hold 120Kg per shelf. The one we were given to play with had bamboo shelves but you can get wooden veneered shelves too. The main body of the rack is made up of an X shaped shelf that supports the actual shelf your kit sits on. Each of these "inner" shelves (essentially the SVT Bronze Upgrade) has bronze feet which sit in little brass locaters on the main rack. Now, the bronze is very important we were told, but I remained very sceptical indeed!

You can order as many levels as you need, with the spacing columns between levels being available as 20cm, 25cm, 30cm and 35cm, so you can choose the rack to fit around your system and build it accordingly. Each of the levels on which the shelves sit on has a large hole in the middle on the X Reference.

Fit and finish are very good indeed, but this is very much a rack that is designed with the audiophile in mind – it's not going to appeal to everyone's taste at all and is pretty big by conventional standards. However, it appeals to me and looks like it means business in a techy kind of way.

Sound

QUADRASPIRE X REFERENCE RACK

The review process went like this. We placed our DAC on a conventional SV2T Quadraspire rack along with all our other kit and then placed one of the shelves with SVT bronze upgrade (these are the inner shelves of the X Reference) onto the rack and popped the DAC on that. We then moved the X Reference into place and put the DAC onto that. The idea here was to supposedly demonstrate a path of improvement to overall sound as you move up the food chain. Again, I need to reiterate that my expectation was that there would be nothing to be heard, no improvements or otherwise and that at £1000 a level, the X Reference would prove to be a bit of a white elephant.

I was wrong and somewhat perplexed to say the least. Adding the SVT bronze upgrade to the conventional rack made audible improvements to the sound, particularly in stability of the soundstage. Hats appeared to be crisper and bass more solid. We put the DAC back on the normal shelf and back again several times and every time we heard the same results.

The next step was to place the DAC onto the X Reference and again there was an immediate, if somewhat baffling change in perceived sound for the better and again the most obvious improvement was with stability of the stereo image and better (read sharper) detail in the music. The perception here is that because of this sharpening you can hear more fine detail in the music you are listening to. The best way to describe this is to say that at each step up the ladder it felt as though we were getting more definition and coherence to the music and less of a smearing effect –

as
if

everything tightened up a bit and became more focused.

Conclusion

I remain perplexed as to how and why a rack can make the slightest bit of difference to the performance of a hifi, but it did. There is a clear and demonstrable improvement in the sound quality when you add the SVT Bronze upgrade shelves and then another improvement when the X Reference is brought into play. Playing with different bits of kit on the different shelves saw similar improvements, but the biggest effect was heard with the DAC.

£1000 a level is pricey by anyone's reckoning for a rack on which to place your hifi, but if you are looking to

squeeze the last ounce of performance out of your system then the SVT Bronze upgrade will give you a step up and the X Reference another step up.

This is not the same level of performance improvement you will notice when upgrading loudspeakers, source or DAC, it's a more subtle, but definitely observable, tidying up of soundstage and instruments within it, leading to a more solid sound and stereo image with more detail apparent.



AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Very nicely put together and finished

Sound Quality: An overall sharpening of the stereo image enabling more fine detail to be heard

Value For Money: Not cheap

Pros:

Excellent fit and finish

Tightening up of the stereo image leading to more detail being heard

Cons:

Not cheap

X Reference is physically big and definitely "audiophile" in the looks department but I quite like it

Price:

£1000 per level for the X Reference and £400 for the Bronze Upgrade





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Meze Classic 99 Headphones

By Janine Elliot

Meze is an interesting newcomer to the headphone and IEM market, a company set up in London in 2009 that wants to change the opinion that you have to spend a fortune to get a good sound. Janine Elliot takes a listen to their £256 Meze Classic 99 headphones.

MEZE CLASSIC 99 HEADPHONES



Classical music was just sublime

The last few years have seen plethora of new cans, some of which I have found extremely disappointing and extremely expensive. Trying to dress up the market with over complicated and highly inefficient headphones requiring step-up amplification strapped onto your portable HiDef player goes against everything I wanted after buying my Sennheiser HD650's, the first decent headphones that couldn't be played loud enough on your portable device. Yes I know planar driver designs are not as efficient as conventional loudspeaker drivers, and perhaps portable devices should have better amplification stages, and perhaps many people do actually like to sit listening on headphones next to mains powered headphone amplification. What Meze have done, after a crowd funded campaign, is produce something I have been waiting ages for; sensitive, good looking and cheap headphones to beat everything else out there.

Design and Comfort

The 99 Classic headphones are available as walnut gold, walnut silver, or in the case of the model for review Maple Silver, and if you don't want a wood finish there is the matt black Neo version. At around £256 a pair, these are pretty amazing prices. There is no need for a massive driver, as the 32 ohm 40mm Neodymium/Mylar transducer gets low enough, and loud! Sensitivity at 103dB/1kHz/1mW is enviable, and the whole weighs in at 260g minus the cable, meaning long listening is not a pain. Indeed the box and gorgeous hard EVA carrying pouch case weigh more than the 99's themselves! With other headphones, such as B&W P5 and Sony MDR-1A, and Audio Technica's at this price point, there is tough competition out there, but these really are a recommended audition, and with the added good looks plus all the accessories, set them above much of the competition.

The name 99 might have nothing to do with the Kama Sutra or my favourite ice-cream, but these headphones were



MEZE CLASSIC 99 HEADPHONES



just as satisfying. Their previous models 55, 66, 73, 88, etc, referred to the diameter of the wooden cabinets. The 99 was the next obvious number and the “crowdfunded” project reached its target in less than 3 days. Not surprising with its looks and cheap price. Indeed, whilst reviewing them, several words came to mind like ‘aMeze’ment and ‘Meze’rly priced. I was, as you might realise, quite impressed, and looking for suitable words. Not only did it look better than the price would suggest, but the carrying pouch and choice of plug-in standard 3.5mm and remote controlled 3.5mm leads made it all the more surprising for the money. There are also airline jack and 1/4inch adapter included, all of which fit in a cute bag kept inside the EVA carrying pouch. As well as their Meze 11 Classic and Deco earphones at \$79 and \$49 respectively are now working on the launch of two new earphones, the Meze 12 Classics and Meze 11 Neo. The 12 Classics are built with walnut wood and aluminum while the 11 Neo will have a full aluminum body available in Gun Metal and Iridium. Look out for these as well.

The headphones are designed by Antonio Meze in Romania, a prolific gentleman whose portfolio not only includes headphones - including the gorgeous looking 77 Deco and a few wood-finished IEMs - but also designs for egg beaters, a mouthwash, a skate cycle, ski-pole, water bottles, entry-level mobile phone and tablet designs, and even a digital poker table. Sometimes, though, I did feel his concentration on the design allowed for a few areas important to me to not be so well thought out. Where the manganese sprung steel outer headband makes for good but comfortable pressure, the metal could “ring” if tapped. Perhaps these vocal attributes could be reduced with damping with foam or heat-shrink plastic covering, though would I fear take away some of the good looks. The white cloth-covered cable might perhaps get dirty in the wrong (messy) hands, and if rubbing on my clothes also send the noise through to my ears. However, all these are things seen on many a good headphone, and these ones are

particularly comfortable to wear, look expensive and the PU leather full ear-cups are very classy. Topped off with a velvety lush sound, I kept referring to them as Maple Syrup rather than Maple Silver.

Long listening sessions were no stress, unlike many headphones that other reviewers seem to gloat over. The wood itself takes a long process of sanding and finishing, looking like they could come out of a top end Scandinavian furniture store with pride. The self-adjusting headband is covered in that PU leather to match the ear pads. All parts, including the wood, cast zinc and manganese spring steel are connected using nuts and bolts rather than cheap gluing. Internal components are made from ABS and silicone. Indeed all parts and assembly was meticulously thought out before production.

Sound

Music was excellent, too, though the bass emphasis and mix of smooth treble and slight mid warmth could make my Pink Floyd ‘The Division Bell’ sound a little confused and less in control than a few quicker, brighter offerings at this price point, though this was more than made up with the bass control. “Lost for Words” with its deep 33Hz ‘C’ drone at the start was poignant. Whereas most of the bass usually disappears when the layered acoustic guitars come in at 45 seconds, these just kept going on until the sound engineer had faded it down. This was fun.

Classical music was just sublime. Indeed the waveform is artificially tweaked with a reduction at around 4kHz to create a more balanced and musical sound. I always wonder why crossovers in speakers tend to happen at the critical 3kHz point, which can make the difference between a good and bad speaker and personally wondered whether an attenuation at 3kHz rather than 4kHz might have worked better. Or better

MEZE CLASSIC 99 HEADPHONES



still, have headphones with a perfectly flat response. Funnily, I actually liked that tailored sound.

Playing with the shorter 1.2m Kevlar OFC remote control cable was OK for use with my X5, iPod or Android phone. The remote was good for playing, pausing, forward and reverse track selection and answering the phone, but it missed out on a volume control, which for me is the most important control of all. For me to play on my Brocksieper and Slee headphone amplifiers I needed to swap this cable for a 3m 3.5mm lead. The headphones have individual 3.5mm sockets to connect the cables, and as the ear-cups are symmetrical it doesn't matter which plug goes in which cup, as long as you can remember the slight ridge on one of the plugs is for the left ear, as the words L and R are not easily visible in low light.

Playing via a Brocksieper valve headphone amp gave for a more solid, musical rendition for all I played. Connecting to the Lehmann Audio headphone amp/DAC gave resulted in a more defined soundstage and a clarity that opened up my experience. The high density memory-foam ear-pads form an excellent sound isolation, though with my four eyes I could reduce some of that with the temples on my glasses preventing a full "seal". Indeed, that bass augmentation could be considerably reduced though made the frequency response waveform change considerably for the worse. No, these headphones' selling point is that bass 'oomph', but where other 'designer' headphones from some musicians have failed to do this effectively, the Meze excels in this area. With frequency response of 15-25,000Hz, and nominal input of only 30mW (50mW maximum!), this will work well with

any HiDef player or DAC covering all the important frequencies.

Whilst clarity and space of instruments isn't as profound as many higher priced headphones out there, the musicality from these 99's is tops. Hendrix's 'Purple Haze' was colourful; lots of power, lots of music, just a little compact in detail, and a bit hazy. The high

pitched bell sounds moving around the space between my ears at the end of the track wasn't as clear as from my choice cans.

I normally imagine myself lying in the middle of a country field or at the seaside when listening to Kate Bush "Prelude" and "Prologue" from 'Aerial: A Sky of Honey', and with the 99's I felt that empty space wasn't quite so large, more like I was in the local park, but the more forward sound allowed me to home in to much more of the music than some headphones can give, and I really didn't want to put them back in the box.

The 'Queen Symphony' (Tolga Kashif) first movement "Adagio Misterioso" had impeccable musical warmth that I felt I wanted to curl up in a duvet and imagine I was in some mystical land away from life's woes, only for the thrust from the brass section between the string and vocal phrases to interrupt that musical theatre. It was only at 6'40" when the piano makes his entry stage-left that I did feel that the detail just wasn't quite good enough for me.

Conclusion

I really enjoyed playing with these headphones. The sound was rich and fun, all made even better value by the superb carrying pouch and accessories, plus the fact that it has been created by an award winning innovator and designer. Meze might just be a team of 12 people, but this is a company with big ideas, and music often gets overlooked. The detail is a certain extent by that bass boost, though it was by no means OTT like a number of designer cans favoured by some who should know better.

Musicality was secure and comfort was good. The sound isn't as clear as my headphones of choice, but those are much more expensive. These cans were like my favourite Belgian chocolate covered ice-cream bars; velvety smooth and you always want one but you know you have to leave them for special occasions.

If you have a limited budget, these Meze 99's will suggest that you haven't.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Very good looking and solidly constructed using real wood and nuts and bolts, not plastic and glue.

Sound Quality: Excellent musicality with an engaging bass.

Value For Money: At around £250 these are taking on the competition with force. Since you won't need a step-up amplifier, it might also save you lots more.

Pros:
Smooth treble
Bass emphasis is appealing
Good looks

Cons:

That Bass emphasis might be too much for some audiophiles
Mid warmth
Tailored frequency response might not appeal to some

Price: £256 (€309)

SPECIFICATIONS

Transducer size: 40mm

Frequency response: 15Hz - 25KHz

Sensitivity: 103dB at 1KHz, 1mW

Impedance: 32Ohm

Rated input power: 30mW

Maximum input power: 50mW

Detachable Kevlar OFC cable

Plug: 3.5mm gold plated

Weight: 260 gr (9.2 ounces) without cables


Ear-cups: maple wood

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McIntosh MA 5200 Amplifier

By Peter Stanton-Ife

**This month we dig into the
Hifi Pig vault and pull out a
review of the McIntosh
MA5200 Integrated Amplifier
first published in July 2014**

Put that
way, £5000
seems
reasonable
if not
fantastic
value



As European amps continue to expand in size, and as this amp is rather small by some American standards, this £5000 McIntosh MA5200 100W per channel integrated is perhaps a McIntosh which might contend well in the European market place. With 9 inputs, including 1 Moving Magnet phono and 3 digital inputs that will decode digital music at up to 32 bits and 192kHz, it deserves to: as well as being exceptionally well-equipped and capable, it is a very musical all-in-one amplifier.

McIntoshes are very American both in terms of design cues and in terms of size. Visually it will happily sit alongside any Mac made over the last fifty years – it has the distinctive black fascia with blue dials and a shiny green logo, like it or hate it.

By American standards, it is quite svelte at 48 x 15.1 x 44.3cm but its depth and width might trouble many Euro equipment racks. It weighs a hernia-inducing 17 kilos, so frequent moving is not desirable. On the other hand, this unit (in common with several competing offerings) provides scope for considerable rationalisation as it could credibly replace a preamp, power amp, DAC and phono stage, and accordingly save on all the associated cables, isolation, racking etc. It also supports multi-room implementations. Put that way, £5000 seems reasonable if not fantastic value. Judgement on fantastic value will depend on the sonics.

First impressions

Opening the rather hefty box produced the first surprise and it was a good one – typical of the thought that has obviously gone into this kit. Lifting the amp out of its shipping carton revealed that it had been attached by two screws to both a cardboard base and a rigid MDF base which secured the amp completely against the tender mercies of couriers during its transport. A cheap but highly effective way of preventing needless returns to base. Other manufacturers might take note.

So how about first impressions? Let's get the gripes over first. It is very much a Mac - very American, and I mean that well. It is very muscular but some design aspects jar; the level and source selectors look and feel so plasticky that using them does not give the confidence that the amp's visual cues offer. I imagine it is the same feeling that Aston drivers used to have when they wallowed in lovely leather seats and discovered switchgear from the Ford parts bin plonked on their dashboards. With a £5000 amp, tactility matters and there really is no excuse not have squeezed a few cents extra spend on some better parts. This is, after all, the main interface with the user, especially as the remote is a seriously hideous piece of lightweight plastic. This must particularly matter when you are fighting the likes of Devialet for business. In fairness, I should add that neither the switches nor the remote failed to do what was required of them; my complaints are all about what goods at this price level should feel like.

Under the hood

The treble never obtrudes and the bass is always well rendered without veering towards the flatulence that sometimes comes with big amps

The controls are actually quite sophisticated. Not only do they turn, but they can also be pressed or clicked to navigate the user menu. Reading through the manual, which is well written and comprehensive, you find instructions for a bewildering array of settings such as activating the S/PDIF inputs for the built-in DAC, applying home theatre throughput or setting up comms for a multi-room system. The built-in DAC has a built-in Windows driver which allows simple access through a USB connection. The S/PDIF options are set through the menu where one of the five line-level inputs (4x RCA, 1 x XLR or RCA) is deactivated. All these inputs can be named. In addition to the line level inputs, there is an in-built MM phono stage and a pre-out/main-out loop with metal jumpers. Helpfully there is a 6.3mm headphone socket on the front. The speaker terminals are chunky and are standard rather than multi-tapped.

Let us look first at the pre and power amplifier sections. Sadly, this Mac is made without the proprietary autoformers for which the marque is renowned. Instead, McIntosh has deployed new circuitry called Dynamic Power Management or DPM, designed to intelligently adapt to varying loads. In all fairness, I cannot claim to have presented anything difficult enough to this amp to comment on the effectiveness of this circuit. Living in a built up area and not wanting an ASBO, the limits of my testing were such that this amp never broke a sweat, less still challenged any of my speakers.

How does it sound?

Forget the clichés about American amps, this is not a brute, but nor is it polite. Many amps are voiced to impress in the showroom but then blare and grate rather after some time listening. Or they are just too mellow to stir the soul. What this amp does so well is to let the music come to the fore and simply provide the power when it is needed.

In the interests of brevity, as I lived with this amp for a month and played it every day, I shall not list all the music I tried on it. I applied all the standard tests – female voices, male voices, organ, large orchestral pieces, chamber orchestra, piano, drums and guitar through FLAC, redbook and vinyl.

Like all McIntoshes I have ever heard, the MA5200 generates a credible and large soundstage – you really do get the sense of the concert hall, the cocktail bar or the rock concert. But it is also very well balanced indeed. It comes across with a fluidity and smoothness which makes it very easy to listen to for long stretches.

The treble never obtrudes and the bass is always well rendered without veering towards the flatulence that sometimes comes with big amps, but this is no window shaker, unless you want it to be. It plays good recordings well with only a small suggestion that the top and bottom ends could go further but it also has a tendency to make poorly recorded music more listenable - it tames slightly edgy modern (digital) recordings and it renders sometimes flabby 50s and 60s (especially classical) recordings well. It is not the last word in detail retrieval,



FROM THE VAULT

nor in resolving transients but what it puts out is recognisably music.

The most impressive thing about the MA5200 is just how self-effacing it is: It is a Jeeves of an amp, shimmering about in the background, quietly ensuring that the music is given every opportunity to show itself at its best, and keeping all those reserves of power for when they are really needed. If you are not looking at the amp itself, it is easy to forget that it is in the musical chain. It just sounds good and this is helped by the consistency across the line stages, the DAC inputs and the phono stage which all behave with a similar tonality and integrity. This amp is very easy to live with and I can see why Mac buyers have such brand loyalty – in technological terms, it really is “fit and forget” – no tweaking, no perpetual chase for upgrades, no “voicing” – just listen to the music.

I used the MA5200 with both a pair of Sonus Faber Grand Pianos and a pair of Bastani open baffle speakers alternating between runs of Skogrand Ignis Purist cable and my normal Electrofluidics cable. I also borrowed a pair of Spendor BC1s from a friend to try out on the MA5200. Again, consistency of sound proved to be the order of the day, even with speakers as coloured as the SFs. I tried a pair of elderly Sennheisers on the headphone output and can report that late night listening will not be a chore.

Turning to the built-in DAC, I simply could not differentiate between the two S/PDIF inputs. To my ears, they had the same tonality. The asynchronous USB input had marginally clearer resolution than the coax input from my streamer but that might just be down to differences in cabling. (I understand that the DAC circuitry in the MA5200 is substantially the same as that in McIntosh's rather more expensive units, so that the consumer here is getting the benefit of some rather tasty trickle down technology.)

As an experiment, I ran my satellite box through the DAC and will happily report that using the MA5200 as a stereo TV amp with my Sonus Fabers delivered by far the best audio I have ever heard from my TV, far, far better and clearer than the dedicated AVR amp and 5.1 speaker system!

In comparison to the V1 DAC in my Naim rig, I could not honestly say much more than that the V1 was marginally



better resolved and had more “bite” i.e. it sounded typically Naim and that the Mac sounded typically McIntosh. But would I spend £1250 on a separate V1 if I kept the MA5200? Probably not. In my opinion, you would have to find quite a lot of money more conclusively to beat the Mac's DAC.

I'm afraid I was much less taken with the standard 47 K ohm MM phono stage, but then I listen to vinyl more than any other medium. For “residual” vinyl users it will do the job with a good MM or HOMC. It does its job adequately but compared to any of my outboard phono stages, even the humble Dynavector P75 Mk III, it falls quite short.

Tonally the MM input shares the MA5200 sonic signature but it was not fully up to the job on dynamics, soundstaging and separation for serious and extended vinyl listening. It might, of course, be that McIntosh's own turntables and cartridges mate better with this amp than the ones I had at my disposal.

I tried my Reference Fidelity SUT with my Zu Audio Denon 103 into the MM input and it sounded a bit clearer, more dynamic and differentiated more of the instruments and voices than either the

MusicMaker MI or my Ortofon Black MM, but if you listen to a lot of vinyl, you will probably need to plan on using a discrete phono stage. The good news is that a good one really sings - my Whetst PS30RDT came through dynamically and clearly with a line input, as did my Electrocompaniet.

Conclusion

I have long been a fan of McIntosh kit and the MA5200 does nothing much to disappoint. For me, the McIntosh MA5200 is an excellent amplifier, with a quality DAC and a no fuss approach to presenting music. The amp is very tolerant of supports, cables and sources and requires only simple set up and precious little tweaking. Set it up in an hour or so and off you go.

If I were in the market for a £5000 all-in-one amp, I'd be perfectly happy to take the MA5200 and pair it with a good pair of loudspeakers. As for sources, you could get going with only a laptop. It is an outstanding amplifier with a fantastic sound quality and a build quality (despite my quibbles regarding the knobs and the plastic fantastic remote control) far better than much of what is produced in the UK.

Behind The Brands

With Conrad Mas Of AVID Hifi



BEHIND THE BRANDS

Hifi Pig talk to Conrad Mas, the man behind the UK based manufacturer AVID Hifi. AVID Hifi are perhaps most well known for their range of turntables and phonostages, but at last year's Munich High End the company introduced a full range of electronics and loudspeakers...and won the Hifi Pig Loves You Award.

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

Absolute Sounds, a retail shop in my home town of Watford, UK was my first paying job within the industry. By this stage I'd established a relationship with them and they knew of my endeavours. I was still young and the owner took me under his wing allowing me free access to everything in the shop. I only learned recently that Jim Dovey the owner has recently passed away, very sad indeed.

Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?

Strangely enough that would be my parents which I haven't unfortunately had the most positive relationship but sometimes such negativity can make you driven to achieve the unexpected. Probably enough said.

Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?

After 20 years of development the Acutus is still my baby and now the mother of all our turntables. Now in Reference Mono form, I'd happily put it up against anything. People today say it sounds amazing and to think they could of had it over twenty years ago...

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

Nothing really, especially as everything we've launched is still in production with the exception of our Isosshelf rack system, but don't hold your breath you may see this making its return...

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

Currently we have quite a few design projects in development, notably cascading our electronics from the Reference Pre and Mono amplifiers down to an affordable integrated amplifier. Not forgetting our roots we're



finally designing our own tonearm and cartridges.

You and your system

What was your very first system?

A friend invited me to listen to his home built turntable. I eventually bought the whole system which started my quest to design the best turntable. The turntable was the Connoisseur BD1 kit turntable with JVC JAS-22 amplifier and home made Chris Rogers Pro9TL speakers.

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

It wasn't till some years later that I bought a Thorens TD160 and Hadcock GH228 tone-arm, my first serious kit. The Thorens suffered the usual blutak treatment and at this stage I developed my own theories from a blank sheet of paper. The Thorens was later replaced by a Logic DM101, it seemed to follow my thoughts on a rigid one-piece subchassis. Some time later I worked in



BEHIND THE BRANDS

a HIFI shop, which gave me access to many great products of the time. I'd got my own working prototype working by this stage and frankly could do with the money, so I sold everything to fund my development work but whilst working in the shop my home system changed almost daily. Now my system is pretty much a complete AVID syste

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

Actually none, but a different type of answer would be 'who' I missed the opportunity to meet. George Hadcock called me one day to ask me something. To me it was being called by a legend and I felt really humbled but it turned out he felt the same way and we agreed to meet up. Events prevented us meeting and George sadly passed away and I never got the opportunity to meet the man behind the first serious HIFI product I bought.

How often do you listen to music?

That's easy; every day. In the car or at work, radio at home and most weekends with shows or dealer events, which is especially good as I'm exposed to so many new artists I'd never get to hear.

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

There are so many that have really impressed me over the years, including the Stan Curtis designed Cambridge CD1 two box CD player, the Tandberg 3014A cassette deck and the Apogee Scintilla loudspeakers, so choosing one

is difficult. Put on the spot I'd have to say listening to Alison Moyet on the Infinity IRS V loudspeaker system is still the one that perpetually stays in my mind as being totally awesome.

The state of the industry

Vinyl resurgence... what are your thoughts?

