

Hifi Pig

EXTRA

& GadgetyNews

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NOVEMBER
2016

HIFI REVIEWS

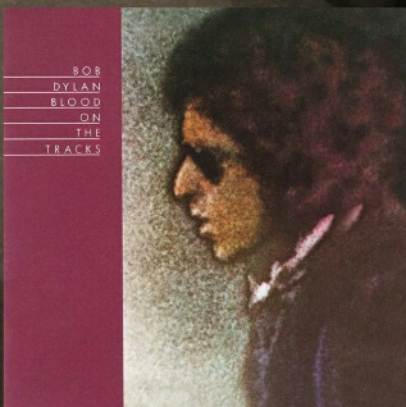
WESTMINSTER LAB UNUM POWER
AMPLIFIERS
AVID HIFI VOLVERE TURNTABLE
TAGA HARMONY PLATINUM F 100 SE
LOUDSPEAKERS
AXIS VOICEBOX S LOUDSPEAKERS
REVEL CONCERTA 2 M16 LOUDSPEAKERS
FOSTEX TE05 and TE07 IEMS
BLACK RHODIUM QUICKSTEP SPEAKER
CABLE
MID PRICED LOOM FROM CHORD COMPANY

ALBUM AND LIVE
MUSIC, PLUS
PHOTOGRAPHS
FROM BOTH THE
INDULGENCE
SHOW AND THE
WINDSOR SHOW

GADGET REVIEWS

Acoustic Energy Aego Sound3ar
Vivitek Qumi Q3 pocket projector
Udoq universal phone and tablet dock
Prism Sound Callia DAC/pre/HPA
Garmin DriveSmart 60 Satnav
Skullcandy XTfree sports earphones
MVR Ascend Virtual Reality kit
Parrot Minidrones first look
Dali KATCH Bluetooth speaker
Dell XPS 15 laptop
Skullcandy Barricade speaker

CLASSIC ALBUM



BEHIND THE
BRANDS
With Mark Fenlon of
Markaudio and
Markaudio-Sota



Tellurium Q®

8 products of the year and most wanted components
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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





WELCOME

We've been quietly working away in the background over the last few months on a very special project and things are almost ready to announce to Hifi Pig readers. Watch this space for some great news with regards Hifi Pig in the coming months!!

This month we visited the inaugural Indulgence Show in London and despite a few hiccoughs it was a great success. Of course we've got loads of photographs from that show, as well as the more recent Windsor Show.

We jet out to Warsaw soon to visit the second largest Hifi show in Europe and of course we'll be bringing you all the news, photographs and more from there.

Everyone at Hifi Pig hopes you enjoy this issue so settle down, put some tunes on the stereo, perhaps pour yourself a drop of your favourite tippie and get stuck in to another bumper issue!

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HIFI NEWS & REVIEWS

HIFI NEWS

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DAC/pre/HPA

Garmin DriveSmart 60 Satnav

Skullcandy XTFree sports earphones

MVR Ascend Virtual Reality kit

Parrot Minidrones first look

Dali KATCH Bluetooth speaker

Dell XPS 15 laptop

Skullcandy Barricade speaker

MUSIC

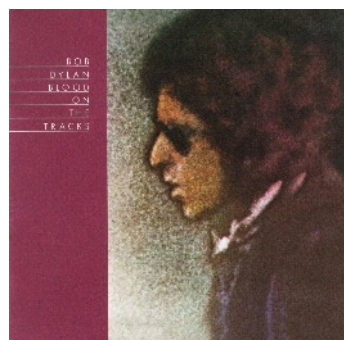
ALBUM REVIEWS AND LIVE MUSIC REVIEWS



LUKE HAINES



CLASSIC ALBUM



COLUMNS

BIRDS EYE VIEW - Linette Smith discusses handbags and earrings...and a bit of Hifi too

BIRD'S EYE VIEW

ALSO AVAILABLE AND MORE FROM THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...BY LINETTE SMITH

VIEWS OF STU - This month Stu lets vent on an apathetic music buying public

THE VIEWS OF STU!

COMMENTARY, POLITICAL AND MUSICIAN...BY STU

RETRO BITES - Janine Elliot is here to explain the history and the science behind vinyl equalisation

RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND SCIENCE AUDIO...BY JANINE ELLIOT

INTERVIEW - Hifi Pig goes Behind The Brands Mark Fenlon of Markaudio and Markaudio-Sota

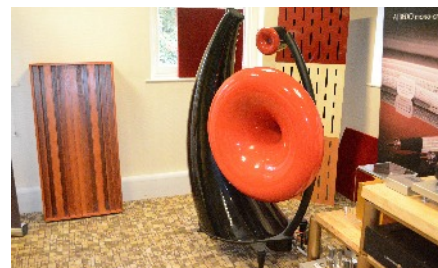


FROM THE VAULTS

PrimaLuna Prologue Premier Valve Integrated Amplifier



SHOW NEWS - Photographs from The Indulgence Show and The Hi-Fi News Windsor Show



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dCS Network Bridge

PRICE: £3250

AVAILABLE: NOVEMBER

The dCS Network Bridge acts as an interface between your digital music and your DAC. The hardware platform in Network Bridge enables you to stream high resolution music files from network attached storage, connected USB drives, online streaming services as well as Apple devices via Apple Airplay, outputting bit perfect audio direct to your DAC.

The native Network Bridge app provides full control of the wired and wireless streaming capabilities as well as the input, output and clock settings. The Network Bridge app is based on the same network streaming and app technology used in dCS's flagship Vivaldi series, which they say provides 'an intuitive interface for you to quickly and easily organise and manage your entire digital music library'.

Designed for simplicity, a single, FPGA platform is the heart of the unit and the Network Bridge is Roon™ ready, also supporting streaming services such as TIDAL™, and Spotify™. Network Bridge currently plays files sampled at rates up to 24-bit, 384kS/s, supporting all major lossless codecs, plus DSD/64 or DSD/128 in native or DoP formats.



Compatibility with legacy dCS DACs is assured by an integer down-sampling feature. This down-sampling feature converts high res data (for example DXD or DSD) to 24 bit PCM at either 176.4/192kS/s or 88.2/96kS/s – bringing the data within a range supported by your DAC. Network Bridge also supports the dCS 'auto clocking' architecture as used in Vivaldi and Rossini. The Network Bridge firmware can be updated from the internet using the control section of the app. This allows dCS to add new features or improve the performance of the product during its production lifetime. Designed and made in Great Britain, Network Bridge's chassis uses aerospace-grade machined aluminium to reduce sound-degrading mechanical vibration and magnetic effects. Multi-stage power regulation is employed to isolate the sensitive clock circuitry from digital processing noise.

Porsche Design And KEF Collaboration

Porsche Design and KEF, have collaborated to develop a trio of Hifi systems, Gravity One, Motion One and Space One.

Designed by the Studio F. A. Porsche in Zell am See, Austria, the Gravity One Bluetooth® speaker's winged design is crafted from a single piece of aluminium and features KEF's signature Uni-Q technology. It is priced at £329.95.

The Motion One in-ear headphones feature brushed aluminium housings with a titanium finish and high-contrast black soft silicone neckband. These can be used with the supplied cable or as wireless IEMs. Price £219.95.

Space One are over-ear, active noise-cancelling headphones which feature a distinctive use of aluminium in their shells, with a sandblasted titanium finish. They have 40mm drivers



together with a large 20mm neodymium magnet and a lightweight copper-clad aluminium wire voice coil and 'Racetrack' around-ear pads made from breathable, sweat-resistant leatherette over memory foam. Price £369.95

All products available now Porsche Design stores, KEF stores, carriers and retailers worldwide.

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Gryphon Introduce Diabolo 120 Integrated Amplifier and Diabolo 120 DAC Module

The concept of an integrated amplifier that embodies the same ethos, musical and sonic qualities as Gryphon Audio Designs' most esoteric offerings, but at a fraction of the cost, is clearly an attractive proposition. As far back as April, 2009, Gryphon introduced the original Atilla, in continuous production until 2016, the Atilla had a long run. In the interim period, Gryphon has made advances in the critical fields of circuit topology and parts design and selection with the evolution of the Pandora preamplifier and Mephisto power amplifier. Now, drawing on their experience with these reference level components, Gryphon Audio Designs presents the next generation Atilla, the Gryphon Diablo 120.

The Diablo 120 integrated amplifier is essentially two independent mono devices for reduced crosstalk and minimal inter-channel interaction. The only things shared electrically between channels are the famed Holmgren toroidal transformer and AC power cable. The custom made 1,200 VA transformer adds substantial heft with discrete secondary windings for left and right channels. Each channel is fed by its own 60,000 μ F capacitor bank. The output power of the Diablo 120 is 20% greater than that of the original Atilla: 2 x 120 W (8W), 2 x 240 W (4W), 2 x 440 W (2W). Consistent increases of output power as impedance is halved is a reliable indicator of high current capability, just as the wide audio bandwidth, 0.1Hz to 250 kHz (-3 dB), is a sign of stability. Heatsink surface area has also been increased to match the increase in output power. With two pairs of Sanken transistors, Diablo 120 can



drive difficult loudspeaker loads without strain. The Diablo 120 circuit employs zero global negative feedback and a unique microprocessor controlled passive attenuator for the transparent volume control. Regardless of the selected level, the 46-step relay attenuator places maximum six resistors in the signal path. A large, graphical vacuum fluorescent display is employed instead of a more conventional LED character display to provide space for more information and a larger, more easily legible font. The display and control circuits are powered independently via a separate, isolated transformer in order to eliminate any risk of noise contamination. All front panel controls are touch sensitive (capacitive actuation.) The Diablo 120 offers one balanced and four single-ended inputs, a comprehensive menu of configuration options (four levels of display brightness, user-defined start and maximum volume settings, individual source labelling with eight-character names and a dedicated and electrically

isolated A/V bypass function for integration with a multi-channel audio system.

At the time of original purchase or as the need arises at a later date, Gryphon Diablo 120 can be fitted with a specially designed Gryphon DAC PCM/DSD module based on the innovative, award-winning Gryphon Kalliope digital-to-analogue converter. The module adds four digital inputs (USB, balanced AES/EBU 115 Ω , TOSLink optical and BNC S/PDIF 75 Ω). Via USB, the Diablo 120 DAC module can process PCM up to 32-bit/384 kHz as well as DSD (on Windows OS up to DSD512, on Mac OS up to DSD128, on Linux OS up to DSD128 DoP); via BNC S/PDIF and AES/EBU inputs up to 192 kHz/32-bit PCM and via TOSLink up to 96 kHz/24-bit PCM. Format compatibility of the various inputs is subject to change without notice. The Diablo 120 also offers the alternative of a MM/MC phonostage.

TRINNOV Audio Appoints Tom Garrett as Sales Manager - EMEA

TRINNOV Audio has recently announced the appointment of Tom Garrett to the newly-created position of Sales Manager - EMEA. Tom Garrett will support Trinnov's existing Multichannel business and expand their High End Audio

"I am honored to be the newest addition to such a great team, and a company with such extraordinary, unique products," says Tom Garrett. "The Altitude32 is the only consumer product

that decodes all the major 3D audio formats and renders those formats to more than just 12 discrete channels."


"With regard to the 'Hi-Fi' section of the Trinnov lineup," Garrett continued, "it is the ultimate solution for the many people who still listen mostly to two-channel music. Imagine having all the power of the Optimizer and Remapping technologies in your high end music system."



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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

Pro-Ject Audio Primary Turntable

PRICE: £169/£229

AVAILABLE: NOW

Pro-Ject Audio Systems, of Vienna, have produced popular affordable record players in recent years, for customers who want to experience audio quality on a budget. The company's latest offering, Primary, takes two established designs and merges them together to produce a high-quality, inexpensive turntable with real plug-and-play simplicity.

The Primary takes inspiration from the Elemental and the Essential II turntable designs. Like the Elemental, the Primary uses an 8.6" aluminium tonearm with sapphire bearings for optimal tracking. The tonearm is pre-configured for the supplied Ortofon OM 5E pick-up cartridge, so there's no need to set-up the tracking force or anti-skate during installation. The motor is also the same perimeter belt-drive type, with a low-vibration synchronous motor that's controlled by a built-in regulator for improved speed stability. Where the Primary takes from the Essential II is in the traditional design layout. It shares the Essential II's high-quality MDF finish, and the MDF platter/felt mat platform. The plinth is available in matte black, red or white finish, and the added benefit of this layout is in the included detachable dust cover.

The Primary is available in two options. The standard Primary is terminated with RCA cables for direct connection to a Moving-Magnet phono stage. The Primary Phono USB boasts a built-in phono stage and optional USB output for recording vinyl to a PC or Mac. The Primary Phono USB is supplied



with RCA cables, but the use of a junction box allows for retro-upgrading with better cables. The Primary and Primary Phono USB turntables set out to prove that hifi quality turntables don't need to be complicated. Simply install the belt and connect it to a system in order to enjoy vinyl playback on an affordable device.

Both options are available with black, red or white matte finishes.

The Corelli Power Conditioner

After a two year development period, Akiko Audio has launched a power conditioner that doesn't rely on conventional power filtering techniques. Four internal units are responsible for an active reduction of high frequency noise. 'Power filtering is undesirable and should be avoided' says designer Marc van Berlo. 'The Corelli exclusively reduces noise, without any negative side-effects such as a loss of

dynamics or an unnatural sound. This makes our product unique.' The Akiko Audio Corelli connects to the power strip or wall socket that your equipment is connected to. The power conditioner is named after the famous Italian violist and composer, A. Corelli. 'No coincidence' says the producer: 'the Corelli is able to render the high tones and rich sounds of violins and acoustic instruments exquisitely.'



Trinnov Amethyst And Altitude32 Roon Ready



Trinnov Audio is announcing their support for Roon music software, with availability expected in the first quarter of 2017. All existing Amethyst and Altitude32

preamplifier/processors can become Roon-Ready with a simple, and free, software update that includes a 60-day complimentary Roon license.



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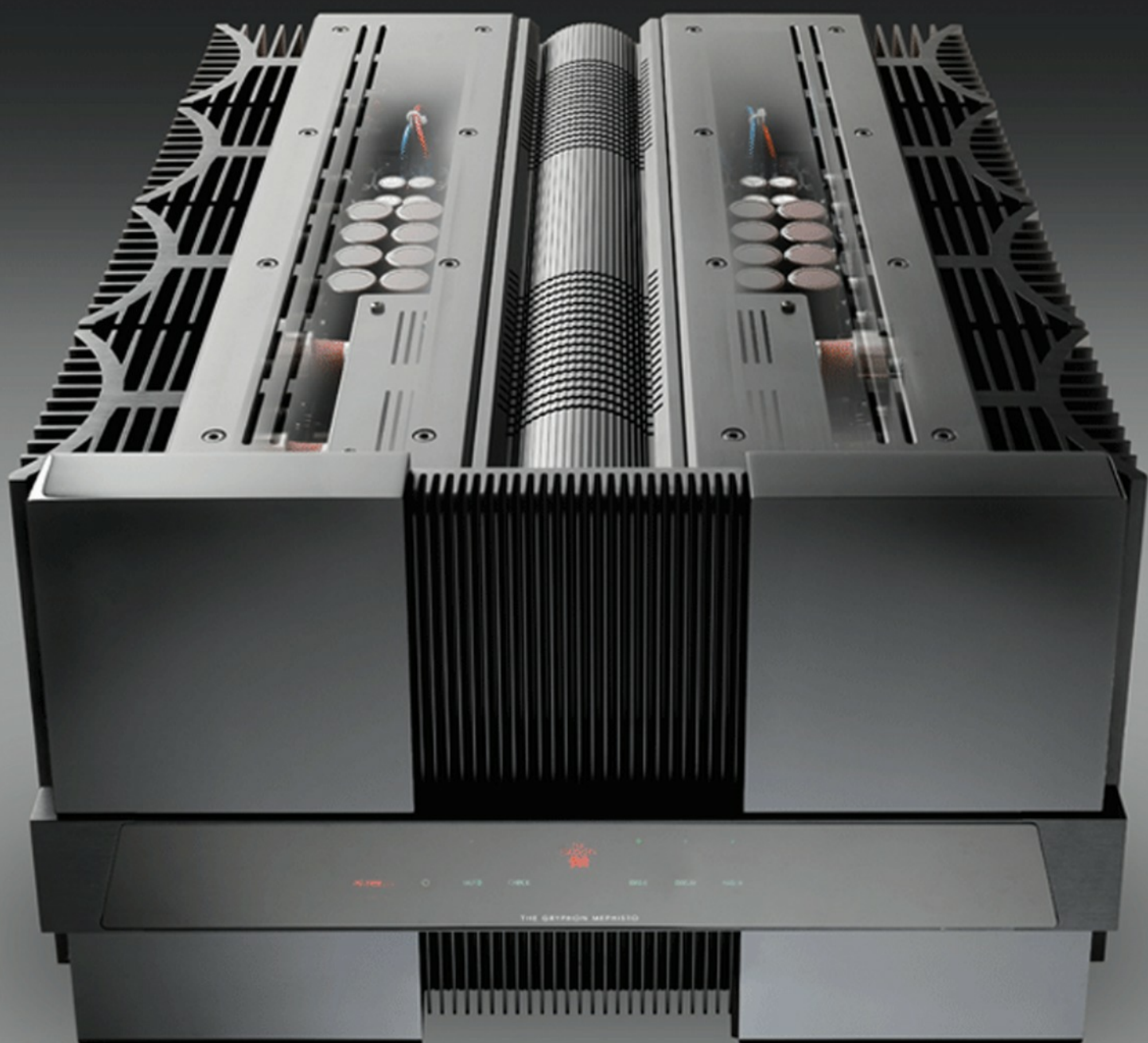
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DS Audio Master 1 Optical Phono Cartridge

PRICE: Cartridge and phonostage
£19995

AVAILABLE: NOW



In 2013 DS Audio pioneered the world's only optical phono cartridge, the DS-W1, which was an immediate hit in its native Japan. International distribution soon followed, now the company is proud to announce its new flagship, the Master 1. DS Audio's new flagship Master 1 features a number of advances over the company's original DS-W1. During a two-year development process, every aspect of design and construction was re-evaluated and no detail overlooked.

The Master 1 uses a Micro-ridge stylus in place of Shibata and a sapphire cantilever rather than boron. A duralumin body provides rigidity, while an enhanced optical-mechanical system enables the re-designed micro-optic sensor to be placed closer to the stylus, resulting in a much shorter optical path length. In addition, the use of a wire-suspended cantilever considerably lowers the compliance, making the Master 1 able to perform at its best with a much wider range of tonearms (whereas the DS-W1 should be paired with a low-mass tonearm for peak performance). The Master 1's matching phono stage/equaliser features fully discrete dual-mono analogue circuits. Each channel has its own dedicated power supply, while a third supply is dedicated to the cartridge's LED drive system. Both single-ended RCA and balanced XLR outputs are provided, with a choice of three subsonic filter settings. The unit's robust 24kg weight is the result of the twelve 120K µf electrolytic capacitors and three transformers housed within. To achieve the lowest possible impedance, a pure copper bus-bar provides the optimal connection between them.

Bowers & Wilkins P9

PRICE: \$899.99

AVAILABLE: NOW

Bowers & Wilkins today announced the P9 Signature. Which they say is their 'best sounding and most luxurious headphone to date.' P9 Signature was conceived to celebrate Bowers & Wilkins 50th anniversary. Engineered by the same team responsible for the 800 D3 loudspeaker, P9 Signature is Bowers & Wilkins' largest over-ear headphone. They have positioned the transducer to provide a more natural listening experience. They say that the wearer hears sound as if they are listening to a pair of stereo speakers rather than headphones. The headband adds strength, but is decoupled from each ear cup, stopping unwanted vibration from distorting the sound while also offering 'the very best in comfort'.



The headphones are crafted from Italian Saffiano leather, using a 'stamping' technique that gives the material a distinctive cross-hatch finish. Memory foam cushions in the ear pads help isolate noise from the outside world and mould to the shape of the user's head over time. The aluminium arms are foldable and the headphones come with an Alcantara® and Saffiano leather case. P9 Signature will come with a variety of high performance cables suitable for use at home and on the go. An additional Lightning cable is in development and will be out from early 2017 free of charge to those that have registered their P9 on Bowers & Wilkins' website.

Naim

Naim has confirmed that it is launching four new models in its Uniti Series.

New Uniti is the next incarnation of the Uniti family all-in-one players. Inspired by Naim's passion for music, new Uniti is an all-in-one streaming platform with five times the power of the previous generation. Combining seamless digital technology with a rich analogue soul to deliver sound quality and musical performance with ease of use and joy of ownership.

Ready to go – just add speakers, Naim say that 'Uniti gives instant access, total clarity and no compromise on quality, all within a beautiful all-in-one form. The advanced connectivity will unleash music wherever it is stored. New Uniti is unique, with bit-perfect ripping and music serving technologies, a completely new and state-of-the-art streaming platform delivering a unique



superior feature set, over-the-air updates, beautiful industrial design and true Naim high-fidelity sound.'

Uniti will be available to purchase from Naim specialist retailers. The components are priced as follows:

Naim Core £1,650 (inc. VAT)

Uniti Atom £1,600 (inc. VAT) and £1700 with HDMI

Uniti Star £2999 or £3150 inc. DAB (inc. VAT)

Uniti Nova £3800 or £3959 inc. DAB (inc. VAT)



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Cyrus Adds TIDAL To Streamers And Lyric



Cyrus has released the latest version of the software that powers its audio streamers and Lyric products to bring the TIDAL lossless audio streaming service to its new and existing customers. The embedded software streams high quality audio files from the TIDAL servers direct to the Cyrus unit, having the software resident within the Cyrus units also means that everything is controlled via the Cyrus Cadence App, available for iOS and Android devices, providing a single interface to control the system, browse files on a local network, and stream music over the internet via TIDAL.

From today, purchasers of any new Cyrus streamers and Lyric will be able to benefit from the updated software, which will ship pre-installed in their product. Existing users of the Stream X Signature, Stream Xa, Stream XP2,

Stream XP2 Qx, Stream X2, and Streamline2 models will be able to take their product to their local authorised Cyrus retailer for a free upgrade to the new software. Customers with Lyric models can update their firmware themselves at home. If users do not already possess a TIDAL subscription, they can benefit from a free three month trial which can be unlocked directly through the Cadence App.

Simon Freethy, Managing Director, welcoming the new service says, "The increasing take up of streaming services by consumers is evident in the figures released by the BPI. In 2015 there was a staggering 82% increase in the number of audio streams in the UK compared to 2014, at just shy of 27 billion streams. To cater for this growing demand, TIDAL, with its emphasis on streaming high quality files, was the obvious partner for Cyrus." He continues, "Our goal is to build a better music experience for our customers, and that meant giving them access to the highest quality streams possible to enable their Cyrus equipment to perform at its best. Now Cyrus customers can enjoy the convenience of an embedded streaming service which gives them the same high quality they currently enjoy from their CD collections. This brings them convenience and choice in their listening, with the added advantage of the Cyrus sound quality they love."

Black Rhodium Announces Tempest And Breeze Speaker Cables

The design of the Tempest and Breeze is based on the Twist, Twirl and Samba speaker cables but include many additional design features.

Tempest and Breeze are treated with Black Rhodium's

DCT++cryogenic processing treatment and come with 8 x 55g vibration stabilisers, High quality rhodium plated connectors, Rhodium Plated RCA plugs with hourglass silhouette, thick wall insulation for lower 'Proximity Effect' magnetic distortion and conductors wired in opposing direction for lower noise floor



3m pair Breeze Loudspeaker Cable
£1500.00

5m pair Breeze Loudspeaker Cable
£1900.00

3m pair Tempest Loudspeaker Cable
£2400.00

5m pair Tempest Loudspeaker Cable
£3200.00

New ProPhile-8 IEM From InEar



German headphone company, InEar, contacted us to tell us about their new IEM, the ProPhile-8. They said of their new product: 'To achieve a studio reference tuning across the whole frequency range, we have equipped our InEar ProPhile-8 with a 4-way crossover and 8 balanced armature drivers per side. Additionally, there are two switches on the inside of the earphone to separately boost low frequencies by +3dB and high frequencies starting at 8 kHz by +2dB. Based on a linear reference tuning for professional mixing and mastering, you can choose one of totally four different sound signatures to adjust to your audiophile preferences outside of the studio. You will rediscover your music thanks to easy natural reproduction of music in highest resolution, uncovering of subtle details, breathtaking transparency, huge sound-stage and perfect imaging!'

The matte housing of the ProPhile-8 is based on InEar's "StageDiver" series, and they use a cerumen filter to prevent earwax of entering the earphone. Blocked filters can easily be replaced by yourself in just a few steps. Included in the box is the ProPhile-8 earphone, 4 pairs of silicone ear tips (sizes XS, S, M and L), 3 pairs of Comply TS400 foam tips (sizes S, M and L), gold-plated 1/4" adapter, 3 cleaning cloths, InEar hard case IE13 and cerumen filter set H3.

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Wilson Audio Announce The WAMM Master Chronosonic

Wilson Audio have released the final prototype pictures of their huge new loudspeakers the Wilson WAMM Master Chronosonic. Wilson Audio say that these are Dave Wilson's 'Magnum Opus' and have taken five years of intense research. More news and pics when we have them



New Black Integrated From Bel Canto



Bel Canto Design Ltd., manufacturer of home audio electronics for 25 years, will begin shipping the new Black Integrated Amplifier the ACI 600 now.

Based on the 2015 Black Amplification system. The ACI 600 is constructed from a solid billet of aluminium. Bel Canto say: "It houses the most advanced integrated audio system available, seamlessly interfacing to the many audio source options available today, while maintaining the highest audio standards. This new generation processor based on Bel Canto's Advanced Asynchronous Audio Processor core platform has been in development for the past 2 years. Our A3P 64-bit processor controls the critical Asynchronous interfaces, custom FIR Filters, Tilt, EQ and Bass Management and other functions with the highest level of accuracy. The ACI 600 ULN Masterclock circuitry holds jitter below 40 Femtoseconds, ensuring pure sonic performance".

Burson Launch Cable+

Burson got in touch with us to tell us about their new product, the Cable+. "There are two bottlenecks preventing your smartphone, tablet and laptop from sounding hi-end. They are the low voltage output of these devices and the 1940 era audio cable connecting them to the audio amplifier. We have created a new type of audio cable for today's audio world. Our Cable+ removed both bottlenecks and ensures perfect synergy between your playback device and amplifier."





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Lector Strumenti Audio ZXT-70 Hybrid Integrated Line



Lector, from Italy, have launched their new hybrid integrated amplifier, the ZXT-70, which is available with mosfet output circuitry.

Power output: 70 Watt per channel @ 8 ohm, 100 Watt per channel @ 4 ohm sound as VFI700 class

Pioneer Launch XDP-300R Digital Audio Player

The XDP-300R supports many high-res audio formats including DSD (up to 11.2MHz) and FLAC/WAV (24bit/384kHz) files. Featuring technology usually reserved for high-end audio products, Pioneer say the XDP-300R is the best audio player they could build. Like the existing XDP-100R, this model is one of the first products in the world to support the new MQA format. The XDP-300R builds on the credentials of the XDP-100R by adding dual ESS DACs alongside a fully balanced pre-amp circuit. Taking further advantage of these added capabilities, a dedicated balanced headphone output has also been added to ensure the “finest performance possible with suitably equipped headphones”.



Available in late October, the Pioneer XDP-300R is available in black or silver with a UK SRP of £599.99

Leema Announce New Streamer

PRICE: £3995

AVAILABLE:NOW

Leema Acoustics, the internationally respected Welsh hi-fi manufacturer has partnered with leading music server software company Innuos, to develop a streaming music server system.

The new Sirius is a hi-fi-grade streaming music server system that provides a high-performance solution for the storage and playback of digital music. Developed in partnership with Innuos, Leema's ex-BBC engineers have combined audiophile performance with the convenience of a UPNP/DNLA-compatible music server.

Sirius is the latest edition to Leema's flagship Constellation range. It features a raft of audiophile-grade components centred on a powerful server-grade main circuit board with a high-speed quad-core processor with up to 8 gigabytes of system memory. The app-controlled server is available with huge storage reserves in two gigabyte increments up to an impressive eight terabytes. Sirius incorporates a high-performance TEAC optical drive for the one-time bit-perfect transfer of CD data to the hard drive.



Its straightforward operation makes digitising large music libraries simple. Sirius offers backup for CD audio, right up to lossless FLAC files and supports WAV, AIFF, ALAC, OGG Vorbis, AAC and MP3; USB 3.0 is available for audio backups.

A key feature of the Sirius is its high-quality DAC. The server benefits from an integrated asynchronous USB DAC based on a high-end ESS Sabre DAC chip and Xmos USB interface. The DAC supports 16, 24 and 32 bit-depths, from 44.1kHz up to 384kHz with DSD 64, 128 and 256 also supported. For consumers already invested in a high-end DAC, the Sirius' ultra-low-noise USB output offers Class 1, Class 2 and DoP external connections. Balanced

outputs via XLR and unbalanced outputs via RCA are also offered.

In a further nod to its audiophile credentials, Sirius benefits from a dual-Ethernet connection: one for routers and one for dedicated streamer connections. The device is compatible with a wide range of playback systems including: SONOS multi room; Naim Mu-so/Uniti; Denon HEOS; Squeezebox; Linn DS; Pioneer N-50A; Cambridge Audio CXN and Denon 720AE.

Further features include editable metadata and album art, support for Tidal, Spotify, BBC iPlayer and internet radio, plus simple importation from computers, USB and NAS drives. There's also a three-way linear power

Pro-Ject 6 Perspex Turntable

PRICE: £1300

AVAILABLE: NOW

The 6 Perspex turntable from Pro-Ject Audio Systems has been a staple of the company's range for many years. Now, the latest version takes the existing design but adds a few enhancements to improve the performance.

The 6 Perspex SB takes the same design as its predecessor, but utilises a superior motor.

The new perimeter drive-belt mechanism has been inspired by the recent introduction of the RPM 10 Carbon turntable, which uses a fully-decoupled motor. With the 6 Perspex SB, the motor sits within its own cut-out inside the main plinth, lined with damping material for reduced resonance. The motor itself is an AC design, which is regulated by its own built-in speed controller. This speed controller not only offers easy switching between 331/3 and 45rpm, but it also

generates an entirely fresh new sine wave for the motor – filtering out the fluctuations and distortions associated with a typical mains supply, for reduced resonance.

The turntable's sub-chassis is made of Corian®, a solid-surface material renowned for its isolation properties.



This sub-chassis is then isolated from the main plinth by magnetic power, effectively creating a “floating” platform free from unwanted vibrations. The precision-balanced vinyl sandwich platter rides on the sub-chassis utilising an inverted main bearing, which combines a stainless-steel axle with a ceramic ball. The platter's 4mm thick vinyl top-layer is the perfect interface for a playing record, and eliminates the need for any form of turntable mat. The platter is finished with a threaded spindle, to accommodate the supplied screw-able record clamp.

The 6 Perspex SB is finished with Pro-Ject's coveted 9CC Evolution tonearm for a true high-end experience. The 9" tonearm boasts a one-piece conical carbon fibre tube, TPE-damped counterweights and an inverted bearing design that allows for perfect tracking and minimal resonance, even with demanding pick-up cartridges.

The 6 Perspex SB is the complete audiophile turntable, but at a very appealing price.

Innuos Launch 4TB SSD Of Zenith

Due to the increasing demand for Hi-Res music, which requires more storage space, Innuos decided to launch a new version of the Zenith which they say is “ideal for Audiophiles who don't want to compromise sound quality for larger storage”.



With a triple linear power supply using Nichicon MUSE acoustic series capacitors, In-Memory playback with 4GB cache, Medical-grade mains filter

Chord Company Announce Tuned ARAY Headphone Cable

PRICE: £275

AVAILABLE: NOW



For the first time in over 30 years, The Chord Company has applied its cable-building expertise to a headphone cable. The new ShawCan, which will make its debut at October's headroom show features the company's Tuned ARAY conductor technology.

The Chord Company's ShawCan features high-quality silver-plated conductors with PTFE insulation. The shield is a composite design that doesn't just shield but helps to minimise unwanted mechanical noise — an inherent problem with headphone cables. The conductors are enclosed in a black outer jacket that is more than just a braid to tidy the conductors: the jacket is actually designed to further reduce mechanical noise.

ShawCan is available in a range of terminations to suit most of the leading headphones including: Shure, Audeze, Mr Speakers Ether and many others. The ShawCan is also available with the industry-standard 2-pin connector used on many IEMs.

and Ultra low-noise USB Audio Output, the Zenith is designed to isolate power noise from your HiFi. You can play Hi-Res music up to 32 bit/384 KHz, DSD256 as well as MQA, when connecting to compatible DACs. All Zen MkII series models, including the Zenith, are powered by innuOS – Innuos' own operating system developed in-house. It enables a complete computer-free operation for managing CD ripping, importing digital music and editing album data and cover art.

Paint It Black

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

Tony Bolton

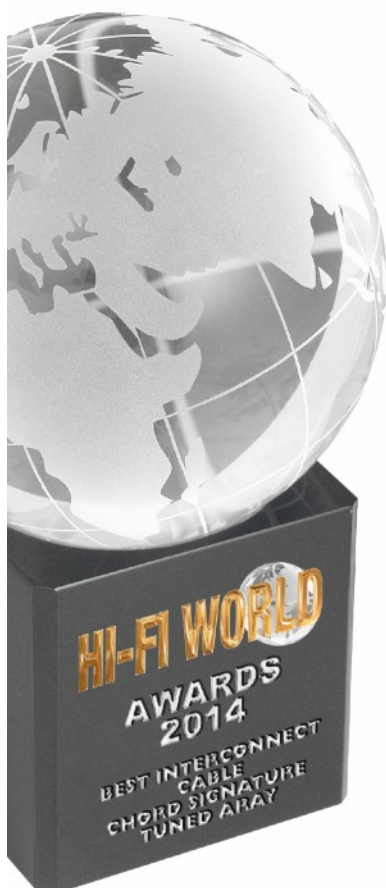


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TANNOY Prestige Manufacturing Will Remain In Scotland



MUSIC, owner of TANNOY, has stated that it remains committed to Scotland and will continue to build the TANNOY Prestige as well as other high-end loudspeakers in the country. The company which already builds current Prestige models at its manufacturing plant in Coatbridge, is considering relocating to a new plant following large investment from parent company MUSIC. The new facility will also see substantial investment in innovation and production, as well as a museum and show room for the brand's 90 year heritage. TANNOY will celebrate its 90th anniversary this year and has been based in Scotland since the 1970's.

Uli Behringer, head of MUSIC, commented: "We are excited about the future of TANNOY and we believe we have developed a sound strategic direction to protect its rich history and heritage. TANNOY was facing great economic pressures and we believe that our plan will ensure the longevity of the brand. We are planning to relocate manufacturing to a new plant in Scotland which will deliver modernised and streamlined operations while continuing our involvement in local communities providing employment in the region. This will secure TANNOY to remain a serious competitor in the high-end residential marketplace." Behringer continued: "Since the acquisition of the famous UK audio companies MIDAS, KLARK TEKNIK and TURBOSOUND, we have hired close to 150 new engineers and other staff in the UK which demonstrates our commitment to the country."

Music also announced the appointment of a new Vice President to lead its Lifestyle Division. James Bradbury, a versatile executive with robust general management skills in the international marketplace, in areas such as connected home and digital marketing, is excited about taking TANNOY's Lifestyle Division to new heights. Uli Behringer said, "We are excited about James joining our team, his strong focus on customer experience and infectious passion make him the perfect person to lead our Lifestyle Division. MUSIC is all about passion and we are excited to energeise TANNOY with James on board!"

"My priority is to re-invigorate TANNOY into a 21st century business by leveraging the incredible capability of MUSIC's organisation, taking advantage of the huge investments that the business is injecting into research and development as well as state-of-the-art production facilities. It is a privilege to be working with such a revered brand and extremely exciting to be part of the mission to bring the most innovative and seamless experiences to our customers," adds Bradbury.

KEF LS50 Wireless Launched

PRICE: £2000

AVAILABLE: NOVEMBER

KEF has announced the LS50 Wireless, a completely active, digital and wireless lifestyle audio system consisting of two speakers whose connection to your music source is completely wireless. Designed in honour of the 55th anniversary of KEF, the LS50 Wireless is closely based on the design of KEF's LS50 loudspeakers.

KEF told us, "All the outstanding acoustic features of the original LS50s are retained. The cabinet, Uni-Q driver, port and cabinet bracing are all the same as in the award - winning original design. KEF's world-renowned Uni-Q driver technology places the tweeter in the exact acoustic centre of the bass/midrange cone, so that both act as a single point source that disperses the sound more evenly throughout the room

than any rival speaker. To these original elements we have added a host of state of the art technologies that allow LS50 - level audio quality within a sleek, 21st century lifestyle product".

The LS50 Wireless also features 2 x 230 watt amplification in a bi-amp dual mono configuration and a time correcting DSP crossover. The system uses 92kHz/24-bit high resolution digital signal path and a dedicated DAC for each channel. It features a variety both wireless and more traditional wired connections.



Available in Titanium grey/Red, Gloss Black/Blue, and Gloss White/Copper finishes.



Performance connections.

Our Mavros cables have gathered extensive praise and multiple awards over the last couple of years, becoming best-sellers around the world. So when it came to improving them, we thought the best thing to do was to give you a little less. In our 'Ultra' wideband RCA plugs, reduced mass means less distortion and minimal signal loss.

Sometimes of course, less can mean more.

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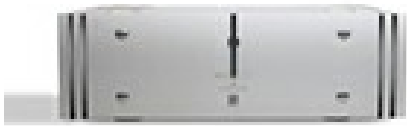
atlascables.com



ATC Announce P2 Amplifier

PRICE: £3125

AVAILABLE: NOW



Hand-built by ATC in the UK, the P2 class A/B stereo power amplifier is designed to complement the brand's range of hifi preamplifiers aesthetically and operationally. Rated at 300W continuous power per channel and developed in tandem with the P2-Pro studio amplifier, the ATC P2 is a Dual Mono design, keeping the power supplies, signal and

return paths discreet. This approach ensures that the amplifier will achieve the maximum signal separation with minimal crosstalk, and that inter-modulation between channels via the power supplies is reduced to an absolute minimum across a frequency range of 400kHz. It also means that the power delivery from one channel cannot affect the specified power available from the other.

Within a new low-vibration chassis design featuring a precision machined 12.7mm brushed aluminium front panel, the P2's layout includes a massive, custom-made 400 VA low-noise transformer for each channel and an output stage involving 3 pairs of MOSFET devices per channel to achieve peak current output of over 15 amps. The gain of the P2 matches that of the lower power P1 (150W/ch) so that they can be used together in bi-amp or tri-amp systems connected via the amplifier's 'Link' phono inputs/outputs.

The ATC P2 offers balanced XLR and unbalanced 'link' phono inputs, 'link' phono outputs, proprietary 4mm speaker terminals, and IR remote control.

NAD And Bluesound Become Roon Ready Partners

NAD Electronics and Bluesound, announced that they will become a Roon Ready Partner. The integration as a Roon Ready Partner will provide subscribers of Roon's intuitive, information-rich music library management software the ability to connect to BluOS-enabled devices from NAD and Bluesound. The integration is expected to be live before the end of 2016. By analysing a music collection, Roon allows users to explore the connections between the artists, composers, performers, producers, who created the music they love most, providing valuable insights and helps them to discover new music. In combination with NAD and Bluesound's hardware, music lovers will be able to stream high resolution music throughout the home, to one or many speakers simultaneously or individually.

"We are proud to partner with Roon, as it's an integration that has been widely requested across all of our channels," said Greg Stidsen, Director of Technology and Product Development for Lenbrook (owners of NAD and Bluesound, among others). "It's a partnership that reinforces NAD's and Bluesound's commitment to expanding the richness of networked and high-resolution audio and music experiences our users and fans desire."

MQA Pick Up Industry Awards

The team at MQA, the technology which delivers master quality audio in a file small enough to stream, picked up three awards at two industry events this month.

British Engineering Excellence Awards

The British Engineering Excellence Awards (BEEA) were held on 6 October in London. Organised by b2b publisher MA Business, the awards acknowledge the achievements of UK engineering companies that compete on a global level. The Judges' Special Award is given at the discretion of the judges to a recipient that, in their opinion, deserves particular recognition. The panel of BEEA judges unanimously agreed that "the development of the MQA audio

codec – and its positive reception by leading consumer electronics brands – shows the UK is more than capable of holding its own in this highly competitive market."

Rocky Mountain International Hifi Press Awards

Meanwhile across the pond, at the Rocky Mountain International HifiPress Awards (RIHPA), MQA's founder, Bob Stuart, was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award, while the company scored a further success by winning in the Innovation category for the second year running. The RIHPAs celebrate success in the high-end audio industry, with winners selected via anonymous ballot by specialists from some of the world's leading high-end audio

publications. The ceremony was held on 7 October during Denver's annual Rocky Mountain Audio Fest (RMAF), which brings together more than 400 companies in the consumer audio and home entertainment sectors from across the globe.

MQA founder & CTO, Bob Stuart, commented, "It's a huge honour to be recognised by both the British engineering community and the global audio press. As well as acknowledging the hard work of the team, these awards demonstrate the value of strong partnerships and I'd like to thank all our hardware, music service and label partners for their belief and tremendous support."



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The Ensis was developed to fulfill one of the most cherished wishes: to fully satisfy both the ear and the eye with a stylish, compact and truly full range high end floor standing loudspeaker. The three-way cabinet design resembles a musical note. Each component is engineered to deliver exceptional clean sound and live-like precision in reproduction. Its unique qualities satisfy the most critical listeners, but most of all ensure you of long hours of listening pleasure!

www.aequoaudio.com

Dynamic Sounds Associates Amp I Mono Block Amplifier

PRICE: \$25000/pair

AVAILABLE: NOW



Dynamic Sounds Associates introduced the Amp I mono block amplifier at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest this October. Each Amp I produces 125 watts of pure Class A power and is of solid state design employing an all-JFET/MOSFET design using DC coupled circuit topology following a source follower input with blocking capacitors to provide a constant input impedance and prevent input DC offsets from damaging speakers.

The amplifier has no loop feedback in order to prevent transient intermodulation distortion and to provide a very wide power bandwidth, without concern for output phase shifts caused by speaker loading or amplifier time delay. The output driver uses 8 of the legendary Hitachi power MOSFETs in a push-pull configuration with a bias current of 3 amps to achieve 125W of Class A power output into an 8 ohm load. Each unit has separate power transformers, power supplies and voltage regulators for the amplifier, driver, and output stages.

Spendor D9 Loudspeaker

The new Spendor D9 is a 3-way, 4-driver, floor-standing loudspeaker. Spendor told us: "The D9 incorporates all the engineering innovation developed for our 3-way Spendor D7 loudspeaker, but the new D9 is far more than just a big D7..."

The Spendor LPZ tweeter is built around a stainless steel front plate which forms a damped acoustic chamber directly in front of a lightweight woven polyamide diaphragm. The front plate incorporates a phase correcting micro foil to equalise sound wave path lengths across the diaphragm surface. Simultaneously it generates a symmetrical pressure environment on both faces of the diaphragm so the tweeter always operates in a balanced linear mode. The front plate also provides mechanical protection for the delicate tweeter dome. The D9 mid-bass drive unit has an advanced EP77 polymer cone. Housed in an isolated enclosure at the top of the cabinet, it handles only mid-range frequencies which eliminates mid-low frequency inter-modulation. The two D9 low frequency drivers have ultra-rigid, two part bonded, lightweight Kevlar composite cone assemblies. The bass drivers are in a large dedicated low-frequency acoustic enclosure. All three drivers feature cast magnesium alloy chassis, high efficiency motor systems, optimised electro-dynamic damping, and excellent thermal dissipation for wide dynamic range. New polymer surrounds with stable molecular composition reduce driver break-in time.

In the D9 low frequencies are handled by two specially designed bass drivers in a substantial volume enclosure. For low frequency response and power handling the enclosure is ported, but, say Spendor, "not like any conventional loudspeaker. The D9 incorporates our innovative Fifth Generation Spendor Linear Flow Port Technology. Inspired by Formula 1 diffuser technology it offers significant advantages over any conventional port or transmission line loading. An aerodynamically profiled central baffle, like an aircraft wing, creates a tapered twin-venturi port. Air at the port extremities is smoothly decelerated and there is a further reduction in air velocity in the large tapered area at the cabinet base. The result is evenly balanced acoustic pressure and linear air-flow

along the whole length of the port. Rapidly decreasing air velocity at the port extremities creates an air-curtain effect to eliminate port noise and spurious mid-band radiation. A carefully optimised combination of bass driver electrical and mechanical parameters, enclosure volume, air flow and wide-band (very low Q & very low phase shift) alignment allows the D9 to deliver deep, fast, articulate bass in a way no conventional loudspeaker can challenge". In the D9 there is no low frequency damping, the sound path, from the bass drivers to the listening room, is unrestricted.

UK retail price is £7,495.00 per pair for special finishes and £6,495.00 per pair for standard finishes.



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TEAC Adds Bluetooth Capability To

PRICE: £399

AVAILABLE: NOW



TEAC has added a new model to its range of analogue turntables with the launch of the TN-400BT, the first standalone TEAC turntable with Bluetooth capability. Available in five finishes, the TN-400BT allows users to simplify their music playback system by wirelessly streaming their records to Bluetooth-enabled headphones and speakers.

An evolution of TEAC's TN-300 turntable, the TN-400BT also features several technological improvements. The onboard phono EQ amplifier (designed to support moving magnet cartridges such as the Audio-Technica AT-95E that's supplied), provides a way to connect the turntable to hifi amplifiers and systems that lack turntable inputs. A new subsonic filter prevents warped records from generating poor quality, uncontrolled low bass. The phono stage also has a USB-output (16-bit/48kHz) for digital archiving onto a PC. The Bluetooth wireless streaming system is equipped with the higher quality aptX and AAC codecs and an LED indicator lets you know when the turntable is connected.

A new low-resistance spindle has also been developed together with a brass bearing and die-cast aluminium platter. The static S-shaped tonearm features a universal-type headshell. All three turntable speeds – including 78rpm – are supported and switching between them involves turning a knob.

Mission Appoint Exertis Unlimited As UK



Mission, the British loudspeaker brand, is pleased to announce the appointment of Exertis Unlimited as the exclusive UK distributor and pan-European e-tail partner of all Mission branded products. The new distribution deal comes as Mission enters an exciting phase in its 40-year history, with the launch of the new LX speaker range – including the LX-2.

Steve Macintyre, UK Sales and Marketing Manager at Mission's parent company IAG, said: "This is an exciting time for Mission; the new LX Series is already going down a storm and the roadmap for 2017 is extremely ambitious. The appointment of leading tech distributor Exertis Unlimited helps to further differentiate Mission from IAG's other prestigious audio brands, engaging new routes to market whilst growing Mission's sales profile across Europe."

Richard Booth, Business Manager for Mission at Exertis Unlimited, said: "It's an honour to be working with a brand with the heritage, popularity and quality of Mission; it's a stunning addition to our Premium Audio portfolio. We look forward to introducing Mission's evolving line-up to retailers and customers."



Pro-Ject
AUDIO SYSTEMS

The Classic



August 2016



Best Turntable 2016-2017

An Instant Classic

The Classic was released to celebrate Pro-Ject Audio Systems' 25th Anniversary. This retro-inspired turntable has been designed from the ground-up to combine timeless aesthetics with modern technology and audiophile sound performance.