What's more interesting here is the driving force behind the resurgence. It's amusing that the press and industry weren't really aware of it until it happened, many sectors haven't really embraced it and many are still wondering if it'll last. The driving force is the record industries push for profit. Whilst downloads remain the dominant volume of music format purchased, despite lower unit sales, vinyl produced higher profits last year and actually a few years ahead of schedule. From a record label perspective, they spend a fortune retaining artists, produce an album, manufacturing and distribution costs, only to have people download two tracks for two bucks. On vinyl however you have to purchase the whole album which then becomes more profitable, let alone reissue box sets with huge profits. Just like people buying white cars was cool and everyone followed like sheep, so to the vinyl resurgence stimulated by the larger labels and its here to stay and grow. The downside are some people looking to cash in like supermarkets and hoping to reduce prices, but as the pressing capabilities world wide are saturated it's likely to remain a niche profitable sector which in turn will keep quality high. Obviously this is just a

conspiracy theory but we do know some influential people :-)

Is CD a dying format?

Again its all about perspective. Whilst CD sales and CD related hardware sales have fallen off a cliff, they still massively out sell vinyl. But what goes around comes around and with the sheer volume of this format out there don't be surprised if it has its own resurgence in ten years time.

What are you 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?

This is a massive and potentially far reaching question, but possibly one to answer short and sharp. Easy first, as a typical system in 5 years will be streaming and vinyl dominated. High end I think will actually grow as the largest generation listening to music evolve from teenagers into adult families at home. Prices will remain in line with inflation as in the next five years the global economic situation will not improve greatly, especially in the UK with its new isolationist agenda.

Digital downloads, what do you think their impact has been on the way people listen to music?

Well its certainly got more people listening to music and especially the younger generation and allows people the opportunity to easily seek out new artists and genres of music. I think in the future download services will increase in price, however music publishers will also use low resolution or clips to market to potential new customers but with the view of purchasing on more profitable vinyl. So downloads will become the McDonald's of music; easy consumption usually on the move and vinyl is your at home with a bottle of wine quality experience.

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

It's been the audio industries biggest problem for the last thirty years. There is more people listening to music than ever before, but they simply don't know that we exist. A lack of marketing to make audio aspirational and differentiate between true HIFI and low-fi means people's buying is cost and perception



BEHIND THE BRANDS

driven rather than listening and making comparisons. The saviour of HI-End audio will I believe be the advent of higher quality headphones and the resurgence of vinyl making listening 'cool' again. Better headphones take people away from low quality MP3 and back to quality. As this generation grows older to have families, listening to music becomes a social activity leading hopefully to separates and loudspeakers. Unfortunately the majority of the audio industry does not have the budget to undertake effective marketing of the scale required, although social media does offer good opportunities. Hopefully they will not become the lost generation that missed high quality audio.

Online shopping's effect on the retail industry?

Effects have been both negative and positive. It's allowed once unknown retailers accessibility to a wider audience and the ones that offer good service have grown and seen many of their internet customers become shop customers. However on the negative side we've seen an increase in discounting which not only devalues brands but then takes up valuable time with manufacturers policing the web. Most detrimental though is that internet

selling are lost opportunities. As customers click and buy, retailers think of the order as easy money, however the opportunity to up-sell through demonstration or discuss alternatives means a less profitable retailer and one that loses the ability to sell, rather than just collect orders. This is also a disservice to the buyer as well. Can you imagine an internet self diagnosis website and then click and buy dangerous medication. Its what doctors are for and good retailers should be audio doctors, giving clients best advise. For that I'm afraid you need good customer contact and not a mouse click.

The way you work

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

Dare I say it, sometimes the equipment measurements aren't always good but offer great musical insight, like a lot of valve amps for instance. When assessing new designs we look for certain things, but ultimately its needs the women effect. You may not realise but in R&D women make the best listeners. Whilst men will procrastinate for hours about the virtues of equipment, most women will give a simple yes or no, it's right or

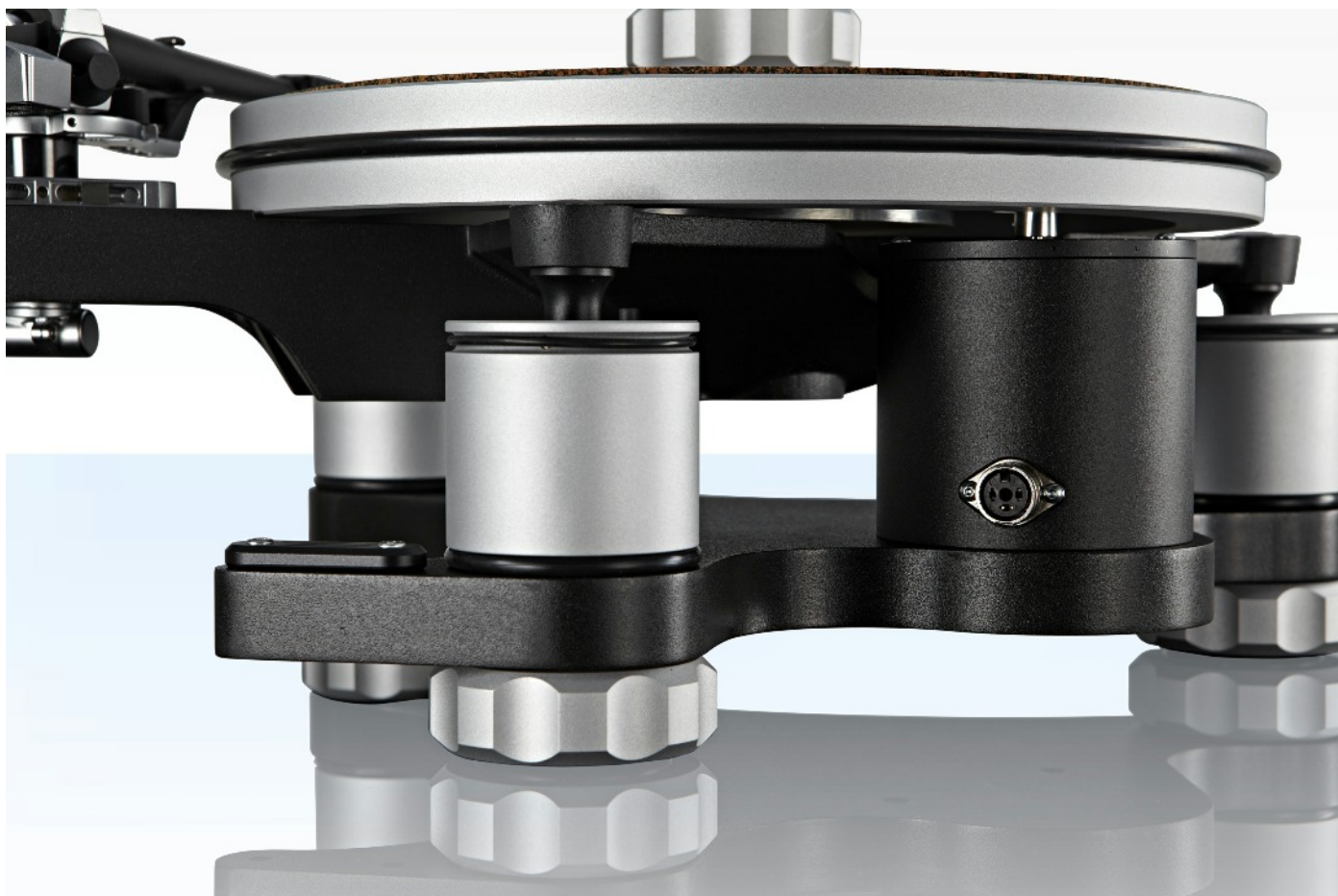
wrong. Ultimately if it makes you want to put another piece of music on to see how it'll sound you know its right. In fact with our Acutus turntable we know its right, so much so we've been thinking about warning new buyers against sleep deprivation...yes it's that good we believe!

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

Depending upon the music, it's all of those things. The problem is when the reproduction equipment varnishes the music, making it HIFI rather than an experience. When you go to a live gig, it's an experience not HIFI, High Fidelity should give you that same feeling.

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

I simply cannot imagine how some manufactures can offer a buffet of different drive systems other than just to shift another box. As a designer who spent twenty years in search of perfection I want to give the best performance at any given price. For me it's belt drive for so many reasons, so all



BEHIND THE BRANDS



our turntables use the same drive system.

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

Dare it be said, loudspeakers have profound effect upon the final sound. So whilst different turntables will have a large effect, the difference between a closed box design loudspeaker to an electrostatic is simply huge. However the room conditions are even more significant in choosing the right loudspeaker, especially room size, type of walls, suspended floor and on. Not ducking the question, but you ideally choose the speaker to best suit your conditions and musical tastes, in the same way you don't choose a Ferrari to plough a field.

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

What is your favourite recording?

There's so many that mean different things but 'Alive and Kicking' by Simple Minds is that fall back track that keeps me motivated even after the usual kick-backs that running a business in this industry presents.

Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings.

For voicing our electronics and loudspeakers we do have three specific tracks to give us what we're looking for;

The beginning of 'Friday Night In San Francisco' by Al de Meola, John McLaughlin & Paco de Lucia where we look at the speed of the guitars,

Alison Krauss & Union Station's Album 'So Long So Wrong'. The track 'Looking into the Eyes of Love' we look for Alison's voice to be uncompressed,

Eagles 'Hotel California' on Hell Freezes over live album where we are listening for the impact of the kick drum.

What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures?

Another's embarrassment is someone's pleasure so you should never be shy about playing something you like but it's true it can surprise some people, especially at audio shows. So you'll find me playing James Blake, Megan Trainor, Ellie Goulding and Paloma Faith rather than the usual Patricia Barber or Dave Brubeck.

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?

Eagles 'Hell Freezes Over' live... do you know how much its worth :-)

The Future

What do you as a company have in the pipeline and what new products can we expect to see?

At this years Munich HighEnd Show I think we shocked many people with the unexpected launch of our Reference loudspeakers, let alone the Acutus Reference Mono turntable. We were delighted to have come onto the Hifi Pig radar winning your Hifi Pig Loves You award. Next Munich High-End Show, however, we hope to maintain our surprises, so we'll have an electronics line all the way to an integrated amplifier, our own tonearm design and pick up cartridge. It's what makes me get out of bed in the morning, my hobby that I get paid for...what a great life.

Thanks for speaking with Hifi Pig.

Read More Behind The Brands Interviews.

READERS LIVES

HIFI PIG READERS' ADVENTURES
IN AUDIO

An Awesome DIY Turntable Build By Hifi Pig Reader Stuart Armstrong

Hifi Pig talks to Hifi Pig reader Stuart Armstrong who has an interesting and very accomplished DIY turntable project





Hifi Pig: Introduce yourself to our readers

Stuart: I am an Electrician by trade and have been for about 25 years...I have also been an audiophile as long as I can remember and DIY speaker cable ect. builder...I would consider my turntable custom design build an achievement that ranks with the best contenders in its weight class.

Hifi Pig: Tell us a little about your turntable history. What commercial tables have you owned?

Stuart: My first turntable was a Pioneer pl 7 bought new in 1980 I think. Just after the advent of the compact disc I purchased a Revolver after reading a magazine review and had a Shure V 15vmr installed and never looked back. I owned a handmedown CD player for a while but when it stopped working properly I never replaced it and I only had a handful of CD's. After a good friend gave me an AutoCAD program and taught me the basics of it I began designing different turntable concepts. Years passed but I kept plugging away

with the Idea of custom building a high end deck.

Hifi Pig: What other DIY turntables have you made? (If none what other tinkering/DIY have you done?)

Stuart: That was my first. It took me a long time to complete as I wanted something that would succeed design wise and would be an upgrade from the Revolver. Before I was building speaker cables from 25 pair cat 6 and terminating them into two channel speaker system and still use. I custom build interconnect cables as well. Speaker and turntable stands I made from wood and steel. Extensive speaker Mods to a set of Infinity RSB's that I no longer use.

Hifi Pig: Where did the concept for your DIY design come from?

Stuart: I observed other designs like Micro Seiki DQX 1000 and Clear Audio Solution turntables. I designed my turntable to accommodate both arm board types to make it as versatile as

Years
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The platter and bearing assembly alone set me back 2K\$ Canadian



possible. It too can accommodate up to three tone arms.

Hifi Pig: Tell readers about the design ideas behind the turntable and the problems you've faced along the way

Stuart: After several designs I decided to keep things simple yet versatile. The main foot assembly/arm board support parts consist of only four parts per foot (not including arm board and bolts). There is no suspended suspension in this design relying on choice of materials, mass and plinth design to control resonance. The platter alone is 30 pounds of solid aluminium and is 2 1/2" thick. Light weight suspended designs tend to act like a large microphone and will feed back when stereo is at high volume. It's because the light turntable will be free to resonate on a suspension. It is much harder for acoustic energy to excite a resonance in a massive deck that is directly coupled to a rigid stand. If I tap hard the plinth or arm board with two fingers on my turntable being played loud you will barely notice any feed

back. The problems I faced along the way you ask? Well there is plenty in all areas of custom design and build. Sourcing materials and finding a good machinist to make parts is a big one. Expense is high as you might expect being a custom build. The platter and bearing assembly alone set me back 2K\$ Canadian. There were other issues with fitting foot bolt parts but I think that was a pretty minor setback compared to what other people have experienced. I think I got lucky in most respects and for the most part this project was a success!

Hifi Pig: What's the drive mechanism on the turntable and why did you choose that system?

Stuart: The drive was a combination DC motor and controller custom built (height) in one rectangle box and was also supplied with two rubber string belts manufactured by Space Tech Labs. Versatile but motor hasn't enough torque and power to run the heavy platter properly. I have to leave platter drive on for a while just to warm up platter bearing and leave on continuous





for the record playing session. Space Tech Labs digital drive system is noisy but not noticeable when playing music. Build and parts quality could improve some and speed needs to be adjusted by ear more often. I do intend to one day design/build a motor/controller system but that itself is a large undertaking.

Hifi Pig: How many hours have you spent designing and constructing the turntable and how much do you think it has cost you in total?

Stuart: Never kept track but countless nights on the computer just designing and drawing. It doesn't matter how long it takes when you design because that's the most important part of building anything to perfection. The parts were all made by different specialists in their field. My cost for everything that I personally designed (bearing assembly was partially designed by Choir Audio) to basic turntable (no motor/controller, no armboard and no arm/cartridge) About \$5,200 dollars Canadian.

Hifi Pig: What turntables have you compared your design to and how do you feel it performs in comparison?

Stuart: My first audiophile turntable the Revolver (early non rebel version) was my first audiophile deck and remained so for along time beating just about any cd player. I still own it. Needs a new belt, but still works great. My custom turntable was built with bettering the Revolver in mind. Aside from the AC motor having a more consistent speed in the Revolver I succeeded. My brothers refined system includes a VPI scoutmaster or Aries. Although there is many factors that will affect the way a system will sound a turntable can be the most important reason why a stereo can sound so good. Even though the arm that

I had mounted was a vintage gimbal (circa 1970) Japanese Sound Audio that I picked up for \$350, he thought it was a better sounding deck than his.

Hifi Pig: Where next? Do you plan any other DIY projects?

Stuart: I am currently designing a linear tracking arm of massive proportions (no air design). Its a major undertaking and I don't think it will be complete before next spring...that's the project I want to complete next but there are others...I am keen on different speaker concepts as well.

Hifi Pig: What kind of speakers?

Stuart: I have this floor stander idea that is tall narrow with support by circular column on either side of a line of open baffle drivers...that's all I will say for now on that subject.



I am currently designing a linear tracking arm of massive proportions (no air design)

TIMBERWORX

**Ever wondered what goes into making a loudspeaker cabinet?
Ian Ringstead visits specialist
loudspeaker cabinet maker
Timberworx.**



FACTORY VISITS



Greaves
branched out
in the 80's into
manufacturing
turntable
plinths and
loudspeaker
cabinets for
the likes of
Linn and then
later B&W,
Spendor

I came across Timberworx by chance when I was reviewing a loudspeaker range last year. The designer happened to say he was visiting a company in Sheffield, where I happen live, to get some quotes on a new design he was working on. Instantly my interest was piqued and further investigation revealed that the company in question was Timberworx, and that it is now owned by the loudspeaker manufacturer Spendor.

Now Spendor is a blast from the past whom I fondly remember from my early initiation into audio in the 70's. The company is now owned by Philip Swift an old friend of mine from my retailing days in the 80's and 90's when I used to

sell Audiolab amps by the bucket load. When Philip bought Spendor out a few years ago I was pleasantly surprised and couldn't wait to ask him about his new ventures.

Timberworx came about following the demise of Greaves, a long established cabinet maker in Sheffield harking back to the proud days of the cutlery trade which made Sheffield world famous. Greaves branched out in the 80's into manufacturing turntable plinths and loudspeaker cabinets for the likes of Linn and then later B&W, Spendor, Meridian and many other classic audio companies. As the market has changed and evolved over the last thirty years or so, competition from abroad and



FACTORY VISITS

Timberworx believe that feel and touch are far better than the human eye at determining the end result



aggressive marketing meant manufacturers had to be inventive and keep their eye on the ball. Greaves like many companies fell to the market foibles and idiosyncrasies of world trade and home trends.

Timberworx, like the phoenix, arose out of the ashes of the cabinet making trade in Sheffield and ex employees and their skills were employed to carry on the tradition, but needed to become relevant again in the modern business age. At one time there were many loudspeaker cabinet makers dotted all over the UK that companies could go to, but as times changed many went to the wall. Timberworx supplied a valuable niche in the market for companies wanting high

quality cabinets that they would proud of and made to their exact specifications. Philip saw a great opportunity when the chance to acquire Timberworx came about a couple of years ago. He felt the addition of a specialist cabinet manufacturing facility would not only benefit his loudspeaker business, but be a bespoke manufacturer who could supply others in the audio industry.

Getting a product manufactured to your exact requirements is a lot harder than you might first imagine. After speaking to many of my friends in the business, it appears that getting consistent, high quality products is extremely difficult and can be very expensive. A lot of companies are simply not interested in



FACTORY VISITS



low volume, bespoke work and even if they will supply goods, then the costs can be astronomical or not commercially viable. China of course will manufacture at much lower costs if the quantities are large enough, but bespoke or low volume work is usually a non-starter.

I applaud Philip for wanting to share his company's expertise and flexibility with the rest of the Audio community. His passion for the business and the many friends he has, like mine from the last forty years, is testament to the spirit of Hifi business. The audio business in the UK is tiny compared to most consumer electrical markets and is driven by the passion enthusiasts have had over the

last eighty years or so. Most businesses started from very humble origins and ideas; to either become large brands sold all over the world, or remain bespoke companies dedicated to their roots and beliefs.

The Timberworx factory is based on a typical industrial estate in East Sheffield and is a relatively small unit in comparison to some I have visited. Philip started the tour with the "goods in area" where all the raw materials are initially delivered and stored. Needless to say there were large piles of timber, mdf and veneers ready to be used as and when required. I was then taken through the initial processes of the raw materials being prepared, selected and graded.

The work force
seemed fully
engaged and
are
encouraged to
make
suggestions
and
improvements
to the
manufacturing
process
wherever it is
appropriate



FACTORY VISITS

one false move or loss of concentration and a cabinet can be ruined

High tech machines were in abundance as one would expect, which aid the manufacturing process greatly, but human touch and skill was evident everywhere. Philip explained that the different grades of mdf they used were very important, as consistency and durability are key to good and consistent end results. Chipboard has been a popular material in the past, but modern designs use mdf for its superb machining qualities and consistent results. Birch ply is an option that some manufactures have used and indeed some still prefer, but as Philip explained to me, even using the best quality Finnish birch ply is costly and, when used in the aircraft industry, each piece has to be x-rayed to check for air pockets.

Veneers of many different types can be supplied and I watched the process of a side panel being passed through a machine to apply the glue and then the operator placed the veneer of choice on to it and it was then placed in an industrial press and several tons of pressure applied. This ensured a perfect fit and finish as no one wants the veneer to lift or bubble later. Several machines that were computer numerically controlled (CNC) were being used to cut out the many different shapes and sizes required on large vacuum tables to hold the materials in place.

Once the cabinets had been cut out, veneered and glued together, they went through the many finishing processes involved. One that particularly caught my attention was the belt sander. A large continuous roll of sandpaper is placed on a machine and then the operator very carefully and skilfully places a paddle on top of the rotating sand paper and smooths the wooden surface of the cabinet to a perfect finish. I was told this is all done by touch and only achievable through experience; one false move or loss of concentration and a cabinet can be ruined.

Other areas of the facility had several people assembling cabinets ready for their paint finish to be applied. Again human touch came to the fore as Timberworx believe that feel and touch are far better than the human eye at determining the end result. Upstairs in the factory there were spray booths to apply the special paint or high quality piano lacquer/ high gloss finishes. Also speaker grilles were being meticulously made by hand from the fully machined frames that were then carefully covered in the fabric cloth and makers badges applied. The work force seemed fully engaged and are encouraged to make suggestions and improvements to the manufacturing process wherever it is appropriate.

Once the cabinets or products have been finished they have a final inspection before being packaged and sent off to the companies for them to finish their assembly.

Looking at Timberworx you would assume that what they do is the norm, but believe me it isn't. Any specialist company has to work very hard to keep ahead of the game and provide exceptional service. You cannot rest on your laurels.

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BIRD'S EYE VIEW

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

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A Day In The Life

This Month Linette
Shares a Typical
Day's Events at
Hifi Pig Towers

A couple of months ago Stuart gave you the story behind why Hifi Pig is called Hifi Pig, it is something that people always want to know. Perhaps the second most-asked question after that is 'so what do you actually do all day?'. Hifi Pig has grown from a little blog that was just something to keep Stuart occupied and out of mischief, to the globally read news and review site that you see today, which keeps both of us pretty busy.

So what do we do all day?

We usually kick off in the morning with a vat of coffee and a gazillion emails. We get a lot of press releases and because we deal with people all over the world, they keep coming whatever the time of day or night. First job is to start getting the news, that has come in overnight, up onto the site. We pride ourselves on being pretty fast at this, so you are likely



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to be reading the hifi news first on Hifi Pig. There will be reviews and articles to post throughout the day and a lot of time on the phone and email to various contacts around the world.

Stuart keeps an eye on the site stats to see how we are doing. I always find this really amazing. When we first started out we used to get very excited if there was one person reading Hifi Pig. I remember the first time there was over one hundred people on the site in a day...we went out and bought a bottle of fizz to celebrate! Now that the visits are in the thousands every day it is still just as fascinating to see what people are reading and where they are from. You can literally watch the world wake up and go online, there will be a jump in the stats and we'll look at the clock and go 'that's East Cost America just got up' and a few hours later the West Coast follows. We love to think of audiophiles the world over getting up and reading Hifi Pig along with their morning coffee.

Social Media is a big part of the day

Its a fantastic way to connect with those people reading the site and helps us to understand what they are looking for in an online Hifi magazine. It has helped us virtually meet people the world over and make new friends. Its really cool to then go on and actually meet these people at the various shows that we visit. It is kind of down to social media that I ended up with hair of various hues. I used to dye my hair bright pinky-red when I first met Stuart, he always called it 'Student Red'. When we were about to go to our first High End Munich we were not sure how people we had just met online would know who we were. So Stuart suggested I died my hair again and he could tell people to look out for a woman with bright pinky-red hair...it worked a treat.

There is a lot of behind the scenes organising and admin that goes on

From arranging reviews to booking advertising and sorting out travel logistics, there is constantly something that needs doing. It is very interesting to speak to brands and distributors around

the world and it just shows you how buoyant the hifi industry is right now. From long established brands celebrating their 30th or 40th anniversary year, to new start-ups with fascinating new products that they are getting crowd funded, there is never a dull moment and always something new to spread the word about or arrange a review of, it is probably one of the most interesting industries there is. Our reviewers are incredibly important, in fact it is safe to say, its not just Stuart and I that make Hifi Pig what it is...its down to our small, wonderful team. We are very lucky to work with people who are extremely dedicated and knowledgeable and very passionate about hifi and music. Our little band of merry men and women want to share their knowledge and opinions with the general public and we are incredibly proud of what they do. It really makes our day when we get a comment back from a reader about how a review helped them make a decision about what to buy and we know our reviewers feel the same. We get that warm fuzzy feeling when an advertiser lets us know how well their campaign is working. When someone says that their website visits have increased along with their sales because of their Hifi Pig ads it means a lot to us.

We travel a lot to get to hifi shows and that usually involves various modes of transport, so a lot of time is spent planning and booking. We have become very familiar with certain airports, Charles De Gaulle Paris has perhaps our least favourite place to spend a few hours as we usually end up in the circular hell of terminal 1, Munich on the other hand is an absolute delight as far as airports go. If we are travelling to a show then the work comes with us and we can often be spotted on ferries, trains or in airports writing up articles and reviews. We don't really take holidays as such, if we are going somewhere then it is usually hifi related, but we enjoy what we do and if it wasn't fun we wouldn't do it.

We get a lot of deliveries from CDs to Pallets of speakers to review

We love to think of audiophiles the world over getting up and reading Hifi Pig along with their morning coffee



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The delivery guy thought that it was perfectly acceptable to leave a note on the front door saying 'Because you are out I've left your parcels in the back garden.'