The striking frame design is available in three wood finishes, and provides clever decoupling between the acoustically treated aluminium platter and the motor.

The new motor is powered by a built-in generator, for a consistent performance, and drives a sub-platter that sits atop a precision-engineered main bearing.

The all-new 9" Classic Tonearm is made of aluminium and carbon fibre, for unrivalled rigidity while retaining a low mass. The arm benefits from a new bearing system for completely free movement and is supplied as standard with an Ortofon 2M Silver cartridge.

Available Now for £799.00 (UK SRP)



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Mytek Introduces Manhattan II DAC



Mytek Digital, the second MQA® license after Meridian to ship an Audiophile DAC with MQA technology, will be introducing their MQA-capable Manhattan II DAC. The new Manhattan II DAC is a reference USB/Network DAC/Preamplifier with MQA decoder, 384k PCM and DSD256, phono and line analogue preamplifier and a reference quality headphone amplifier.

It can integrate digital streaming and vinyl analogue playback for reference listening on headphones and speakers, when used with the optional Phono input card. An optional "Roon Ready" Network Card turns the DAC into a streamer. Designed with the new 130dB Sabre ES9038 32bit DAC chipset, the unit handles PCM up to 384k, 32bit, MQA, native DSD up to DSD256, DXD and 130dB Dynamic Range. A new Mytek Femto Clock™ is incorporated into their C777 Clocking architecture and Wordclock input and output allows stacking multiple units for multichannel operation, including multichannel DSD and SACD.ISO playback. There are two separate, oversized, isolated power supplies, one each for the analogue and digital stages and a 1dB analogue attenuator circuit for main out and headphones, with a choice of 1dB step digital 32bit attenuator or purist relay bypass.

The Manhattan II's digital inputs are USB2 Class2 (OSX, Linux driverless, all formats, up to 32bit integer), AES/EBU, 3X S/PDIF, Toslink/ADAT, (up to 24 bit, PCM up to 192k, up to DSD64 DOP) and SDIF3 DSD up to DSD256. (Its two extra additional SPDIF inputs equals a total of three plus optical.) All front panel functions can be also controlled from a computer via Mytek Control Panel App. Analogue inputs: RCA Line In switchable to Phono with Optional Phono Card, second pair of RCA's is Line In, third pair is XLR Balanced Line In. Analogue inputs are routed through minimal path (no caps) analogue attenuator directly to analogue and headphone outputs. The headphone function offers a reference high current, high transient headphone amp, 500mA, 6 Watts, 0 Ohm out impedance. Its dual headphone jacks are designed to drive the most demanding headphones with +/-12V swing. Balanced operation is possible with an optional Mytek Balanced Headphone Adapter.

An enhanced front panel menu structure offers easier operation over its predecessor. Mytek's Control Panel App allows full control from computer, the included Apple IR remote and future control via an iPad App (tba in 2017). The Manhattan II's sculpted form was the result of Mytek's working with industrial designers. The bi-metal fabrication of its inner steel chassis covered in a California-made custom-milled aluminium enclosure. The optional Precision Phono Analogue Preamp Card offers a M/M, M/C Phono Preamplifier with custom nickel core step up transformers, relay switchable and tunable. Input impedances, transformer ratios, RIAA curves and choice of gain can be changed within the menu or using the remote via relay switches. Optional card is sold separately and is user-installable. The optional "Roon Ready" Network Card turns the Manhattan II into a network streamer with 24/192k and DSD64 maximum throughput. Compatible w/ Roon, Airplay, DLNA/UpnP, Spotify Connect, IOS and Android.

Shipping in late November, the Manhattan II will be uniquely available in three finishes: Silver, Black and Gold. MSRP: \$5,995 US/Worldwide or €5,995 (VAT incl.) in EU. The Phono Preamplifier Card is optional at \$1,495; Roon Ready Network Card is optional at \$995. Current Manhattan owners will be offered a full upgrade to Manhattan II for \$995, starting December, 2016. Upgrade requires replacement of the motherboard, and can be performed by Mytek's Brooklyn, NY office, Mytek EU Office in Warsaw and importing dealers worldwide.

Pro-Ject Launch Essential III Turntable

PRICE: £239

AVAILABLE: NOW



Pro-Ject Audio Systems have announced the immediate availability of a new, and they say "dramatically improved" version of the Essential II, the Essential III.

The Essential III boasts a series of improvements. It retains the simple yet elegant frame of the Essential II. Made from high-quality MDF for its acoustically neutral character, and now wrapped in a high-gloss paint finish (available in red, white or black). The plinth is then mounted on three anti-vibration feet, for decoupling from the surface on which the turntable is placed. One of the most obvious changes with the new model is in the use of an upgraded Acryl-IT E platter. Available separately for £85.00 (SRP), the Acryl-IT E provides an inert platform for your vinyl records to reduce the unwanted effects of resonance. Available for use with and without the supplied felt mat, the platter uses a stainless steel bearing in a bronze bushing with Teflon-lined bottom for smooth rotation.

The motor is a premium, synchronous AC design that's driven by a built-in signal generator and there is a brand new aluminium pulley. The Essential III is pre-fitted with an 8.6" aluminium tonearm. The gimbal bearing assembly uses sapphire bearings to allow for smooth tracking across a record, and the supplied counterweight allows for a variety of pick-up cartridges to be installed. The tonearm is supplied with an Ortofon OM 10 cartridge installed. Superior to the Essential II's OM 5E cartridge, the OM 10 uses an elliptical profile and precision micro-mechanics.



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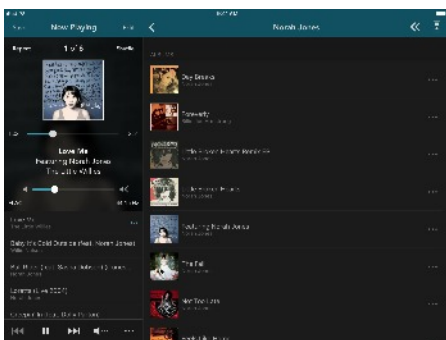


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Arcam Release MusicLife App 1.3.0



Developed in house at Arcam, MusicLife is a UPnP streaming app, that is regularly updated to add features and functions to Arcam's range of networked of HiFi and AV components.

Able to control local streaming music from Mac / PC / NAS drive etc, directly from iPad, iPhone or iPod Touch, the latest V1.3.0 brings internet streaming from TIDAL and Qobuz, plus Internet Radio and Podcasts, to Arcam's latest Disc Players and One Box Solo Systems. In addition to the streaming and extended UPnP functions, the app plays media from local servers to any Bluetooth device, enabling streaming to almost anything paired with an Arcam miniBlink or rBlink Bluetooth DAC.

MusicLife features a control page for connected devices that offers remote control of a large selection of the

products functions and features. You can control the Media Player in Arcam network-based music systems, including features such as playback of content stored on iPad, iPhone or iPod Touch, shuffle & repeat playback etc. Bluetooth playback allows you to play music from iPhone / iPad or NAS drive to any Bluetooth device and you can now also play from Mac, PC, network drive or iPhone/iPad directly to the Arcam Solo bar. Using an Arcam rBlink or miniBlink and the MusicLife app, you can turn any audio component into an iPad, iPhone controlled network music streamer. Simply plug an rBlink or miniBlink into any audio product device with stereo inputs.

Atlas Cables Introduces Four Dedicated Replacement Turntable Cables

Atlas Cables, has added to its range of analogue cables with the introduction of four new replacement turntable cables – Element TT, Element Tonearm, Hyper TT and Hyper Tonearm. In response to the vinyl renaissance, Atlas has taken the step to offer its top selling cables with the addition of earth cables (Element TT and Hyper TT) and in the case of the Element and Hyper Tonearm, utilised its dedicated straight or right angled 5-pin Din connector to connect straight into the bottom of compatible tonearms.

Element TT & Tonearm

The Element signal conductor is made of high quality OFC (Oxygen Free Copper) copper encased in cross linked Low Density Polypropylene (XLPE). A fully-shielded, pseudo balanced design, the Element is designed and constructed to provide maximum resistance to RFI (Radio Frequency Interference), which has a particularly negative effect on the delicate signal provided by a turntable cartridge.

The TT variant is fitted with Atlas' proprietary Integra non-magnetic RCA plugs both ends and comes supplied with a separate spade-terminated ground lead. The Tonearm version is fitted with Atlas' own precision-turned, hard gold-plated 5-pin Din (straight or right-angled versions available) at the tonearm end and is also supplied with a spade-terminated ground lead.

Hyper TT & Tonearm

The Hyper signal consists of two independent channel conductors produced from OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) high purity, single grain copper encapsulated within a low-loss Fluorated Ethylene Propylene (FEP) dielectric.

As with the Element TT, the Hyper TT is fitted with Atlas' own low-mass, non-compression, constant impedance, self-cleaning, solder-free construction Integra RCA plug at both ends, whilst the Tonearm version is fitted with the same 5-pin



Din connector. Both versions are supplied with a separate spade-terminated ground lead.

Commenting on the launch of this new range of turntable replacement cables, Kevin Kelly, Managing Director at Atlas Cables, said, "Having seen a significant increase in turntable sales over the last couple of years, it was inevitable that there would be demand for turntable versions of our most popular models. These new products not only offer Atlas customers the opportunity for a complete cable solution from source to speakers, but also enables new customers to hear for themselves just how significant a difference upgrading existing turntable cables can make to the enjoyment of their valuable vinyl records."

Available now, prices start from £82.50 for the Element cables and £190.00 Hyper cables for a meter pair inc VAT. Hand-built in Scotland.



AZURE B-40 v. 2

Say BONJOUR to that speaker!



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Loewe Launches Klang 1 Speaker

PRICE: £450

AVAILABLE: NOW

Loewe, the German manufacturer of televisions and AV equipment, has announced the first of a new generation of speakers called 'klang' ('klang' means 'sound' in German). The klang 1 is a pair of satellite speakers designed to work in many configurations, from stereo to surround sound.

Featuring a cylindrical design, each klang 1 speaker is covered with black acoustic material, with no visible screws, seams or fixings anywhere on the casing. A choice of dedicated stand options – wall-mount, integrated table base or stainless steel floor stand – ensures the speakers can be placed virtually anywhere in the room. Klang 1 also features gilded metal clamps for the speaker cables and hidden cable management that uses a magnetic cover to hide the connections from view.

The klang 1 utilises an enhanced, three-inch full-range drive unit. The speakers can be used in a full Loewe system, integrating with Loewe TVs and active subwoofers, or with any amplifier.



When combined, the klang 1 speakers and Subwoofer 300 form a neat 2.1 speaker system, complete with fully integrated power amplification. The klang 1 also benefits from the subwoofer's built-in signal processing. Add a Loewe TV with onboard Dolby Digital/DTS decoding into the mix and the TV acts as the centre speaker in a 3.1 configuration, with a pair of klang 1s for the left/right channels, powered by the Subwoofer 300's built-in amplification. Add another pair of klang 1s, and a second Subwoofer 300, and you've got a full 5.2 surround sound system, without requiring any external processing or amplification. When used with a Loewe TV, all sound parameters can be adjusted via the TV's remote control. The combination of Loewe TV, speakers and subwoofer all operate switching on and off together from just a single remote command.

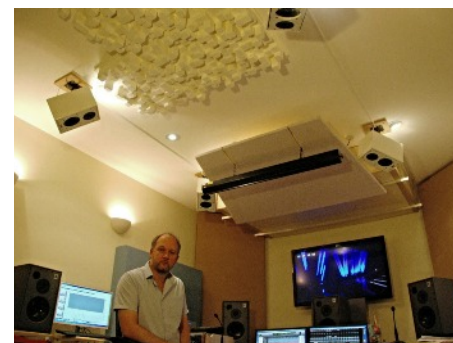
PureAudioProject Revises Trio10 Timeless Open Baffle Speakers

First played at RMAF, the revised Trio10 Timeless, was named by show visitors as 'breath-taking', and it will soon start selling for less than 3,000.-US\$, delivered. PureAudioProject say "We hope these narrow speakers will open many hearts and homes for Open Baffle and we managed to bring their price to under 3,000.-US\$ (incl. shipping), without compromising whatsoever on sonic performances, construction and looks".



Featuring drivers that are made by Morel specifically for PureAudioProject and for Open Baffle, the two field proven PAP1075 bass/mid woofer and Morel's soft dome tweeter reproduce bass down to 40HZ. The Trio10 Timeless woofers and crossovers are similar to the ones used in the Trio10 MundorfAMT and the two models differ only by the Morel soft dome tweeter and a jumper position on the crossover.

ACE Post Production Choose Harbeth For Dolby Atmos Upgrade



North London post production facility, ACE has a reputation for mixing some of the UK's biggest TV music shows, including Later with Jools Holland and Glastonbury for the BBC. Its sound facility is managed by Tudor Davies and Richard Sillitto.

Tudor says "We have long used Harbeth for our monitoring, so when this upgrade to a 7.4.1 speaker layout was planned we decided to continue with what we liked and trusted. Our system now has 7 x M30.1s and 4 x M20.1s. We have been very pleased with how similar the midrange and highs are on the two models, this is critical if you are panning sounds around the room."

Dolby Atmos is an immersive audio format, in a 7.4.1 set-up there are 7 speakers in a circle around the room, with 4 in the ceiling. Many blockbuster films are now mixed in Dolby Atmos, with Blu-ray DVDs releasing 7.4.1 audio.

Avid Acquires Exclusive Nexidia Licensing Rights

Avid today announced it has completed another development for the MediaCentral® Platform by exclusively licensing the rights to develop and commercialise media and entertainment technologies and solutions from Nexidia, a developer of dialogue and audio analysis products.

Avid will integrate Nexidia's media and entertainment products, like Dialogue Search and Illuminate with Comply, QC, and Align modules into the MediaCentral Platform, adding new content discovery capabilities, and expanded quality assurance, reporting and content repair capabilities



MC Step-Up Transformers
Phono Amplifiers
Pre Amplifiers



Dan D'Agostino Progression Mono Amplifier

The Progression mono amplifier is the largest and most powerful amplifier that the company has made, delivering 500 watts into 8 ohms, doubling to 1,000 watts into 4 ohms and doubling again to 2,000 watts into 2 ohms.

The Progression circuitry borrows greatly from our D'Agostino's Momentum amplifiers. Its design couples their core circuit topologies and introduces a new Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems topology, the Super Rail. The Super Rail, counter-intuitively, uses additional higher voltage power supplies in the input stage than the main output stage. This higher voltage front end provides headroom for the output circuitry. It employs a fully complementary driver stage, outfitted with 84 output transistors—42 for the positive signal and 42 for the negative signal, a nearly 3,000 VA power supply transformer, and 400,000 microfarads of power supply storage capacitance.

The look of the Momentum amplifiers' power meters, inspired by the elegant faces of classic Swiss watches, continues with the Progression series. The Progression mono amplifier features a new meter design with a 90-degree needle swing, driven by a high-speed

ballistic circuit that enhances the meter's responsiveness. The longer swing allows the needle to cover the amplifier's entire output range. The Venturi-style heatsink design premiered in the Momentum amplifiers has been adapted to the cooling needs of the Progression mono

amplifier by enlarging the row of openings to each heatsink. Each heatsink is milled from a single, 48.5-pound (22-kilogram) aluminium billet. Pictured in silver, the Progression mono amplifier is also available in black.



Roksan Release The Pink Turntable

Roksan Audio have released a limited special edition version of their Radius 7 turntable. 'The Pink' turntable not only offers a new cosmetic change for audiophiles, but with every piece sold Roksan will also make a charitable donation to one of the UK's leading breast cancer support charities, Breast Cancer Care.

Breast Cancer Care was founded in 1973 to support those diagnosed with breast cancer, and their families. The charity uses their resources to provide practical and emotional support, bring people affected by breast cancer together, campaign for improvement in standards of support and care and to help promote the importance of early detection.

In all other ways The Pink offers the same performance as the original Radius 7. The Radius 7 employs a dual-layer Perspex plinth construction to effectively decouple the turntable's core components from each other. The newest Radius also boasts an improved drive motor for control over the rotational force of the platter, as well as the convenience of pushing a button to switch between 33 and 45rpm. Elsewhere the turntable benefits from an acrylic platter, silicone drive belt, premium bearing system and is supplied as standard with a Nima uni-pivot tonearm. The Pink takes the Radius 7 and gives it a brand new look, while also doing something good for a great cause.

SRP £2,050.00



The Pink differs from the standard Radius 7 principally thanks to the pink tint in the glass-effect plinth. However, it's not just the turntable which has changed – The Pink also employs a special finish to the Nima tonearm, where the arm tube has its own subtle pink shading. Aside from these cosmetic enhancements,

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Westminster Lab Unum Power Amplifiers

By Janine Elliot

Westminster Lab makes no claims as to how good it is, rather just invite you to enter into their 'new dimension' of music experience. According to them words are totally futile. But that would make for a short review, so, not known for keeping quiet, Janine Elliot wanted to tell readers about this unique amp costing £32 000

WESTMINSTER LAB UNUM POWER AMPLIFIERS



The name WestminsterLab is a result of 29 year old boss Angus Leong and his two friends meeting in London to discuss starting a company making exotic hifi and the name they chose seemed to fit very well; Westminster has old school architecture but inside is a high-tech centre of the UK. This is an apt description, too, of his Unum power amplifier up for review here; with a minimalist mono-block design that could easily sit in the Tate Gallery and which hides considerable high-tech engineering ideas inside it. Angus took GCSEs, A-levels and appropriately both a Bachelor and Master degree in architecture whilst in Britain, though he is Hong Kong born from where the Unum is handcrafted and designed; only the cables department of the company is in the UK. He started listening to music at the age of 12 and soon realised he couldn't afford the high-end products he loved so started making his own gear. Much later he met some friends and started making cables, and now he is manufacturing both the Unum and a variety of cables, some of which I used in this review.

At £32,000 for the basic Unum, £42,000 for the Unum Edition and £66,000 for the Unum Connoisseur these are by no means cheap, but the amount of hand crafting in these product puts most companies to shame, whatever their price. This is a 30kg block of 6082 aluminium, which is then machined down to 8kg for everything else to be tightly packed inside, taking the weight of the entry model to 21kg, rising to

23kg for the top Connoisseur model. Clues to the rise in weight relate to the addition of stainless steel, and improvements in design and components, which also put up the price. In the £44,000 model, for example, there is a better power supply, better matching of transistors and resistors and a gold plated heatsink. Facilities in the more expensive models include things like 12v remote trigger.

The finishes included 'Premium Rose Gold' for an additional £4,500.00 and 'Platinum' for £5,500.00. There are even options for further ancillary improvements to be made, such as replacing the gold plated copper heatsink with a dark glossy black DLC (Diamond Like Carbon) coated copper heatsink. This material is deposited onto the copper with a technology called Physical Vapour Deposition which offers, according to WestminsterLab, a durable surface which "enhances thermal and audio performance". On each corner of the unit there are huge machined brass grounding spikes which you can screw from above to alter their height and then place stainless steel finishing corner pieces over the top once the two mono-blocks are made level.

The looks and construction are a major part of the design of each of the 23.2cm x 7.2cm x 50.1 cm mono units, though care in design of the electronics is equally painstakingly thought out. Components in this Class-A/b design are sourced from a wide variety of manufacturers and types, carefully

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WESTMINSTER LAB UNUM POWER AMPLIFIERS

This is a very special amplifier, one that amazed me, not only in its Rolls-Royce build, but also its unfettered, accurate and musical performance, and not putting aside its technological claims



chosen by both performance analysis and listening experiences.

Rather than simply being soldered onto a cheap printed circuit board (PCB), components are instead installed onto a plastic PEEK chassis. Polyether ether ketone (PEEK) is a colourless organic polymer which comes from the polyaryl ether ketone (PAEK) family, which is used in engineering applications. Printed circuit board are of course the standard in the industry for their ease of use and low cost, as well as space saving qualities. In the good old days before PCB's, components, as in my Leak Stereo 20, were connected directly to each other in what was known as a "point-to-point" construction, sometimes with terminal strips or "tag boards" or turret boards. This meant that routes for the components could be shorter than that on a PCB, but because the components were themselves further apart the size of the unit would be bigger, something of an anathema to most manufacturers from the 70's. Whilst PCBs would reduce the overall surface area of components, one of their drawbacks can be unwanted effects from this impure transmission route; a mixture of metals and bad contacts. Signals from a component have to pass through a soldering point with its soldering pad connecting to a thin flat copper layer taking it all the way to the next soldering pad and soldering point before finally reaching the next component. Since RoHS even the use of solder has meant changing from a low-heat lead solder to a higher heating silver based solder which costs more to buy and heat up, doing anything but help the universe, and can have the side effect

of poor or dry joints. I remember writing a piece in HiFi News when these changes first started, with some manufacturers noticing changes in sound quality, not just about effects of different solder, but also different materials in the components themselves, and even worries that the solder could come away from the PCB at low temperatures. WestminsterLab's solution is, as I mentioned earlier, to use a machined plastic PEEK chassis which provides excellent dielectric qualities, being a thick plastic with equidistant holes for inserting components which are then soldered to the next component in the circuit, a bit like the practice wannabe designers, like myself, using 'perfboards' created their prototype designs.

In the Unum there is no chance of knocking components loose as this amplifier weighs a ton, and all joints are mechanically joined with hooks to give even greater join. They had considered a PTFE board as the dielectric, but it is very soft, so may not have held the components securely enough.

Next, fasteners and bracing materials needed to be well thought about; metal creates magnetism and eddy currents, so they decide to go for Titanium screws, which have a higher tensile strength than common stainless steel screws. Similarly, to affix transistors to the brass heatsinks, rather than using metal screws, Westminster Lab decided to use PEEK screws, which they believe give a clearer, purer and more direct sound over metal screws. They found PEEK was hard, stiff and stable enough, as

WESTMINSTER LAB UNUM POWER AMPLIFIERS

well as being an excellent dielectric, so no eddy current.

In designing the circuitry use of ears was considered as important as looking at computer simulations or technical readings. WestminsterLab wanted to produce a pure and clean sound, reproducing as close as possible the original sources. That then made them consider what internal shielding should be used inside the solid aluminium frame, and ultimately how internal wiring should be constructed. A detailed investigation by WestminsterLab looked at materials for the wire, the dielectric and even looking at what degree of twisting should be deployed. In summary, Carbon fibre is extensively used as shielding materials for both amplifier and cables, with cabling twisted at various angles depending on where it is deployed in the circuit. What they found out was that capacitance and inductance change depending on the angle it is wound at; a big angle will generate a bigger capacitance and lower inductance they say. In their tests a single angle gave a particular resonance to a particular frequency range which was not good for multi-frequency musical signal. To solve this, they decided there should be different angles, coming up with their own self-formulated 'Vari-Twist' design, whereby the signal cable is twisted at varying angles throughout the circuit. The inductance of the cable keeps changing in order to minimize the resonance with particular frequencies yet at the same time interference and the magnetic field are still minimized. The art of cable design and manufacture is a big business, and in this review I also

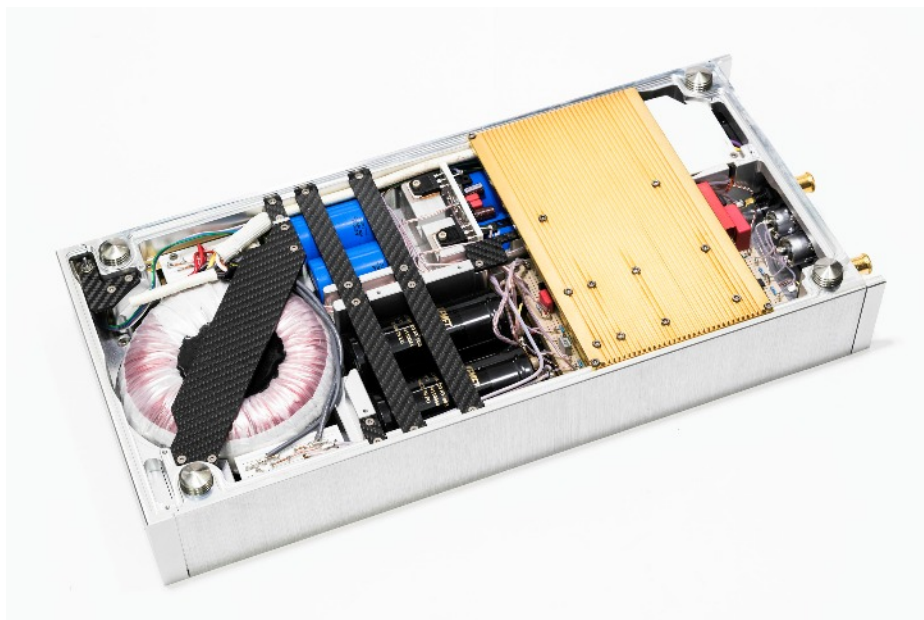
used WestminsterLab's own mains and connector cables.

The unit itself has an off/on toggle on the underside below an etched out symbol next to the words 'WestminsterLab' which light up firstly red and then bright white when it is ready for listening to. It's so nice not to see a simple circular hole for an LED to be inserted. To make the stencil they use an industrial process called EDM (Electrical Discharge Machining) to mill out the complicated graphic shape. A lot of thought has gone into even the indicator of these amplifiers.

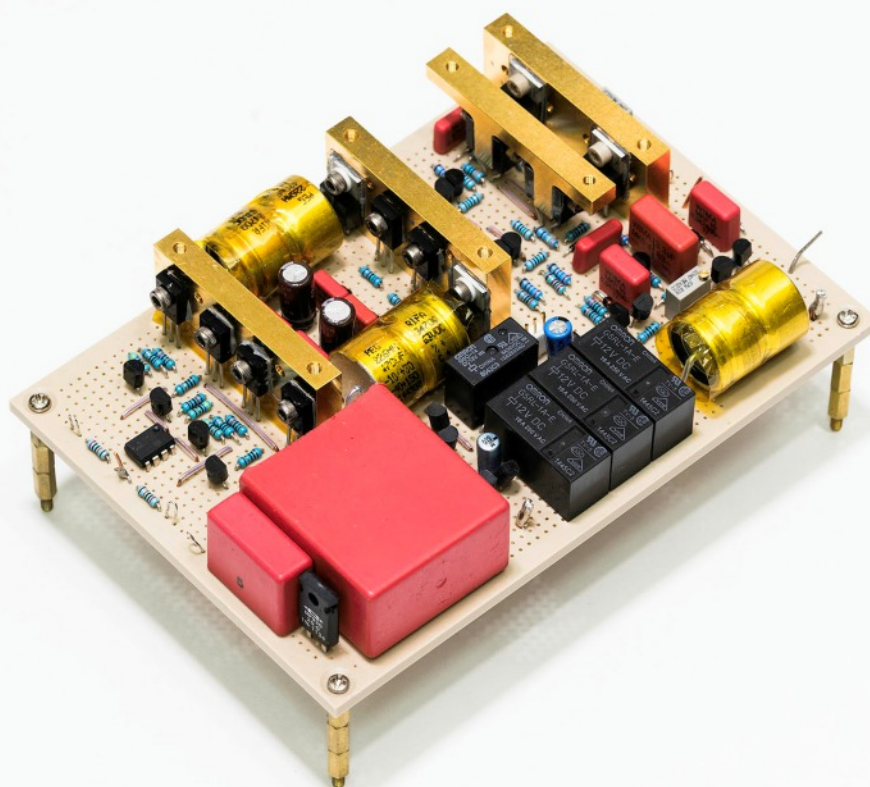
At the back are Neutrik XLR's; the male socket for input and a female for output 'pre' the amplification, so you can send the input to further amplifiers if you want to bi- or tri-amp. There is no need for labelling as the male/female XLRs tell you all you need to work out how to connect up. The loudspeaker binding posts are WBT. There is a slight dimple in the stainless-steel top corners of the Unum so they won't slide about if put more than one unit on top of each other.

As the unit is quite shallow in size, fitting in a normal toroidal transformer is not easy, so they use an 'O' type transformer which is more efficient than usual toroidals, and, according to them, offers cleaner, purer and faster power due to its different iron-core design. Standard toroidal transformers are themselves very efficient, and Angus claims his USA made 'O' toroidal to be 95% efficient; with no leak from the core and low eddy current. A second toroidal is used for non-audio functions,

This amp
had far
more up its
sleeve than
its modest
spec might
suggest



WESTMINSTER LAB UNUM POWER AMPLIFIERS



such as controls, protection and the LEDs.

Power transistors are first mounted onto a single piece of copper and then mounting this piece of copper onto the aluminium chassis. Controlling their temperature through the clever heatsink helped keep the output sound more stable and dynamic, according to Angus. The power transistors are mounted close together inside a gold plated copper heatsink and then closed up like a sandwich; helping to keep them cooler and all operating at the same temperature. The body of the Unum is solid aluminium and this also acts as a heatsink. The whole amplifier was surprisingly cool in operation for a Class A/B product.

The amplification circuit itself was initially a total surprise to me in several ways. Firstly, the unit is quite shallow, kept very cool, and the amplification section only takes up a corner of the frame, so I assumed it was actually Class-D. Having a fairly small main toroidal power supply wasn't what I expected either. This unit is actually Class A/B, though the Class-A first section only operates for around ½ Watt which is much less than I would normally like or expect; around 5 Watt

would be a ball-park number for me. The Class-B section takes it to around 95 watts @ 8Ω RMS (around 190W peak). This is not a particularly big amp in terms of power, but what it really does well is control everything it plays.

I really did enjoy this amplifier more than I thought I could, and all was made even more enjoyable when using their cables. The Ultra XLR 1m interconnect is £3200, 2.5m Ultra speaker cable is £5,040 and their 1.5m Ultra mains cable is £3600.

Sound

The Oak and the Ash (The King's Singers) is a very sparse recording and this amplifier gave the music all the space it needed to breathe, without any hint of pressure. Using my Graham Audio LS5/9's as loudspeakers, the Minnesota Orchestra Pictures at an Exhibition, "The Hut of Baba-Yaga" Mussorgsky, had all the oomph needed to get the movement in full flow, but the mystery of the middle section had so much patience that it felt the music was slowing down. The kettle drum outbursts were clear and fast as they needed to be. Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is my favourite of the nine, particularly – as a viola player – the

second movement, which has a great solo for the instrument. This movement always gets me in floods of tears with its emotion and this performance from The Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra (Herbert Kegel) didn't leave me dry. The saxophone in the Yuri Honing Trio "Walking on the Moon" was walking in air, contrasting with the urgency in the toms. Each instrument of the trio was positioned in their own well-defined space; the double bass and saxophone very forward in the soundspace; my Leak sends it all to the back in contrast, so I felt very much involved with the musicians.

My old favourite 'New Orleans Bump', Wynton Marsalis, includes trumpet, clarinet, banjo and drums, all carefully placed in the recording and this can sound a little rough using some amplifiers, especially the trumpet, but this amplifier kept it all under control and with no hint of bitterness. Wynton was born a year after me, but in his life as a trumpeter, composer, teacher, music educator, and artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York City he has done so much to promote classical and jazz music, particularly to young audiences. The drum solo in Cotton Tail (Dee Dee Bridgewater) was precise and fluid. The audience applause in this live

WESTMINSTER LAB UNUM POWER AMPLIFIERS



recording actually sounded like an applause, something some amplifiers are not that good at. But at £32K-£66K this monoblock amplifier pair should be good.

Only in Rickie Lee Jones Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most, did I find that the vocal was a little less clear than some amplifiers; her voice is not always clear, but I had hoped this amplifier could de-mist the vocals like it did so well to the accompanying acoustic guitar. The problem is that if the voice sounds too clear then you know there is some top-heavy EQ going on, so getting it just right is not easy. She should still sound a bit like she is yawning throughout the piece. The house Krell Class-A KAV250a gave a sound that was further back in the soundstage, and once I had swapped from the WestminsterLab to the Krell I immediately wanted to go through the backache of re-plugging it back in. What the Unum did do, though, was make her voice more real than many amplifiers do. Whilst the Krell has a rather intimate relationship with the AC supply; a gigantic toroidal transformer, over 50,000 microfarads of filter capacitance, and a 2000VA rating, the WestminsterLab appears modest on paper with just 680VA.

This amp might be more Class-B than anything else but it was more in control and with less distortion than one would normally expect a Class-B amplifier to have. This amp had far more up its sleeve than its modest spec might suggest. The Unum has control, fun, space, excitement, speed and good looks, to the point I really didn't want to give it back.

At the moment there is no distributor in Europe, but if you have the cash spare to buy a Unum you can do so directly from the manufacturer with a "build time" of a week for each basic mono model, rising to a month for the Connoisseur.

There are a number of amplifiers out there in this price range, so do consider them as well, but what WestminsterLab have done is aim for perfection, which cannot be done cheaply. Angus tells me "Over engineering is our game". Cost is not a consideration in the building of this amp, and they begin with the middle, £44,000 model, and then created the other two models from this starting point. What WestminsterLab has done is forget business and just work to create good audio. If you want a pair, then you will be entering into an exceptional members-only club of fine audio.

Conclusion

'E Pluribus Unum' is the motto of the USA; "out of many, one". In a world of many amplifiers WestminsterLab want there to be no other amplifier like the Unum, and in many respects this is the case.

This is a very special amplifier, one that amazed me, not only in its Rolls-Royce build, but also its unfettered, accurate and musical performance, and not putting aside its technological claims. It might be tame in terms of facilities and power, but the age of powerful monoliths is a tad old hat some would say.

All the care taken in design and assembly of this mono-block make for a very clean and very accurate sound. If you want lots of grunt and an extravert sound then you'll need to look elsewhere. This one is just plain honest.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Superb attention to quality of build

Sound Quality: Detailed and well controlled audio, covering all frequencies with ease. Exceptionally low distortion for the Class-B stage

Value For Money: At £32,000 for the base model this is a considerable outlay, but for this you will get an excellent sound quality and a clarity and speed of sound that is addictive

Pros:

A unique product

Bass slam and speed

Accurate and musical performance

Low distortion

Impressive looks

Cons:

Modest Class-A side of 1/2W, but that Class-B stage is epic

Rather a lot of money

Price:

£32,000

SPECIFICATIONS

Power:

190 watts @ 8Ω

380 watts @ 4Ω

720 watts @ 2Ω

Power (True RMS):

95 watts @ 8Ω

190 watts @ 4Ω

360 watts @ 2Ω

Frequency Response: 5 Hz to 75 kHz, -1 dB, 10Hz to 40 kHz, ±0.1 dB

Distortion: (95 watts @ 8Ω) <0.1% @ 1 kHz

Signal-to-Noise Ratio: 103 dB, A-weighted

Input: 1 balanced XLR input

Output: 1 balanced XLR output

Input Impedance: 200 kΩ

Output Impedance: 0.10Ω

Dimensions: W232 x H72 x D501 mm

Weight: 21kg

AVID Hifi Volvere Turntable

By Janine Elliot

AVID Hifi is headed up by Conrad Mas and make a wide range of turntables to suit many pockets. Janine Elliot gets her hands on the British company's £4000 Volvere turntable

AVID HIFI VOLVERE TURNTABLE



When I think of turntables and stunning looks one name, AVID, always comes to mind. With their precision build quality and great visual attraction, you can be sure they have rustled up a product worthy of a listen. When I first encountered them a number of years ago I thought they were a model range of a famous German company, until I was clear that that this was indeed a British audio company that could produce such high levels of engineering and design. Whilst CEO, Conrad Mas's mother might have arrived from Spain and his father from Australia, Conrad is English born and bred, and very proud of it.

AVID started its life back in 1995, and in 21 years is now regarded as one of the premier turntable manufacturers in the world, recently extending their expertise into phonostages, loudspeakers, preamps, power-amps, cables, alignment equipment, racks – the list just goes on – and soon tonearms and cartridges. At their manufacturing base in Kimbolton, near Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, not only do they make products under the AVID banner, but also design and manufacture for other companies within the audio, automotive, medical and military industries.

Conrad Mas has had a history of engineering and hifi. His interest in hifi stems from buying a Connoisseur BD1 plus Acos Lustre arm from a friend at the age of 16 and spending hours trying to improve it, which led eventually to him creating his first Acutus T turntable in 1995. His varied career in between included insurance and glazing, Musical Fidelity and Acoustic Arts in Watford.

Whilst the entry point AVID Ingenium is a very able machine at only £800, the Acutus Reference is at the other end of the scale, and quite simply stunning in both looks and performance. However, whilst the Acutus range starts from £10,000 rising to £25,000, it is nice to see that many of their ideas have been filtered down into the Volvere, up for review here, ranging from the design philosophy to the bearing, clamping and suspension. This is a similarly well-built and equally good looking mid-range turntable but at the much lower price of £4,000.

Set Up and Tech

The Volvere is a belt-drive, two-piece turntable with 3-point sprung sub-chassis that is fairly easy to assemble, especially with the instruction booklet with great photos; something other manufacturers could learn much from. Even pictures of what the internal packaging looks like makes assembly that much easier. Reviewing several products a month means taking hours unpacking, reading manuals and then attempting to re-package it all to send back, and is not something I look forward to. I just want to listen to music.

Taking the lead from the more expensive turntables the Volvere comes in two defined levels; the sub chassis on top of the main chassis is reinforced with a 'W' brace so that it has built in rigidity in the important areas with crumple zones like on cars so that the energy can be dissipated where it is not needed. The arm is fitted to this sub chassis, meaning the very critical set up can be done before connecting to the

This is a similarly well-built and equally good looking mid-range turntable but at the much lower price of £4,000

AVID HIFI VOLVERE TURNTABLE

main suspended chassis. This unit has three legs which fit into the suspension cups of the main chassis. There are lateral suspension O-rings around the top of the feet of the main chassis which are stretched and clipped onto the underside of the sub-chassis. This converts undesirable rocking modes into the vertical plane, and because the frequency of suspension is lower than that of the arm and cartridge (at around 3.5Hz), when the suspension moves the cartridge moves with perfect linearity. The platter is a solid aluminium beast with brass centre point at the spindle, and with a fixed cork layer on the top rather than being loose as on some turntables. This is a welcome sight, meaning better linkage between the platter, record and record clamp.

Once the sub-chassis is inserted, levelling of the turntable can be done using the supplied Allen wrench. Also,

the suspension joints can be adjusted so that they work at the same frequency; bear in mind the weight of the arm will mean the balance of the sub chassis on one of these feet will be heavier and therefore of a lower frequency, so the other feet need to be adjusted to match, usually by the retailer or AVID when adding the arm. Think of three different sinewave signals joined together; at certain times in the cycle the added total will be a higher point, meaning a repeating peak. This is the basis that piano tuners use to tune pianos, listening for audible beats each second when playing two notes a 4th apart to know that the interval between the two notes being tuned is correct. Most turntables will be repeatedly bouncing and then wobbling as these frequency variations coincide. Simply having a system on the turntable that levels the deck won't on its own correct the frequency differences. External vibrations are also

isolated by this unique AVID variable frequency suspension system. Another important factor is the vibration caused by the stylus on the record. Rather than going to the arm or absorbed into the platter, vibrations are transmitted to the sub-chassis directly through the main bearing via the mat and clamping system. Conrad explained;

“The mat acts as a mechanical impedance mismatch, thereby keeping the vibration in the record which is then coupled to the main bearing via the central brass fitting which acts as a mechanical grounding point for the vibration to be transmitted to the sub-chassis

Many years ago some manufacturers promoted felt mats to be placed under the record. This simply meant that vibrations would just stay there rather than being dissipated or removed.



AVID HIFI VOLVERE TURNTABLE

The Volvere in its SP guise now includes a varispeed DSP controlled signal-generating power supply, and improved mains transformer, which totally removes the inconsistency of speed caused by the unpredictable household mains. Motor stability and vibration is also improved, because a better mains improves the ability of the motor to work at its best, and hence noise, vibration etc is reduced. There is no insertion of distortion or harmonics into the signal. The modified 24V ac synchronous Crouzt motor attains 55mNm, which means there is exceptionally high torque, something usually found only on direct drive motors. AVID have always used motors from this French company. Attaining full speed is done within a second, with no belt slipping but a noticeable noise, beating most of the competition at the starting gate. This formula 1 motor is no slouch at the traffic lights and then is silent when it really matters. On the AVID Volvere Sequel SP turntable the refined power supply is taken from the Acutus (adding another £1500 to the cost) with a whopping 140mNm torque, giving even better control of speed stability. The introduction of twin belts keeps that regulation even more precise and aids getting the record to full speed in a very short time after switch on, as well as removing the chances of slippage from a single belt. Like thick tyres on the back of a car it gives more control and improves belt life as there is less strain. However, having twin belts connected between the sub-platter could mean setting up the turntable would require considerable dexterity with the fingers were it not for the clever belt fitting pin; The belts are fixed around the sub platter and stretched past the pin that is screwed into the underside of the platter, which means the belt protrudes beyond the motor when the platter is placed on the turntable spindle, and then after revolving the platter a smidgen to line up with the indents of the motor capstans, the pin is then removed making it easy to get the two belts in the right place. It is bad enough trying to get a single belt connected to a motor that is hidden under the platter and much harder if there are two belts, so this simple device is a clever and welcome addition. Just remember to unscrew it after setting up! The turntable has a revised stainless steel bearing which has further improved the platter dynamics plus tungsten carbide/sapphire thrust point. This requires no lubrication, though careful set up including fitting of

the platter would be advised and expected with this thoroughbred.

The Sound

Listening to favourite albums my immediate observation was the control this turntable had on the music. Whether through my Manley/Krell system or via the Entotem Plato Class-A amplifier, the music was in charge. London Grammar 'If You Wait' is an exceptionally recorded and mastered album on 45rpm. "Stay Awake" was very moving and bass was extended with Hannah Reid's voice calm and controlled; a mixture Florence and the Machine, Judie Tzuke and Goldfrapp. The trio produce a scarcity of music structure, but with plenty of reverb and effects over her gentle voice and the Benz Silver cartridge on the SME 4 arm gave a very detailed and painless performance, allowing all detail to last to the very last millisecond, with no hint of floor noise or rumble, showing just why vinyl cannot be beaten. "Wasting my Young Years" was released as a single in 2013, reaching number 31 and this track gave a clear and extended bass response and clarity in the top that was infectious.

The standard Volvere power supply is deceptive in use; the big knob on the left turns the unit off and on, and press "speed" control to change between 33 or 45. Finite speed adjustment is carried out by pressing the "play" and "speed" buttons simultaneously and then pressing either to alter in small increments. I initially thought the big knob would have an indented normal speed centre point and turning left or right would decrease or increase the speed. That would be too simple! The LED next to the speed button changes between green and yellow for 33 and 45 respectively, though these and the red "play" LED are not easily distinguished if the unit is in direct sunlight.

In use I found the power supply unit gave a very accurate check on speed of the modified 24v 55mNm ac synchronous motor, allowing the Benz Micro Silver cartridge to just concentrate on making the music. Playing the 180g 2015 Rox Vox remaster of Rush "Xanadu" there was a very definite hum at the start of the track at 15Hz recorded on the album that the cartridge and arm faithfully portrayed with no sign of turntable anxiety; a faulty lead at the live recording in Kiel Auditorium, St Louis Missouri in 1980,

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AVID HIFI VOLVERE TURNTABLE

Coming in silver or black finishes, the AVID Volvere is a breath of fresh air in terms of pairing physics with musicality

must have gone unnoticed. I didn't need to play my Ortofon test disc test-frequency tracks to realise that this turntable/arm combo was now set up to perfection and that likely stylus bounce was out of the question.

The revised bearing design improved platter dynamics, giving a greater depth and gusto to the music than I could have hoped for with such a modest cartridge as the Silver, but there was also a clear bond between turntable, arm and cartridge to produce a musicality that is hard to achieve at £4000. This Volvere wasn't reproducing the music, it was literally playing it!

Conclusion

I love reviewing turntables; always seeing how different manufacturers employ different methods to get the best portrayal of the music. If only all manufacturers could get together to make the definitive player. But, like peeling potatoes, there is more than one way of doing it.

Coming in silver or black finishes, the AVID Volvere is a breath of fresh air in terms of pairing physics with musicality. There is no need to quote signal to noise or wow and flutter figures as numbers don't enter the equation when I am enjoying music as much as this.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Clever use of mixing technology, science, maths and music in a solid, well built and good looking product

Sound Quality: Well controlled capture and performing of music, with no hint of stress or angst

Value For Money: With many ideas from the £10,000 - £25,000 Acutus, this £4000 mid-priced turntable performs with admirable aptitude. No wonder Avid turntables are finding their way into so many rooms at hifi shows

Pros:

Well-built, and good looking design

Not influenced by external vibrations

High torque motor reaching playing speed in around a second

Excellent instructions to get set up in a short time

Cons:

Not sure about that big knob on the power supply

Nothing else at £4000

Price:

£4000

SPECIFICATIONS

Drive: Twin Belt drive

Speeds: 33.3 and 45.0 RPM

Platter mass: 6.7 Kg

Bearing: Inverted stainless steel

Thrust point: Tungsten carbide/Sapphire

Suspension: 3 point, springs in vertical, o-rings in lateral frequency, vertical 3.2 Hz (variable), lateral 4.5 Hz

Tonearms: Std. cut for SME (adapters to order)

Motor: Modified 24v 55mNm ac synchronous

Power supply: DSP Vari-Speed control unit

Voltage input: 100-240vac 50/60Hz 20 watts max. (depending on region)

Dimensions: Turntable (overall) 425 x 370 x 205mm (WxDxH)

Net weight: 12.5Kg turntable, 2.2Kg psu

Five Year Warranty - Upon Product Registration

TAGA Harmony Platinum F 100 SE Loudspeakers

By Stuart Smith

TAGA Harmony make a wide range of products and today Stuart Smith takes a listen to the company's €2380 Platinum F-100 SE Loudspeakers

TAGA HARMONY PLATINUM F 100 SE LOUDSPEAKERS



We've looked gear from TAGA Harmony in the past (here) so I'm not going to bore you with their background other than to say they're a Polish company whose products are designed and engineered in Europe and who have their own, dedicated manufacturing facilities in China.

The C word has had bad press in recent years with questions about build quality and reliability, but from the moment the two large boxes arrived it's clear that TAGA don't really fit that mould, and indeed I think in general Chinese products have come on in leaps and bounds in recent years.

Once you get the speakers out of their well packed boxes what you are greeted with is a gorgeous looking pair of very glossy, real rosewood veneered floorstanders that look very smart and classy indeed. Should you choose, you can also get them in piano black or white (these cost slightly less at €2250 inc VAT), or rosewood with a matt finish. They come with dedicated stands that bolt onto the bottom of the speakers and spikes that finish off the sophisticated look of these speakers.

The Platinum F 100 SEs are a three way design with a 1 inch (25mm) tweeter, a 5.25 inch (133mm) midrange driver and two 6.5 inch (165mm) bass drivers. They have a nominal impedance of 4

Ohms, sensitivity of 92dB and have a large front firing port. The tweeter is a TAGA Pure Titanium Tweeter Dome (TPTTD-II) (TAGA like their anachronyms as you'll see) whilst midrange is provided by the TPACD-II (TAGA Pure Aluminium Cone Driver) and the two bass drivers are TWCD-Is (TAGA Woolen Cone Driver). The enclosures themselves are TLIE (TAGA Low Interference Enclosure) which is a rigid MDF structure with walls of 18mm – the knock test proves them to be pretty inert but not as “dead” as some.

There's a grille included and this is firmly kept in place with eight doodads that are very tight ensuring there's no rattle – indeed when trying to remove them first of all I assumed they were fixed in place, but they do come off and I much prefer to see a loudspeaker in all its glory rather than covered up. I do have a very minor niggle here that, in truth it's being a bit OCD, but the branding on the driver surrounds is not centralised on any of the speakers other than the mid driver. I see why this has been done (screws are in the way) but it would have been nice to have them lined up...an inconsequential grumble indeed! Visually they have an air of being a cross between the Signature and Esprit range of speakers from Triangle.