The house often resembles a hifi shop; we have had to give up a room just to store the boxes in and right now the dinning room is full of loudspeakers...resembling Aladdin's cave! If the delivery driver can find us then it's a bit like Christmas most days, however, being out in the sticks and at the mercy of third party couriers, our day might involve frantic phone calls from delivery drivers who can't find us, despite having delivered the week before, or a trip to the local delivery office to pick up a parcel that they just didn't bother to try and deliver! Possibly the worse delivery fail we had was from a well known courier company (who shall remain nameless). The delivery guy thought that it was perfectly acceptable to leave a note on the front door saying 'Because you are out I've left your parcels in the back garden.' Thanks for that! The parcels were of quite a high value and were in the garden lovingly protected by plastic envelopes draped over them. Some manufacturers are wise to the ways of the couriers so they bring the gear personally and we cook them dinner and ply them with fine wine for making the effort.

Of course what it is all really about is listening to music

During the day this tends to be critical listening on the main or one of the smaller systems, depending on whether we are reviewing hifi components or Stuart might be doing music reviews. There is generally a pretty eclectic mix of sounds! We have what some people might think is a rather mad hifi, it's not run of the mill or conformist in any way. The whole point of it though, is because the music we love sounds great on it. When it really comes into it's own is when we are listening to music for pure pleasure, not listening critically for a review. When we have friends round for drinks or dinner in the evening, tunes get put on and people always end up dancing...I think that is the sign that you have got the hifi just right!

So really, as you can see, running Hifi Pig is no different to running any business We don't really lounge around all day drinking wine and listening to music...even if that's how it sometimes comes across! It's busy, it can be hard work but it is still fun and we are always excited about what Hifi Pig will do next...we hope that you, our fabulous readers, enjoy reading what we do as much as we all enjoy writing it for you.



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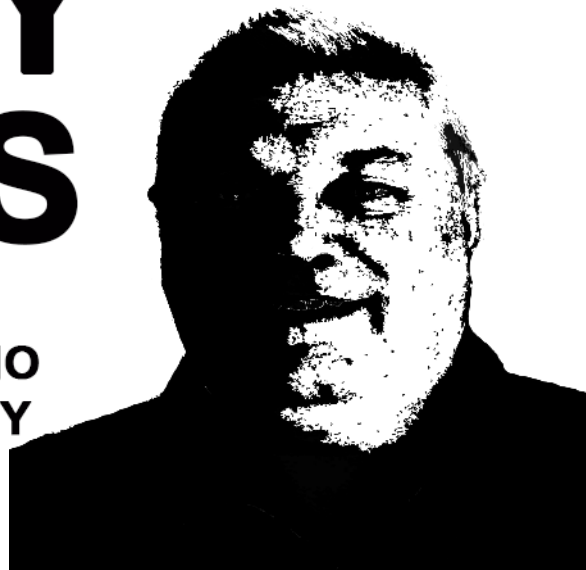
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IAN RINGSTEAD**



Going for Gold

Following the incredible success of Team GB at the Olympics and Paralympics, Ian Ringstead takes a look at some of the British heroes of Hifi

With the recent Olympic and Paralympic games still fresh in my mind I got to thinking how incredible as a nation the United Kingdom is. The fact we came second in the medal tables for both games, coming just behind the USA in the Olympics and China in the Paralympics was amazing. The Chinese in particular couldn't believe how a nation of our size could do so well given their population is about 1.4 billion and ours is roughly 60 million.

Now what has this got to do with hifi? Well the British bulldog tenacity has always been strong ever since the Romans left the British Isles, and

although the Vikings and William the Conqueror dented our pride for a while, as a nation the British have shown a remarkable ability for innovation.

Let's look at a few of the companies and pioneers

Leak Audio

Leak audio had been making audio-related products since 1934. In 1946 Leak introduced their first "Type 15" audio power amplifier, which drew upon "wartime research" for its four stage, negative feedback design. It was soon replaced by the very popular and long-

lived TL/12, which Leak continued to build for many years.

Quad

Another British company, Quad was founded by Peter Walker in 1936. Although better known today for their speakers, Quad's first commercial product was a power amplifier, the Quad 1. It wasn't until 1956 that Quad unveiled their first speaker, the legendary ESL57 which remained in production for twenty-eight years.

In England, the Lowther company was making raw drivers such as the Type P.M.2, which had a published frequency response capability from 18 to 20KHz. Lowther also made "the Horn Cabinet" which was a corner-loaded cabinet based on a "tractrix" curve in its horn design. A lot of Lowther owners did then what they do today - build their own cabinets and they are still revered today.

Tannoy

Tannoy was the trade name of a company formed by Mr. Guy R. Fountain in 1926. The name originates from a solid-state rectifier invented by



Photo courtesy of Andy Ryan

Guy Fountain made from an alloy or mixture of Tantalum and Lead. This Tantalum-Lead Alloy produced the name Tannoy. The name stuck fast to the company's products over the years and eventually became the company name, Tannoy Ltd.

From 1926 through the recession of the thirties and during the Second World War Tannoy produced many different products all to do with speech and music communications. One innovative design was a universal speaker system designed for a travelling circus. The speaker requirement was for high quality speech and music for announcement and entertainment purposes in the largest travelling circus of Bertram Mills. The speaker had to be efficient because all the amplification was by tube amplifiers (design and built by Tannoy of course) and the power supplies were derived from not very efficient motor generators and rotary converters. Of course Tannoy became a commonly used term in our language to describe a public address system such as used in train stations.

Tannoy, was already making their 12" and 15" "Dual concentric in the 1950's. With their nominal 15-ohm impedance the Tannoys were easy to drive with the small triode valve amps that were so common at that time. Tannoy made a wide range of designs from domestically acceptable models to the large corner horns the GRF (Guy R Fountain). Tannoy is famous worldwide for its innovative, unique and very accurate sounding Dual Concentric. A Dual Concentric speaker unit is very different from the standard speaker industry drive unit. It has the tweeter or treble unit mounted at the centre of the bass unit so that the two units operate in total harmony with each other. Many manufacturers such as JBL, Altec, KEF,

Pioneer, TEAC, have recognized the benefits of the co-axial or concentric arrangement of woofer and tweeter to cover the whole audio band from a single apparent point source. Tannoy Dual Concentrics are by their very nature complex to manufacture and therefore you will not find them in a low price system.

Sadly recent announcements from the company suggest that production of the vast proportion of their loudspeakers will now be in China.

Meridian

There are many other companies from the UK that have made their mark more recently such as Meridian Audio which was founded by Bob Stuart and Allen Boothroyd in 1977. They continue to lead the company with Bob Stuart heading all technological developments and Alan Boothroyd leading the design team. Since the company's inception, all Meridian products have been conceived, engineered and built in the UK. The company was the first to introduce active loudspeakers (loudspeakers with power amplifiers inside the cabinet) designed for the domestic market, and was the first British company to manufacture a CD player in 1983. The Meridian MCD, launched in 1985, was the first audiophile CD player. Meridian also created the first digital surround-sound processor and the first DSP-based digital active loudspeakers.

So we Brits have certainly made our mark in the audio industry and apologies to the many other companies I haven't mentioned, but there are so many I could only take a snapshot of a few favourites.

Alan Dower Blumlein

Sadly recent announcements from the company suggest that production of the vast proportion of their loudspeakers will now be in China

So three cheers for the Brits and long may we continue to inspire

It's not just the equipment manufacturers that have made their mark though. Stereo as we know it today would never have been around if it wasn't for the genius of its inventor Alan Dower Blumlein (29 June 1903 – 7 June 1942). He was an English electronics engineer, notable for his many inventions in telecommunications, sound recording, stereophonic sound, television and radar. He received 128 patents and was considered as one of the most significant engineers and inventors of his time.

In 1929 Blumlein joined the Columbia Graphophone company. His first project was to find a method of disc cutting that circumvented a Bell patent in the Western Electric moving-iron cutting head then used, and on which substantial royalties had to be paid. He invented the moving-coil disc cutting head, which not only got around the patent but offered greatly improved sound quality. He led a small team which developed the concept into a practical cutter. The other principal team members were Herbert Holman and Henry "Ham" Clark. Their work resulted in several patents.

Early in 1931, the Columbia Graphophone Company and the Gramophone Company merged and became EMI. New joint research laboratories were set up at Hayes and Blumlein was officially transferred there on 1 November the same year.

During the early 1930s Blumlein and Herbert Holman developed a series of moving-coil microphones, which were used in EMI recording studios and by the BBC at Alexandra Palace. Blumlein may or may not have invented the long-tailed pair, but his name is on the first patent (1936). The long-tailed pair is a form of differential amplifier that has been popular since the days of the vacuum tube (valve). It is now more pervasive than ever, as it is particularly suitable for implementation in integrated circuit form, and almost every operational amplifier integrated circuit contains at least one.

In 1931, Blumlein invented what he called "binaural sound", now known as stereophonic sound or simply "stereo". In early 1931, Blumlein and his wife were at a local cinema. The sound reproduction systems of the early "talkies" invariably only had a single set of speakers – which could lead to the somewhat disconcerting effect of the actor being on one side of the screen whilst his voice appeared to come from

the other. Blumlein declared to his wife that he had found a way to make the sound follow the actor across the screen.

The genesis of these ideas is uncertain, but he explained them to Isaac Shoenberg in the late summer of 1931. His earliest notes on the subject are dated 25 September 1931, and his patent had the title "Improvements in and relating to Sound-transmission, Sound-recording and Sound-reproducing Systems". The application was dated 14 December 1931, and was accepted on 14 June 1933 as UK patent number 394,325. The patent covered many ideas in stereo, some of which are used today and some not. Some 70 claims include:

A "shuffling" circuit, which aimed to preserve the directional effect when sound from a spaced pair of microphones was reproduced via stereo headphones instead of a pair of loudspeakers

The use of a coincident pair of velocity microphones with their axes at right angles to each other, which is still known as a "Blumlein Pair"

Recording two channels in the single groove of a record using the two groove walls at right angles to each other and 45 degrees to the vertical

A stereo disc-cutting head

Using hybrid transformers to matrix between left and right signals and sum and difference signals

Blumlein's binaural experiments began in early 1933, and the first stereo discs were cut later the same year. Much of the development work on this system for cinematic use was completed by 1935. In 1934, Blumlein recorded Mozart's Jupiter Symphony conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham at Abbey Road Studios in London using his vertical-lateral technique. This is just the tip of the iceberg for this prolific inventor relevant to audio, and we as music lovers have so much to thank Alan Dower Blumlein for.

He died during WW11 on 7 June 1942, aged 38, during the secret trial of an H2S airborne radar system then under development, when all on board the Halifax bomber he was flying in were killed when it crashed in Herefordshire.

So three cheers for the Brits and long may we continue to inspire.

RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY
JANINE ELLIOT



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Philips Motional Feedback Speakers

Talk of powered speakers and the chances are you will think instantly of Bang and Olufsen or Meridian, or perhaps PMC and ATC. I was pleased to get hold of the Meridian's M2 in the 1990's, though had seen them in KJ LeisureCentre in Watford in the late 70's and craved for them then. But the idea of powered speakers in the hifi industry goes further back than that. Up until the mid-70's record players with built in amplifiers and speakers were all the craze, though I never really got into Bush, Murphy, HMV, ITT, Ferguson and all the other mono record players that were up for sale in Tesco, Timothy Whites, Co-op, etc. The sad thing is that they seem to be making a comeback with HMV and others selling Crosley retro record players.

The idea of separate loudspeakers that were powered first came to light for me with the Philips Motional Feedback series back in the mid 70's. This was not just a powered loudspeaker system, but one that could listen in and adjust the sound so that distortion was reduced. Motional feedback in a loudspeaker means using a method of measuring the motion of loudspeaker diaphragm and using this observation to alter the speaker's driving voltage and/or current so that the diaphragm now moves at its best. This system works much the same as the computer system in your car, which maximises the potential of the engine and adjusts to your driving prowess.

The Philips idea was brilliant, though not the first system designed to get the

best from your audio. The first attempts at controlling and optimising the movement of the loudspeaker cone came from a certain G.H. Brodie, back in 1958. His patent featured an assembly on the chassis, plus a contact on the cone, which formed a parallel plate capacitor, itself controlling the movement of the cone. A company called Servo Speaker continued this idea showing in their measurements that THD would drop below one fourth (12dB) of the THD of the same speaker driver without motional feedback. This would typically equate to a drop of around 50% (6dB) at 20 Hz. A cylindrical capacitor was placed in the space inside the voice coil and above the pole piece of the magnet system. As the capacitance of this cylinder changes linearly according to the deflection of

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the cone, it sent messages to a control circuit to compare against what the amplifier was sending. The idea of controlling distortion at low frequencies has been adopted by a number of subwoofer manufacturers. Servo Speaker doesn't exist now but there is a website showing you how to "modify" your loudspeaker to create your own capacitor monitoring system, should you feel inclined to mutilate your woofers. Paradigm Servo 15, for example, has an onboard comparator which controls the 400-watt RMS amplifier and compares the output of the subwoofer to the input signal and makes instantaneous corrections in order to get the best sound.

The Philips approach was to use a piezo-electric accelerometer to provide information about the movement, speed and direction of the bass cone to the amplifier, in order for it to be controlled and therefore reducing distortion. The ceramic sensing device on the cone

'vibrates' and as it does so an electrical signal is generated. This is then fed back and compared with the signal that made the woofer vibrate in the first place. If there is any difference then corrective action takes place in the amplifier. Close up view of the woofer shows two sets of lead-out wires connected to the cone, rather than the customary single pair. There were five models in the range; the smallest being the RH541 with 7" woofer and 1" dome tweeter, and increasing in size and cost through the RH544, AH567, RH532 and finally the RH545, the most talked about and biggest of the range. The RH544 and RH545 had complex switches and knobs on the front hidden under a plastic cover, where you could alter whether the speaker was against a side or rear wall, and whether on the floor, as well as knobs for cut off frequencies and sensitivity. Thus, highly complex alterations of sound architecture were possible. Their 3-way RH532 was advertised as a bookshelf speaker with

true bass response, complete with a 20W and 40W amplifier for tweeter and woofer respectively. Using the system effectively extended the bass frequency, quite appreciably on the smaller RH541. This 22.9 x 29.4 x 17.3cm speaker could get down to 35Hz complete with a 30W amplifier. Speakers have a resonant frequency, particularly in infinite baffle motional feedback designs, caused by pressure forced against the cone as it moves. This, plus any distortion induced by the enclosure or the cone itself can be immediately corrected by the feedback system. To a small degree, the sensor-feedback system also compensated for non-optimal room acoustics, something stressed in their advertisements. To do the "listening in" it is vital that the ceramic material is suspended in rubber blocks for freedom of movement. In addition, it must not sit in the flow of the voice coil of the speaker to avoid false readings. This was achieved simply by mounting the component in an airtight saucer.

Philips technology was brilliant and a shame that it wasn't developed for more than a decade before being forgotten, like much of iconic Philips technology; the cassette, V2000, DCC, and currently their share in the design of the red-book CD. The Motional Feedback System unfortunately never really caught on in a big way. The Philips technology was expensive at the time, meaning price-wise it competed with high quality conventional loudspeaker and amplifier separates that actually sounded better. What the Philips technology couldn't do was change overall tonal balance or change cabinet colouration. I am pleased, however, that all those hours and much Dutch guilder were not used in vein, with the philosophy, if not the technology, being used by other companies for products such as subwoofers where it can be put to good use in monitoring the movement of a sub-bass drive unit to prevent damage at high excursions and volume levels. However, as loudspeaker drivers and cabinets improve reducing distortion and resonance, the need for a monitoring monitor becomes redundant.

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Roy Harper – The Usher Hall, Edinburgh

Roy Harper may well be rock's least well-known legend. The only non-band member to have sung a lead vocal on a Pink Floyd song (Have A Cigar from Wish You Were Here), he is also the subject of a Led Zeppelin song (Hats Off To (Roy) Harper). David Gilmour, Paul And Linda McCartney and Kate Bush have guested on his albums and Bush, Peter Gabriel and This Mortal Coil have covered his songs.

In 2013 Harper broke a hiatus with the release of a new album, *Man And Myth*, and played a series of highly acclaimed gigs. It seemed like Harper was all set for a new phase in his career. However, as he played the last of these gigs, he knew something that his fans and the press were yet to discover; he was facing the possibility of charges of historical sexual abuse being brought against him. It was eventually found that there was no case to answer but waging his defence cost him dear, both financially and emotionally. Harper has decided to mark his 75th birthday with a tour. Is it



a last stand or another new start? Only time will tell. But as Harper notes in one of his songs, time is temporary.

Although he is at heart an acoustic performer, comfortable enough with only his guitar for accompaniment, Harper has often detoured into rock and often used string and brass arrangements in his songs. On this tour he is backed by a small string and brass section and by Bill Shanley on second acoustic and electric guitars. The arrangements are light touch with the musicians often sitting out all together where the song clearly requires no adornment, but adding an extra texture as and when required.

As the musicians takes their seats an audience member calls out: "Where is he?". Harper wanders on and is greeted like a long lost friend. Opening with *Commune* from his 1974 album *Valentine*, Harper takes just a little time to settle in. The occasional lyric is fluffed and the odd line started over. "There will be mistakes" Harper warns us later. These mistakes may be seen as being aged-related, but in fact seasoned Harper fans will be aware that forgetting the odd lyric has been a staple of his gigs over the years. Harper's voice, which was in fine form on his last album, remains strong and although it takes a song or two to get fully warmed up, his ability to hit high falsetto notes is undiminished.

Alluding to recent events, Harper tells us that he is the kind of person who can fall in love four or five times a day and attributes this to genetic programming. He admits that this has resulted in "inappropriateness" but has always been "stopped by his own cops". This seems to fall somewhere between an admission of his own failings and an excuse, but I admire his honesty in addressing the matter on stage rather than airbrushing it from his history.

The passing of time is, unsurprisingly, a recurring theme tonight. *January Man* from his last album *Man And Myth* examines the thoughts of a man confronted by his own ageing. *Time Is Temporary*, played later in the show and dedicated to Harper's wife and best friend, Tracy, is similarly contemplative.



LIVE MUSIC

The string and brass section come into on their own with the lush Another Day, a personal favourite from Harper's Flat, Baroque And Berserk album. Between-song preambles are A Harper staple and tonight it is enlightening to get a glimpse into the genesis of some of his songs. Some members of the audience are keen to add to the banter and these interjections are warmly received and responded to by Roy. Towards the end of the show though, it appears to have got a bit too much for one individual. "Just sing a song, for fuck's sake" he interjects. Roy takes this in his stride, laughing and seeming to consider whether this request is a reasonable one before rejecting it.

While the string and brass section deserve a special mention for their contribution, particular praise is due to Bill Shanley on guitars and Beth Symmons on double bass. Bill has the unenviable task of playing guitar on some songs on which Jimmy Page was the original guitarist. – no pressure there. Rather than imitating Page, Shanley brings his own interpretation to the songs, adding an extra dimension to Roy's own playing, which has lost none of its skill. When not bowing decorously as part of the string section, Beth moves centre stage behind Bill and Roy and gets down to some serious plucking, her percussive bass lines adding a bit of bottom end to Bill's guitar.

The second half of the show opens with a version of North Country Girl, a folk music standard possibly made most

famous by the Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash version on Dylan's Nashville Skyline. Other highlights include Time Is Temporary, before which Roy reveals that he spent his honeymoon in Edinburgh. Naming the hotel in which they stayed elicits a loud "boo" from an audience member. "Why the boo?" asks Roy. "It's overpriced" comes the reply. Roy thinks for a while. "Yes, it was overpriced" he agrees, "and there was a large bust of Queen Victoria in the room that watched over you while you, err, made your moves." Roy goes on to regale us with the tale of an earlier Edinburgh visit involving infamous mining union leader Mick McGachey and a bag of mushrooms. A double whammy of excellent versions of Hallucinating Light and Me And My Woman take us to the end of the evening. After a standing ovation from the audience and some heartfelt thanks from Roy, we are treated to a particularly poignant When An Old Cricketer Leaves The Crease. Roy describes it as a song about changing times, which perhaps it was when he wrote it forty one years ago, but it carries a deeper resonance now, one that is not lost on any of us, least of all I suspect, Roy himself.

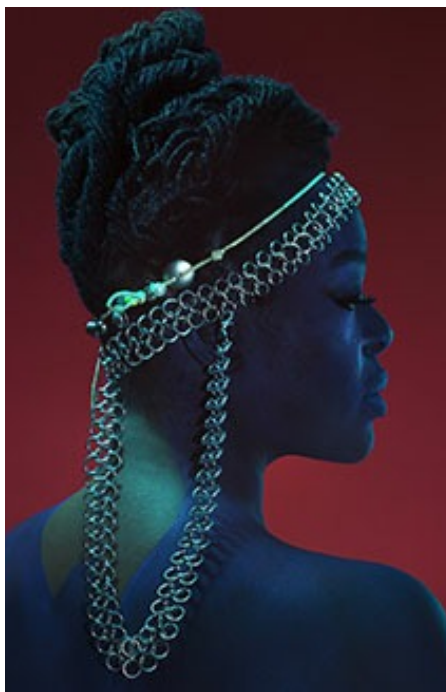
On the strength of tonight's performance Roy Harper has a good few innings left in him. Let's hope he's back again soon.

John Scott

As the musicians takes their seats an audience member calls out: "Where is he?". Harper wanders on and is greeted like a long lost friend



Eska - Summerhall, Edinburgh



Okay, I'm going to put this right out here. I'm guilty. I suspect I might be guilty of something that we may all be guilty of but I'm not going to use that as an excuse. I'm guilty and I'm going to make a full confession. So, here goes.

Preconceptions. I knew that Eska had released her debut album on Naim's record label last year. I hadn't heard the album but I did that thing that I'm sure we all do sometimes – again, I'm not offering that as an excuse – I made assumptions. I assumed, partly on the basis that the album had been released by a record label owned by a hifi manufacturer and partly on the understated elegance of the album cover, that I knew what Eska was all about. This was going to be an album that you would either put on in the background at dinner parties or play to your mates to show off your hifi system; kind of like a 2015 version of Sade's *Diamond Life*. I bet if you've seen the album you've thought exactly the same thing. But I'm really not using that as an excuse. Really.

So I turned up at the gig pretty sure of the kind of thing I was going to hear. I

was a bit surprised to see that it was a standing gig, I'd thought maybe a little cabaret vibe – seats at round tables with candles on – might have been appropriate. The band file on stage and guitarist Joseph Newman fires up a riff; a close cousin to Jimi's *Voodoo Chile*. Bass and drums kick in with a jazzy groove. Eska wanders on, gives a cheery wave and just **EXPLODES**. Shuddering and juddering like a woman possessed, she turns the opening song, *Magic Woman*, inside out.

Eska Mtungwazi's voice is an extraordinary instrument. Capable of moving from James Brown to Kate Bush in a heartbeat, she fuses jazz, blues, rock and soul to create something that is truly inimitable. Eska has been described as the finest female singer in the UK and on the basis of tonight's performance I wouldn't argue with that.

Eska's band are clearly all talented musicians but there is very little in the way of showboating. Drummer Jose Joyete plays what is effectively a drum solo during one song. The only thing preventing it from being a solo is that Eska continues singing and the rest of the band keep playing while he is doing it. What could easily have been a car crash works perfectly. Bassist Andy Hamill stretches out on another song with a lovely bit of playing that again doesn't really qualify as a solo so much as an enhancement to the song. Phillip Achille on acoustic guitar, glockenspiel and harmonica is the only band member to take a conventional solo. His tour de force piece on harmonica is jaw droppingly impressive and for something so full of blowing and sucking, it at no time either sucks or blows but it does blow the audience away.

Over the course of a dozen songs Eska performs like a force of nature and by the end of the gig the audience are bouncing - cabaret tables would have been a really bad idea- and I leave with my preconceptions blown well and truly out of the water. This was definitely not dinner party music but if Eska and her band want to come and have dinner at my house, I'm sure there would be a hell of a party.

John Scott

Eska wanders
on, gives a
cheery wave
and just
EXPLODES.
Shuddering
and juddering
like a woman
possessed,
she turns the
opening song,
Magic Woman,
inside out

Fraser Anderson / Callahan Morrison and Eli West – Soundhouse at The Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh

It is rare for me to go to a gig specifically to see the support act but I made an exception for Fraser Anderson. I had reviewed Fraser's excellent album *Under Cover Of Lightness* earlier this year and has remained a regular listen. When I found out at the last minute that Fraser was gigging, I was determined to attend.

I had no idea whether this would be a solo or band gig but the presence of a stand up bass at the back of the stage gave me some hope that we would in for a close facsimile of the sound of the album. Sure enough, when Fraser took to the stage he was accompanied by Ali Ferguson on electric and acoustic guitar, Bex Baxter on vocals and Chris Agnew on bass who provided superb backing. Shorn of some of the album's production touches such as brass and electronic beats, Anderson's songs are ably supported by Agnew's supple bass lines and Ferguson's filigree guitar, while Anderson and Baxter's vocals mesh perfectly.

Opening with a couple of songs from his earlier album's, Anderson takes the opportunity to showcase songs from his latest album. Fraser's vocals have drawn comparison with John Martyn's – which is a good thing in my book – but the similarities are serendipitous rather than studied. Please Let This Go,



Crying With My Heart, The Wind And The Rain and *With You All* all make their case for *Under Cover of Lightness* being an essential purchase. Unfortunately, tonight's gig being the end of a Scottish tour, the supply of CDs at the merchandising stall has dried up and Anderson is left having to encourage the audience to buy the couple of LPs he has remaining or to order the CD online. The set ends with *Beautiful Eyes*, which on the album has an almost Portishead production but tonight is given more breathing space and includes some excellently executed audience participation. Fraser Anderson has been given 40 minutes tonight to show what he can do. Let's hope that next time he plays in Edinburgh he'll be headlining.

Before tonight's show, Callahan Morrison and Eli West were unknown to me but by the reaction of the audience, I am clearly in the minority. The Seattle duo arrive on stage to a rousing reception and are treated like old friends. From the outset it is clear that their old time bluegrass music is deeply rooted in tradition; this is no banjo ransacking, hipster friendly fad like Mumford & Sons. Multi-instrumentalist Callahan dazzles on banjo and mandolin while Eli is equally impressive in guitar. Their close harmony vocals evoke the ghosts of an earlier age, whether on traditional songs, their own material or covers of artists such as Townes Van Zandt. Like Fraser Anderson before them, Callahan and Eli are also out of luck at the merchandising stall. Their tour car was stolen in Leicestershire along with 160 CDs. With wry good honour Callahan tells us that he hopes that at the very least the thief might now be a fan and is

When I found out at the last minute that Fraser was gigging, I was determined to attend

happy to offer him the opportunity to become their UK distributor. In compensation, tonight's audience are offered the chance to purchase a download code for their three albums, *I'll Swing My Hammer With Both Hands*, *The Holy Coming Of The Storm* and *Our Lady Of The Tall Trees* for the bargain price of £10.

I came tonight for Fraser Anderson and stayed for Callahan and Eli and I'm very glad that I did. A splendid night all round.

John Scott



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Beltane Fire – Different Breed Expanded Edition (Cherry Red)



This is actually from 1985 but is now available for the first time on CD along with eight bonus tracks included. When it first came out Kerrang said it was a “distinctive and attractive alternative to the mainstream flow of things” and that’s as true in 2016 as it was then

I’d never heard the original so this is all new to me and to be honest Different Breed is not really what I was expecting – you know what they say about not judging a book by its cover! What I was expecting was either head down metal or airy fairy prog rock, but what you get is most definitely rock but a bit more “poppy” than you’d think...and certainly has a very mid-eighties feel to it.

The lyrical themes on Different Breed are the stuff of myth and legend, as you may expect from the band’s name, just take a look at some of the song titles; Excalibur, King Arthur’s Cave. And they’re delivered with a very serious and heroic style.

The music is certainly full, well accomplished and, to my surprise, quite foot tappingly infectious. It’s not going to appeal to everyone and it is a bit contrived, but if you’re into your rock with an epic feel then this could be for

you. Best track for me is the Sabbath bonus track Far Cry.

Stuart Smith

Antoine Fafard – Sphère (Timeless Momentum)



This is bass player and composer Antoine Fafard’s fourth album and features Gary Husband on drums, lead synth and piano and Jerry De Villiers Jr on lead guitar.

Fafard is now UK based but Canadian born and has been releasing instrumental music for over fifteen years and this, like his other albums, falls most squarely into the jazz-fusion pot.

There are nine new pieces on Sphère and it’s all very clever stuff that, despite its apparent complexity, is pretty accessible and enjoyable.

Of course the main driving force behind the music is the electric bass of Fafard, but there is enough space left for the other musicians to come to the fore. Particularly enjoyable is the soaring, and yet understated, lead guitar of De Villiers, whilst Husband’s drums range from delicate touches to more rock solid beats – it’s certainly all very clever and accomplished stuff.

Interestingly the three musicians recorded in three different studios (two in London and De Villiers in Canada), but given the solidity and the way the

instruments play off each other you’d be forgiven for thinking that Sphères was a live recording.

This is polished and skilful song writing and musicianship that is intellectually interesting, whilst still being enjoyable. Sphère will certainly make a really great system sing and I can see it being used in dems a good deal.

Most definitely recommended.

Out now on Timeless Momentum.

Stuart Smith

Marsheaux – Ath.Lon (Undo Records)



Female electro poppers Marsheaux took their name from a portmanteau of the first syllables of their first names: Marianthi and Sophie. Hailing from Thessaloniki, the girls moved to Athens to form the band. Steeped in electronic pop music from the likes of Depeche Mode, The Human League, OMD, Soft Cell, New Order and Sparks, the girls have worked to bring their own personality to their influences over the course of four previous studio albums and during this time Marianthi and Sophie have also carved out a parallel career as remixers, reworking tracks by Katy Perry, Gwen Stefani, Kylie Minogue, Depeche Mode and Moby.

Their latest album Ath.Lon is named both for the Greek word ‘Athlos’ which means achievement or feat, and the cities of Athens and London in which the

ALBUM REVIEWS

album was recorded. Ath.Lon retains the hallmarks of '80s electronic pop while brining a contemporary sparkle to the sound. If you imagine that Susan Sulley and Joanne Catherall from The Human League had recorded a side project in 1983 while somehow being able to employ recording technology from 2015 then you wouldn't be a million miles away from Ath.Lon's overall feel.

From the powerful Burning to the playful Strong Enough, all the way through to closing track The Beginning Of The End, Marianthi Melitsi and Sophie Sarigiannidou have created a Eighties album that firmly belongs in the Twenty Teens.

John Scott

Various – And This Is Me: Britain's Finest Thespians Sing (London Municipal)



I thought it was a joke when this landed on my desk earlier but as with all the albums that arrive here at Hifi Pig Towers I gave it a fair trial and popped it on in the car whilst we drove to our destination for lunch.

Now being an audiophile is a serious business. As I understand it from several people on Facebook groups, laughing and having a silly time is only permitted three times a month at most, and only then when strictly confined to one's own living room. Thing is, as much as I may enjoy a serious documentary or a challenging film, I also get a good deal of pleasure from daft comedy. And why should music be any different? Indeed, wasn't it Frank Zappa who asked "Does humour belong in music?" (The answer is yes, by the way.) However, in the main music tends to be pretty serious stuff, but it wasn't always this way and the novelty record has a great tradition.

What you are getting with And This Is Me is a collection of tunes from the fifties and pre-Beatles sixties made by stars of stage and screen from the UK. The UK thing is very important here! Not everyone around the world, or for that matter in Britain, is going to get this record, but it is good fun. It's sort of a time-capsule to a more innocent and carefree time when fans wanted to get close to the stars and a 45RPM single was one of the ways to do this. Brits of a certain age will recognise most of the names on this record; Bernard Cribbins, Max Bygraves, Mike and Bernie Wineter, Spike Milligan, Norman Wisdom, Hylda Baker, Terry Thomas...there's loads more, and if you are a fan of the Carry On films you'll recognise pretty much all the rest on here as its got them by the shedload.

Some of the tunes are serious attempts at making proper pop records, but in the main it is the novelty type record that abounds here. There are tunes whose lyrics you'd be hard pushed to get past the political correct monitors of today; Ian Carmichael's Lemon Twist is a case in point where he encourages a young lady to partake of sizeable straight vodkas with a twist of lemon for nourishment. Unfortunately for Carmichael his victim manages to escape his clutches as he gets so blind drunk he falls asleep. Another is Sid James and Liz Fraser's Double Bunk – I'll let you work that out.

So, is this a record you should rush out and buy? I genuinely don't know is the answer. It is good fun, we belly laughed a good few times whilst driving about, and it is most certainly a memento of a bygone age, but I'm not really old enough to remember these stars in their prime and so I'm unlikely to play it over

As I understand it from several people on Facebook groups, laughing and having a silly time is only permitted three times a month at most, and only then when strictly confined to one's own living room

and over. However, if you enjoy this kind of curio you'll love this and I didn't skip a single tune. There are tongues firmly in cheeks throughout and to quote Barbara Windsor, it's all a bit cheeky, though there are, as mentioned, more earnest offerings too.

Stuart Smith

Elvis Costello And The Attractions - This Year's Model

This month John Scott turns his attention to the UK singer songwriter Elvis Costello who rose to stardom in the first wave of punk rock and here looks at his album *This Year's Model* recorded with his band The Attractions.

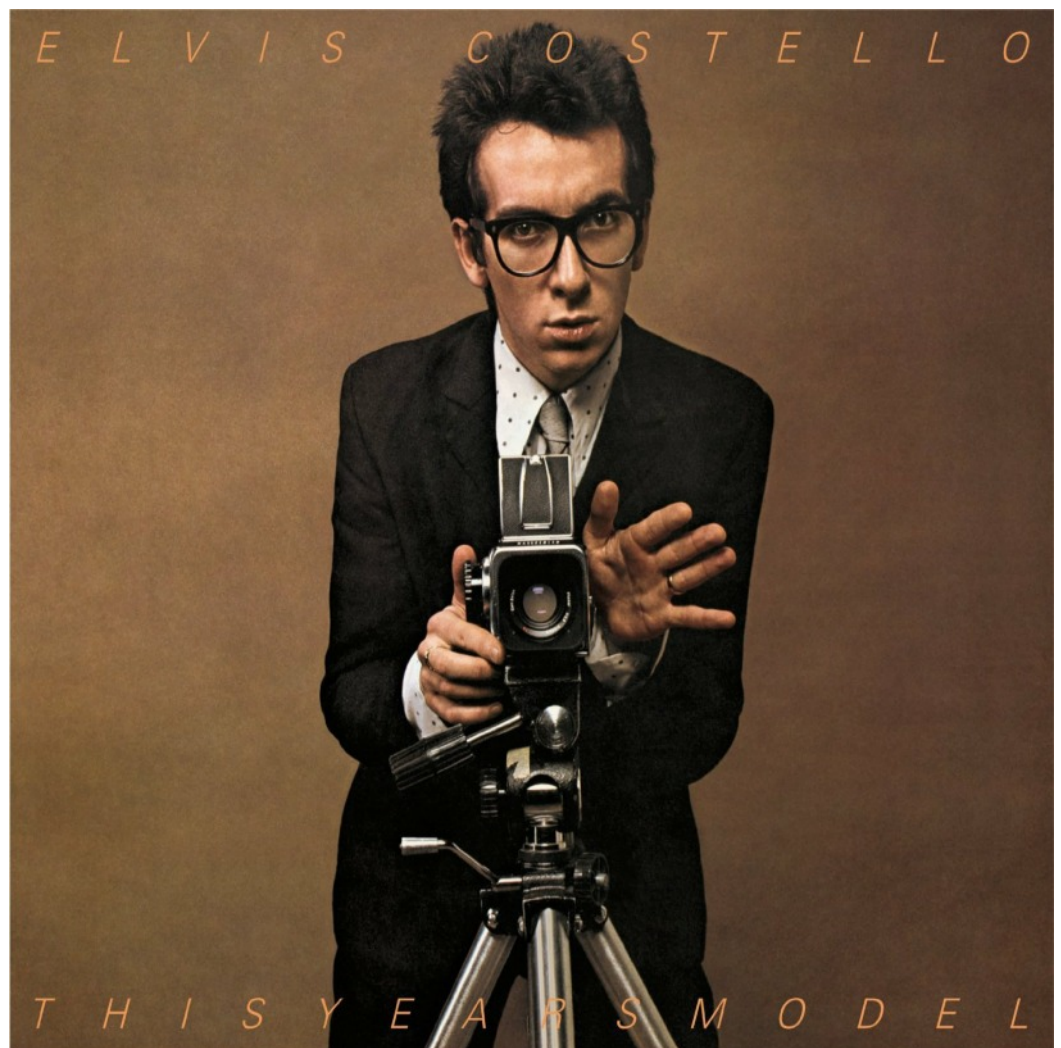
The punk explosion of 1976 famously encouraged anyone with three chords and a guitar to form a band. Punk's DIY ethos also opened up opportunities for a shed load of musicians who had been slogging away in the pubs in and around London for years but getting nowhere fast. Pub Rock was an amalgam of American musical styles, mixing up rock and roll with rhythm and blues and country. As established and newly-formed record labels scrabbled around to sign up almost anyone with a guitar and a couple of tunes, bands like Dr Feelgood, Brinsley Schwarz and Kilburn and The Highroads seized the chance, either collectively or individually, to break out of the pubs and into the charts.

Amongst these pub rock hopefuls was a certain Declan McManus whose band Flip City had started working the pub scene in 1974. Having had no success, McManus had ditched the band in favour of full-time employment as a data entry clerk with cosmetics firm Elizabeth Arden but was still writing songs. McManus recorded some demos which came to the attention of Stiff Records who earmarked him as a staff writer, but were eventually persuaded that he had enough quality songs to record an album of his own. Taking sick days off from work, McManus recorded the songs that would become his first album, *My Aim Is True*, produced by former Brinsley

Schwarz bass player Nick Lowe and backed by American band Clover. While not in any way punk, its stripped-down direct approach was a breath of fresh air from a British singer-songwriter and the album was an immediate critical success on both sides of the Atlantic.

The newly-named Elvis Costello now found himself in need of a band with which to perform the songs on tour.

Keyboard player Steve Nason – rechristened as Steve Nieve by Ian Dury, drummer Pete Thomas from Chili Willi And The Red Hot Peppers and bassist Bruce Thomas – a session veteran who had played on albums by Al Stewart and been a member of The Sutherland Brothers And Quiver – were convened as The Attractions and would be Costello's backing band for the next 12 years.



CLASSIC ALBUM

The band quickly developed into a dynamic live act, taking the songs from Costello's debut album and giving them a driving garage band twist. The combination of Pete Thomas' tight drumming with Bruce Thomas' supple, intricate bass playing and Steve Nieve's skilful and playful keyboards with Costello's rhythm guitar provided a highly charged quick-fire exhilarating live experience; this was killer musicianship, pared down and stripped of all excess.

Costello's new songs made the most of the band's strengths. On *My Aim Is True*, Clover had played the part of anonymous session musicians backing a solo artist. Elvis Costello and The Attractions were, however, a single entity; welded together by the white heat of their performance. For producer Nick Lowe, the challenge was to capture the raw energy of the band's live shows while providing a pop sheen that would reward repeated listening.

As its title makes clear, *This Year's Model* presents a very different view of Elvis Costello. On *My Aim Is True*, his songs had portrayed the viewpoint of an angry outsider. On *This Year's Model*, Costello is angrier than ever but he is speaking from a place inside the entertainment machine. He has seen the trappings of fame at first hand and is determined to keep his distance.

"I don't want to kiss you, I don't want to touch" spits an unaccompanied Costello a split second before the band pile in with an adrenaline rush that threatens to send opening song *No Action* tumbling head over heels. "I hold you like I hold that Bakelite in my hand" he sneers, feigning disinterest, but the second verse reveals his true feelings; "Knowing you're with him is driving me crazy."

Years before supermodels became a thing, *This Year's Girl* castigates those who objectify the latest pinup but there is no sympathy shown either for the girl in question. Costello is pitiless in his derision: "You want her broken with her mouth wide open...Time's running out, she's not happy with the cost, There'd be no doubt, only she's forgotten much more than she's lost."

The Beat ramps up the tempo with an ode to onanism. While the rest of the world goes out at night, Costello overdoes it at home: "Take it easy, I think your bending me." *Pump It Up* raises tensions even higher before *Little Triggers* slows the pace briefly. Up until now Costello's guitar has played second fiddle to Nieve's organ but it takes the fore on the intro to *You Belong To Me* in a parody of *The Last Time* by The Rolling Stones.

Over the course of the album, Costello continues to cast a jaundiced eye over contemporary society. In the US, *(I Don't Want To Go To) Chelsea*, was dropped in favour of *Radio, Radio*. This was a re-write of a Flip City-era song called *Radio Soul*, a love letter to the radio that would not have sounded out of place on Van Morrison's *Moondance* Album. Costello, realising on which side his bread was buttered, turned it into a punky anti-radio song in which he wants to bite the hand that feeds him, while no doubt relishing all the radio play that the song racked up.

AT A GLANCE

Released 17 March 1978

Recorded Eden Studios, London, 1977–1978

Genre Punk rock, new wave

Length 35:44

Label Radar

Producer Nick Lowe

Side one

"No Action" – 1:58

"This Year's Girl" – 3:17

"The Beat" – 3:45

"Pump It Up" – 3:14

"Little Triggers" – 2:40

"You Belong to Me" – 2:22

Side two

"Hand in Hand" – 2:33

"(I Don't Want to Go to) Chelsea" – 3:07

"Lip Service" – 2:36

"Living in Paradise" – 3:52

"Lipstick Vogue" – 3:42

"Night Rally" – 2:41

The album's masterpiece is *Lipstick Vogue*, during which Thomases Bruce and Pete relentlessly raise the tension to near-bursting point. Just in time, Bruce's bassline eases off and Pete tamps down his tom toms to allow a bit of breathing space before the song explodes into life again.

With *This Year's Model*, Costello captured the mood of the times while avoiding the right-on posturing of many of his contemporaries. This was, to borrow a phrase from his producer "Pure pop for now people". Many of the songs from *This Year's Model* still form the core of Costello's live set and the album itself has lost none of its sparkle and excitement. If you are yet to discover it, *This Year's Model* could be this year's favourite.

Leaving Blues: The Story of Taste

By Robert Harris

2016 marks the fiftieth year since Taste, the blues-rock trio, was formed by legendary guitarist Rory Gallagher. Taste's story almost reads like a Ziggy-ish rock n' roll film script: a youthful band that promised much, only to split after a short period in a rather dramatic and personalised fashion, when they were right on the verge of 1970s rockstardom, due to a troublesome relationship with management. Thankfully, there is a lot more to Taste than such rock n' roll cliché might suggest. Taste had a goodly share of creative achievement, both in its MKII and lesser-known MKI line-ups, which mark the band as deserving of more than a mere foot-note in the in the annals of 60s rock.

First Taste

Rory Gallagher grew up in an environment where the restrictions of the 'showband' predominated. While in his teens, he joined a group called 'Fontana' in 1964, which he helped transform into 'Impact', shifting the focus, from hits and easy listening, to blues and R&B. The band split in 1965, and Gallagher put together a three-piece with prior Fontana members. The band, sometimes continuing to be identified as 'Impact', or retrospectively as 'pre-Taste', went on to tour Hamburg and Ireland. The band split the following year, due to the many difficulties of gigging with little return.

When Gallagher returned to Ireland, he went on to form a new band, which was soon to be dubbed 'Taste'. Its original line-up consisted of further ex-showband members Norman Damery (drums), and Eric Kitteringham (bass). Trios were still a novel concept in 1966, and Taste, as well as its predecessor, had to pretend to have additional members (audiences would sometimes be greeted with the odd sight of "band members" doing nothing other than sitting on chairs), or draft-in members playing peripheral instruments like the tambourine, because anything less than a four or a six piece outfit didn't conform to expectations of club management, or breached union rules!

MKI Taste had to contend with the same difficulties as Gallagher's previous band, but the international music scene had very much moved on by 1967, when blues-based three-piece bands suddenly became a tempting commercial prospect. The band was recognised as such by Eddie Kennedy, the manager of a Belfast club at the Maritime Hotel, where Taste had a residency. It would turn out to be a pivotal time. Some demo tracks were recorded on primitive studio equipment, in an effort to obtain a recording contract, and, the following year, a new line-up of Taste would be fused with members of another band previously resident at the Maritime.

The demo tracks were belatedly released in the early 1970s, albeit without official sanction by the band, prompted by the growing success of Gallagher's solo career. The recordings have been issued under various titles, and are often attributed to Rory Gallagher rather than his old band. Titles include 'Taste First' (1972), 'In the Beginning - An Early

Taste of Rory Gallagher' (1974), and 'Take it Easy Baby' (1976). These albums feature seven tracks, making up a rather short playing time of 25 minutes. The story goes that at least an album's worth of tracks were cut in July 1967, but there was an attempt to erase the two masters to prevent release, with limited success since only one master would survive.

The songs err on the lighter side of blues-rock, sounding surprisingly restrained, and there are few of Gallagher's characteristic guitar solos, but the tracks are of a surprisingly good standard. Most of the seven tracks do not appear on the later Taste albums - 'Worried Man' would become 'Dual Carriageway Pain' on Taste's official debut. Respectively, 'How Many More Years' and 'Take it easy Baby' are Howlin' Wolf and Sonny Boy Williamson covers. The other tracks appear to be original Gallagher compositions that do not seem to have been released elsewhere, arguably making the album a wee bit more than just a worthy purchase for the completist.

Blister on the Moon

In 1968 Taste moved to London, with Kennedy as the band's manager. The band rapidly made an impression on the UK music scene. One highlight was a short July 7th performance at the Woburn Abbey Festival. Taste also recorded tracks for the 'Top Gear' music show, which can be found on a bootleg called 'London Invasion'.

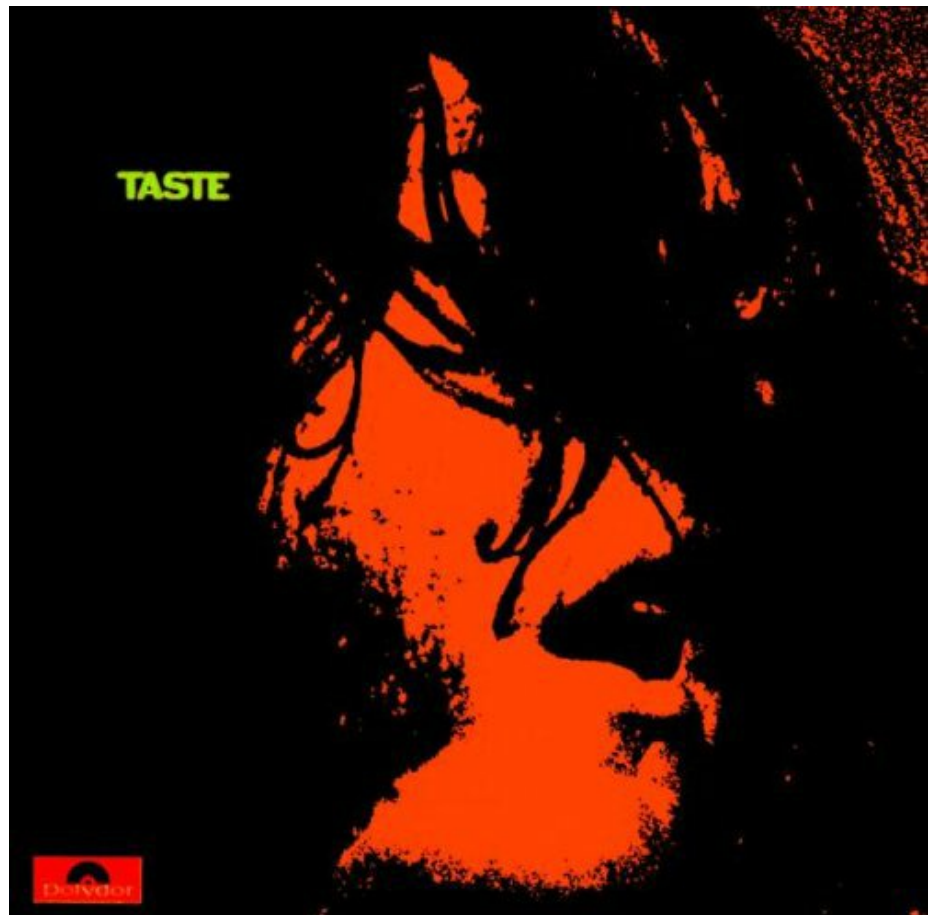
Taste cut an impressive single, 'Blister on the Moon'/'Born on the Wrong Side of Time', issued on the Major-Minor label in April 1968. Both tracks were re-recorded for Taste's debut, but nonetheless demonstrate the extent to which the MKI line-up had matured, having forged the heavy blues sound that would later define the band's reputation. The single, Woburn Abbey gig, and extant the July '67 recording have recently been issued on a box-set called 'I'll Remember' (2015).

MKII

Damery and Kitteringham were replaced at the manager's behest, with Richard McCracken (bass) and John Wilson (drums). Like Taste's prior members, the technically proficient McCracken and Wilson also met on the showband scene, and in 1967 formed a short-lived

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The tracks are so slow and break so often that they almost come across as an intentional deconstruction of the Chicago Blues sound, with the implications of the electrification of the blues taken to an ultimate conclusion



four-piece blues-rock band called 'Cheese', that was also generating attention in the UK, but promptly decided to throw their lot in with Gallagher circa August 1968. (New) Taste would continue to build on the reputation inherited, and a contract with the Polydor label would soon follow.