Round the back of the speakers you get a nicely finished plate with the two pairs of good quality binding posts that will

Initial impressions were that this speaker is a class act with a nice and detailed presentation, but without over-blowing scale and dynamics

TAGA HARMONY PLATINUM F 100 SE LOUDSPEAKERS



accept spades, bananas or bare wire. You can bi-wire or bi-amp if you like, but for the duration we used a single amp and a single set of cables.

There's good sense in partnering equipment for review with gear that is commensurate with the kind of things a member of the public is likely to partner it with. I see little wisdom in putting this sub 2500 Euro speaker on the end of our reference system where the price of a pair of interconnects is almost equivalent in price. So, I put together a little system I felt would be in keeping with the kind of thing folks would themselves put together and this included the excellent little Clones Audio 25i integrated, the Leema Acoustics Elements compact disc player, wired with Chord Company's Anthem Reference interconnects and their Epic Reference speaker cables.

Sound

I have a bit of a liking for front ported loudspeakers in the main as they are usually pretty unfussy about positioning and for the duration we had them well out into the room and away from walls with a slight toe-in towards the listening position that itself was well out into the room. The speakers had come from a previous review and running in consisted of little more than a quick blast through a few CDs to blow away the cobwebs.

First up a bit of Miles Davis and Kind Of Blue. Initial impressions were that this speaker is a class act with a nice and detailed presentation, but without overblowing scale and dynamics. Of course you can still tell that this is a box speaker, but the sound-stage expands well beyond the loudspeakers and has good depth and height to it. Musicians sit where they should and there's a feeling that you are listening to a more expensive speaker than you actually are. It's quite an "audiophile" sounding speaker that will appeal to those looking for a smooth, balanced and unforced presentation that is easy to get on with and very easy to get lost in. You may think I'm suggesting that the Platinum F-100 SE is a little polite and perhaps rolled off at the top-end, but it's not; Davis' trumpet has all the required rasp and bite you would expect and microdetail in the little snare brushes and the like are all there to give you a good representation of the recording and the recording space. Nothing really

TAGA HARMONY PLATINUM F 100 SE LOUDSPEAKERS

jumps out at you and suggests that the speakers are over emphasizing any particular frequency range, despite my initial thoughts that the aluminium cone driver would be a little harsh sounding...it's just not!

Lyn Stanley is the darling of the audiophile community around the world and these speakers were crying out for her Interludes album to be slotted into the CD player. The album opens with Lyn singing the opening lines to How Long Has This Thing Been Going On? acapella and you immediately sit up and take notice. Her voice is elegant and refined and it suits these loudspeakers to a tee – unforced, clear and untroubled. But this is 'audiophile music' and to my mind it's relatively easy to make a system shine with this kind of well recorded program - that's why it's used so much at shows and the like and so without further ado it's time to wake up the TAGA Harmony speakers, and perhaps the neighbours, with something a little less restrained and much more raucous.

And so onto Daft Punk's magnum opus Random Access Memories. This is an absolutely fantastically produced record and a good physical workout for any loudspeaker. It's one of those records that can sound good on a lot of systems but can also sound truly magnificent in the right system. What comes to the fore here is that at its price-point this should be a mediocre performer, but with this record you are getting a nicely rounded and grown up presentation. I know this record inside out and it's one we always

play at some point during a review. On Giorgio By Giorgio his spoken word is a little forward in the mix but once the music begins you are presented with a nice, tight and tuneful bass that isn't overblown or over-exaggerated, perhaps a little light if anything. No, these speakers aren't etching the mix out in front of the listener as you would expect with the best, but for the money being asked they do a sterling job – some may actually prefer this less absolutely truthful presentation, this is, after all, a loudspeaker for the home rather than a monitor/tool for dissecting a record to pieces... in short it's very listener friendly. The track that for me defines Daft Punk is the final track on RAM, the absolutely spectacular Contact. It's a track that really does separate the men from the boys in many ways and in absolute terms (and do keep in mind our everyday listen is the Avantgarde Duo XDs) there could be more dynamic punch and hit (particularly in the snares) and things could be more separated in the mix but (and this is crucial for a loudspeaker to get past this point) I still got the Pavlovian Goosebumps at 4 minutes.

At 92dB sensitivity it struck me that it would be remiss of me not to throw some valves at the TAGAs and so I plumbed in the Qualiton A20i integrated we have here for just such occasions. It's a little Class A amp using Tung-Sol 5881 drive tubes that, as its name suggests offers up just 20Watts a channel. Mad Professor is the undisputed heavyweight champion of British dub reggae and his album

These are a
pretty
luxurious
statement
that will
grace many
homes and
appearance
-wise they
look like a
much more
expensive
loudspeaker



TAGA HARMONY PLATINUM F 100 SE LOUDSPEAKERS

Science and The Witchdoctor has been a firm favourite here for well over two decades. No, this is not the most refined of music, but it demands to be played loud. Twenty tube Watts up these and turned up to nice volumes really gets these speakers dancing. Bass is controlled and never bloaty and the spatial effects that make dub what it is are all there. I've mentioned being refined and classy previously, and this is important for many different kinds of music we've played earlier, but for me a speaker needs to be able to boogie and have that dance factor, and the right music turned up loud and these TAGAs do well.

Conclusion

These are a pretty luxurious statement that will grace many homes and appearance-wise they look like a much more expensive loudspeaker. Thankfully this is carried through with their presentation and what you get is a really nice and elegant sound with lighter material that will please many who listen to this kind of music. They're also not too fussy about where you sit and will sound good even out of the sweet spot which is a bonus for the kind of people I think these will appeal to.

They also boogie too and you can turn them up and get the party going with the proper music. I do feel that you need to really turn the volume up to get the very best out of them with this kind of stuff...but then that's what it was made for!

In absolute terms there are better loudspeakers out there, but the €2380 TAGA are asking for these seems to be very reasonable, and if you have this money to spend on a floorstander then an audition is a must. Again, when compared to our much more expensive reference there are flaws – they can get a little confused with more hectic music and the stereo image isn't as holographic and etched as some may prefer, but for the money you're getting great looks and very, very acceptable sonics with good detail and a fatigue-free presentation.

The F-100s aren't going to wow you with hifi histrionics and fireworks, but sit back with your favourite tippie, put on the music you love and let them take you with the flow.

I really enjoyed my time with them.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Well put together and luxurious looking

Sound Quality: Sound more expensive than they are and have a laidback, and smooth presentation many audiophiles will love at lower volumes. They can also move air and party when asked.

Value For Money: Excellent value for money package

Pros:

Look great

Sound like a more expensive loudspeaker

Audiophile type presentation

Easy to listen to for long periods

Crank up the volume and they're great fun

Cons:

Can get a tad confused with complex passages

That audiophile presentation won't suit everyone

Price :

€2380

SPECIFICATIONS

Design: Floorstanding, 3-way, 4 drivers,

Bi-wiring

25mm MDF front and 18mm walls TLIE enclosure

Crossover points: 700Hz, 2.5kHz

High-Frequency Driver: 25mm (1")

Midrange Driver: 133mm (5.25")

Bass Driver: 2 x 165mm (6.5")

Recommended Amplifier Power: 20-280W

Frequency Response: 28Hz-40kHz

Impedance: 4 ohm

Sensitivity: 92dB

Dimensions (H x W x D): 108.9 x 25 x 34 cm

Weight (net): 53.3 kg pair



Mark Audio SOTA Cesti B Loudspeakers

By Ian Ringstead

**These standmounters
use a good few
interesting design
features and cost
£1199. Ian Ringstead
takes a listen**



What
Markaudio
Sota are
aiming for with
Cesti B is
'simply' to
provide an
attractive,
reasonably
priced, quality
standmount
which offers
something a
bit different to
the norm in
terms of its
engineering
design

Markaudio Sota is a brand that is new to me so I was intrigued when asked to review one of their loudspeaker models the Cesti B. Scott Lindgren one of the design team based here in the UK kindly dropped the review pair off and we had a good chat about the company and the model under review.

What Markaudio Sota are aiming for with Cesti B is 'simply' to provide an attractive, reasonably priced, quality standmount which offers something a bit different to the norm in terms of its engineering design. They think it's valid, and has advantages over the more usual approaches - but of course, ultimately that call belongs to the listener.

Cabinet

The Cesti B enclosure is a bass reflex design with a moderately damped alignment and a slightly flared front vent to provide reasonable positioning

flexibility in a variety of rooms. In most UK spaces you should find them good for a solid 40Hz. Construction is an MDF/HDF variant with piano lacquer finish (available options are black, red & white). The Sota 5, which is being used as a tweeter in the Cesti B, is an open-back unit, so is isolated from the bass driver in its own aerodynamically shaped sealed sub-chamber. There is a shallow waveguide machined into the front baffle -the speakers are supplied as mirrored pairs and can have this providing a very gentle bit of lateral dispersion either toward the sides of the room or toward each other. It gives a little extra positioning flexibility. Binding posts are a low-resistance 5-way type with good quality OFC copper internal wiring. Grills are standard and magnetically attach to the front baffle so there aren't any peg holes etc. There isn't a vast amount of difference in the sound whether the grills are on or off.

Drivers & Crossover

MARK AUDIO SOTA CESTI B

Being a decent sized cabinet the Cesti B had no trouble producing a good bass end down to 40Hz in my living room and had a very clear full frequency range as it was designed to

Cesti B uses Mark audio's Sota 11 and Sota 5 units (names come from their diameter in cm). These are actually all-range / wideband drivers; the Sota 11 will make < 40Hz depending on box design, and can cheerfully motor up to 23KHz or so. The Sota 5 is good for < 100Hz when run solo and can get up to about 30KHz. The drivers and crossover are really where the Markaudio are a bit different. They're both custom designed and made in-house; the design is by Mark Fenlon, who developed the Alpair, CHR, CHP and Pluvia ranges of full-range drivers for Markaudio. Both have very long stroke suspension, and are extremely low-mass. Where things get particularly interesting from an engineering perspective is the cone design. If you look at them, you'll see they have a very shallow profile compared to drivers of similar size, giving a very wide dispersion angle. It gets even more interesting, because the cones share the same profile, so their dispersion behaviour is almost identical, which is not the case for a typical cone midbass + dome tweeter. Makes using low order filters much more practical - in the case of Cesti B, 2nd order acoustic (and electrical), which as you know has less in the way of phase-rotation than higher order slopes. As a bald principle, lower order slopes in Scott's view are

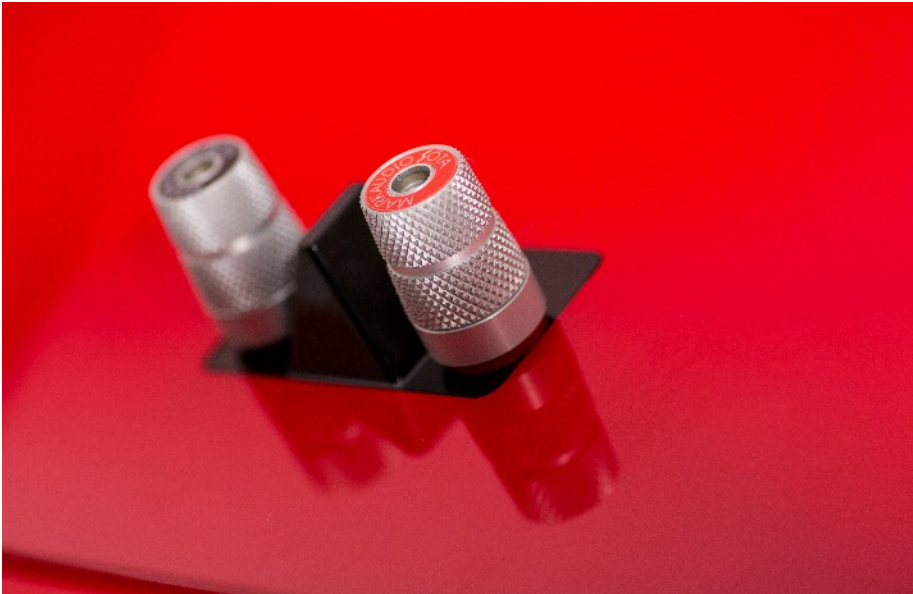
preferable to steeper slopes, but that usually comes with a large bunch of caveats over power-handling, dissimilar dispersion behaviour, stop-band rejection etc. In this case, the Sota 5 has about 4x the radiating area of a typical 1in dome tweeter, about 5x - 6x the radiating area of a 3/4in dome, long stroke suspension & the same basic cone profile, so Markaudio are able to use them with more flexibility than is often the case.

As you can see Scott and the team of designers at Markaudio put a lot of time and effort into each model with every detail being meticulously researched and developed. On unpacking the Cesti B, I was very impressed with the fit and finish. I requested the red option and the finish was immaculate. I used them on my resident 28 inch wooden stands to great effect and they looked very smart in my living room.

Running in didn't take long and Scott felt that this design was not fussy about long burn in periods. Being a decent sized cabinet the Cesti B had no trouble producing a good bass end down to 40Hz in my living room and had a very clear full frequency range as it was designed to. What impressed me most was when I got used to the presentation I could really hear the layering in the



MARK AUDIO SOTA CESTI B



sound stage and really good depth. I can only put this down to the clever design of the full range drive units, crossover and that contoured front baffle. It was an effect that remained, being a characteristic of the Cesti B and Scott had said he felt the Cesti B was an unsung hero in the range.

I tried Audiolab's 8300A amp and my Tisbury Audio passive pre / Meridian 556 amp combination and both worked seamlessly. The Cesti B's doesn't appear to be amp fussy and were easy to drive, but like any good design they should respond well to much more expensive electronics.

Compared to larger floorstanders I am currently trying the Cesti B won't plumb that lower octave, but still make a valiant attempt and don't sound out of control like some other designs I have used or reviewed in the past. When you don't listen to larger floorstanders for a while you soon forget their lower end advantage if designed properly and the human brain is fantastic at adapting. I recently got Christine and the Queens new album "Chaleur Humane" with the catchy single Tilted on it that has been well received. Recorded here in the UK, the album has some good low synth bass lines, and the quirky arrangements Christine likes worked well on the Cesti B and the recording techniques were easily picked out. As Scott told me with both drive units in the Cesti B being full range, they have a great ability to not sound limited or restrained to a particular frequency range and so blend seamlessly along with the crossover design.

I could happily live with the Cesti B and along with a run of speaker designs I have recently had the pleasure to review modern designs have really got rather good. With a lot of clever design collaboration and excellent build quality the Cesti B are a welcome newcomer onto the audio scene.

The Cesti B's doesn't appear to be amp fussy and were easy to drive, but like any good design they should respond well to much more expensive electronics

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Excellent for the money.

Sound Quality: Detailed, well layered sound.

Value for Money: With a price of £1199 this is excellent value.

Pros:

Great musicality and detail

Look great in the piano lacquer gloss finishes

Unless you are a bass fiend plenty of low end for most people

Can handle power well

Good packaging

Cons:

None really other than the fact the drive units are delicate with regards to handling so don't go poking them and treat with respect

Price: £1199

Axis Voicebox S Loudspeakers

By Dan Worth

The Axis Voicebox S loudspeakers are an Australian design, collectively envisaged and implemented by two Aussie engineers John Riley - the creator of the concept and brand, along with Brad Serhan. Dan Worth checks out this \$(US) 2500 standmount loudspeaker that incorporates a 50mm metal ribbon tweeter

AXIS VOICEBOX S LOUDSPEAKERS



The decay
of notes just
floats and
fades into
the
darkness
with so
much
realism

John collaborated with Brad in respect of integration of a mid/bass driver for a small box design loudspeaker which would compliment his choice of 50mm metal ribbon tweeter. Fortunately Brad had spent time just recently with a 5.25" Peerless Nomex paper cone driver which he felt would make an excellent addition to the ribbon John wished to use. The overall compliment resulted in a crossover point at 3khz utilising a fifteen element linkwitz Riley fourth order crossover and the Voicebox S prototype was born.

Initial testing of the design concept proved to be very satisfying and the company's goal was to produce a speaker that was a clear statement, a unique sound which had all the presence of great British designs of the past giving excellent vocal performance and presence.

Cabinet construction is top rate, a deep lustrous piano black finish, rear ported, with a pair of binding posts which sit one above the other to one side of the rear of the cabinet. It was evident from the designs overall size of 7" x 12" x 8" and completely solid and inert cabinet (with use of the knuckle wrap test) that these speakers were not going to produce large amounts of bass, but eluded to the reproduction of extremely controlled low frequencies. The small bookshelf speakers also come with some very pretty magnetically attachable metal grills which are not advised to be used during critical listening due to their mass, they are simply provided for an aesthetically pleasing layer of protection whilst not in use.

The VB-S's frequency range is stated to be 60hz - 20khz at +/-2db but with their density at 50Ohm and nominal impedance of 83db take some real power to truly get going as I found out.

The speaker cabinets are built and fitted in China and John being a stickler for perfection makes regular trips to the Far East in order to check on quality control and overall build parameters. My pair were sent directly from China at a time when John was actually there overseeing the subcontractors at around the time of the Chinese New Year. Delivery of the speakers was very swift from the point of dispatch and I must say the packaging is very effective, simple and well thought out. So many times I've had speakers arrive which are packed with more than adequate materials for packaging but the design of the internal protection has been overlooked and instead of transferring vibration around the product it actually transfers it directly to the item causing load damage.

Knowing our own rooms very well, we all have the ability to judge how a speaker should be initially placed in relation to front and side walls and of course to each other, so I made the usual calculations for a speaker of this type and size and sat back to listen. The initial listening showed to me that I could be a little I fussy about exact placement as I moved them around a little due to the incredibly wide dispersion of the sound. A little closer to the front wall, just under a foot away helped the bass a fraction, although these are not to be used for organ replay

AXIS VOICEBOX S LOUDSPEAKERS

they really do get going with some good watts up them.

Sound

When confronted with a speaker such as the VB-S one is immediately focuses heavily on the immensity of the detail produced, I can fully understand the choice of mid/bass driver to the metal ribbon and memories of Proac Tablette Spring to mind, however, treble response and transients were clearly more articulated and full of integrity, combining huge agility with the drive unit. These are clearly attenuated in the bass but in their respective response I struggle to find a comparison to really express how engrossing the sound is within the designs parameters.

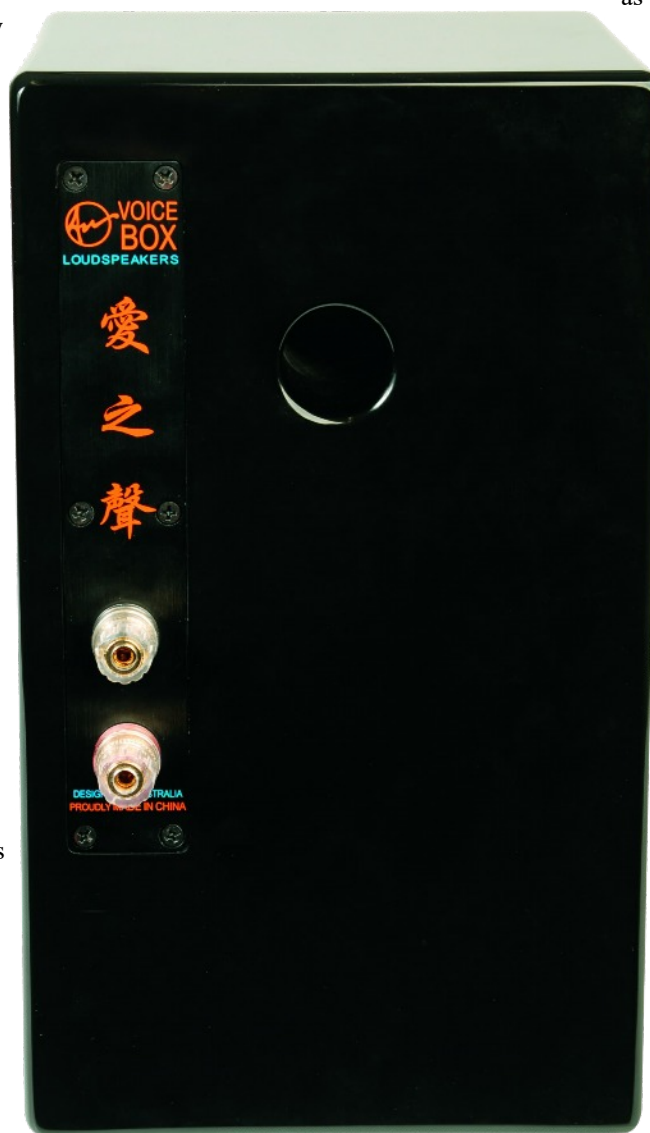
The tweeter is an absolute star, making Nils Lofgren's strings sound just so naturally well defined, in fact I'd say I haven't heard a top end to produce these notes so well. The decay of notes just floats and fades into the darkness with so much realism. I could hear nuances that hung around the soundstage for a time period I really wasn't used to. My own Accuton tweeter has been carefully integrated into my redesigned crossover to take away its sharpness and when this is achieved correctly they are an absolute treat, but I've always been ever so fond of true ribbons and the VB-S's top end is everything I want personally from a tweeter.

In relation with the drive unit of the VB-S, coherence and timing is absolutely on the money, I flooded the speakers with numerous vocalists and one of my test tracks is 'I Can Explain' from the wonderful Rachelle Farrell, a record holder for her vocal range. Although piano notes were a little thin on the ground at lower volumes Rachelle's voice was absolutely pristine, giving depth of tone, clearly controlled upper mids and dynamics that were bang on the money, conveying the true magic of her tones. In fact the sound is that good it just left me screaming 'I want more the bass!' to fill out the bottom end to engage with me a completeness from

top to bottom that could only be imagined to be obsessive in its entirety.

If the VB-S's were a lesser speaker I don't think my comment would have been supplemented from brain to mouth but they are that engaging I want to hear this plus lower frequencies in a design that could be so advantageous that it's implementation will truly set new standards.

Recently a British design company has



been working on an extension to the famous LS3/5A. A pair of bass cabinets which act as stands for the monitors and also produce the backbone to the sound, adding lower frequencies which will match the speed and sonic signature of that speaker. I remember Neat Acoustics did this with the first Petite, manufacturing a pair of additional units called 'Gravitas'. I'd strongly urge Axis to consider this, or a floorstanding design with split internal cabinet design in order to really make a mark on the

market. If I had a seriously accomplished sealed subwoofer here at the time of this review I would have integrated it with the little VB-S's but anything less than seriously impressive just will not stand up to the astonishing ability of this design within its own boundaries of frequency response.

Back to what I have here for review then...

The soundstaging of the Axis is equally as impressive as its natural detail retrieval, a small speaker by its very nature will image very well but the Axis VB-S manages to produce an image that seems beyond the boundaries of what the ribbon should be capable of, with extended depth that has a true encapsulation effect, with micro details floating mysteriously around the listener. Small acoustic venues and live events were particularly engaging, allowing for a real feel of the venue. Vocalists and musicians were clearly defined at the forefront of the performance while crowds applauded or made remarks of excitement.

With the sheer amount of detail the VB-S is able to convey and in such a controlled manner, I was intrigued to hear how lesser quality recordings would effect the stability of the sound. This really could go one way or the other as detail intense speakers tend to become grainy and well controlled treble can act almost as a filter for the overflow of this grain. I'm pleased to say that although the performance was reflective of the lesser quality music from say Spotify, the seesaw was better balanced than I expected and more towards what I hoped for. The VB-S seem to reproduce the top end to the point where its limit is reached and then say stop, that's it, without ever sounding constrained, blunted or even boisterous through attenuation.

A few weeks later I took these over to Dominic's place, he has a smaller listening space to me which we believed to be perfect for the Axis. I have brick walls and a concrete floor where he has plasterboard walls and floorboards. The suiting for the VB-S was more complimentary in the bass with added extension from the cavities in his home.