Taste's self-titled debut, recorded quite soon after the ignition of Taste's MKII line-up, (issued the following year), conformed with the ascendant hard rock/blues template of the late 1960s, but nonetheless made its mark for possessing a raw uncompromising sensibility. The album was well received, and sold approximately 200,000 copies in the first year of release.

The debut album stands out for quite distinct stylistic divergences across its nine tracks. 'Blister on the Moon' and 'Born on the Wrong Side of Time' come across as the most seminal tracks on the release: conforming to the label "proto-metal", with tight but explosive riffola, and a misanthropic sense of societal alienation, that to some may come across as a bit unsubtle and even slightly trite, but aesthetically are not a great distance from the tone of Black

Sabbath's first two innovative album releases.

The lengthiest tracks, 'Sugar Mama' (arguably the band's signature track), and 'Catfish' (another live favourite 'til the end), seem to define the album like no other, and perhaps explain Taste's reputation as a more aggressive (or less subtle) version of Cream – arguably an unfair comparison for two bands that possessed different strengths. The tracks are so slow and break so often that they almost come across as an intentional deconstruction of the Chicago Blues sound, with the implications of the electrification of the blues taken to an ultimate conclusion – with hindsight of course blues-rock would play a defining role in the evolution of 70s heavy metal.

Some critics treat the album as if it firmly established the creative direction of Gallagher's later career. Such views are largely fair, but, with the benefit of hindsight, the album comes across as the work of a band that knew where it collectively wanted to go, but the path was still quite uncertain. Gallagher, et al, were still looking for a sound or a style that was quintessentially their own. It would come after a dramatic about-turn.

CLASSIC BANDS

The path was rockier still when it came to the album's lyrical content. Whilst Gallagher was never a noted lyrics, his understated style with archetypal themes, may appeal to those who do not expect challenging political content or highbrow wordsmithery. However, the lyrical and musical tone of the lighter tracks (the folksy 'Hail', and especially the country-ish/jazzy 'I'm Moving On'), point most distinctly toward the feel of Rory's later albums, despite his continued reputation as a guitar-slinger par excellence. These songs would herald the a dramatic change in direction for the band's second and final album 'On the Boards'.

On the Boards



Taste's debut would help launch the band as a new force, with some seeing the unit as Cream's successor, after their split was announced in 1968. The group would tour North America in the Autumn of 1969, as the back-up band for Blind Faith, and became a headline act in Western Europe.

'On the Boards', recorded in late 1969, and released in February 1970, arguably represents Taste's crowning achievement. Ta

On the Boards' diverges from the outset, with a much lighter sound even when rendering hard rock. For example, with the opening track, 'What's Going On', the distortion-drenched frenzy of the debut, is substituted with a clean almost-chiselled angularity, which may initially disappoint some. The album shifts from unconventional blues, jazz and heavy boogie workouts, through to memorable acoustic numbers, such as the inwardly-looking solo number 'See Here'. Gallagher would continue in this direction with his eponymous debut, recorded shortly after Taste's split.

A leap in the quality of Gallagher's lyrics is evident on Boards. Blues emulations, and counter-cultural sentiment, are replaced with a quirky, slightly surreal, and, at times, playful sensibility, with some surprisingly catchy lyrical hooks. Whereas one could get the impression that Gallagher was retracing some of the steps of those he admired on Taste's debut, Boards marks the point in which he found voice – as exemplified by the whimsy of 'If I don't sing I'll Cry', and the leisurely 'Railway and Gun':

"Keep your railway and your gun,

Just leave anytime you choose,

Tell me what you hope to find,

I'll tell you what you've got to loose."

The albums stylistic shifts come across as part of a broader organic whole, with only the album's two extended jams, 'On the Boards', and 'It's Happened Before, It'll Happen Again', contrasting with the tone of the rest of the album. The looser jazz-fusion feel of the tracks, and Gallagher's altosax, call the listener to particular attention. The move may have been intentional, since the two extended workouts on Boards' predecessor ('Sugar Mama' and 'Catfish') also acted as focal-points for the listener.

'It's Happened Before, It'll Happen Again' is the busier of the two tracks, with the technical ability of the band very much on display, perhaps hewn from the effort that many a 60s rock band made to broaden their musical horizons with extended live jams. However, the song transcends its origins, and comes across as one of Taste's definitive statements.

The title track contrasts, with softer atmospheric jazz stylings, rather than the harsher self-consciously technical sound of the newly emerging jazz-rock. The song has a breezier but nonetheless tense feel that carries hints of Miles Davis' seminal jazz-fusion album 'In a Silent Way', which was issued a few months before Boards was recorded. Davis evokes mood through a web of textured electronic keyboards, while Gallagher and co. maintain a strict minimalism, underpinned by a slow droning bass, while the lyrics seem to be little more than an incidental scene-setter to aid the music.

The album proved a steady success for the band. According to the Official-Charts website, the album hung around the UK top 100 charts for 11 weeks, peaking at number 18 in February 1970.

"A rare live showing (February 1970) of Gallagher's brass skills on 'It Happened Before'"

I'm Moving On

Relations between Gallagher and Wilson/McCracken, deteriorated, to the extent that the two factions would hardly communicate, and occasionally fought on stage. There was some criticism of the way in which the band was managed, and there was a reputed clash with Gallagher for control. Gallagher played down the tensions, while Wilson and McCracken were more vocal – criticising the guitarist for supposedly expecting them to settle for a wage. They may have felt sidelined or treated as little more than a backing band, since irritation was expressed that Gallagher received an undue level of attention. The reaction may have been understandable since Gallagher was often greeted with a high-on religious fervour.

The writing was on the wall by the time of the Isle of Wight performance (the misery of which was intensified by the theft of their equipment before the gig), and Melody Maker received a shock tip-off the following month that they were splitting. Gallagher, who was reputedly less than keen to go solo, would be forced to split Taste. Touring continued until the end of December to honour commitments.

It'll Happen Again

Gallagher would go on to achieve much during his solo career, although, when it came to commercial success, he didn't have the luck of his peers. Gallagher remained unhappy about the failure of Taste for some time, and refused to play any of the old tracks live, until the turn of the 90s. A reunion was mooted before he died from health complications in 1995.

Post-Taste, McCracken and Wilson would form 'Stud', with two ex-'Family' members. They would make three well-regarded jazz-rock albums, during the early 70s but success would evade them.

McCracken and Wilson would reunite under the band name in 2000. Wilson

CLASSIC BANDS

would go on to record an album, called 'Wall to Wall' (2013) with various other musicians. In 2013, MKI's Eric Kitteringham joined Gallagher as a prospective member of the Greatest rock band line-up in the Above.

A combined misfortune of circumstance, and a high degree of ability at a young age, arguably prevented the band realising its potential greatness, and the near-certainty of notable commercial success. Bags of potential surely qualify Taste as one of the bigger 'what ifs' of the era.

Live Releases

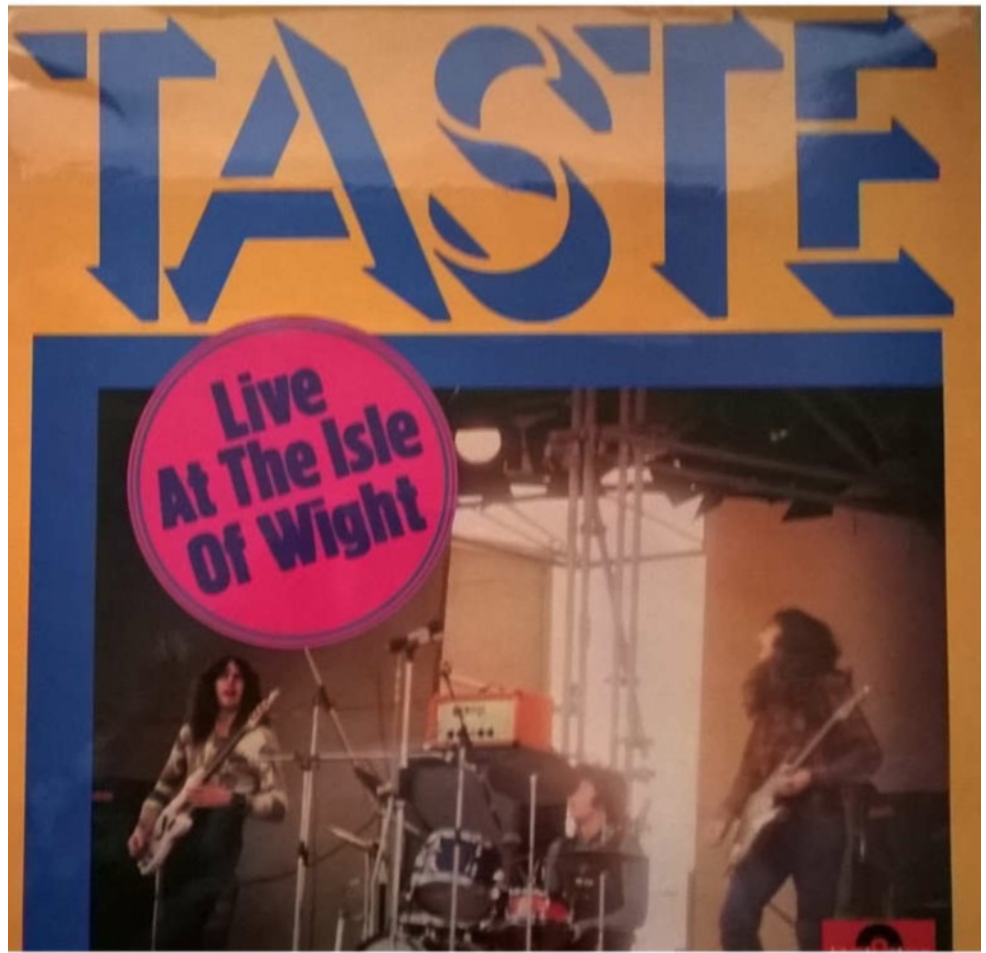
For such a notable live act, Taste's extant live releases are sometimes of variable quality, and of limited quantity, despite the many years that have passed. A free (probably "unofficial") download of a February 1970 concert in Basel, Switzerland <http://soundaboard.blogspot.com/2012/05/taste-basel-switzerland-1970.html> usefully demonstrates how the band could be on a great night – notably before relations badly deteriorated - although allowance has to be made for slightly wonky sound quality.

'Sugar Mama', Basel, Switzerland, February 1st 1970

Live Taste (1971) – the first post-band album release, which Gallagher initially criticised. Live Taste features a performance at the Montreux Casino, Switzerland, dated to the 31st of August 1970. The album proved to be Taste's best UK chart showing, reaching number 14 in March 1971. A clean but arguably less than inspired performance from the endpoint of the band's career, perhaps singled out for release due to the sound quality of the recording by Radio Switzerland, but nonetheless possessing a few genuine highlights across the five songs featured: an energetic rendering of the Broozny blues standard 'Feel so good', which presumably was divided (into Parts One and Two) to even out the (relatively short) playing time for each side, the outstanding solo track 'Gambler Blues', and impressive lead guitar work on 'Sugar Mama', which is redolent of Hendrix's live renditions of 'Red House', but the side is let down with a weak (exceedingly hoarse) vocal performance.

Live at the Isle of Wight (1971) – taken from the second Isle of Wight festival, which dates to the 28th of August 1970. An interesting, colourful, but at times slightly off-colour performance. Taste made do with minimalist equipment – the cover is virtually an advert for the band's substitute Orange amplifiers.

The album was issued in December 1971 but crept to the hot number 41 spot almost a year later, perhaps due to increasing interest in Gallagher's solo career, which was peaking with the



issuing of 'Live in Europe'. Top trax: a primordial version of 'Sinner Boy', 'Feel so good', and an indulgent 'Catfish'. The album appears to have been replaced with a release called 'What's Going On: Live at the Isle of Wight' (2015), which features a cleaner modern mix, and additional material from the performance, necessitating a double vinyl release. The performance is also available on video.

An extract of the Isle of Wight performance (1971 album mix)

In Concert (attributed to 'Taste featuring Rory Gallagher') (1978) – an early Marquee Club concert, of good quality, recorded on the 25th of October 1968, two months after the transition to the MKII line-up.

I'll Remember (2015) – the third disc of the boxset features live material from the MK II line-up. Most of the tracks are taken from a decent end-of-days gig at Stockholm's Konserthuset theatre (September 18th 1970), while an earlier Top Gear performance (April 2nd 1970), for UK radio (with introductions by human music library John Peel), suffers from surprisingly poor sound quality. The fourth disc features the MK I line-up's short July 7th, 1968 performance at the Woburn Abbey Festival.

Historic information was obtained from a variety of sources, including Chapter One of 'Irish Rock: Roots, Personalities, Directions' by Mark J. Prendergast (1987, The O'Brien Press), and Chapters Three to Eight of 'Rory Gallagher: His Life and Times' by Marcus Connaughton (2012, The Collins Press).

National Audio Show 2016 At Whittlebury Hall

By Stuart Smith, Linette Smith, Ian Ringstead and
Janine Elliot

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National Audio Show Virgin Stuart Smith Takes A Look Around the Show To See What's What

This is the first time Linette and I have visited the National Audio Show at Whittlebury, but after speaking at length with Roy Bird of the Chester Group we decided that this was certainly one of the shows that needed to be on our calendar this year.

For those of you who have not attended National Audio Show before then I strongly suggest you do. The venue is a huge country hotel that has a golf course, spa and loads more going on. It's situated a stone's throw from Silverstone and when you're outside the venue you can hear the cars – it was the British Touring Cars doing their stuff the weekend of the show. Being such a massive place there's loads of other stuff going on and we were sharing the venue with a wedding or two and lots of golfists. One of the weirder things was being sat in the bar with folk wandering around in dressing gowns – we assume these were people mid spa pamper rather than trying to make some-kind of fashion statement.

Whilst not heaving with people, the show was busy and there were a good number of couples in attendance which was good to see.

After a bit of a wander round to get a feel for what was going on and to get our bearings we started going into each of the rooms to take a look and listen to what the exhibitors had to offer.

Vivid Audio

Vivid Audio had taken a large room at the show and were demoing their Giya G2s when we were in the room. Amplifier etc came in the form of a Devialet LE 1000. I've never not been impressed with the sound that Vivid manage to produce at shows and have really enjoyed them at Munich in the past.

We managed to have a word with the main man behind the unusually shaped Vivid range of speakers, Laurence Dickie, as well as Jake Purches and Arif Huseyin from the company too, and all seemed very pleased with the sound in the room.



Also on show were the smaller, and somewhat more conventionally looking loudspeakers, the B1 Decades which our very own Janine reviewed only very recently as well as a pair of G1s.



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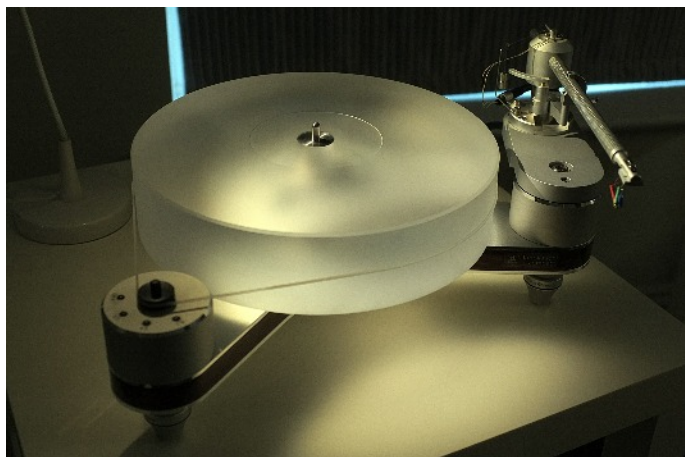
Sound Foundations

This was an exceptionally good sounding room that just oozed high-end quality from every pore, as well as being visually stunning. The centrepiece to the whole caboodle was the stunning vinyl replay system composed of the Clearaudio Master Innovation with a DS Audio Master 1 optical cartridge with its dedicated phono stage. This thing tracks brilliantly and with the Furutech SK Filter in place there wasn't a hint of static.



Pre amp was in the form of the Gamu T D3i feeding the Danish company's D200i stereo power amplifier, which in turn powered a pair of their RS7i loudspeakers. Isotek Super Titans dealt with any nasties in the power supply, bringing the whole lot together and offering up a really, really lovely sounding system. Other, and more affordable, Clearaudio turntables were on show of course and hats off to Chris and Alex for putting together a room that was relaxed and chilled out, but also for playing real world music rather than the plinky plonky jazz favoured by some at shows.

Reference 1 preamplifier, all feeding the Giya loudspeakers from Vivid Audio.



Onkk and Vinyl House

The Onkk Cue turntable is the brainchild of Paul Beckett and really is a sight to behold. It's a direct drive and highly engineered bit of kit that today came fitted with an Origin Live Conqueror arm and Van den Hul Colibri cartridge. Accompanying the turntable was the NVO SPA2 phono stage that sports no less than 21 valves and the Music First Baby

Paul is highly passionate about his creation and, whilst this esoteric turntable could possibly command a stratospheric price tag, he is adamant that it will retail without an arm and cartridge for around £16K when it is finally in production in mid-November.



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Divine Audio



The boys from Divine Audio were making some rather pleasant sounds in their room using the Analogue Works Zero turntable (which we use a higher level model here at Hifi Pig Towers) along with a Jelco SA-750EB tonearm and Nagaoka MP150 MM cartridge. Most interesting were the speakers in the room that sounded really pleasant indeed. These were the Omega Speaker Systems single driver speakers that have a sensitivity of 95dB and as Tim Chorlton described them are a "Fred in a shed" design. The £2000 speakers use a super alnico driver and are hand built in Norwalk, Connecticut, not by Fred, but by a chap called Louis Chochos. Preamplifier and power amplifier were from Croft.

Zouch Audio

Zouch Audio are a retailer based in Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Leicestershire and stock a great range of brands but at National Audio Show 2016 they chose to use Luxman electronics partnered with Dali loudspeakers. The power amp was the Luxman M 700u, preamp was the C 700u, CD player was the D-06u, whilst the Dali speakers used on the day were the Epicon 6 model sat on top of Townshend Audio's isolation platforms.



Wall Of Music



Now here was something completely different and totally unexpected. Wall Of Music are based in Northern Ireland but are actually Lithuanian in origin and designed by Audris Saklys. The £3700 Prelude loudspeakers were positioned very closely together and powered by a VERY modest power amplifier. Speaking to Audris he says that the speakers are "designed for people who like music and not sound" and claims they will reproduce music perfectly happily from YouTube or any other source.

The speakers are an unusual design and you'd be forgiven for thinking they were an electrostatic design at first glance but each speaker has 16 bass drivers, each 16cm wide but with a very light diaphragm weighing in at just 2.5g.

These speakers were really rather lovely to hear despite the humble electronics before them.

Xclusive AV



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Xlusive AV are a retailer based on the South coast at Hastings. At National Audio Show 2016 they were highlighting the range of loudspeakers from French manufacturer Waterfall. Now these are an interesting range of floorstanding speakers that are made of glass. They look absolutely stunning and we've heard them many, many times in the past. Today they were powered by Roksan electronics and a Marantz CD player.

Waterfall also produces the Hurricane Evo in-wall loudspeaker that xclusive say are proving to be very popular indeed.

Concerto Audio and Analog Domain



Concerto Audio are a retailer based in Clayhall, Essex. They stock a wide range of gear and today had founder and CEO of Analog Domain, Angel Despotov with them. Of course the preamplifier and power amplifier were from Analog Domain in the form of the Isis pairing, but also on show were the Formula DAC from Aequa and their La Diva transport. Speakers were from Swedish company Marten in the guise of their Django Ls. All in all a very high-end system that sounded very nice on the day.

Longdog Audio



Longdog Audio are based in rural Halifax in West Yorkshire and is owned and run by the splendidly bearded Nick Goreham. Apart from the loudspeakers that were Harbeth, the preamplifier and phonostage that was from Music First and the Garrard turntable, the rest of this system was made by Longdog Audio and rather splendid it was too, having a retail price of around £35 000.



The highlight of this room was a demonstration of the company's Audio Quartz Regenerator that is made especially for idler wheel turntables just like the 401 they were using today. For the AB dem the guys from Longdog plugged the turntable directly into the mains without the supply in place and then added the new regenerator. Now I'm a little sceptical about all these things and only really believe (or otherwise) the hype of products after having heard the item in question. This was a bit of an eye opener if I'm absolutely honest and there was a very obvious and somewhat gobsmacking change in the sound once the unit was inline; there was simply more weight and authority to the music being played. If you have an idler wheel turntable then you really do need to get yourself along to an audition of this!

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Air Audio



Air Audio is a UK based distributor headed up by Michael Osborn. The system on show today at the National Audio Show consisted of The Planalogue Prelude turntable with an Abis SA-1.2 tonearm and Hana SL moving coil cartridge. Phonostage for the day was a Trichord Dino along with its PSU. Preamplifier was a Herron Audio VT SP-3A and power amplifiers were Trichord's Linear D monoblocks. Loudspeakers were the DSS 'Geal'. Cove Audio provided the interconnects and speaker cables whilst Power cables and distribution block were by MS HD.

Air Audio are UK distributors for STS digital who produce great vinyl and reel to reel recordings and so, of course, there was a rather splendid reel to reel machine in evidence.

Choice Hifi and Analog Domain



At the front end of this rather nice sounding system was a SME Model 15 turntable; whilst at the loudspeaker end were a pair of Estelon Model XC loudspeakers. Phonostage was a Tom Evans The Groove + and the CD was a belt drive model BDCD1.1 from BMC Audio. Again Analog Domain Isis amp and preamplifier combo were duly noted and a Melco unit was also in evidence.

There was a whole load of Entreq ground boxes in evidence too and whilst I'm wary of this kind of product in the main, the

whole lot came together very well indeed to offer up an unforced and natural sounding system.

Roksan Audio



Roksan put on a great room at this year's National Audio Show and I still love the Darius S1 loudspeakers with their exceptional ribbon tweeter. As I said in the room, these would be on my shortlist for reference loudspeakers if I didn't have the much more pricey Avantgarde Duo XD's.



Today the speakers were being driven by the company's new BLAK range of electronics and there was a special edition Radius turntable in pink. I'd have liked to say this was a nod to Hifi Pig and our penchant for pink, but, as Simon Pope who deals with this British company's PR explained it was pink for a much more important reason – a percentage of all sales will go to breast cancer charities. What a great idea and what a great cause – well done Roksan.

Highlight of the show for me was whilst about to end the day with a well earned pint in the bar, Tufan, the owner of Roksan, ran over to us and embraced us. Needless to say we enjoyed a bit of a natter and a couple of ales.

The visual impact in the Roksan room was brilliant and the branding is just so strong it's hard not to sit up and take notice.

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Henley Designs #1

Actually this is Henley's second room strictly speaking as the Roksan room was also theirs. In this room Henley Designs were showcasing the Unison Research brand from Italy and Opera speakers. Having owned Unison research in the past I can heartily recommend the brand!



Today the electronics included a Unico amplifier, CD Duo, Opera loudspeakers, also Italian and a ProJect Signature 12 turntable.



I was thrilled to hear proper music playing in this room in the form of Kraftwerk's Tour De France album and the whole lot sounded powerful yet refined.

Henley Designs #2

In the third of Henley's rooms the company were highlighting the Pro-Ject brand headed up by Heinz Lichtenegger who Hifi Pig interviewed in December of last year.

I like the whole concept of Pro-Ject a great deal; they are making real Hifi accessible to a wider market and their Box Design is well made, bijou and sounds great to boot.



Of course Pro-Jects turntables were out in force as well as a funky vinyl record that when it spins shows spacecraft from the Star Wars film. One of the turntables that is creating a lot of interest is their Classic design and their vertical player is certainly a little different.

The Audio Consultants & German Physics

We've heard German Physiks loads of times at show and have always been really impressed with their effortless and three dimensional quality and their room at National Audio Show was no exception.

For those that don't know the brand all their speakers use DDD bending wave driver technology that make them multi-directional to enable a very wide "sweet spot"; in fact you can sit pretty much anywhere in the room and appreciate a very convincing soundstage with these speakers. The model on show at Whittlebury were the HRS 130s costing around £14500 a pair.

The full system consisted:

German Physiks HRS-130 loudspeakers

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Nottingham Analogue Space 294 turntable with 12-inch arm

Clearaudio Concerto V2 cartridge

Clear Audio Balance + phono stage

Norma Audio DS-1 CD player

Norma Audio IPA-140 integrated amplifier

Harmonic Resolution Systems audio rack

GutWire speaker, interconnect and power cables.

Acustica Applicate DAAD and Volcano room treatments

Audio Emotion



The guys from Audio Emotion put a great room together and put a lot of effort into making it feel a little more homely than the majority of the others. Leema electronics for the main part were partnered with Audio Physic (I believe they were Virgo 25 Plus). Also in the room was a rather splendid looking turntable from German manufacturer acoustic Signature (Thunder Mk2), an Auralic Altair streaming DAC and a Trigon server.

These aren't cheap entry level products by any stretch of the imagination, but what I think Audio Emotion demonstrated here is that you can get relatively high-end performance from gear that can fit quite pleasantly into the home environment, and without having to take out a second mortgage.

Chasing The Dragon



Mike Valentine's Chasing The Dragon was recently featured in Hifi Pig when Janine Elliot was invited along to the direct to disc recording of an album of Ella Fitzgerald tunes performed by The Syd Lawrence Orchestra and sung by Radio 2 presenter Clare Teal and so it was good to see them at National Audio Show. Mike was due to give a lecture in the room but sadly was called away to Malta for a filming assignment, though he did make an appearance by a live link.



Featured in the room was a whole load of Tron equipment, but the item that really caught my eye was a new headphone amp. The amp is a high current class A design designed in a dual mono configuration that can power two sets of headphones at the same time. It can also power a pair of desktop speakers. It comes in two flavours, the standard version and the Reference version (the one with the silver top) and costs £3000 and £5000 respectively.

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CODE



Code are a relative newcomer to the UK Hifi scene having made their debut at last year's North West Audio Show with their System One active loudspeaker system. At National Audio Show they were primarily highlighting their new Stage 4 set up which is nothing if not impressive looking, featuring as it does a total of 8 Bass-2 units and 2 Code Top-2 mid and top units. Again this is an active three way design and as well as the speakers you get a Control 1 and a Power 1 unit. Add a source and away you go.



Code were playing some rather nice electronic music from John Hopkins (Immunity) that really played to the systems strengths. The sound is, to my mind, reminiscent of a really good PA system with more refinement. The room wasn't ideal and there was a bit of boom, but nothing a good set of bass traps couldn't have sorted.

Russ Andrews

Russ Andrews sell a whole host of tweaks and aftermarket cables for Hifi, and judging by the crowd in the room they certainly seem to be very popular indeed with the paying public.

The YelloPower cable, selling at the same price it did thirty years ago was proving very much THE product most in demand, but so were many other products the company had for sale. Russ Andrews is celebrating thirty years in the business and seems as well-loved as ever.



Arendal Sound



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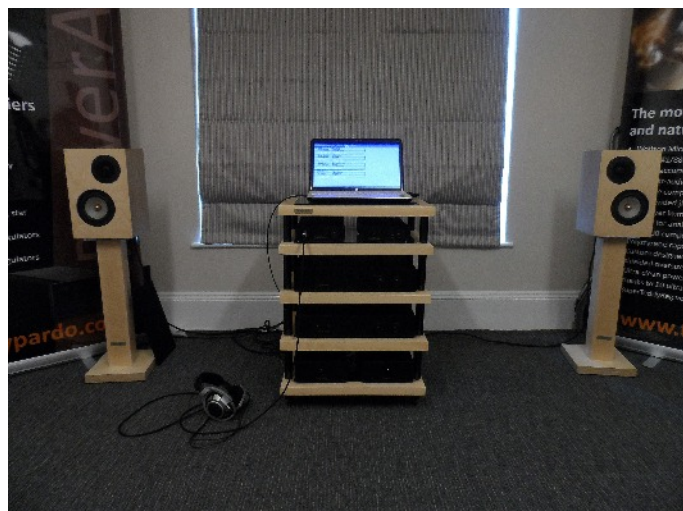


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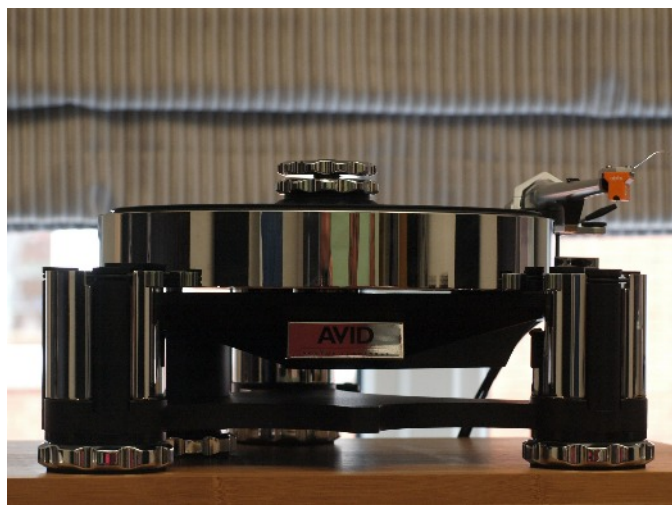
Arendal Sound is a new company to me but it seems they've been around a good while in one form or another and are headed up by founder Jan Ove Lasseen. Arendal Sound are based in Norway (Arendal) and produce a range of speakers, all with the name 1723. There's the 1723 Tower, the 1723 Center, the 1723 Surround, but being demonstrated today was the 1723 Monitor and one of the three versions of the 1723 Sub. The Monitor is in the configuration shown at National Audio Show a sealed enclosure that has two eight inch woofers and a 28mm tweeter with the enclosure being made of high density fibreboard. Sensitivity is 89dB and in the sealed variant will go as low as 58 Hz, whereas the ported version will go down to 34 Hz. Prices shown on the day were a little confusing as they were the dealer price, however, this still seemed to be a good deal of loudspeaker for your money.

Teddy Pardo



Interesting sounding room I thought, with a full system of Teddy Pardo electronics and his SP-1 loudspeakers. For such a small design these speakers really did make a big sound and the whole set up was very home friendly.

Fanthorpes



Based in Hull in the beautiful Hepworth's Arcade, Fanthorpes have been selling audio gear since 1948 and stock over fifty brands. At National Audio Show they had two rooms opposite each other with each having quite different systems.

In the first room they had the terrific Melco unit playing directly through a Chord Electronics Dave DAC into the Bryston BP26 preamplifier which fed the signal to a pair of Bryston monoblocks, which in turn went into a pair of PMC Fact 12 loudspeakers sat on Tosnhead Audio speaker platforms. Covering analogue duties was a rather splendid Avid Hifi turntable using an Avid Pulsare 2 phonostage. Power conditioning was by IsoTek. All in all a very high end system!

On the other hand Fanthorpes other room had a more modest system playing which consisted of another Avid turntable, this time the more affordable Diva II, along with Sugden electronics and PMC twenty 5.23 loudspeakers.



This was an interesting exercise in showing how a retailer can put two systems together at different pricepoints for customers and yet still achieve great results. It also demonstrates just how important the bricks and mortar hifi retailer is.

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Kerr and Smith



These are a new brand run by two young chaps recently graduated from university. My first thought was that the appearance of the speakers was familiar. Nice sound, if a bit much for the small and packed room. They were using interesting kit too including a Pink Triangle turntable, and a humungous Mark Levinson amplifier.

Music First Audio



Jonathan Billington of Music First Audio had both a room and a static stand at National Audio Show. In the room he was using an Audio Note turntable and his Classic QSE amplifier output to a Quad 405 on top of which the preamplifier is designed to sit perfectly. Regular readers will know I'm a bit of a fan of Music First Audio's Baby reference preamp. Speakers in the room were a pair of Graham LS5/9s.

Woof Audio

Woof are a new name to me but had some very interesting gear in their room. Particularly interesting were the Rethm Maarga loudspeakers. These have a full range driver and are Indian made, using a 6" paper cone driver with a whizzer that back loads into a horn labyrinth some 6'8" long. They're 97dB

sensitive and have a sealed isobaric chamber that is 14.75 litres in volumes with a 6.5" driver. Amplification is provided by an



onboard monobloc for each enclosure. They retail at £7095.

Driving the speakers were Glen Croft pre and power amplifiers and a Pear Audio turntable designed by Tom Fletcher and made in Slovenia. The valve amps you see are TriodeLab.

Graham Audio



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The little ls3/5s were playing in the room when we went in and they sounded really nice and tight in this space. Also on show were the LS5/8s, the LS5/9s and the 3XD system. All the speakers follow BBC designs and are hand-built in the UK

We bumped into Paul Graham in the bar just before we left for the ferry and he's very passionate about the company and their designs.

Audio Note



I have to confess that given the price of Audio Note gear I'm often left underwhelmed at shows and so it was a pleasant surprise to really enjoy this room at National Audio Show. The music was natural and fluid. The system was all Audio Note UK with Transport and then DAC feeding into the 18w a channel Tomei amplifier which in turn powered the Type E speakers.

Hifi Hangar

Due to time constraints on the Saturday we just didn't get to see the final two rooms but early on the Sunday Hifi Hangar's room was our first port of call and what a great room this was. The Eminent Technology LFT 8b speakers are really wonderful. They're ribbon speakers with conventional bass, stand pretty high and driven by a pair of Astah 500 Class D poweramps sounded massively open with a bass that was

perfect for the size of room they were in. The speakers are £2800 and the amps are £1500 which seems very good value!



The guys from Hifi Hangar also went to a good deal of trouble to create a space that was very much like a living room space with plants and funky lighting. We'll have more news about Hifi Hangar in our next instalment from the National Audio Show.



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The Right Note and Vertex AQ

The final room proper from this year's National Audio Show made a great first impression as they were playing Shpongole. System was a CEC CD player, Vertex AQ Aletheia DA, VTL TL 6.5 preamplifier, Vertex AQ Aletheia AP60 amplifier which was a new product and the Vertex Aletheia FRS8 loudspeakers.

This is the smallest in the range of their speakers and again new to the UK. It uses the well loved Audio Nirvana alnico drivers in a sealed box and has lots of Vertex AQ tweakers going on inside.



Bird's Eye View Of The National Audio Show 2016, Whittlebury Hall

with Linette Smith

We have attended a lot of shows in the last few years but had never made it to Whittlebury for the National Audio Show (NAS). We decided to come and check it out and we were not disappointed.

Much like the North West Audio Show at Cranage Hall NAS takes place in a beautiful country house setting. Arriving at the hotel through the splendid grounds and golf course, Whittlebury Hall is instantly impressive and definitely on the grand side. It is so huge that the show went on with plenty of room even though there were weddings, people at the spa and loads of hotel guests there at the same time. Being practically next door to Silverstone, the hotel draws room names and décor from the iconic race track. The rather splendid, high ceilinged Silverstone Bar was covered with pictures of famous racing drivers and display cabinets of FI memorabilia...spotting one of Michael Schumacher's Mercedes racing suits was a particular treat for this F1 fan.

The spacious hotel venue was really perfect for a HiFi show and the layout made the show easy to follow. It seemed well attended with plenty of couples and families taking in the sights and sounds, rather than just lone audiophiles of a certain age. There were also ample numbers of water-coolers, food and

coffee facilities dotted around, and of course the bar for when a beer was called for. Though the hotel is quite pricey if you are thinking of stopping over to attend both days, there are plenty of reasonably priced hotels in the neighbouring towns and villages. Although you could do the show in one day, we enjoyed a rather pleasant couple of days and being able to take our time and catch up with lots of folk was a bonus.

Entering the show, visitors are greeted by the static stands of the Brookland Suite where there was lots of records for sale (and doing a roaring trade from the look of it) from the likes of Diverse Vinyl, Theme One Records and Vinyl Adventure. Show favourites MCRU, Townsend Audio, Electromod, Music First Audio and Timestep were also in this area and seemed to be attracting plenty of attention as usual. The rest of the room was dedicated to headfi and was labelled HeadZone. This area was very busy with lots of people trying out some rather nice gear, from modestly priced to the higher end. I think there was most headphone brands represented in this area with everyone from Oppo, Grado, Audeze, Schiit and MrSpeakers to Sennheiser and Fostex. There were plenty of portable electronics on show too from brands like Chord Electronics, Astell&Kern and

Audioquest and Atlas cables were in there with cable upgrades for the true headfi nuts. The visitors had the look of kids in a sweet shop. Such was the range on offer it was possible for visitors to try out and audition just about everything on their wish list...I imagine plenty of people decided what their next headfi purchase was going to be in this area over the weekend.



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The actual listening rooms were a short walk away and were laid out in rooms around a courtyard on the ground and first floor. While Stuart is going into far greater detail, room by room, I thought I would just pick out a few of my stand-out rooms. Henley Designs really know how to 'do' a hifi show and had three rooms displaying their range of brands. My favourite had to be the Roksan room which looked stunning in blacks, whites and greys with the instantly recognisable black and silver Roksan banners. The sound was stunning too with the Roksan Darius S1 standmount speakers easily filling the room. I loved these ribbon-tweetered beauties when we had them for review, and this room reminded me why.



Vivid Audio was another great room; I will always make a beeline for the Vivid room at a show as I have never heard them sound bad, I was not disappointed at this show either. The Vivid range of Giyas are show-stopping in looks as well as their sound. I was impressed with them and their pairing with Devialet but also in the Onkk room with the very new Onkk turntable. We were treated to classical music for our time with Vivid and I would have loved to have got back later for something a bit edgier.

Chris Green and his team from Sound Foundations had a cracking room with Clearaudio and GamuT in evidence, another combination that works very well. They always put a lot of effort into giving people a proper system to enjoy and their hard work does not go unnoticed.



Audio Emotion had made a mammoth journey down from Scotland and had set up a room that felt like it was their home. Excellent sounds from them but also a very welcoming atmosphere...and even a wee dram of whisky should you fancy it.

Hifi Hangar had a small but very lively room on the ground floor circuit. They were very welcoming and were belting out some rather excellent non-audiophile music and I was particularly taken with their Eminent Technologies loudspeakers...more ribbon tweeters

(there is a theme developing here!) and a very affordable price tag. It was a great example of how to do a small room very well indeed. The colourful lighting and plants made it feel funky rather than closed in.

Upstairs we attended Dave Shevyn's room treatment talk. We are converts ourselves but it was still very informative to listen to. He explained how sound is affected by the room and how room treatment actually works in a way that was easy to understand and entertaining. There were plenty of people in attendance and they came away with the confidence to tackle their own room problems.



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I really enjoyed the Code Acoustics room. The new modular system was very clever, both cool looking and sounding and we particularly enjoyed the music selection that was very electronic when we were in there. One to watch I think.

Fanthorpes Hifi had a couple of rooms with a great sound in both. They were featuring PMC loudspeakers and had some lovely Avid turntables and Bryston electronics as well as other gear. Both were nice and lively.

Music First Audio also had a room up here which I rather enjoyed too. Jonathan said that the combination of a demo room and a static stand was the best way he had found to do a show, giving him the flexibility of being able to talk to visitors on the stand (and sell quite a few units I noticed) and letting people just be able to actually listen upstairs.

Overall I think the quality of the rooms at the show were very high, there was some interesting gear and people we obviously



enjoying themselves. It has been quite tricky to just pick my stand out highlights as all the rooms deserve a mention.....more coverage room by room to follow.

Next stop on our show circuit is the Indulgence Show in London in October, see you there!

Ian Ringstead gives us his views on this years National Audio Show at Whittlebury

Whittlebury Hall has been the venue for the National Audio Show (NAS) for the past eight years and I have been to everyone. Unlike Stuart and Linette who were NAS virgins, I am very familiar with the venue and really appreciate its relaxed and sumptuous surroundings. Also it is relatively easy to get to and far more convenient for us northerner's than London which used to be the



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main venue (remember The Penta Show at Heathrow in the eighties and nineties).

Although the number of exhibitors seemed lower than previous years, it meant getting around was less arduous and hurried. I took my dear wife Heather with me this year who was also a NAS virgin and she was most impressed by the show. Having both attended Munich in May this year, Whittlebury was literally a walk in the park for us and made for a hugely enjoyable day.

After a short time queuing up in the drizzle on Saturday morning with the other eager show goers, we entered the main stand area in the Brooklands Suite where all the headphones and static exhibitors were. We would have loved to spend more time here but a busy schedule of trying to see and hear everything meant we had to move on and hopefully return later in the day.

Moving onto the ground floor area of demo rooms I noticed quite a few new names which is encouraging given the doom and gloom prophecies post Brexit. The first name that caught my eye was Analog Domain, a German brand that had mightily impressed me when in Munich. Reminiscent in style and looks to Mark Levinson this brand has an equally expensive price tag, but the fit, finish and sound is sublime, and I hope to get the chance to review their amps one day. They were being used with Estelon speakers, another brand that impressed me in Munich. Next to Analog Domain was Air



Audio Distributors who import Hana moving coil cartridges which I reviewed last year and offer excellent value and sound. Michael Osborn of Air Audio was keen to demo a rather nice and classic Technics reel to reel machine which I remember well. Michael distributes a range of quality reel to reel tapes by STS

Digital that although not cheap, sound great.

Longdog Audio who hail from Yorkshire were demo-ing a superb sounding Garrard 401 turntable. These turntables have a cult following and when properly fettled take some beating. They also used some of their excellent electronics and a MFA pre



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through Graham Audio speakers which sounded great.

Next door was Xclusive AV, a company new to me, but who have been around a few years and are based in Hastings. They are the UK distributors for Waterfall loudspeakers, a French company based in the south of France whom I have seen at a few shows over the years. Being made of glass they look stunning and the room was superbly appointed, with a great display and lighting really showing the Waterfall speakers at their best. For me it was one of the best looking rooms at the show. Hifi Pig reviewed the Victoria speakers back in 2013 and they were well received. In the right setting Waterfall speakers can't fail to impress.

Zouch Audio from Leicestershire (Ashby de la Zouch) had an excellent room dedicated to Luxman electronics and a pair of Dali floor standers. I am a sucker for Luxman as it is beautifully

being one of them). The PD171A turntable was lovely and really showed vinyl at its best. The owner's young son (22 years old) was loving the room and telling me enthusiastically about the product. I wish all retailers were this keen. The overall sound was very smooth as you would expect from Luxman. Zouch had done a great job of dressing the room too.

Nearby, another new name was Wall of Music, a Lithuanian company now based in Northern Ireland. Brand new, these speakers have sixteen drivers in them and look like the old Quad ESL 63's. They impressed me with the limited equipment they were using to demonstrate, and played some good classical music instead of the usual jazz so often opted for. I like jazz, but not all the time. A company to look out for in the future.

Quality dealers such as Divine Audio, Audio Emotion, Sound

made and sounding kit. I owned a L550AII, a fabulous class A integrated which weighed a ton and had a plethora of useful facilities, including those VU meters which although not much use practically, look fab. Zouch were focusing on vinyl and playing a great selection of records including some I have (Simply Red's Picture Book



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Fowndations and The Right Note were all putting on excellent demos and offering expert advice. Henley Designs had three large rooms and put on their usual professional displays of key products including Project Audio, Roksan, Opera and Unison Research.

Vivid Audio and Devialet had a large room, the Suzuka, to show off the stunning Giya speakers and Devialet's new reference amp. Being a large room it was hard to judge critically, but in the right setting I am sure they would be amazing.

Onkk, a new name to the audio scene were showing a very interesting direct drive turntable that will certainly turn heads when it is released soon.



Upstairs on the first floor, Fanthorpes Hi Fi, a long established dealer from Hull had two rooms, both using PMC speakers and a mixture of Bryston electronics in one and Sugden in the other. Both rooms sounded good and showed what you could get in quality hifi from a reasonable budget to deeper pockets for the real enthusiasts.



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Russ Andrews were giving their usual expert advice and appeared to be doing a roaring trade as always when at shows. I spoke to Russ briefly and he said business was brisk and it was good to see plenty of interest from the consumers. Russ gave a couple of lectures on 30 Years of Making Music Sound Better.

Arendal Sound, a Norwegian speaker manufacturer were making great sounds. They manufacture all their own drive units and cabinets being independent of other suppliers and are new to the UK. I hope to try some out soon.

Speaker companies were prolific this year at Whittlebury and another newcomer was Kerr and Smith Audio from Cambridge. They used some classic hifi kit to dem their speakers with, including a Pink Triangle turntable, Sony Tan pre amp and Mark Levinson power amp. Three speaker models were on dem ranging from a large floor stander the KS-100 down to two smaller stand mounters the KS-300 and KS-400. I will be reviewing one of these models soon.

The final newcomer to Whittlebury was Code Acoustics, run by a talented young designer from Woking called Ceri Thomas, who has come up with a rather unique modular system of active electronics, control unit and speaker system that you can build up in stages as funds or desires permit. This system really interested me and impressed me greatly. My wife also loved the design principle and looks of the system. Another young company to keep an eye on.



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Janine Elliot (pictured below between Hifi Pig's Stuart and Graham Audio's Paul Graham) rounds up Hifi Pig's coverage of this year's National Audio Show.



I have been going annually to the National Audio Show in Whittlebury since its first year there in 2009. Set in rural Northamptonshire countryside near to Towcester, Milton Keynes and the iconic Silverstone race course, this has become an important audio show, not least because of the free parking and avoiding the hustle and bustle of going into busy London.

The Chester Group began the NAS event in London two years earlier, though could see the advantages of moving it out of the capital, especially favourable to those coming down from the North. There is a definite relaxation with this

show compared to many, which gives you a chance to carry out the important job of concentrating on socialising and listening to music. Whilst exhibitor attendance numbers weren't as high as it has been in some years, it was still a memorable weekend of listening, chatting, and experiencing first hand old and new products entering this important market.

Whilst there were the usual favourites there, and many conveniently in the same rooms or suites as before, there were a few rooms that really caught my eye and are worthy of mention, particularly home-grown newcomers.

Newcomers to the show were presenting clever ideas that tested the boundaries of existing designs, and were a breath of fresh air for me.

Pristine Vinyl is certainly worth a mention with their record cleaners. At last a machine that you could leave on show when it is not being used; my cleaner is put away when not in use meaning that I actually very rarely get to clean my records. The RCS1 and 2 might not be the cheapest but they are the best looking and really did clean the records. Whilst using the conventional approach of vacuum pumping, unlike most vinyl record cleaning machines that need brushes or strips continually replaced, the ViVac has the addition of cotton thread which, with each clean moves the thread a few millimetres along ensuring that no re-contamination can take place. This would happily sit next to any vinyl set up. If only there was a top-end record player with its own built in cleaner. Meanwhile my cleaner will have to go back into the cupboard.



To play your newly cleaned records, newcomer Peter Laitt had on show his very curvy Prelude from Planalogue. The cuddly turntable design looks like a shelf on top of which is a 5-layer piano black acrylic/birch ply plinth that hides noise decoupling 'patterns' inside that disperse energy and vibrations, so that the important music from the record could be controlled and not coloured by

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the plinth, something all manufacturers aim to achieve. This might be a new turntable but it has ideas from his past now finally put into production, and uses an AC motor in a vibration damping pod.



Newcomer Ceri Thomas was there with his two powered speaker systems. The young manufacturer has a history of automotive design engineering, designing electrical systems for cars, but, as an avid hifi fan, is turning his interest into the two new active speakers (up for review on HiFi Pig soon). Whilst not active in the old sense (amplifiers in the speaker boxes) the 6-channel DSP and power amps (Class D Hypex modules) are in a central box with full digital control. You simply add your source and connect the leads to the speakers. The larger system allows you to add as many speakers as you want, should you wish to annoy your neighbours. All speakers are infinite baffle and whilst looking home-made in their present pre-production form, created an encouragingly good sound.

Old dogs Longdog and Music First Audio always get me interested, especially the MM phono stage I

reviewed in 2015. The former's new P6 mono block (called P6 as there are two small amplifiers driving the output devices; a push-pull driving push and a push-pull driving the pull; so there are 6 Ps!) is class A to around 50 W and class B above, but gives sonic ability of a lower powered amp but with more power. This should be ~£7,500 when they go to market. They also had a new power supply for idler driven turntables such as Garrard 301 or Lenco, adding to their existing PSUs.

A recent newcomer at the show was Graham Audio, whose BBC LS3/5 and LS5/9 were reviewed by me in the last year. On demo was the diminutive LS3/5, the very much larger main BBC speaker of the 80's to noughties the LS5/8, plus the shortly to be released VOTU (Voice of the Universe), a scaled down version of a speaker they designed for the Royal Opera House (the System3D). The LS3/5 shocked many visitors to the show with the amount of bass and clarity attainable from such a small speaker in the reasonably large room. Derek Hughes, son of Maurice who designed the original BBC speakers was also there on hand to talk to visitors to the room. Where the BBC LS3/5 pricked my ears with their precise and musical offering, the best room in my opinion was from Hi-Fi Hangar, whose combination of Eminent Technology LFT-8B ribbon speakers and Acoustic Imagery ATSAH 500 class D 400W monoblocks, sounded crystal clear and musically inspiring at a pleasant price of £4100 (£2500+£1600 respectively) proving that good sound can be attained in the bedrooms of Whittlebury after all, and at a very reasonable price.