AXIS VOICEBOX S LOUDSPEAKERS

Whether this is a true and effective response for the speakers could be debated as I still feel that they respectively require a specific design to lower the frequency range, but it was great to hear the upper frequencies shine as much as they did in my larger room, proving their implementation to again be a real triumph in differing setups and situations.

I've spent a great deal of time and emotional attachment to the Axis Voicebox S, they give a sense of freedom to the sound that is very hard to achieve and can only be found in few speakers. They have a complex crossover which is implemented in such a way that they sound as if they have none. The VB-S don't limit themselves by musical genre, nor do they shy away from complex material. I could see these speakers in a floorstanding format and even an active playback studio monitor (not a monitoring speaker). Vocals are simply stunning and the top end is exquisite, I've really enjoyed my time with these speakers and commend John Riley on having the balls to produce a speaker of such capabilities that has such a high cut off point, but my God they work!

Conclusion

The Axis Voicebox S loudspeakers from Australian company Axis are an absolute eye opener, although I wish I had more bass to compliment the maturity of information presented within their design boundaries, in the size of room I use as my listening space. In smaller rooms with adequate amplification and quality components, they are an experience I feel honoured to have had and I'm already considering the metal ribbon over the ceramic Accuton for my own speakers, which I have now ordered some even better crossover components for after hearing the VB-S's top end performance.

The VB-S deserves the best associated equipment that you are able to pair with them.

They are tactile, agile and dynamic detail enriched small standmount speaker which can handle and prefer some good power up them. They are able to achieve good authority at louder volume levels, whilst at lower levels at night still have an insight to the music that is undeniably addictive and magical. This is how a high-end, small speaker is done - period.

AT A GLANCE

Sound Quality: The Axis Voicebox S has a magical grip on the listener, presenting masses of detail that never border on analytical and strike an impressive balance between information and musical accuracy.

Build Quality: Fit and finish is truly high-end, they look like they sound good!

Value For Money: On audition one can appreciate value for money and simply fall in love with their captivating charm.

Pros:

Intensity of natural detail

Super strong vocals

Imaging is exceptional

Communicative and exciting

Cons:

Overall size limits bass

Price:

\$ (US) 2500

SPECIFICATIONS:

Type: Two-way, bass-reflex

Drivers: 50mm metal true ribbon, 5.25" Peerless Nomex paper cone.

Frequency response: 60Hz–20kHz +/-2dB

Sensitivity: 83dB

Nominal impedance: 5 ohms

Dimensions: 7" x 12" x 8"

Weight: 14 lbs.



Revel Concerta 2 M16 Loudspeakers

By Dan Worth

The £950 Revel Concerta2 M16 standmount loudspeakers are the latest in a very long line of designs from the renowned American brand – part of Harman’s Luxury Audio stable, which includes Mark Levinson, Lexicon and JBL’s flagship Synthesis and ‘Project’ speakers. Dan Worth takes a listen for Hifi Pig

REVEL CONCERTA 2 M16 LOUDSPEAKERS

All interactions
between
driver, cabinet
and port now
produced a
sound which
was smooth,
detailed and
extremely well
chiseled



Having a sleek, curved appearance in high-gloss black and white finishes with no visible fixings, the M16s would be a great fit in any modern home. The M16's system comprising a 1" aluminium tweeter mounted in an Acoustic Lens Waveguide and a 6.5" aluminium/ceramic (Micro-Ceramic Composite) mid/bass driver is built for any small to medium listening space, having a compact cabinet measuring 37 x 22 x 27cm (H x W x D). With a sensitivity of 86db and a 6ohm impedance, the M16 will represent a comfortable load for amplifiers 50-120wpc.

My review samples arrived in the very attractive gloss white finish. The curved design sweeps backwards from the glossy baffle, which is adorned with a finely sculpted tweeter waveguide situated above a neatly engineered mid/bass driver and surround. Both drivers are fixed from the inside and the grilles are attached magnetically to maintain the elegant styling.

At 2.1 kHz the crossover frequency is a little lower than you'd normally expect from a 2-way standmount. I suspect this is down to the waveguide providing a better match with the directivity of the mid/bass driver, blending the sound for a one-source effect – a little like the technique employed by Amphion speakers, if I remember correctly.

The Sound

In my listening space the first impression was of surprisingly extended bass, far belying the cabinet size. After further listening though I found it difficult to really hear the rest of the spectrum properly. Mounted on my trusted Monitor Audio Platinum stands, which are an ideal size for the M16s, the new Concerta design sounded, well, muddy. I'd heard how Revel goes to extraordinary lengths in optimising every aspect of its designs, meticulously evolving the sound on and off-axis using the most scientific test bench analysis backed-up by double-blind listening experiments on a giant mechanical

REVEL CONCERTA 2 M16 LOUDSPEAKERS

The Revel M16s are cohesive, smooth, forgiving and easy to integrate with equipment. They're a safe bet

turntable, purpose built at Revel's development facility to fix the speakers in exactly the same position for every audition. Somehow the sound I was hearing didn't square with the science. Further investigation had me perplexed: the cabinets seemed to be resonating, when, according to everything I'd read about the curved, fibre-board reinforced cabinet walls and strategic bracing, would suggest a highly rigid construction. In desperation I reached for my Soundcare Superspikes in order to decouple the speakers from the stands. The effect was profound, as if an entirely different loudspeaker had muscled its way into the room. Presumably this is why Revel has built a dedicated stand (at around £250 a pair) for the M16, and why all good audiophiles should pay particular respect to the importance of isolation!

Once decoupled, the M16's cabinet and tuned rear port began to function in sync. All interactions between driver, cabinet and port now produced a sound which was smooth, detailed and

extremely well chiseled. In my time I have come across very few speakers that display such a stark contrast in performance pre and post spikes, so be warned: I suspect the M16 will sound as good on most stands, provided the two are de-coupled.

When they're allowed to work, the M16 signature is smooth, treble extremes are well extended and fatigue-free, which makes for incredibly long listening sessions, even at high volumes. Bass performance is a treat, layering the upper bass with a smoother more integrated and extended lower bassline that seduces the listener. Simply sink into your seat and relax in the ambience flooding around you.

Sound staging is really rather good. The integration of on axis accuracy and a well-controlled off-axis response produces an audio image far bigger than you'd expect: wide enough to reproduce live performances in large venues as well as intimate studio recordings. A true reflection of image height is a great



REVEL CONCERTA 2 M16 LOUDSPEAKERS

attribute of the M16. During many listening tests I could 'see' the artist performing, and unpick individual instruments from complex passages - even poorly recorded ones. The M16's phase accuracy and timing offered great insight and revealed just how much a precision-tuned system can contribute to the enjoyment of all the music I tried. This coherence coupled with the smooth sound of the M16 makes for a communicative listen, conveying depth and strong layering abilities.

I spent many evenings listening to the seductive M16s. I often find that a darkened listening space enhances the realism of venue acoustics and transients. So a speaker with the M16's qualities is perfect for these occasions. Listening to the Concerta2 M16s is a journey of exploration: the more you listen, the more you discover. I put many hours on this pair, and the rewards are significant over time.

Many Loudspeakers at the £1000 price point are designed to be dynamically exciting and fast paced. With the Revels, the journey is more subtle; their copious wealth in tonal performance and cohesiveness arrives slowly and surely. Female vocals are given excellent expression without any hint of upper midrange forwardness, grain or hardness. The lower mid frequencies of male vocals are so well rendered, providing a sense of authenticity that simply draws you in.

I'd assumed that the Revel's smooth character would mask the dynamics of pop and dance music, but I was in for a surprise. True, the upper bass seemed less punchy than that of other speakers of a similar pedigree, but replacing a pronounced upper bass was a 'weight' to the music, which was fantastically dynamic, robust and very well layered into the lowest bass frequencies. Once again the effect was non-fatiguing: there was less wham-bam impact but nevertheless the overall result was incredibly engrossing and surprisingly addictive.

The characteristics of the M16s can be tailored very easily. Isolation from the stand is an absolute must and afterwards a little trial and error will find a sweet spot for the room and listener. Trying out different classes of amplification will tailor the sound even more. The M16s are so controlled and even handed that even an aggressive sounding amp

pack will be tamed. Neutral to warm sounding amplifiers will simply enhance the flavour of a speaker which is sonically mature and stable.

I had a few friends over one evening for an informal session involving a huge range of music, not for background listening but also not critical. After the initial comments about how good the M16s look and a good hour into playback with choices coming mainly from Spotify through smartphones to my Mac, a friend summed it up. He said 'I love the fact that they don't sound in your face but at the same time you can hear everything in the music and they sound a lot bigger than their physical size'. 'You've hit the nail on the head, I said to my non-audiophile friend, 'now try elaborating that into an entire review', he laughed, 'I don't need too'.

Sometimes just a few simple words will suffice. Sometimes less really is more. That's where I am with the Revel Concerta2 M16. Although my first impressions were not that favourable, I stuck with the speakers and discovered that when isolated they became a truly musical instrument. Over longer listening periods I was glad that the Revels do what they do. First impressions can be misleading. As in life, real substance and satisfaction arrive through dedication and patience and the Revels prove the point admirably.

Conclusion

To some Audiophiles £950 is not a lot of money, but a thousand pounds on a pair of transducers is still a large investment to many. The Revel M16s are cohesive, smooth, forgiving and easy to integrate with equipment. They're a safe bet. They can respond to, and deserve, the best equipment money can buy, but at the same time their tonal qualities will allow them to be a primary upgrade for any budget system.

When approaching your local dealer for a listen it is essential that you discuss a home demo. Take your time; the M16s will grow on you and could prove to be indispensable. I can imagine many people spending years of sonic bliss with these speakers and being ever so grateful that they had the patience to run them in. Find the correct isolation and stands and begin to build a system around them.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality - Modern looks and a great deep lacquered finish. The lack of visual fixings coupled with the design of the front baffle is very pleasing

Sound Quality - Smooth, weighty and communicative with a terrific soundstage that belies the speaker's dimensions, an absolute fatigue-free listen

Value For Money - The Revel Concerta2 M16 is good value for money and the sonic wealth of the speaker befits its price point. It's a real world speaker at a real world price

Pros:

Fatigue free

Large soundstage

Very engrossing

Great looks

Cons:

A little tricky to setup, but once right...

The matching stands are expensive

Price: £950

SPECIFICATIONS

CROSSOVER FREQUENCIES: 2.1kHz

ENCLOSURE TYPE: Bass-Reflex via Rear-Firing Port

HIGH-FREQUENCY DRIVE COMPONENTS: 1" Aluminum Tweeter with Acoustic Lens Waveguide

NOMINAL IMPEDANCE: 6 Ohms

INPUT CONNECTIONS: Five-way binding posts

LOW FREQUENCY EXTENSION: 55Hz, 50Hz, 45Hz (-3 dB, -6 dB, -10 dB)

LOW-FREQUENCY DRIVE COMPONENTS: 6.5" Aluminum Cone Woofer

RECOMMENDED AMPLIFIER POWER: 50-120W

SENSITIVITY: 86dB (2.83V @ 1M)

DIMENSIONS: 14.75" x 8.6" x 10.76" (37cm x 22cm x 27cm)

WEIGHT: 16 lbs

Fostex TE05 and TE07 IEMs

By Janine Elliot

Fostex is a name many will associate with home and pro studios. Here Janine Elliot takes a listen to their TE05 (£89) and TE07 (£189) In ear Monitors

FOSTEX TE05 and TE07 IEMS



There are so many ear and headphones flooding the market that it is important that you choose carefully before parting with your cash

There has been a big rise in sales of headphones and IEMs in recent years. Each offering new technologies or perhaps new looks. Fostex have been producing some good products in recent years, a name I first heard in the 1981 with their A8 eight-track reel to reel recorder (Had one in the studio – Ed) the precursor to many a personal recording studio that included cassette and then digital portastudios.

The history of Fostex actually dates back to the Foster Electric company making loudspeakers from 1949, and Headphones and IEMs have been a part of the company's portfolio for a long time. Their 6301 active mini monitor has graced recording studios since 1981. So, with their TE05 and TE07 IEMs I should be in safe hands.

There are so many ear and headphones flooding the market that it is important that

you choose carefully before parting with your cash. As well as technical specification this includes 'fit'. These two are big enclosures which were my first concerns. Being used to the diminutive and excellent Flare R2's anything that stuck out my ear was going to cause me concerns, especially if walking or running. These headphones are fairly heavy, but managed to stay put after a certain amount of pushing. Both IEMs have similar dimensions the cheaper black with conventional 3.5mm plug and the more expensive TE07 in silver and 'L' shaped 3.5mm jack and with colour-coded left and right colour coding on the enclosures, making them far easier to direct to the appropriate ear. The cheaper TE05 wasn't so easy to identify; having a minute protruding R and L word moulding could never be easily seen, especially in the dark.

Sound



FOSTEX TE05 and TE07 IEMS

The more I listened to the Fostex the more my ears adapted to the sound and I found them more and more impressive over my initial observation

For the test I used three players; iPod, Fiio X5 and the Questyle recently reviewed by me in HiFi Pig. Both had their distinctive Fostex sound of highly musical midrange, and slightly rounded top end. Classical music worked well. Simon Rattle's Sibelius Symphonies offering from Deutsche Gramophone was forceful and accurate. All was there. I actually preferred the bass on the cheaper TE05, which was more extended. Both have removable and anti-tangling cable though did find the cable could be noisy when it rubbed against my clothing, something only a few manufacturers have successfully cured; the 6N cable model ET-H1.2N6 cable in the TE07 can be updated for the TE05, should you wish. The IEMs also come with a handy leather case. Both are efficient at 92dB/95dB for the 05/07 respectively. Both are made from aluminium and come with 4 size ear tips (XS, S, M, L) for matching to your ears. Both pairs are significantly better than the TE03, the baby of the family. Whilst the bass is less boomy than my fun £17 JVC Xtreme Xplosive, I did in some respects prefer the JVC XX's for excitement and involvement. These IEMs are dressed to impress, where the Fostex are recessed and controlled. If anything I felt the sound was a little like an upturned "V", with most of the work happening in the midrange. A/B testing is always a bad thing as you can be affected by what you have just heard, so I made sure I auditioned them without my reference Flare R2Pro infecting my aural observation.

The more I listened to the Fostex the more my ears adapted to the sound and I found them more and more impressive over my initial observations. The sound from both is fast but it is very exact and allows music to open up so I could hear facets I was hitherto unaware of in my FLACs and WAVs. The mid-range is the most important part of the music, as

LS3/5a historians will attest to. Those speakers might have little bass below 100Hz and were designed for 400-20,000 Hz nearfield studio operation, particularly spoken word, but the sound is still special 40 years later, and once you get used to the lack of bass, everything else makes up for it, and it doesn't seem to matter. With the 05's and 07's the detail in presentation of the music stops you worrying about the recessed bass and the tad harshness in the top end - especially in the TE05's. The TE07's have more control in the top end, though it is less pronounced, but the bass is better in the cheaper TE05's.

Hmm. Lots to think about then. At £89 and £189 respectively both are good value and the sound will depend much on what player you use them with. The bright sound of the Questyle QP1r "Current Mode Amplification" made the best match. Both IEMs worked best with Comply foam tips, allowing more of the bass to get through. Ultimately, your ability to listen for a long time on that train or whilst exercising will factor greatly in your decision to buy, and something these cans did more than many is allow you to listen for a long time without fatigue.

Tops and bottoms were all there, just not so 'in your face' as many IEMs like to have them; Iver Kleive's organ interpretation of 'Bridge over Troubled Waters' (96/24, HD7041888514725) had a deep bass end that was all there but very well managed, and the top end in Karl Ristenpart's JS Bach four concertos for harpsichords BWV 1060-1065 (192/24) was clear enough to hear the mechanics of the plucking strings, but again, not sticking out so that you have to notice it. These headphones were becoming more addictive the longer I listened, and I actually preferred the cheaper TE05 once I got used to the slightly tizzy top end.



FOSTEX TE05 and TE07 IEMS



Conclusion

I suggest you listen to these with your DAP of choice before deciding to buy, and make sure you listen for at least a few minutes. If you want a smileyface response with excessive bass and treble, then these won't give you that. But Fostex was primarily a company for the wannabe sound engineer when it was formed in July 1973, and that is very important here. These IEMs give you a modest and honest sound engineering especially of the important mid frequencies that many earphones and headphones cannot do at any price.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Both units are well made and feel solid

Sound Quality: Excel in the all important mid-band but could be seen as being bass and treble light

Value For Money: At £89 and £189 these offer good value for money

Pros:

Detachable cabling

Upgradeable cable

Fashionable leather case

Excellent mid-range

L-shaped plugs in the TE07

Cons:

Bass and treble light

The TE05 left and right identification not easy in poor light

Price:

TE05 - £89

TE07 - £189

SPECIFICATIONS

TE05:

Type: Dynamic

Frequency Response: 10Hz – 25kHz

Impedance: 13 +/-5% ohm

Sensitivity: 92 +/-3dB (at 1kHz, 1mW)

Maximum Input: 5mW

Plug: 3.5mm, 3P mini plug

Cable Length: 1.2m

Accessories: Spare ear tips (XS, S, M, L) and Leather Carrying Case

TE07:

Type: Balanced armature

Frequency Response: 20Hz – 20kHz

Impedance: 33 ohm

Sensitivity: 95 (at 1kHz, 1mW)

Maximum Input: 5mW

Plug: 3.5mm, 3P mini plug

Cable Length: 1.2m

Accessories: Spare ear tips (XS, S, M, L) and Leather Carrying Case

If you want
a smileyface
response
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excessive
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Black Rhodium Quickstep Loudspeaker Cable

By Janine Elliot

Janine Elliot cuts a rug with the Black Rhodium Quickstep loudspeaker cables costing £400 for a 3m pair

BLACK RHODIUM QUICKSTEP SPEAKER CABLE



I have always enjoyed listening to Black Rhodium products, having sold them as well as using them in my systems, particularly the now discontinued Rhapsody. Their clear portrayal of the music got me inspired, particularly the higher frequencies, and use of silver making them particularly good on my valve gear. Set up by Graham Nalty, he has been involved in the design and development and marketing of audio products since 1975 including amplifiers, cables and now components. The Black Rhodium factory is set in Derby where they use selected components and materials with a proven record for sound quality enhancement.

The name Black Rhodium itself was originally a stereo interconnect in which the wire was plated in rhodium, but the name Black Rhodium was arrived at when a particular wire turned black with oxidation, but remained a shiny finish where it had been plated in rhodium. The new Black Rhodium Quickstep loudspeaker cable was inspired by their Thunder cable and uses the same conductor as Foxtrot but is now fitted with the gorgeous looking Graham Nalty Legacy Range GN-1 straight Line Contact rhodium plated plugs (the Foxtrot uses their gold plated Z plugs). Indeed, they developed Quickstep and Harmony due to a customer telling them

that whenever they tried any other cables they always went back to Thunder. That got Graham thinking that Thunder had special properties that the others did not;

“I isolated the differences between Thunder and the other Black Rhodium cables and built a test cable using these features. I then used the same principles to design Quickstep and Harmony, plus a number of other cables”.

On paper, Rhodium might not have such good conductivity as copper or silver, but Graham chose it because he believes it gives the best sound quality, reproducing the speed of the music better and making the music more exciting and dramatic, and revealing much more of the music. In my tests, that speed, excitement and detail of information was certainly profound. Graham once tested interconnects in which the same wire was plated in gold, palladium, ruthenium and rhodium. Rhodium came out best, with palladium and ruthenium about the same, and gold last. To coat the whole of Quickstep with rare metals would be extremely expensive, and therefore silver-plated copper is used, and which works extremely well. Today's value rhodium is about \$650 for troy ounce (it hit \$10,000 at one point in 2008), whereas

silver is \$19. Incidentally, copper is around \$4500 for a tonne!

Build and Tech

Black Rhodium products have always been keenly priced, showing that excellent quality of build and audio quality can be obtained without selling the house. At £400 for a 3-metre version of Quickstep this is highly competitively priced both in terms of the looks and sound quality achieved. What immediately got me interested in the Quickstep was the flexibility of the cable itself, something that is vital for the orderly homeowner. For two pounds extra the cable braid is also available in white, yellow, red, green or blue if black doesn't match with your furniture. A lovely thought. Designed to reject RFI and EMI interference as well as vibrations, the cable worked adequately surrounded by all the other cables in my set up. The construction includes the use of two separate and complementary materials to effectively dampen mechanical vibrations. The science of cable making is very complex, not just about the metal or dielectric, and more than just scientific equations concerning L, C and R. I still wonder why some people can still say that all cables sound the same. With all else being equal the lower the capacitance the higher the inductance, and in a crossover capacitors

BLACK RHODIUM QUICKSTEP SPEAKER CABLE

Whilst the bass wasn't over pronounced it had a sense of energy that many speaker cables are unable to convey well

block low frequencies and let high frequencies get through. The Quickstep having conductors further apart has an excellent low capacitance at around 80pF for the 3 metres, but the bass is still surprisingly tight and full, and the treble extended and fast. Indeed, cables can work much like your crossover, so it is essential that that you select one to work best with the rest of your equipment. The Quickstep has excellent details and speed particularly in the higher frequencies. Bass was surprisingly detailed and quick. 'Transient Phase Distortion' and 'Proximity Effect' distortion are reduced by using thick insulation which effectively increases the distance between conductors, as well as the braided cable design which reduces the magnetic field created by the two wires. The conductor itself comprises of 16 x 0.2mm diameter silver plated copper wires with silicone rubber insulation. Understanding the design of the cables helped me to back up my audible observations, and whilst, yes, the low capacitance and choice of materials meant the top end would be better, there was no loss of bass.

Sound

Using my Class-A Krell set-up initial listening gave a brilliantly clear and exciting soundstage playing the Polish Classical brass album "Trombastic Tutti Virtuosi" from For-Tune Productions. Silver works well on brass instruments, and this combination gave an exciting and lively rendition of the music.

Whilst the bass wasn't over pronounced it had a sense of energy that many speaker cables are unable to convey well. Imaging is also very detailed and tightly placed within the soundstage, with all music played without stress. David Bowie's "The Next Day" is a real test of detail. This is not my favourite Bowie album but I now felt I wanted to listen to more of it. I always find there is too much compression and limiting in this album with all instruments competing for supremacy and some cables can just exacerbate the situation and make the whole muddy and complex. Quickstep was like cleaning your glasses after they have been covered in finger marks. Everything just opened up and I really began to enjoy these cables. Track 4 "Love is Lost" was particularly well defined and more human, though I did miss some of the "edginess" that gives the track the

emotion and pain that I felt was being portrayed in this track. Listening to the new 180g Tribute to Ella Fitzgerald (Clare Teal, The Syd Lawrence Orchestra) opened up the sound significantly, particularly in terms of separation of the instruments within the soundstage, as well as improving transients of the brass instruments.

Conclusion

Quickstep is keenly priced at £400.00 for a 3m pair complete with the GN-1 Straight Line Contact rhodium plated plugs. For sound per pound this is an excellent choice for the audiophile offering a detailed soundstage with exceptional speed, and a sound that was very open and effortless. Well worth listening to.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Excellent construction and good looking GN-1 straight Line Contact rhodium plated plugs

Sound Quality: Very controlled and extended top frequencies with an effortless but exciting portrayal of the music throughout the full audio range

Value For Money: An extremely good set of results for the price. This is exceptionally good value, though if the price is too high then the cheaper Foxtrot uses the same cable though different plugs

Pros:

Excellent speed of top frequencies.

Openness

Effortless portrayal of the music

Excellent quality of build

Cons:

Some may find the bass is not prominent enough.

Price:

£400.00 for a 3m pair

Mid Priced Loom From Chord Company

By Dan Worth

David Robson continues his Chord Company "Cable Doctor" series of reviews, where specific cable combinations are recommended for his system by Nigel Finn of Chord. Previously he has focused on the entry level C Line and Clearway cables but now moves up to the new Shawline series interconnects and digital cable, along with the Epic Twin speaker cable

MID PRICED LOOM FROM CHORD COMPANY

Earlier this year I was asked to do a series of articles based around Chord cables and interconnects. This “Cable Doctor” series was to start with the lower end of the cable market and slowly work up to improving my system sound. I thought what a great idea, to do within a few months what most of us do over several years. Unfortunately the system I started this series with has changed a little due to a slight accident (don’t ask! The lady of the house is still scowling). So I have lost a little in the way of consistency for the articles, but the front end is still the same.

Chatting to Nigel Finn from Chord we decided to put a slight twist to the Cable Doctor idea, that to push my hifi system with the use of the upper levels of cable performance, and a price point that people don’t normally go to in relation to the equipment cost.

Chord Shawline Digital 1m (£200)

The Chord Shawline Digital is built to Chord’s high standard of workmanship and finish. The bright red nylon woven outer sheathing terminating in shrink wrap, and their Chord VEE 3 RCA connectors which are all silver plated and have the directionality of the cable printed upon the sheathing.

I have found some of the better sounding cables have been made with metal free outer RCA plugs. I don’t know if this is just by accident or manufacture process, but better it has been.

The new range of Shawline cables have been designed on the same principles as the top specification Sarum cables utilising the Tuned ARAY methods in their manufacture and design. This design theory has been created to carry as much information that is available with as much accuracy as possible; this gives the DAC less work to do, thus improving the sound, or so goes the claim.

Having had this Digital cable running in for some days the initial sound, which had a slight fuzzy edge to the treble making cymbals fizz a little, completely relaxed and bedded in and lost that unnatural sound. Once the sound had smoothed out and settled, it began revealing a rounded warmth with plenty of detail coming through to my Russell K Red 50 Speakers.

To kick off proceedings I put Fleetwood Mac’s album “Penguin” into the CD draw. The smooth bluesy “Revelation” sprang to life with a good organic and natural sound; the finger drums (I think) are clearly defined. Bob Welsh’s lead

I have found
some of the
better
sounding
cables have
been made
with metal
free outer
RCA plugs



The qualities in the Shawline cable allowing a natural rendition of the singer's talents and the smooth flow of the music come out to play

guitar hunts out from the speakers, and John McVie's basslines are clean sounding and tight, and hold the music together with a clear confidence. The following track "Did you ever love me?" has steel drums panging out; the detail in their tone and metallic skin has good resolution with Christine McVie's silky vocals not being interfered with by anything else going on with the music, the Shawline Digital carrying enough information for the system to keep everything separate and in its correct place.

What I have noticed using the Chord cable is a slight lift in the higher frequency range, this does not come through as sibilance, more a lengthening to the decay of the sound in the upper reaches. This is apparent on Diana Krall's "Wallflower" album. The recording I have on CD has always left me a little cold, as it comes across a little dull and lifeless. The slight rise in the higher tones gives tracks like "Wallflower" some extra detail and life. The piano in "I'm Not In Love" makes for a more believable reproduction, and what seemed like Miss Krall had been using a cardboard microphone had now a bit of vocal sparkle. These are not huge differences in a night and day fashion, but a very subtle difference between an album that once made me quickly skip tracks, to one where I just let it play through. The duet with Bryan Adams "Feels Like Home" has the pair's vocal talents separated well within the soundstage, Krall's deeper female tones keeping Adams gravelly voice in good company. This is possibly the best I have heard Bryan Adams voice. The qualities in the Shawline cable allowing a natural rendition of the singer's talents and the smooth flow of the music come out to play.

Next up a bit of Phil Collins, "In The Air Tonight" has been in my CD collection from the early 80's, and although Phil's music has quite a lot of people split and either love or hate it Marmite fashion, I quite like the varying styles within the album. "The Roof Is Leaking" starts with atmospheric Cricket chirping sounds, the Shawline Digital enabling the soundstage to wander into the listening area and the chirping sounds giving a surround sound 3d feel. The track then blends in to the next one, "Droned" has an African beat to it, an instrumental, drums are defined and rhythmical and have a nice realism and feel, probably again due to the slight

improvement in detail due to the raised high frequencies. There are no real downsides to the Shawline cable, I usually find one or two things that are a negative, but this Chord cable really doesn't seem to add or leave out anything that isn't already on the recording. The Album features quite a lot of drumming and drum lead tracks, which you would expect from Mr Collins being a successful drummer himself. They all seem to kick and have the right tightness attributed to them. Other finer details too are not left out of the recordings either. As drumming goes, the title track, which was recently featured in a chocolate advert being played by a Gorilla and is well known in its own right, comes across as a very "Live" performance; it has a very atmospheric presentation and as Mr Collins tears at the skins you can feel like your "There"! time to turn down the lights, and turn the volume up!

Pros.

Great detail and resolution, uncoloured sound, represents good value for money and does exactly what it says on the tin

Cons.

Nothing of note

Chord Shawline RCA 1m (£200).

Having tested and reviewed the Chord Shawline Digital RCA previously, I was looking forward to a similar sound and sonic experience from the Analogue RCA. I swapped around my own Digital Cable for the previous Chord test cable and replaced my own reference RCA cables for several days before then replacing my cables for the Shawline RCA set. Who needs Yoga when you get a full workout messing with the cable monsters!

Like the Digital cable before, the Shawline is virtually identical in appearance, having the Chord VEE 3 RCA plugs which have PTFE insulation and are fully silver plated inside the connector housing, thus giving a very good connection between the cables and equipment. The cables are also marked for direction of signal path. Even on cables that do not have these directional marking, it's my belief that consistency is always a benefit within cabling and I always mark one end just so I can

MID PRICED LOOM FROM CHORD COMPANY



always have the cable facing the same way. Like the high-end Sarum cables the Shawline uses the Tuned ARAY conductor geometry.

As this “Cable Doctor” series progresses from the lower end or starter “C” series to this the Shawline range and onto the Epic level, this Shawline is probably the type and level of standard that would be consistent with the rest of my system, and be a reasonable cost against performance. Those who frequent Facebook groups will know the ongoing battles between the believers and none believers on the cable debate. Having been lucky enough to try several types of brands from very reasonable to expensive handmade exotica, it’s my belief that most Hifi enthusiasts should be looking to push their equipment performance via use of cables and mains supply products. Asking your local dealer to loan out a small bundle is the key, even to hear a worse sound so that you at least know the differences in sounds and what changes can occur with a simple cable change. If you have a group of friends or a good local dealer, why not set up a “Cable Bank”? where for a deposit you can take away some cables and then bring them back if they don’t suit, or pay the balance and keep?

Anyway, on with my testing.

One of my favorite test albums is The Eagles and “The Long Run” the title track has a bouncy bass line and fine guitar backing. The Shawline has a great positive effect on this type of music, giving a rhythmical and tight portrayal of the track. The RCA doesn’t ever sound congested or cluttered and separation on the sinister “Disco Strangler” which builds from a single guitar riff to the full set of The Eagles crew is excellent. Bass, Cymbals, Drums and Tambourine all clearly separated within the soundstage. Like the previous Shawline Digital Cable there is a very slight rise in the upper frequencies, which is actually an enhancement in quality as it brings even more detail and resolution into the sonic picture without it becoming harsh or frosty and yet remains smooth. This gives the cable good dynamic range as the RCA balances on the warm side but never sounds dull. It has a very accurate sound to my ears.

Going to a similar style of music, but not as well recorded I put “God Willin’ & The Creek Don’t Rise” by Ray LaMontgne. The self-titled track has a wide and atmospheric opening. Electric slide guitar protruding from the silence

The
heightened
details, fine
tempered
midrange
and
rhythmical
bass come
together to
produce a
relaxing and
musical
rendition of
your
favourite
tracks

MID PRICED LOOM FROM CHORD COMPANY

with a big drum accompaniment then Mr LaMontagne's husky vocals leaving the speakers with good emotion attached, the Shawline RCA allowing the drums to extend outward, giving a feeling of space and depth to what feels like an outdoor rendition of the song. It's a pity that some of the finer details in the recording are not as well recorded as some cymbal sounds are lost, this is inherent the recording though. What is great on this album, and the Shawline majors in, is the detail and realism brought out from the recordings. "Are We Really Through" is played very simply with Guitar and Vocal. Ray's voice plays out with a liquid and smooth honey like texture sprinkled with a little grit. I'm waiting for the feeling of his breath on my skin, such is the inflection and nuances the cable provides. "Beg Steal Or Borrow" has a faster tempo to the track, the Audiolab CDQ usually majors on timing and the this is borne out by the added Chord cable. The foot tapping country music has carried the tuneful verve to the tips of my toes.

Moving genre to rock, Steven Wilson of Porcupine Tree fame gets an outing. "Hand. Cannot. Erase." This album has come across a little congested in the past. This annoyed me greatly, and it reminded me of Freeform Jazz (A little

pet hate). Playing this album from the beginning for those not familiar with it, track 1 is an instrumental and flows prog-like into track 2. "First Regret + 3 Years Older" the sound effect of a children's playground moves to a crescendo of guitars and drums firing out of the sound-space between speakers. There is an extra level of grip on the music that doesn't castrate or strangle the track, nor does it allow it to arrive at your listening box in a big hit of mush. Each strike or pluck of a string is held in its own company. This seems to make the pieces of music flow and become enjoyable. Track 6 "Home Invasion" starts like what could be described as the intro to some epic Sci-Fi film or a high octane spy thriller. The Chord Shawline cables manage to catch and convey the tension and drama of the piece perfectly, the driving bass drum and rhythms, slap of sticks on the skins crack out with menace and yet doesn't cloud the delicacy of the cymbals in the background tinging away.

Chords goal for this range of cables was to design a cable that does "Nothing", this has always been a goal for Hifi enthusiasts and manufacturers alike. To have a cable that does nothing but carry the signal without adding or taking away anything from the original. Well I'm

convinced that the engineers have cracked that target. I doubt that Sherlock Holmes would find anything missing from the original recording. I really can't find anything to criticise, these Chord Shawline RCA cables seem to do exactly what the engineers designed them for, "Nothing"!

Pros.

The very small differences between these cables and my reference ones do add up to provide a great all round performance. The nice warmth and extra little details provide a relaxing and entertaining presentation that I think would benefit most systems.

Cons.

Nothing, just what the doctor ordered

Chord Epic Twin Speaker Cable. 3m. Factory Terminated. (£400)

This speaker cable sits in the upper middle of the Chord range of cables. Price wise it is around that 10% range of my system value, which is spoken about as a ball park figure as a reasonable amount to spend on system cabling compared to cost of your main system. This Cable Doctor series of reviews will later allow me to push past that 10% figure to see how far you can reasonably push performance with regards to various cabling options.

The Chord Epic Speaker Cable arrives in a very nice custom made circular black nylon bag, the cable inside is separated by 3 nylon leaves allowing for 4 cables to be carried at the same time and tagged with cable type, length and termination option. This is a nice touch and the presentation gives you confidence that these hand-made cables you have purchased are a high quality product.

Inside the brown/grey cable the main conductors are 12awg silver plated twisted Oxygen Free Copper and are sourced from Chords Odyssey cable. Information taken from Chord's database tells me that the conductors are spaced with a PVC jacket for mechanical damping before a foil and metal braid shielding is applied. Outer



MID PRICED LOOM FROM CHORD COMPANY

jacket is translucent PVC to provide further mechanical damping. The cable is relatively stiff and is assembled to a high standard. The banana plugs are the single plug with a single sprung bar. These are not always the easiest to fit as the speaker wire that enters the plug is slim and getting a good grip isn't easy. One (why is it always one?) refuses to go in. It takes a little fiddling with a pair of pliers but it eventually slides home. It's no big deal as at least you know you have a good solid connection to the amplifier's speaker terminals.

After running the cables for several days and getting a couple of hundred hours of music through them, I settle back to fully finding out how they fit into my system.

Going to an old favourite The Eagles classic, "Hotel California", the familiar sound of the lead Guitar and bass initiate with accompanying crisp cymbals followed by the thud, thud of drum. Throughout the song what strikes me is the way the bass guitar is tight and defined, the sound is clearly being transferred well from the CD to the speakers, there seems to be an extra little level of detail from the metallic lead guitar too. In fact there is another guitar that I really don't think I've heard before from the left channel at about 1m43s. Maybe it has become a bit more forward with these Epic cables? I have heard the soundstage a little wider and deeper before with this track, I have also heard a bit more projection from the vocals. Although the track doesn't seem boxed in or two dimensional either. "New Kid In Town" has a metronomic cymbal tick from the right hand side, with poor cables this is just that, a tick, The Chord Epic has a properly defined metal transient to it. There is only one little niggle for me, some of the drum sounds including the bass has a slightly soft edge to its presentation. It's not a deal breaker by any means and it doesn't seem as apparent on the following "Life In The Fast Lane" and "Victim Of Love"; the drums in these kick out like a stung mule, and the punch in your gut feeling tells you it is all there. Separation of instruments is good, with the speakers having that "disappeared" mode to them and music being out there and not too confined between the speakers.

Swapping CDs to some "Ella and Louis" on the Verve label, an album which has re-written my views on "old"

recordings. If only all recordings could be preserved this well! "It's A Lovely Day" has Ella Fitzgerald's vocals sublimely laid out, and held fixed in the air forward of the speakers. There are fine nuances in that voice, which produces good emotion and feeling. Mr Armstrong's throaty rumblings seem more closely recorded on the microphone and the Chord Epic allowing the music to portray this technique. Louis's voice carries and extends the SSSSSSS sounds, again this can sound like the scraping of chalk on a chalkboard with other cables but the Chord Epic has it more like a hot poker being dipped into cold oil - it has a more natural presentation. I do think these speaker cables have a slightly elongated treble that glistens and makes for a more involved sound. I usually shy away from bright sounding equipment as I find it a bit tiring, but with the Chord and I'm happy to listen and relax.

Giving Annie Lennox's "Diva" an outing which can trip up some set ups I've run. This early 90's album which has deep electronic bass and digital instruments can sound a bit strained and a little too fake at times. What is silkily powerful is Annie's voice. Track 5 and "Cold" has her vocals held in check centrally at 12 O'clock. Muscular deep noted pulsing away, I feel her performance is a little withdrawn into the rear of the soundstage; it's also a little warm, which is surprisingly opposite to what I was expecting. It's possible that the speaker cable doesn't mask any recording flaws, and this is what I'm hearing. Moving on to "little Bird" which has a big heartbeat and sweet vocalisations, and I think showing Annie Lennox's pedigree at it's best. The track is still a little confined, but it's a better rendition. The music takes more of a centre stage to the proceedings and has strong verve and pace. The Chord Epic does like a bit of a party and pulls no punches with overly processed recordings.

Conclusion

Pros

A sweet sounding cable that's well engineered. It brings added detail to the overall sound and this helps the Chord Epic to give a great lively performance, with the rhythmical and deep bass this cable really likes to Party

Cons

It's possible for the top end to go slightly over the top with some recordings and poorly recorded bass can be a little rounded

Chord Shawline Loom and Epic Speaker Cable

Having looked and listened to the Chord Shawline Digital, RCA and Epic speaker cables in isolation, I now have the task of seeing how these cables work as a loom.

In the past, I'd always be reluctant to stick with one cable manufacturer; it just wasn't in my blood to do it. I'm talking early on in my hifi hobby! Back then the better end of the cable market was out of my reach financially so trying to cobble together cheap cables that sounded well together became a bit of a game. Now I'm in the fortunate position to try out what was once beyond me for real.

I'm not going to go into a track by track review, you have probably had enough of my CD collection by now, what I will say is these cables together work hand in glove with each other. What may have seemed a little foible in isolation seems to be overcome when partnered. The heightened details, fine tempered midrange and rhythmical bass come together to produce a relaxing and musical rendition of your favourite tracks. There is no hiding place though, what comes off your record collection ends up at your ears and your best will sound great, the poor, muddy or scratchy stuff will remain just that. In a market where technology is giving us better and better value for money, these Chord cables are playing a good game, they are a must listen or demo to those who may be looking for an upgrade from the £20-£100 cable bracket. They seem at this price point not to have any compromises that lower priced or lower specification cables have.

The Digital or RCA don't to my ears impregnate the sound with any voice or fingerprint of their own, they just seem to let the music flow out as it was meant to be. That may be that these cables have the right synergy with my mid-price system. On a very high end Hifi you may be able to detect more, but it's horses for courses for me, and these work.

PrimaLuna Prologue Pre- mier Valve In- tegrated Amplifier

By Dan Worth

Glowing out from the Hifi Pig vaults this month is the PrimaLuna Premier Valve Integrated amplifier originally reviewed in April 2014



One are the days when valve amps sounded like a lush, overly warm and romantic interpretation of

the music. These days a typical valve amplifiers circuit is more geared towards a sparkly more dynamic and gutsy type of presentation and the PrimaLuna Prologue Premier continues this trend. This particular valve integrated from PrimaLuna was sent along to Hifi Pig for review from Absolute Sounds in the UK.

The amp looks modern and clean and on the front has just the volume control (ALPS Blue Velvet) and the source selector knob. A valve cage is included to protect the valves from inquisitive fingers and the power switch is on the left hand side of the amp. Around the back is a good selection of four line level RCAs, a home theatre pass through and speaker terminals for 8 and 4 Ohm loads. Inside wiring is point to point. Included in the design of the PrimaLuna is a Bad Tube Indicator which takes the form of a small LED on the chassis in front of each valve and as its name suggests this indicates if a valve is bad. The Power Transformer Protection circuit allows the amp to switch off and reset should the power transformer overheat and there's a similar circuit (OTP) for the output transformers. In place of a plate fuse the amp utilises a "+B relay" which works in conjunction with the OTP circuit to protect in case of valve failure.

The model we were sent had 4 E134 power tubes and 4 smaller ECC82/12AU7 valves. The more typical

'old school' valve enthusiast would take one look at this valve compliment and suggest that the amp would have a large, overblown midrange, soft bass and perhaps a rolled off treble. How wrong he would be!

It's such a common misconception with valves that they are nothing but trouble ridden unreliable and unnecessary parts of an audio setup - this is also untrue. Yes, a valve can have issues of its own from time to time, but they are far from unreliable in their modern form and with the ability for a user to replace a valve rather than send an entire transistor amplifier to an engineer for repair general maintenance is somewhat simpler in the main. I have personally been using valve amps for a fair few years now and apart from one instance (which a quick valve change solved) have not had any trouble with them whatsoever.

One of the main advantages for me is that the valve platform allows for tube rolling where the valves can be changed to offer a slightly different sonic characteristic and flavour to the music, which is certainly something that cannot be achieved with solid state amplifiers.

The Prologue Premier being all valve has this tube rolling capacity, but taking this notion one step further the PrimaLuna has the ability to configure its Auto Bias settings via the flick of a switch to power KT88 valves and it's variant a 6550 - as well as the EL34's (provided for this review) and their variants of KT77 and 6CA7 valves.

It's such a common misconception with valves that they are nothing but trouble ridden unreliable and unnecessary parts of an audio setup - this is also untrue

With its ability to switch between KT88, EL34's and their variants via a simple flick of a switch and its non-deadly auto-biasing feature, the PrimaLuna is extremely flexible and should cater to the specifics of most users

Then there are the four ECC82/12AU7 which also have various and different sounding equivalents in modern or NOS (new old stock) vintage tubes, industrial, military and broadcast forms. A minefield you say? No, a fun way to tailor the amp to specific requirements and tastes in that all valves convey slight variations in bass, treble and midrange presentation with some have larger effects than others.

There's a certain unmistakable quality to vocals and instruments using a good valve amplifier, a richness of tone, a naturally glorious and beautifully liquid midrange which is both expressive and organic. The PrimaLuna Prologue Premier is one of those valve amps which certainly ticks these particular boxes for me.

Sound

The first thing apparent when switching the PrimaLuna on is its cleanliness in the top end. It has a wonderfully sparkly and airy treble which blends down into a clean upper midrange. Details are prominent and easily depicted even when listening to large crescendos and larger orchestral pieces. Dynamics in this portion of the frequency range are not overly strong, they are however far from subdued or mellow and they are a little more energetic and cleaner than natural.

Moving down into the midrange most listeners would agree that this is the strongest area of the sound reproduction with valve amplifiers (and which I agree with) although there are vast differences in tonal balance in this area from amplifier to amplifier. Vocals on the

Prologue Premier are strong vibrant and clean in nature, projected and very slightly upfront - which is how I like them. An EL34 tube will always have some added warmth in the midrange and the cleaner circuit on the PrimaLuna allows for a great flavour to vocals. As well as the cleanliness the midrange conveys there is an unmistakable richness to the undertones of male vocals and an organic and natural rasp to the sound which really allows the listener to hear the great vocal range of the likes of Frank Sinatra... or his modern counterpart Michael Buble.

Female vocalists like Rachelle Farel, Ilse DeLange, Mariah Carey and Diana Krall all have a pitch of tone respective to their vocal presentation. Here, although a little bit cleaner than some other modern EL34 amplifiers, upper midrange factors in a bit more forwardness when hitting higher volumes, but at reasonable volumes it's not as apparent.

Moving along into the bass regions - another common trait of an EL34 amplifier is that its bass is a little fuller, less driven and a little less complex. The nature of the PrimaLuna circuit actually compliments this very well! There isn't a lot of bloom, there is a tightness compared to other amps such as the Eastern Electric M520 and a simple change of the power valves to the 6CA7 or KT77 would increase pace, drive and lower mid information. Bass as I said is full and it's surprisingly well extended for an EL34 which is a testament to the circuit used in the PrimaLuna. I would say that overall it was more complimentary to live performances than manufactured music.



FROM THE VAULT

Exploring some other aspects of the sound a little further Damien Rice's 'Volcano' showed marvellous timbre to the running of guitar strings to the left hand side of the realistic soundstage allowing both the male and female vocals to sound fluid and engrossing. This is a great late night listening track with great flow and although a modestly stripped down piece of music, the Premier really brings out all the small nuances and finely detailed sounds within the soundstage in a true 'out of the box' fashion'.

I wouldn't say that there is a great amount of refinement in this amp's presentation, although it can convey delicacies which for a bit of soft rock such as 'The Sultans of Swing' from Dire Straits allows for the electric guitar to pierce the air and give a bit of an edgy grunt to proceedings.

Of course, being an ardent tube roller I just had to swap out the tubes in the amp and opted for a quad of Gold Lion (GL) KT77's which bias from the EL34 switch on the side of the amp. I also changed the stock 12AU7's for a quad of Siemens and Halaske (S & H) triple mica E82CC long plates from the early 60's. From experience the GL's should provide more bass drive whilst retaining warmth whilst the S&H will add bandwidth, balance and control.

Switching back on and allowing the PrimaLuna to preheat the valves and do its usual safety circuit checks the differences that could be heard were immediate.

There was a larger bass response which was also tighter and more driven. Midrange gained openness and the silky clean expression of the vocals attested to a more 'in the room' feeling with them being more lifelike, less muddy and absolutely wonderful in every way.

Top end was a huge leap for me with the depiction between details and the airy silences really added a more intense and lifelike feel to the sound. Notes were crisper yet more controlled and the detail retrieval seemed greatly improved with added bandwidth and rendering.

Dynamics also seemed to sound freer and came from a darker background which was never overly dead and still allowed for that seductive valve flow to wash across an improved soundstage.



I ended up concluding my time with the PrimaLuna listening to some rock and I'm sure most of you that follow my reviews know this really isn't my favourite genre, but then I do like a little from time to time. One of my favourite rock albums of all time is the 'Hysteria' album by Def Leopard, definitely their best work and with the rolled tubes on board I easily went through the whole album. The amp still retained the previous grunt with the genre that I enjoyed earlier when listening to some Dire Straits and this was truly unexpected. I'm sure some would argue that valve amps just don't do rock music but I enjoyed it very much with the PrimaLuna in the system.