Hifi Pig's coverage of National Audio Show 2016 is proudly sponsored by Music First Audio

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Hifi Pig
www.hifipig.com

The Hifi Pig Loves You Award



"We love doing Whittlebury, it's always got a great vibe, we also get to play a wide variety of music, which is really what it's all about for us. We decided to go with basically the same system as last year, as we strongly believe in the Eminent Technology LFT8b ribbons and the Acoustic imagery Atsah 500 class D amps as they work so well together. The more people that get to hear them, the better!! Also, at £4,100 for the speaker and amp combo, it's incredible value for money... especially when you get 400w monos and 5ft speakers... it's almost too cheap... We kept the front end super simple, using a basic passive pre and Squeezebox music server, coupled with a Beresford DAC, to really let the power amp and speakers show what they can do.

It means a huge amount to win this award, along with Sarah Ansell, Joint Director of the Hifi Hangar, Darren Hatcher, the importer of the speakers, and John Young and Hillary Russ from Acoustic Imagery who all worked very hard during the show, answering all the technical questions and generally coping with my stress levels!

Thank you so much!"

Hifi Hangar, Hifi Pig Loves You!



When we visit a show we give out an award to the exhibitor that we think is the most deserving. This award is not for the best sound in the show (although that is an element of it) it is much more than that. We celebrate an exhibitor who has obviously taken a lot of care in setting up their system, making the room look and feel good and who treats the general public really well and makes them very welcome. Recent winners have included AVID Hifi at High End Munich 2016, Sound Foundations at Bristol Sound and Vision 2016 and Dean Brissett for his Top 10 Album presentation at the North West Audio Show 2016.

Our winners for NAS 2016 are Hifi Hangar. These guys specialise in vintage, second hand and classic Hifi with a selection of new components also available. They have a shop with both modern and retro listening rooms in Bordon, Hampshire. Steve and Sarah Ansell had put together an excellent room at NAS 2016. They were in one of the smaller rooms, which can be a challenge, but they made their room funky and enjoyable. They obviously care passionately about the Hifi that they sell and this was evident in the sound that they achieved in there. They were very friendly and welcoming and they played an excellent mix of music...we were drawn in by some great electronic music and I have seen several mentions of their room being one of the best sounding in the show, on social media.

Steve Ansell was over the moon when we told him about the award, he says:

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Music First Audio

Award winning products for a life time of musical pleasure



VaultCard RFID blocker

I was contacted to see if I wanted to test the VaultCard from VaultSkin. It promises to “*protect your digital wallet*”. Colour me intrigued.

I have seen other products similar to the VaultCard, and I have seen similar products debunked as failures.

As VaultCard was still a Kickstarter project when I was contacted I was extremely interested to how it would perform.

VaultCard design

The card itself has the dimensions of a regular old credit card.

Perhaps a bit thicker (1.1mm).

It's even been made to replicate those looks, complete with a serial number and hologram sticker.

In the top left of the card it states 13.65MHz, which is the frequency used by RFID cards.

On the back of the card there is information regarding the protection it gives and how far away from the VaultCard you need to hold the card you want to use.

VaultCard performance

I have tested the VaultCard at the station's Oyster Card barriers, with my work ID pass and when paying for goods. On each occasion, the transaction failed to take place because of the protection given by the card.

The VaultSkin website states that:

Vaultcard switches on automatically when it senses the electromagnetic wave emitted by a RFID scanner.

It responds to a signal strength a hundred times smaller than what

protected from even the most powerful scanning devices.”

I am unable to vouch for any of the tech behind it but I can say that the card had a 100% success (or should that be fail) rate.

It also works when the VaultCard is just near to the cards you want to protect. It doesn't have to be touching or even in real close proximity to your contactless cards.

The other bit of good news is that it doesn't use batteries so, in theory, it will continue to do its job indefinitely.

VaultCard review conclusion

There are some scary statistics surrounding RFID theft through card skimming.

As contactless payment cards become increasingly popular it makes sense that the ne'er-do-wells will look for any opportunity to relieve you of your money.

The VaultCard does work and, for that reason alone, I cannot knock it.

VaultCard price and availability

The Kickstarter campaign was a success but you can still get one at the pre-order price of £24.99 via the VaultSkin website.

Overall score 9.1

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 10/10

Performance 10/10

Value 8.5/10



your RFID enabled cards need. VaultCard then creates a sophisticated electromagnetic jamming signal that blocks RFID readers.

This principle is frequently used in military jamming systems.

The stronger the signal of the scanner, the stronger the jam signal that VaultCard will generate. This way your credit cards, passports, etc. remain

Buffalo MiniStation Slim 1TB

We could do with more storage. That's pretty much a given. There's cloud storage but we can't always access that. Portable hard-drives are still handy but some can be bulky. Not the Buffalo MiniStation Slim though.

The Buffalo MiniStation slim, as its name suggests, is a compact portable hard-drive that manages to pack 1TB of storage in to a body that is less than 9 mm thick.

The drive utilises USB 3.0 for speedy data stuff.

MiniStation Slim design

Having 'slim' in the name already has your expectations raised. Thankfully, the MiniStation Slim is a pretty slender offering.



This 1TB MiniStation measures a skinny 8.8mm thin.

The drive is wrapped up in an aluminium case that's just 8.8 x 79 x 115mm (HxWxL) and weighs in at 140 grams.

The MiniStation Slim does look really nice and sturdy enough for life in your laptop bag.

Connectivity comes way of the bundled USB 3.0 cable.

As well as looking good, it also feels surprisingly sturdy for a device that's so small. Giving it a light flex test (I have to return these, remember) I couldn't detect any give.

Buffalo MiniStation Slim performance

This small USB 3.0 external drive can easily slip in to a pocket, let alone a bag.

But it's speed that can make or break an external drive.

The Slim I received to test was all set-up for Mac users – as this will play nice with both camps. After a simple reformatting via some of

Offering 1TB of capacity, the drive proves to be quite swift with maximum sequential speeds of a 125.2 MB/s read and 124.7 MB/s write.

Whilst these are not blisteringly fast times, it still manages to show a clean pair of heels to the likes of Seagate's Seven and the WD My Passport Ultra Metal.

MiniStation Slim review conclusion

There may well be faster drives out there but I found the MiniStation Slim reliable as well as good looking. The shimmery silver aluminium version I tested actually garnered a few complimentary comments. Not something I'd expect from an external hard-drive.

I love how it feels and that it can easily fit in a jacket pocket or even a laptop sleeve.

Having 1TB of space in something so portable has to be a good thing.

MiniStation Slim price and availability

The Buffalo MiniStation Slim is available now in 500GB guise for £55. The 1TB version, as reviewed, is £88.74 inc VAT.

Personally, I think that the extra £33 is worth it for double the storage.

Buffalo's software, my PC recognised the drive straight away.

I did not load any performance enhancing software so the following time trials are purely of the newly formatted drive.

Loading up Crystal Disk Mark I set 5 passes of 32GB transfers to see how this little Buffalo drive performs.

Overall score 8.3

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 9/10

Performance 8/10

Value 8/10

NanoQuad Cam Drone

Following on from the well received Nano Quad is the latest from Revell Control – the Nano Quad Cam.

No doubt you have guessed what this new version has that the last one didn't. No?

The Nano Quad Cam features a tiny camera that records directly to an on board SD Card.

Do great things come in small packages? Abe took the Revell Nano Quad Cam home for a test flight.

Nano Quad Cam design

This tiny radio controlled camera drone packs a lot in to its 68 x 68 x 25mm (LxWxH) frame.

The copter looks pretty cool. A little like some military spy gear.

The open frame appears to be durable and the rotors at each corner should give it a decent amount of agility.

The front of the drone is where you'll find the little camera. This captures video at 720x480 pixels in AVI format.

Other than what comes with the box, you don't need any other tools (e.g. screw driver) to use the Quadcopter but you do need two triple A batteries for the controller

Nano Quad Cam performance

Preflight

Charging the quadcopter takes about 45 minutes, but you get very little flying time – 10 maybe 15 minutes at best. (Bear in mind the



copter wasn't in the air most the time as I kept crashing).

The core of the Quadcopter is quite durable. I was crashing all over the place but it was still in very good condition. However, I think one of the lights may have been damaged as it wasn't turning on.

An extra set of propellers are provided in the box which you'll most likely be using as it is VERY easy to lose the propellers after a crash. There have been a few times where I've spent up to 20 minutes looking for a propeller so I'm sure even spare ones won't be enough in the long run.

Thankfully, it's very easy to change the propellers as each one is marked differently and the instructions are clear on how to fix each one on.

In flight

I calibrated and aligned the Quad Cam on many occasions but it still has a habit of drifting. I have only been flying indoors so can't blame

the wind. This was the main cause of me crashing as I had to counteract the drift using the joysticks.

According to the manual, the resolution of the recording is 720 x 480 pixels. When I did test this function, I thought it was quite blurry and the colours weren't really accurate.

Flight recorder

Checking the files is straight forward though. You can add the 4GB microSD into a USB adaptor (which is provided in the box) and connect directly to your laptop/PC.

Once the USB is registered you double click on the file in the drive which takes you to your recordings. One thing to note is I was getting a few 'corrupt' messages when trying to view the recordings.

The recordings do NOT record sound. I think it would be a good idea for the next generation Quadcopter to be able to do so.

Nano Quad Cam Drone



Apart from the MicroSD card and MicroSD to USB adaptor I've mentioned already, you also receive a USB charger to charge the Quad Cam. You also get a microSD to SD card adaptor. This is all useful as you don't need to buy any items (apart from the batteries for the controller).

Having said that, the microSD is only 4GB so you'll probably run out of space quite if you're recording a lot.

Although it does mention it in the instructions, I think the company still need to be a bit more clear on how to put the microSD card in to the drone. There is another section which you can mistakenly enter the SD card in which could potentially damage the microSD card or the quadcopter.

Nano Quad Cam review conclusion

The Nano Quad Cam is very easy and fun to use.

Revell states that it's suitable for ages 14 and over, which feels about right.

The copter is fairly easy to control indoors and I think I need more time calibrating it. The short flying time can be a little frustrating as it's usually at the time I feel I'm getting the hang of when it dies.

As long as you're not expecting fantastic quality from the video, it is watchable. It's fun to play back and watch your flights in first person view.

In the next generation, I think it would be a good idea if the controller could be charged using the same USB charger for the Quad Cam rather than having to purchase two triple AA batteries.

Nano Quad Cam price and availability

The Revell Control Nano Quad Cam is available from Argos and all good toy and model retailers. The RRP is £49.99

Overall score 7.9

Build quality 8/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8/10

Performance 7.5/10

Value 8/10

SteelSeries Rival 700 mouse

SteelSeries recently released a new gaming mouse, the Rival 700, and seeing its customisation abilities and OLED screen, I just had to review it.

SteelSeries have some great tech for serious gamers and I know that the Rival 300 has been a firm favourite for many FPS fans.

Does the Rival 700 carry the torch forwards or has the bling got in the way of performance?

Rival 700 design

The mouse comes bundled with a 2 meter long braided cable and a shorter, 1 meter, rubber-coated laptop cable.

I love the fat, long and low profile of my Corsair M65 (yes it could do with a clean) but the Rival 700 seems to follow a more conventional mouse design.

The Rival 700 has an almost typical 2:1 size ratio at 4.92(L) x 2.70(W) x 1.65(H) inches / 124.85 x 68.46 x 41.97 mm.

The first thing I noticed was that the SteelSeries controller weighs quite a bit more than my M65. The

and the rubber textured scroll wheel has a flush tread.

The mouse has two RGB light zones and features a removable rubber nameplate at the rear.

There are no fewer than 7 programmable buttons, and a removable top cover adds to further customisability (that's a word, right?).

Rival 700 customisation

Hardware

As this is an obvious unique selling point (USP) I reckon this deserves a section to itself.

Let me start with possibly the most important aspect. The Rival 700 comes equipped with the fantastic 16,000 DPI PixArt PMW3360 optical sensor. This can be



The rubber nameplate at the rear end of the mouse can be removed. SteelSeries provides a template on the Rival 700 product page for 3D printers. This allows you to personalise your mouse with your name, or your team logo, etc.

The top cover can also be removed and replaced with another piece from SteelSeries. The cover pack comes with one glossy cover and one anti-sweat textured cover.

Software

More tweaking can be achieved via the SteelSeries Engine 3 software. This plays nice with Windows and OS X.

This program allows adjustments to the button assignments, sensor tracking settings, and lighting configurations.

The Rival 700 also supports the GameSense feature which allows the mouse to react directly in response to game events. At the moment there's not much support but Counter-Strike Global Offensive (CS:GO), DOTA 2, and Minecraft do.

GameSense takes up its own submenu where you can configure the Rival 700's RGB LEDs, OLED screen, and tactile motor. You can also set when the

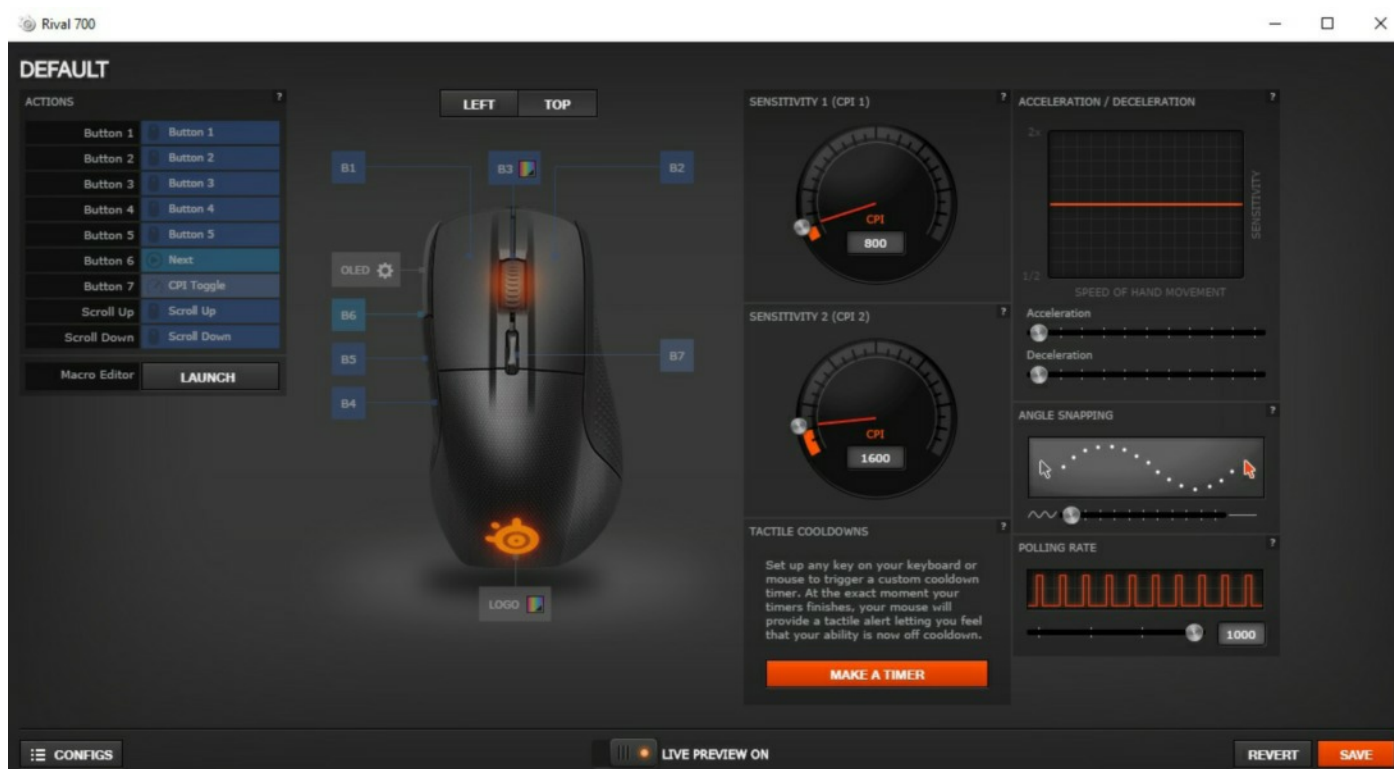


Rival 700 tips the balance at 135 grams, in contrast to the 31g of my Vengeance mouse.

The sides of the mouse are covered with textured rubber grips

swapped out by way of four screws so that you can slip in the Pixart 9800 laser sensor module if you should so wish.

SteelSeries Rival 700 mouse



vibrations happen via the Tactile menu. This allows customisation to when and how the feedback motor reacts to assigned game events. Multiple game events can be assigned to trigger the motor such as low health, low ammo, stun states, and so on.

Buttons

Opening the settings for the Rival 700 for the first time you'll see the CONFIGS sidebar. This shows five on-board profiles and any locally stored profiles.

The seven buttons (Left and Right, the three thumb buttons, CPI and scroll) as well as the scroll wheel are all fully customisable.

To the right are various sliders for adjusting the tracking sensor. These are the two sensitivity banks, pointer acceleration, angle snapping / prediction, and polling rate / latency.

You can also set a key or mouse button to trigger a timer that

vibrates the mouse when time's up.

There's a whole slew of customisable button settings: keyboard keys, macros, media controls, and any other mouse button can be sorted.

The Macro Editor has two interfaces. Here keypresses and delays are shown in a flow diagram allowing for macro micromanagement.

Alternatively, the text macro editor makes it much easier to dump a block of words, sentences,

or even paragraphs. Handy for those RPG players.

Lights. Action!

The Illumination Effects menu is perhaps the most fun. Each zone, track wheel and SteelSeries logo, can each be assigned a pre-set or custom colour effect. This is all very easily configured.

Now, that OLED screen.

You can, of course put what you want on there. I managed to get my band logo to appear (please



SteelSeries Rival 700 mouse

excuse the blurry pic), but there's other things you can do.

For instance, get it to display the 'Headshot' graphic when you take someone out in that matter when playing CS:GO.

There are even GIFs you can download made by the community. To me, this brings back memories of when you could buy designs for your Nokia from the back of magazines and newspapers.

I guess the main difference is that these can be triggered by certain things. Although, its usefulness for imparting important info at crucial moments is dubious.

Rival 700 performance

The mouse feels just about right for me to use a 'claw grip' as well as the more standard 'palm grip'. Although, as I have quite long fingers, the palm grip isn't ideal for me. Using the 'fingertip grip' doesn't really feel comfortable on this mouse for me either as it's a tad slim. It might be one of those things that gets easier after a while though.

The important thing is that the Rival 700 performs brilliantly. I couldn't confuse it with swift movements and it tracked well even through magnified scopes.

The buttons are useful and I preferred the placement of the

thumb buttons on the SteelSeries mouse than my Corsair daily driver.



All the buttons give good feedback with nice, definite clicks.

The scroll wheel is also precise as is its button.

I even like the vibration feedback. The good thing is, as the feedback motor runs up and down, it doesn't throw things off balance when it kicks in.

Rival 700 review conclusion

I cannot ignore that the Rival 700 owns (or PWNS) some firsts. The tactile feedback motor, swappable tracking sensor and an OLED screen are all new to me on a mouse.

Does it need these though? Well, the vibrating feedback works remarkably well I have to say. I like it.

The swappable sensor? Well, if there were other units than the one on offer, possibly. I suppose it does somewhat future-proof it

when better ones come along. The thing is, the one in the mouse already is pretty darned fantastic.

The OLED screen? I can't help but think that this is the equivalent of spinners on your hubcaps. It's not really there for anything other than impressing the people around you. It is fun but taking your eyes off the monitor to check what's going on your mouse – you get shot in-game my friend. I know. I was there man.

The Engine 3 software is easy to use and I do like the light configurations too.

This is a great mouse and definitely one for those who like to pimp their controllers. This is one FPS mouse that you cannot ignore.

Rival 700 price and availability

You can buy the SteelSeries Rival 700 mouse now for £85.87 from Amazon or direct from SteelSeries for €109.99. The SteelSeries site also has the optional extras on offer too.

Overall score 8.4

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Performance 8.5/10

Value 8/10

BenQ BL2205PT monitor

The BenQ BL2205PT could be the monitor you're looking for if you're in the market for a business-oriented screen for around £100.

The BenQ BL2205PT is definitely aimed at the more office-based uses.

While it may have the basics covered, video and picture editors should be looking elsewhere. The same goes for you gamers too.

What this monitor aims to do, however, is provided solid business use at a budget-friendly price.

So, how does it do?

BenQ BL2205PT design

The design of the BL2205PT will fit inconspicuously in to any office environment.

You get an understated, all-black look featuring a narrow black bezel around the 21.5-inch matte screen.

The right-hand bezel area is where you will find a series of indicator lights. These are for the menu buttons which are actually around the back of the bezel. The buttons cover duties of power, menu and three others which can be user assigned as menu shortcuts.

It is good to see that the BL2205PT features height and angle adjustment.

Around the rear of the monitor is where the connectivity ports live. Here is a D-sub (VGA), DVI, and a DisplayPort v1.2 socket. You



also get a headphone jack and an audio line-in port.

Nope, I've not missed anything out there. No matter how many times you check, you won't find a HDMI port here.

BenQ BL2205PT set up

Getting started with the monitor is pretty straightforward.

To put it all together, once out of the compact packaging, is simply a case of putting four screws through the backplate and fitting them. Then just screw on the base and you are good to go.

In order to get the perfect position, the screen is adjustable up and down by 15cm. You can also tilt it back and forth.

As team work is all important, the stand swivels generously so you can share what's on your screen.

Menus

Pressing the top button hands you the BL2205PT menu. This is split into 5 areas: Display, Picture, Picture Advanced, Audio & System.

I have used slicker OSD (on-screen display) menus. It is a blessing, then, that you are able to attribute shortcuts to your most used tweaks.

The Picture Menu contains the basic settings of Brightness, Contrast, and Sharpness. Dive in to the Advanced menu and you can adjust Gamma, Colour Temperature, Hue and Saturation.

BenQ BL2205PT performance

The BL2205PT utilises an LED backlight to illuminate the 21.5-inch Full HD (1920 x 1080) TN panel.

The screen has an aspect ratio of 16:9 and a claimed maximum brightness of 250cd/m2 with a native contrast ratio of 1000:1.

Pixel response time is claimed at two milliseconds, grey-to-grey. The monitor specs are rounded off with promised viewing angles of 170 degrees horizontal and 160 degrees on the vertical plane.

Kind to eyes

The BL2205 features BenQ's proprietary Flicker-free Technology. It has the Low Blue Light Mode which aims to reduce the strain of blue spectrum light.

BenQ BL2205PT monitor

The Low Blue Light Mode is preconfigured to one of the hot keys and provides default 30% reduction for multi-media, 50% for Web-surfing, 60% for 'Office' and Reading gets a 70% reduction.

The monitor also features an anti-glare panel which is pretty good at keeping reflections down and is something else that will preserve your peepers.

Image Quality

Overall image quality is probably the most important part of this business screen.

If documents are your thing, and for most office workers it is, you'll be glad to know that text is sharp and clear in all modes.

I found that I needed to tweak the sharpness up a bit from the standard settings but that might be my eyes.

The viewing angles are quite narrow, but I guess that's why they have the swivel function.

Everything looks pretty good across the whole panel. Yes, the corners do get a little washed out but no more than some other TN panels I've seen.

Speed and fatigue

Slinging Project Cars up on my machine did task the BL2205, but I expected that. The same goes for movies too for that matter. This is down to the monitor only having screen refresh rate options of 50,

59.94 or 60Hz, where the majority of films call for a 240Hz output for optimal viewing.

If your office allows you to play top level games or watch video, they should really supply you with a gaming screen.

Contrast out of the box is decent, as is its brightness.

BenQ's Eye-care features do really work, from what I experienced.

Using the BL2205PT for extended

For the most part though the BL2205 performed well enough for standard tasks and viewing.

BenQ BL2205PT review conclusion

If you spend most of your time working on documents with occasional distractions from your favourite social sites, then this monitor could be the one for you.

The BL2205 is inexpensive and performs well for the price.

You get really good images and eye-care tech and flicker-free functioning that will allow for comfortable working days.

I am really impressed by the adjustable stand and range of connections. The lack of HDMI shouldn't cause much issue thanks to the inclusion of

DisplayPort 1.2.

BenQ BL2205PT price and availability

Amazon has the BL2205PT available now for £122.

Overall score 8.1

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8/10

Performance 8/10

Value 8/10



periods felt comfortable. The Reading Mode, in particular, is very gentle. Sitting in front of this monitor for an 8 hour day, with regular breaks of course, would result in minimal fatigue.

Colour Accuracy

The BL2205PT ships in the sRGB Picture Mode. I expected this to follow the industry standard of the same name. Unfortunately, it seems a little off to me.

This can be remedied through the User Mode if you require better on-screen accuracy. But, as I said earlier, this is not really an editing screen.

Motorola VerveRider+ earphones

You have probably read the review of the totally wireless VerveOnes+ (think a chunky AirPods that looks less like you've shoved an electric toothbrush tip in your ear). Here is its slightly less technically amazing, but still darned fine looking, stablemate. I give you the VerveRider+.

The Motorola VerveRider+ Bluetooth earphones are, as its name suggests, aimed at those who tend to ride things for fitness. So, bicycles, skateboards, rollerblades, horses, you get the idea.

Saying that though, I reckon that these would fit the running types too.

You see, where the VerveOnes+ were great in that they had absolutely no chords attaching them to anything (or each other) that 'leads' to a problem. You can't just flick out an earpiece to listen to something/

one. Well, you could and watch that rather non-cheap earpiece barrel along the floor.

The VerveRider+, however, do have cables attaching them but to a natty control collar.

VerveRider+ design

As I have already hinted at, the VerveRider+ is based around a flexible, yet sturdy collar.

This collar hosts all of the controls as well as giving the earbuds something to be attached to.

Attached in more than one way.

Firstly, the controls. Most of these live on the right end of the collar.

On the edge you have the joint volume/track skip rocker control.

The face of this side is home to the play/pause button recessed in a little circular area.

At the very tips on both sides is a microphone, for extra clear hands-free calling.

I did mention that the earbuds were attached in more than one way. Those cool recessed buttons on the front of the collar are magnetic as are the bases of the earbuds. So, when they are not in use they can be attached to the collar, out of harm's way. Neat huh?

VerveRider+ performance

Having that plus symbol in the VerveRider's name signifies that this kit is happy to get moist.

Sweat and a little bit of rain won't stop this fitness freak from performing.

Just don't wear it in the shower or go swimming with it, ok?

The battery life is quoted at 12 hours before needing a boost and I

have easily managed to get a good week of commutes and lunchtime listening.

Sound quality

I must say that I hardly noticed the collar at all. Which is good as that was my main concern having never worn any earphones like this before.



Over on the left hand side, you get the call answer/end button in its exact opposite location.

While we're over on this side the bottom edge here is where you power these on and control the Bluetooth sync. This button can be a bit tricky to find at first.

Also this is where you'll find the USB charging port.

Motorola VerveRider+ earphones

The accompanying Hubble Connect app doesn't have the same array of features as it does with the VerveOnes+ but it still has the tracker. Which is handy.

The audio is comparable to the other Verve headphones which is pretty good. You don't get the variety of EQ settings as the Ones but, to be honest, these didn't need them.

The bass-end is favoured, of course, but everything else sits just about right in the mix. The tips offer decent isolation ones you have found the optimum fit.

Comfort

The VerveRider+ comes with a selection of tips so getting a good fit shouldn't be a problem.

Having all the electronic gadgetry in the collar means that the



collar converse with a Barista is something most earbuds can achieve. But not having the earbud flail around loose could be distracting when cycling. This isn't something you have to worry about with the Rider+ thanks to those little magnets.

I will openly admit that I have sat at my desk all day with the collar around my neck and earbuds sat in



earbuds themselves are fairly light. Wearing these for long periods of time, on a bike ride for example, should be easily achieved without discomfort.

I don't cycle but I do buy coffee. A lot. And being able to flick one of the earbuds out in order to

their magnets and never noticed till home time. Yes, that's the kind of colleagues I have.

Still, it just shows how unobtrusive the VerveRider+ is.

VerveRider+ review conclusion

The Motorola VerveRider+ might look a bit odd, but most specialist equipment does.

I was extremely dubious about wearing a bright orange collar with earbuds hanging from it but the design works; and it works well.

Being water and sweat resistant is good but having the magnetic buds attach to the collar when not in use is great.

The sound quality is good enough to get that motivational playlist pumping in to your ears. Should you need to chat to anyone, at least you know that you'll easily find your earbud again.

VerveRider+ price and availability

The Motorola VerveRider+ is available now for £55.

Overall score 8

Build quality 8/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8/10

Sound quality 8/10

Value 8/10

D-Link DIR-879 EXO AC1900 router

Last month I put D-Link's EXO AC1750 router through its paces. Since then I have received the DIR-879, the AC1900 version of the same. It looks identical (so no new photos) but it promises better performance.

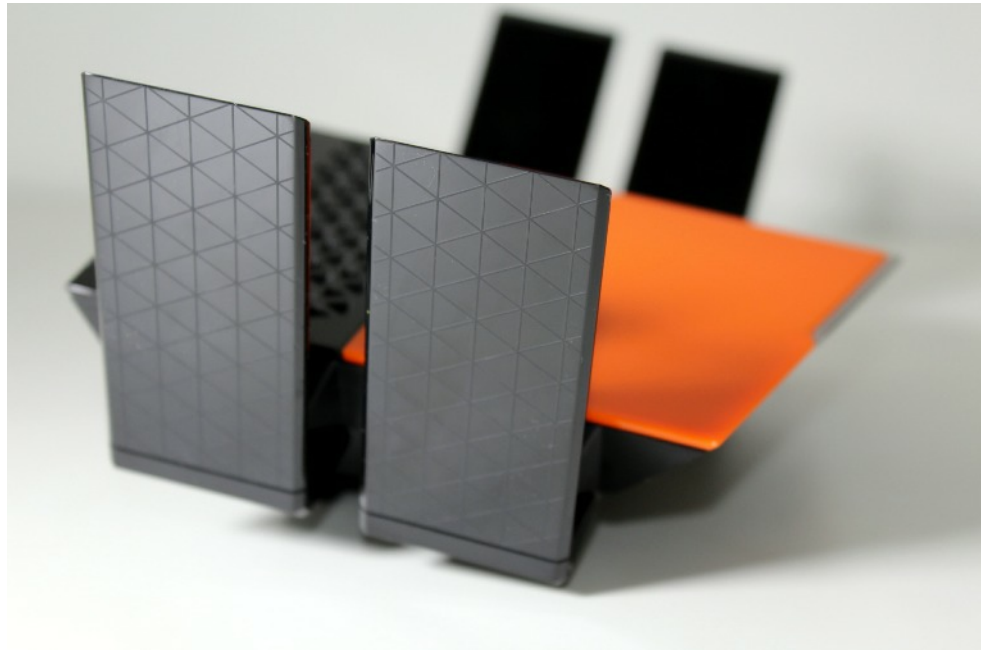
This is the first time I have been sent two versions of the same product. When I say 'the same' there is no physical difference between the D-Link EXO AC1750 or the AC1900 version.

EXO AC1900 design

Both have that stealth fighter look. Both are that rather groovy orange colour. Both have four folding, non-detachable aerials.

All the important differences are under the hood.

This makes a 'design' section of this review a little bit pointless if



that is equipped with USB 3.0 this isn't so much of a deal-breaker for me. Others wanting to share data will have to do that via their networked PC.

EXO AC1900 performance

This is the area I was really interested in testing.

My daily driver is a [Linksys](#)

Naturally, the closer to the router the stronger the signal. Some routers I have tested before are unable to reach my spare room/office as it's upstairs and at the other corner of the house from the router.

As you can imagine, this also means that the router has to project through walls and a floor. A decent test for any device I am sure you'll agree.

I have only had two other routers that were potent enough not to require a boost or cloned connection in order to give reasonable speeds. One is the Linksys EA7500 and the other is the beast known as the Nighthawk X8. Now, there's around £200 difference between those two. Thankfully, the D-Link is at the Linksys end of the scale.

EXO AC1900 speeds

There is hardly anything in it between the D-Link and the Linksys on the 2.4GHz band. It goes with-



you read the other EXO review.

I will point out that the DIR-879 also has four Gigabit LAN ports and one Gigabit WAN port on the back.

It also still lacks a USB port or SD card slot. As I use a NAS drive

[EA7500](#) which has a similar tech spec to the EXO AC1900. This will be my basis for comparison.

EXO AC1900 range

The router's range is pretty good with a strong signal strength throughout the house.

D-Link DIR-879 EXO AC1900 router



If it is its looks you like, I'd definitely recommend getting the 879 over the 869 for the sake of £30. It is a strong performer in every area and at a good price.

Remember though, at this price range (and a little more) there are other great devices out there.

out saying that it is a marked improvement over the other EXO.

On the 5GHz band it was definitely faster than the Linksys at close quarters (in the same room as the router).

Good speeds, a slight improvement from what I get from my Linksys, were achieved in the office space.

Very impressive from this rather compact, if conspicuous, router.

Smart Connect

Smart Connect uses both the 5GHz and 2.4GHz bands and decides what the best option for the device you're using.

This works reasonably well and I didn't encounter any dropping out.

Personally I like to keep the bands separated using the 5GHz for my more hungry tech and leaving the 2.4GHz band for guests and our phones.

EXO AC1900 review conclusion

I liked the D-Link DIR-869 but found it lacking slightly in grunt. The DIR-879 might look the same but it certainly has it where it counts – apart from the lack of USB/SD ports.

True, it will be noticeable wherever you put it thanks to its angular design and bright orange finish.

Overall score 8.4

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 9/10

Performance 8.5/10

Value 8/10



Neato Botvac Connected

I will never have the money, or the need, for a butler or a maid. However, like many of you, finding time to have a quick clean around the home isn't always possible. Thankfully, the future is here. The arrival of domestic robots happened a few years ago and I have lived with the Neato Botvac Connected for the last week.

I've met the Neato Botvac Connected a couple of times and its apparent ease of use and clean app, mixed with what seemed to be great performance piqued my interest.

We all know that there are other robo cleaners out there – some are even ridden by cats in shark costumes. Where

the likes of the Mi Robot Vacuum and such have gone for the UFO circular form-factor, Neato has gone for the D – so to speak.

The other difference is that the Neato Botvac Connected uses Wi-Fi.

Neato Botvac Connected design

The Neato Botvac Connected is all-black. My other-half was a tad disappointed that it didn't look "more robot-like". I think she was hoping for a robot butler who runs

through the whole 'I Want to Break Free' routine.

The D-shaped domestic droid has a raised circular disc finished in silver on top, which is its 'eye'. This houses the Botvac's LaserSmart Mapping and Navigation technology which helps it figure out a methodical way of cleaning the home.

Also up top is a central rectangular

right with the house starts a full house clean, while the button featuring several small squares performs a spot clean.

Neato offers a 276mm brush, a spiral blade brush, combo brush, as well as a side brush. My review model has been well used looking at the side brush. Please ignore the hairs – both me and my girlfriend both have long hair and tend to moult.

On the front of the rounded edge of the Botvac Connected is where you'll find a magnet.

This connects the bot to a relatively small docking station. This is the Neato's

home, where it retreats for some r'n'r – that's rest and recharge. I particularly like the way it wriggles and snuggles in to the docking station. It is a good idea to have the station against the wall as the Botvac likes to get right in there.

Botvac Connected performance

Set up

The Botvac Connected, as has already been mentioned, connects with your Wi-Fi network. It is really easy to set up from the



lid that hides the 0.7-litre dirt bin. Beneath that is the power button.

The dirt bin is simply lifted up and out in order for it to be emptied and the filter cleaned.

The Botvac even thanks you when you empty its bin.

The filter that's also mentioned in the little message above is really easy to remove and there's a mesh screen that keeps dirt from accumulating on the filter.

Beneath the screen that displays various messages there are navigation buttons around it. There are Up, Down and Back arrows and a long button.

There's another two buttons near the flat end. The button on the

Neato Botvac Connected

Botvac's on-board display and menu.

Once that has been done you can then control your trundling servant from the free app.

You will also get notifications from your dom droid via this app too.

Clean up

There are three main cleaning modes: house clean, spot clean and manual clean.

House clean and spot clean offer eco and turbo modes. As you might expect, turbo is a more thorough clean, while eco is quieter and will prolong the battery.



When performing a house clean, the Botvac Connected will scan and analyse the area surrounding it using that Botvision laser navigation technology. As it's not actually looking, as such, you can run the vac in the dark.

Once the room is scanned and an efficient path planned, the Botvac Connected will clean in 15 x 15-inch square segments.

If the area is smaller than 15 x 15-inches, the Botvac Connected will complete the area in one go. Larger areas will be divided up and get cleaned one after the other.

Each segment is cleaned in a straight-line back and forth pattern. Kinda like a good lawn.

If it sets off before a full recharge, or if it bites off more than it can chew, and runs out of juice mid-way, the Botvac Connected uses what Neato calls SLAM technology. This enables it to work out where it has and hasn't cleaned, and so will return to where it stopped cleaning once it's had a quick nap.

For spot clean, the Botvac Connected comes off the docking base and turns right. It will perform a boundary clean of either a small spot size, which is the equivalent of 6.5- x 6.5-feet, or a

large spot clean, which equals 13- x 13-feet.

The large spot clean can only be set through the app rather than on the robot itself.

Following the

boundary cleaning, the Botvac Connected will perform the inside of the target area in the same straight line pattern as the house clean.

Set controls to manual or schedule

If you want to guide the Botvac like a radio-controlled car, then Manual Clean is what you need.

This allows you to control the cleaning path of the robot using the app.

Through this you can make the robot go forwards, backwards, or turn in an anti-clockwise or clockwise circle.

Scheduled cleaning is another feature. As you've already guessed, this has you setting times and days for the Botvac Connected to perform a cleaning routine.

Botvac Connected in use

I have a trusty Dyson that I bought reconditioned and it has been excellent. That vacuum owes me nothing after at least 10 years' service. I gave my home a tidy only a couple of days before the Botvac arrived.

I set my domestic help off and it came back smugly carrying bits in its dirt tray.

Not only is it powerful and thorough, it handles my mixture of laminate flooring and different rugs. I even left the kitchen door open and it handled the anti-slip finish in there without issue.

I did test it upstairs, keeping an eye on it, and it recognised the top of the stairs so I didn't have to catch it. But, I would not recommend this.

It is much safer to use the boundary markers. These black markers are about an inch wide and can be placed around anything you want the Botvac Connected to avoid – an expensive vase or the top of stairs.

There was one morning where it was asking for help. I heard its pitiful pinging from downstairs when I got out of the shower. Looking at the app it was asking for its brushes to be cleaned. I went downstairs to find it

Neato Botvac Connected

entangled with a lacy scarf. Bless it.

Oh, it doesn't like being picked up, even though it has an integral handle at the back.

All the nooks and crannies

Neato says the Botvac Connected can get within 14mm of the wall thanks to the CornerClever technology too. I am inclined to believe them.

True, I lift my dining chairs and footstools out of the way the night before the morning clean but, apart from that, it does a great job. It manages to get in all the places it can, floorstanding speakers and other bits aside.

I will say that it did find and deal with the majority of corner fluff without a problem.

It is almost hypnotic to watch, especially when it rears up to get out of tight situations. Botvac will ask for help by pinging you a "Help, I'm stuck" message. It can motor over the thresholds between rooms no problem.

I was kind of hoping to be able to control it manually from the office using the app and my security camera. Unfortunately, the manual mode only works when you're at home on the same Wi-Fi.

Oh, and it has to be the same connection. If you are running a multi-band network you have to be on the same. I have the Botvac on the 2.4GHz band but my phone goes for the 5GHz first so I have to switch it to the 2.4 band to control the Connected.

Eco mode

The Eco mode is a little quieter and the clean is still pretty good. It

did last longer before recharges but, as I usually had the Botvac Connected working when I was in the shower or scheduled to clean before I got home, the noise wasn't really an issue.

On the subject of volume, you couldn't really have it in Turbo mode and watch the telly or have music on at a moderate level. But it does clean darn good.

Botvac Connected review conclusion

OK, so it can't do the stairs or move furniture out of the way. But neither can Daleks and they're the most feared of all the robots!

The Neato Botvac Connected is an impressive bit of kit. The downstairs of my home has never looked so immaculate thanks to my automated home help having a whiz around every other morning.

I will still have to bring out the big guns to get behind my speakers and the sofa, but anyone dropping by unannounced will just see a well-kept floor.

The Botvac only got caught up once and since then I've made sure there's nothing left out to choke on.

The app is great and really intuitive to use. The ability to control the Botvac manually from



the office if it got stuck would be nice, but that's not a deal breaker.

The Botvac Connected is great addition to the home. Yes, I have started talking to it. I see it as more a part of the family rather than a live-in servant.

Oh, I think there could be a market for Botvac stickers – eyes, a smile, perhaps a BB8-style kit. Just an idea.

Botvac Connected price and availability

You can get your own domestic droid like this right now. The RRP is £679.99 on the Neato website.

It is available for £520 on Amazon at the moment. Neato does have other Botvacs, including two new ones at a more pocket-friendly price.

Overall score 8.4

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Performance 8.5/10

Value 8/10

Allocacoc audioCube

There is plenty to choose from if you want a Bluetooth speaker these days. Naturally, size and sound are two of the most important factors for many. Allocacoc have recently announced their audioCube and sent me one to review.

Dutch manufacturer, Allocacoc, have an interesting proposition to getting the most out of a portable Bluetooth speaker. They obviously like working with cubes, and have therefore added a speaker to almost every face of one.

It looks pretty good but, more importantly, how does it sound?

audioCube design

The audioCube, as the name suggests, is a cube loaded with speakers.

It measures 16.5- x 11.5- x 11.5-cm (HxWxD) so, although not tiny, is still perfectly portable.

The 16cm speakers are loaded on four sides of the unit plus a vibrating plane on the end where



Handy if it doesn't have Bluetooth or if you want to save your batteries.

audioCube performance

Weighing in at 1.2Kg there are lighter portable speakers. But the audioCube is loud and dynamic.

Not only that, in exchange for 3 hours charge you get between 10 and 12 hours of play time. Also, you don't need to drag around a power brick, just a regular kettle lead.

the huge orange power button is housed.

The sixth side is for the mains charging cable.

I quite like the white and orange and the chunky control buttons of the device. It says "fun" in almost a kid's toy kind of a way.

It feels well-made and robust, as a portable device should.

The audioCube comes bundled with an aux lead so you can hardwire your music source.

Set up

Once you have the audioCube charged up just squidge the big orange power button and you get the engine revving sound.

Yup, the audioCube has car-based notification sounds. Turning off the speakers gives you the remote alarm pings.

Now it's just a case of finding the speakers on your smart device



Allocacoc audioCube



and no matter where you are you'll get a party started.

The bass depends on what kind of surface you sit the power button on but it is always decent.

It looks great and sounds potent. Add around 10 hours of play time, this is a fab choice for a portable speaker.

audioCube price and availability

You can buy the audioCube now direct from Allocacoc for Eur 99.95

Overall score 8.1

Build quality 8/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Sound quality 8/10

Value 8/10

Bluetooth menu and you're good to go.

Sound quality

Flipping the audioCube over so that the power button section is touching a surface and you'll get decent bass.

The four speakers really do dish out 360 degree audio. No matter where you are in the room you get good definition and it certainly doesn't lack power.

The audio does project well, even outside. This makes this a great choice for picnics and garden parties (even though the weather is changing).

It played a wide range of music nice and clearly. The added bass resonance did lean it more towards 'pumping' party tunes.

audioCube review conclusion

The Allocacoc audioCube is a very neat, compact speaker. It lends itself more to being a room-to-room or garden speaker due to its weight.

Saying that though, pack this when heading to a festival, park or camp site



FIIL Diva headphones

The Fiil Diva are some very cool-looking headphones which are available through Kickstarter. I am very privileged to have a set to review.

Yes, Apple has ditched the headphone socket, as has some currently China-only Android phones. This could be the future of smart devices but, unless you're prepared to dangle-up, getting the best out of your portable audio is going to rely even more heavily on their tech.

Battery life, control and wireless audio quality are things that are peculiar to Bluetooth headphones.

There is also the issue of getting all of that in to a set that looks good and doesn't weigh heavily on your noggin.

Has the FIIL Diva managed all, or even some of that?

FIIL Diva design

The headphones certainly have a premium air about them, and that starts with the packaging.

A classy white box is wrapped in a similarly white, sleeve that only features what it has to.

The Diva headphones comes packaged inside a hard traveling case stamped with the logo of the company. I have to say that the choice of typeface makes it look more like "Fiii."

The name is also on each side of the Diva which glows a soft white when the device is on.

When the lighting effect is off, the logo still looks good in a metallic

The ear cups and headband are lined with soft leather. This continues the premium look and feel of these cans. Not only that but, unlike pleather, these don't give you sweaty lobes.

The right ear cup has a multifunction button that turns the headphones on and off, controls music playback and will also activate a voice telling you the current battery level.

There's a little toggle switch next to it that controls the special 'My AudioFiilter' mode. This can allow more of your environment in so you know what's going on around you.

You also get a 3.5mm jack port so you can use the Diva as wired headphones.

But there's something

silver hue.

The set I was sent to review, as you can see, are white. It's a really clean, nice white too. The grey vents on the earpieces are grey and are sandwiched between a textured aluminium section that holds the controls, mics and hinges and a chromed ring around the earpads.

The Diva's earcups are about two inches in diameter. The headband can be adjusted about an inch to accommodate larger skulls.

else. Some more controls, but you can't see them. The right ear cup has touch controls.

FIIL Diva performance Controls

Let's talk about those touch controls I mentioned.

This rather neat sounding idea allows you to control music



FIIL Diva headphones

playback via a series of finger swipes on the right ear cup.

Up and down will raise or lower the volume; right and left will skip tracks.

This takes quite a bit of practice and I felt that my swipes worked best when I started right at the edge and go right the way across for it to register.

Later on, I could more-or-less manage shorter swipes so I guess my accuracy was improving.

FIIL+ app

To unlock even more, you can and should download the FIIL+ app for iOS or Android.

The app gives you important info such as battery life for playback and standby hours. Other headphone apps I have seen offers similar.

It also has an instruction manual for how to access the various

This plays pink noise at various volume levels for 8 hours to imitate use.

The characteristics of headphones, as well as other items of Hi-Fi gear, change as they get used. The burn in process speeds this up.

The Diva's battery is excellent. When fully charged the app shows over 30 hours of music playback. Once I had got half way through the week, the headphones still showed more than a third of its charge was left.

3D sound and MAF

This natty, but mostly pointless in my point of view, feature simulates the experience of



your tunes, not something I can see being used that often.

The 'My AudioFiilter' (MAF) has Open, Moni and NC modes. Using the app helps you be sure what you've selected as, just using the button, the female voice states the mode... in Chinese.

These are most useful, especially as NC is Noise Cancelling.

The Windy mode filters out wind noise and this also works quite well.

FIIL Diva sound quality

Standard music playback is bright and crisp, and I found myself noticing details I often miss on other headsets. The reproduction seemed quite level, perhaps with the mids pushed

a little forward.

I eventually ignored those odd modes completely and stuck with the standard settings.

The EQ is handy if you want to ramp up the bass end though.

modes, turning the logo lights on and off, and all that other good stuff.

Burn and battery

The FIIL, however, are the first ones that I have seen that has a 'burn in' function.

listening to music in different-sized rooms. This adds a bit of reverb basically.

The biggest of these is "Hall" so, think empty concert hall. It's fun but, as I said, unless you want to add some false spatial sounds to



FIIL Diva headphones

As usual, I have put a variety of music through these. Everything has come through well defined, clear and punchy.

It makes such a nice change to test Bluetooth headphones that aren't tuned to deliver banging bass.

Bass is there, and it is taught and direct.

The mids are clear with vocals cutting through nicely. The highs come through crisp without any shimmer or harshness.

FIIL Diva convenience

As previously mentioned, the Diva fold up at both ends to either slip in to a bag or in to its travel case. The hinges seem to be very sturdy too!

This is not the extent of its handiness though.

Yes, the touch controls are neat but these also have motion-sensing capabilities.

"But, motion sensing?" I hear you ask.



Well, you see, when you take the headphones off, the music pauses. Guess what, when you put them back on the music resumes. This also works when you're watching videos on your tablet or phone.

I really like this idea. Walk in to a coffee shop and slip your headphones around your neck to chat with the Barista, without missing any of your music. Brilliant!

I found that this worked really well.

FIIL Diva review conclusion

Everything about these headphones both look and feel quality. I love the design, and the little additional bits such as the

app and the motion sensing are the icing on the cake.

Sound quality is great and not the usual 'urban' bass heaviness or 'tuned to be exciting' you usually get.

The only slight drawback is that all the voice notifications are in Chinese. True, I am slowly learning what Bluetooth connected or disconnected sounds like but this hasn't prevented me from enjoying the headphones.

FIIL Diva price and availability

The FIIL Diva is available through Kickstarter currently at \$149 (£114-ish) which is 25% off their retail price. The campaign is looking really good as it stands at \$131,843 of their pledged \$50,000 goal.

FIIL also has a Pro version which boasts 4GB of on-board storage, "Hi-Fi quality sound", and more. Those are available for a \$199 pledge.

Overall score 8.3

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 8/10

Sound quality 8.5/10

Value 8/10