Accompanied with the amplifier is a seriously sleek 'wand' type remote in black metal and with just six shiny stainless buttons. I never touched on this earlier in the review as my example had run out of batteries - probably due to having a button depressed when it was packaged after it's last review, I never bothered to change the batteries as you need to remove the two rubber rings (which prevent it from being scratched (or scratching) a flat surface and which stop it from sliding about on a table) to reveal a couple screws which then expose the battery compartment. I'm used to having to turn two volume pots on my Emille so one was still an easier solution than normal.

I just found myself holding the remote from time to time and admiring it

instead... and playing air guitar with it too from time to time!

Conclusion

I would conclude that the PrimaLuna Prologue Premier's circuit is highly accomplished and with the stock valves in place it sounds fantastic. However with a few changes in valve complement there really is a whole heap of detail, complexity (amongst other attributes) which can be achieved to provide for a really engrossing listen.

With its ability to switch between KT88, EL34's and their variants via a simple flick of a switch and its non-deadly auto-biasing feature, the PrimaLuna is extremely flexible and should cater to the specifics of most users.

Looks-wise it's simple, attractive and well made and it comes with that super sexy all metal remote control.

I for one would certainly stump up the pennies for one of these. Have a listen and see what you think and if you're already on the valve train and have any of the variants of the tubes mentioned take them along and see if your dealer will let you have a play - if not wait 'til you get it home.

**Price when tested EL34 - £2300
(KT88 - £2600)**

Highly recommended for its flexibility, simple good looks and core sonic signature.

Behind The Brands

Behind The Brands with Mark Fenlon of Markaudio and Markaudio-Sota



BEHIND THE BRANDS

Mark Fenlon is the founder of Markaudio (raw drivers) and development Director of Markaudio-Sota (finished product using Markaudio raw drivers) tells us all about his industry past, his systems and what he listens to whilst free-fall skydiving.

Your History

How did you get into the industry?

I built my first pair of loudspeakers in my late teens, a near penniless student. I bought a second hand turntable and amplifier, then turned my hand to making a pair of boxes and bought the drivers from Radio-Shack. I've been based in Hong Kong from 1999 and began making parts for various audio companies, mostly in China and Japan. In addition, from 2002 to 2005, I worked with Doreen Bance (Bandor) and Ted Jordan (E.J. Jordan) on a project basis. E. J. Jordan was sold to a Swedish interest, giving me the "push" to go-it alone and make my own driver designs.

Who or/and what was the biggest influence on your career?

Who is: Matsubara San and Matsumoto San. The former is the father designer of the Fostex FE series drivers. The latter is a fellow mechanical engineer from Honda F1 engine development. We've spent the last several years swapping ideas on my concepts from our respective professional viewpoints. Along with Dr Scott Lindgren, Evan Yue Steve Cheng, Norio Nakajima and several more, I simply couldn't have got this far without all these guys.

The "what" is my many years of mechanical design/engineering experience.

Proudest moment/product you're most proud of?

Producing the Pluvia 11 and the Alpair 5 Gen 2.

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

None come to mind, each product has its own story. They all share input and influence from end- users. Let's remind ourselves that we're talking about simple electro-mechanical devices (transducers) located into sound chambers (boxes). They can all be measured anechoically,



however, how the products perform is in the ears of preference for each listener.

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

Health permitting, new Alpair single suspension drivers (7 and 11). New 10", 12" and 15" wide-band drivers. New negative camber cone technology. I'm sure HiFi Pig readers would like to

know more about the latter. Watch out for more news once I've completed all my tests and certain legal matters are processed.

You and your system

What was your very first system?

From my memory, it was a solid state amp made by Amstrad, hitched to a compact tape deck, along with a

BEHIND THE BRANDS



turntable and a pair of second hand loudspeakers (can't remember the make)

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

I regularly mix and match my system, part of the experimental and working process. Primarily, I'm a devotee of Japanese Mofset amps and loudspeakers. Sansui, Victor (SX Spirit 500 loudspeakers) and Accuphase. For the valve side, a custom built 6V6 single-end, while a Luxman MQ68 sits in my living room astride the Accuphase DP65. I'm starting to thin out my collection (sadly).

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

My Accuphase E308 integrated and its matched CD player DP67. Alas for health reasons, physically lugging this gear, swapping them in and out got too much for me.

How often do you listen to music?

Virtually all the week daytimes, it's my job, my life.

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

Accuphase DP65 CD player with its internal Sony R1 transport. They'll bury it with me.

The state of the industry

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

I'm looking at my Luxman MQ68 Custom amp as I type, what more can I say.

Vinyl resurgence... what are your thoughts?

Glad to see Vinyl remains alive and kicking. Too many wonderful record collections were lost in the rush to CD.

Is CD a dying format?

Hopefully not, like vinyl, there's a great volume of wonderful music out there, pity to see it vanish.

What are your views on the state of the industry/where is it going/what will it look like in 5 years/what will typical systems look like?/What will happen

to prices?/What will happen to the high end – will it carry on regardless?

More compact and mobile systems, lossless downloading will increase along with content streaming. A "typical" system will change the most at the source end (already happening). On pricing, difficult to assess and it depends on growth in the world economies and the demand for raw materials, currency artificially depressed. The high-end will likely carry on regardless, always a market for the "posh stuff".

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

From the Sony Walkman to the current mobile phones, access to music has never been this good, that's the upside. The down-side is poor quality reproduction for many years, dumbing down younger listener's ears from learning what High Fidelity is all about.

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

By making sure publications like HiFi Pig and "alternative" product makers are supported. The more choice, the better.

BEHIND THE BRANDS

Online shopping's effect on the retail industry?

Massive at the lifestyle end of the business. Headphones are the latest example. Most traditional retail is taking a hit from on-line business. But there will likely be a continuing need for A/V high street retail in most markets. When it comes time to make a substantial A/V component purchase, purchasers like to hear and see what they're buying.

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

Too much waffle from some makers using overworked superlatives when describing their products. I'd like to see more attention to basic working/operational detail, but I'm an engineer, by nature I'm bound to view the industry from a different perspective.

The way you work

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

Depends what it understood by the term "measurements". Most decent loudspeaker makers will have their own

in-house anechoic chambers (we've just built a new chamber, second in 3 years). Great for total isolation assessment but near useless for in-room operational observation. Markaudio-Sota spends a lot of its time with end-users and the trade demonstrating prototypes, gaining feedback before going to production. Long may it continue with such a discourse.

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

Me personally...Smooth, listenable musicality. I'm a regular concert attender with little interest in highly coloured or overly-filtered systems.

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

Haven't owned a turntable in years...alas the wrong person to ask on this one.

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

Depends upon the room size, environment and listening tastes. My living space is best suited to Stand-Mounts (Viotti One's currently) plus I regularly use my 5.0 surround sound system. It's too small for descent floor standers.

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

What is your favourite recording?

Tough question and it depends on my mood. Not one, there are several. Górecki's third (second movement Dawn Upshaw - absolutely stunning and kills most tweeters. Solaris 2002 film sound track - Cliff Martinez - mesmerising. I Only Have Eyes For You, Flamingo's 1959 (Solid gold Soul) simply fab. The Whale and also Mr Blue Sky- Electric Light Orchestra - Out Of The Blue Album. Vangelis, Chung Kou (Polydor) best listen to it while free-fall sky-diving. Finally Brian Eno's Thursday Afternoon - long version.

Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings

Only 1 really trusted: Henryk Górecki symphony No 3, David Zinman, Dawn Upshaw Nonsuch 79282.

What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures.

In my youth, I was a regular attendee at the Ministry Of Sound in London, not quite so cool now, was then.

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?

No recordings as I can replace them. However, My Luxman MQ 68 custom amp (with its spare valves) is too good to leave behind.

The Future

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

More Single suspension drivers, negative camber cone technology and larger flagship loudspeakers, if the gods smile upon me.

Thanks for speaking to Hifi Pig, Mark.



RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY
JANINE ELLIOT



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LONG LIVE EARS

If you don't know your NABs from your RIAs or your Microgroove from your Orthacoustic, don't panic as Janine Elliot is here to explain the history and the science behind vinyl equalisation

Over the years we have had to put up with different 'standards' in our single aim for enjoying music. Whether noise reduction systems such as Philips DNL, Dolby B, C or A, DBX I, II or ADRES for our cassettes and reel to reels, NAB or IEC EQ for reel to reels, MP3 (which is actually MPEG-1 and MPEG-2 Audio Layer III, with an infinite number of compression algorithms, set up by the Moving Picture Experts Group) and FLAC, ALAC, DSD, MQA and other lossless formats. You get the point. Many of us playing our records will be aware of the main types of cartridges, MM, MC, MI and ceramic, but not so many will be aware that over the years there have been more than 100 types of equalisation for the humble record cartridge in order for it to play a record correctly.

If you have ever put your ears next to your stylus you will notice the "top heavy" response, with nothing particularly audible below mid frequencies. Today's standard of record EQ is the Recording Industry Association of America RIAA curve¹. That curve tries to "normalise" the response so that after playing the grooves it all sounds normal and flat. In the recording the RIAA curve has around -20dB taken off the signal at 20Hz and rising logarithmically to +20dB at 20,000Hz. That means in playback the EQ needs to amplify by 20dB at 20Hz and attenuate by 20dB at 20kHz. The reasons for the equalisation are fourfold; Firstly to cut the bass down otherwise the stylus would be jumping up and down and probably throw the needle out of the groove, and then likely

ruin the record. Secondly, the larger groove size of the lower frequencies might join with an earlier or later rotation (called over-cutting), and thirdly, it means that with a reduced 'mean width' of each groove you can get more minutes recorded onto your record. Finally, if you boost the higher frequencies relative to the bass you can get an increased signal-to-noise ratio; a bit like Dolby B, and incidentally FM radio (pre-emphasis and de-emphasis in transmitters and receivers respectively).

The first use of EQ in the recording process was as early as 1926 from Bell Telephone Laboratories when they noticed that even in the disc-cutting recording process things were not flat; the amplitude is higher as the bass lowers and decreases as the frequencies

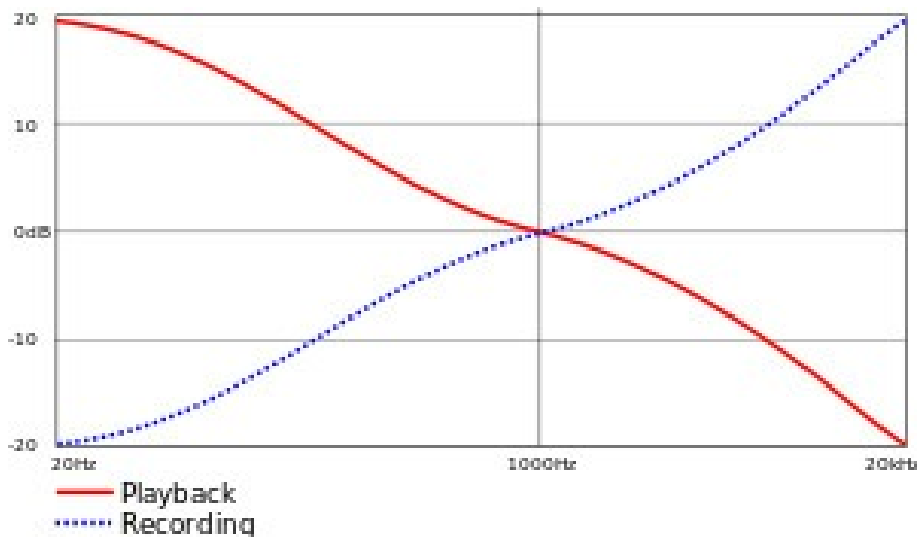
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RETRO BITES



get higher. Whilst creating playback EQ curves in wind-up mechanical record players was not possible, the replaceable needles of the gramophones could be purchased in different shapes to create either “loud tone” or “soft tone” sounds. Incidentally, the term “put a sock in it” originates from putting a sock in the trumpet your gramophone to reduce the level of sound.

As early as the 1940’s EQ curves have been employed in records to improve the listening, all of which have reduced the bass and increase the treble. Before the universal RIAA curve and particularly from the 1940’s, each record company applied its own equalization curve; this meant that there were over 100 combinations of turnover and roll-off frequencies in use. In all these different systems 1000Hz is considered 0dB. It does, therefore mean that playing certain records designed for different EQ settings will sound either bright or ‘bassy’ when decoded using the generic RIAA curve of today. When the Columbia LP was released in June 1948 they noticed that there was more bass boost or pre-emphasis below 150 Hz, and similarly the RCA Victor 45 rpm disc released in February 1949 noticed this had a different recording characteristic, due to the different recording speed. They decided to use the “New Orthophonic” EQ setting whereas Columbia decided to use the “LP” setting.

The various EQ curves used before RIAA came to the rescue in 1954 were from the main record making companies, such as Columbia, Victor, Decca (FFRR-78 and FFRR-LP) Microgroove, RCA and EMI; and even broadcasters and organisations such as BBC, NBC (Orthacoustic), NAB and IEC used their own curves. For example, RCA Victor reduced it by 18.6dB at 30Hz and by the time it got to 15kHz was up 17.2dB, meaning the EQ needed to be set in reverse to flatten it all. As a contrast, the London Gramophone Corporation reduced 30Hz by 13.2dB and raised 15kHz by 15.1dB. Playing on a modern RIAA curve would mean that in the second example the sound would be graphically more like a happy smile with boosted bass and treble.

The importance of playing your records with the correct EQ cannot be overstated. If all your records are post 1955 then you would have little to worry about. Older records should therefore be played with the correct EQ for each record. Whilst RIAA curve was issued in 1954 it wasn’t until 1958 that all the stalwarts finally gave into the new curve. Hartley-Turner, a company claimed to have coined the phrase “High-Fidelity” in 1927 in reference to their wireless receivers, introduced their Tone Control Unit between 1950 and 1954 to allow players of gramophone records to tailor the sound of each record to match the correct shape. Similarly, another British company Lowther introduced their BT/2 tone control in

Whilst RIAA curve was issued in 1954 it wasn’t until 1958 that all the stalwarts finally gave into the new curve

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If the cartridge is not properly loaded with the correct resistance and impedance from the phonostage, it will not playback flat

1948 to do the same. Both were very limiting adjustments, and it took manufacturers such as Leak to make concerted efforts to get exact EQ for specific record types. For example, their early 1952 Varislope I (£12.12s.0d) had LP (for old LPs pre-1955), 78B (British 78's) and 78A (American 78's); the Varislope III from 1957 (£15.15s.0d) had 78E (European 78's), NARTB (for playing LPs by Artist, Capitol, MGM, Westminster, Tempo M33), LP and RIAA. The 1960 Varislope Stereo (£25) added 78NE (New European 78's and also work on Columbia LPs pre 1955). My favourite is the Tannoy Autograph

ACOUSTICAL QUAD 22

FOR ALL MAKES OF LP AND 45 RECORDS ISSUED SINCE 1954 USE ☐ ☐ ☐

FOR ALL MAKES OF 78 RECORDS ISSUED SINCE 1954 USE ☐ ☐ ☐

THE FOLLOWING EQUALISATIONS SHOULD GIVE THE BEST PERFORMANCE FROM RECORDS ISSUED BEFORE 1954. EXCEPTIONS OCCUR, PARTICULARLY WHEN RECORDS ARE MADE FROM SHARED MASTERS. THIS CHART SHOULD THEREFORE BE USED AS A GUIDE ONLY WHEN IN DOUBT USE ☐ ☐ ☐ FOR ALL PRE-1954 RECORDS.

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RECORD EQUALISATION GUIDE

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☐ — PRESSED

☐ — DISCS ☐

☐ — RELAXED

control Unit of 1958 (£16.10s.0d) which had a multi position EQ control for BRIT 1 (for EMI 78s), BRIT 2 (for DECCA 78's), Columbia 78's, RCA (78's and LP), Columbia LP, RIAA, AES and NAB. The Quad 22 featured three buttons which allowed the user to select 4 common equalisation curves, by selecting different permutations of the 3 buttons, which allowed matching to a large number of 78 and 33½ derivatives. Just to be different, several manufacturers decided to stick with their own EQ curves well after the letters RIAA became de facto, including Columbia, Decca, CCIR, and TELDEC's Direct Metal Mastering. As a result a few Phono Equalizers made today offer options to play these.

The TELDEC (Telefunken-Decca) DMM recording process was even more complicated, because these records were cut directly to metal (not the usual lacquer) using a specially adapted Neumann disc cutter (VMS82) which had the groove cutting done at a different angle than normal, meaning that using a standard cartridge set at the standard playback angle of 15–22.5° would change the frequency characteristics.

But, the problem of matching is not limited to the correct EQ, or indeed the angle of the stylus to the record. If the cartridge is not properly loaded with the

correct resistance and impedance from the phonostage, it will not playback flat. Choosing phonostages with user-adjustable cartridge loading is not just for gimmicks, and something only looked at seriously by manufacturers since the invention of the CD that was supposed to supersede it. The RIAA feedback loop in the amplifier assumes that it is getting a perfect negative curve to begin with. Phono amps with an incorrect loading of the cartridge can cause a frequency response off normal by 6 to 10 dB due to improper cartridge loading.

Whilst we have spent years improving phonostages to get hifi nirvana, with passive stages costing £1000 and much more, there is also a movement towards digital and computerised phonostages. Companies such as PSpatial Audio have a Macintosh based High-Resolution Audio App called 'Stereo Sauce' offering historic equalisation algorithms to match any type of 78 or 33, and a number of Windows/Android based products are making excellent phonostages that would have been unheard of just 10 years ago. The phonostage in Convert Technology's 'Plato', reviewed by Hifi Pig recently, is an example. Will the future of the RIAA curve lie in digital form, only time will tell, but the future of the algorithm looks set for a long future yet, however it is arrived at.

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BIRD'S EYE VIEW

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

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In this month's Bird's Eye View, Linette Smith discusses handbags and earrings...and a bit of Hifi too

Something that we have discussed before, and no doubt will again and again, is the price of Hifi. Some people are very vocal with their cries of 'it cost how much????' and 'rip off' whereas others are happy to part with their cash for a coveted new piece of gear for their system. Some people seek out vintage gems, classics that have stood the test of time and can sometimes be snapped up for a bargain price, others will only buy spanking brand new gear from a top end dealer. Then of course there are the 'other' people....'normal'

people who don't share our 'weird' obsession for DACs and valves, turntables and cables. People who don't understand why some of us have spent years putting together something 'just to listen to music' on and are happy splashing a grand on a new phone and then listen to MP3s on that. These kind of people say things like 'of course I like music, I just listen to what's on the radio'. They would rather have the latest designer label in their shirt than spend money on anything more than an I-pod dock. Pity for these poor, unenlightened

ones comes in equal measure from the 'It cost how much?!' and the 'Happy to part with their cash' sides of Hifi consumers...it unites both factions of the Hifi argument and we do our best to show them what they are missing out on.

I am of the opinion that, if it's doing no harm to anyone else, you should spend your money on what you want. In this house it tends to be Hifi (and synths at the moment -Ed) and Stuart and I are both in agreement about this. Of course that means that we go without other



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

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BIRDS EYE VIEW

things that some people might consider more important, like a posh car or a new kitchen or designer clothes and bags. People often think that because I'm female, I should want the designer shoes and bags over and above Hifi. But the truth of the matter is I don't really see the value in those kind of things. I get much more pleasure from an evening of listening to music on our Hifi than I ever would from the equivalent value of designer stuff. Don't get me wrong I like

to look good, but I just couldn't justify spending so much money on designer gear, I mean, what can you do with a handbag other than put your stuff in to carry around...an eye-wateringly expensive designer label doesn't make it hold my stuff any better! If money was no object then perhaps I would be happy to spend more on designer gear, but in reality, for most of us it is a question of making choices.

I get much
more
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from an
evening of
listening to
music on
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People who perhaps were considering First World Problems just a few months ago, people just like you and me, who now find their lives in turmoil where the only vaguely viable survival option is an inflatable boat on a less than friendly sea-journey towards the unknown

When I Win The Lottery

I was looking at the Cartier website the other day. Do please understand that this was in that 'Pre-checking-the-eurosquillions-what-shall-we-spend-it-on-if-we-have-won' kind of moment rather than any really serious shopping spree. I was drawn to their new range 'Cactus de Cartier'; gorgeous little baubles made of gold, emeralds, carnelians and diamonds in the fine tradition of Cartier floral jewellery. I like a quirky bit of jewellery, the little flowering cactus earrings particularly caught my eye. Then I looked at the price. £54,000. Yes, I'll repeat that £54,000 for a pair of earrings. Putting that into real terms, at today's exchange rate that's a pair of my beloved Avantgarde Acoustic Duo XD's for each earring....with over £4K left to spend on other gear. I do totally understand that the Cartier earrings are beautifully crafted, made from the finest materials and they will possibly turn up on the Antiques Roadshow at some point in the future and be worth even more, but I would be terrified of losing them if I wore them out and about. They would probably stay in their box somewhere safe rather than being enjoyed every day. When you look at it that way, the loudspeakers seem a much more sensible choice, you can enjoy them every day and they are much more difficult to misplace!

With Hifi it is possible to have a very nice system, that sounds great, for really, in the wider scheme of things, not a lot of money. If you have a few hundred, you can get on the ladder and once you get started you can upgrade bit by bit. If you can spend a few thousand then you can get something really wonderful, whether that's all brand new gear, vintage or a combination of the two. Of course you can get silly, it's possible to spend lottery winning on sums on a really high end system from the likes of Living Voice and Kondo, but that is for the elite few who are completely obsessed with music and their system, and, have either unlimited funds or completely prioritise their spending on their system.

Putting this in perspective and thinking about the hours, days and years of enjoyment a well put together Hifi will bring you, let's look at the price of a handbag. Like I said previously, something to put your stuff in so you know where everything is when you are going about your daily business. I would think £80 to £100 on a bag would be about the maximum that I would spend....and then I would have to seriously think about it. Probably the Holy Grail of handbags (or so I am told) is the Hermès Birkin Bag. This iconic design, originally made for Jane Birkin, usually retails at around £5,600 for a standard version, and you will generally have to put your name on a list and wait 5 to 6 years for it. Victoria Beckham has a collection of these bags rumoured to be worth over £1.5 million, including a Hifi Pig pink one thought to be worth over £100,000. The most expensive handbag ever to be sold was a Himalayan crocodile Birkin with white gold and diamonds, sold for over £200,000 at Christies in Hong Kong earlier this year. Try as I might, I just can't justify spending that kind of money on a handbag, even if I had it to spend.

I suppose it's a question of priorities. To be honest, we are pretty lucky if we are even thinking about discussing these 'First World Problems'. We could so easily be in the position of people who don't know where they are going to sleep tonight or what they are going to eat, who don't know if they and their family could be blown up tomorrow. People who perhaps were considering First World Problems just a few months ago, people just like you and me, who now find their lives in turmoil where the only vaguely viable survival option is an inflatable boat on a less than friendly sea-journey towards the unknown. Perhaps we should take a step back and appreciate what we have, including the freedom to bicker with each other about the best way to spend our money. Turn up your Hifi and listen to some music, whether its a Birkin Bag level system or not.

That Euromillions lottery ticket was a winner, by the way.....all 4€10 of it.



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THE VIEWS OF STU!

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



In Association With



This month Stu lets vent on an apathetic music buying public

I've been raving to anyone that will listen (the cats mainly) about the fantastic new album by Luke Haines called *Smash The System*. I reviewed it a couple of weeks ago and I just fell in love with it immediately and have played it countless times since. However, it's not really this record that I'm going to bat on about today; it's about one line to one song on the record. This one line comes from a song where the aforementioned Mr Haines sings about his love for the Incredible String Band and is along the lines of "They may take a while to get into but you should give them a try" and this got me thinking.

We're a lazy bunch when it comes to our listening to new music habits and we're the ones who actually really, really love music. Those sad fools whose musical input is limited to the whitewashed, homogenised slurry we get pumped into our living rooms every Saturday night

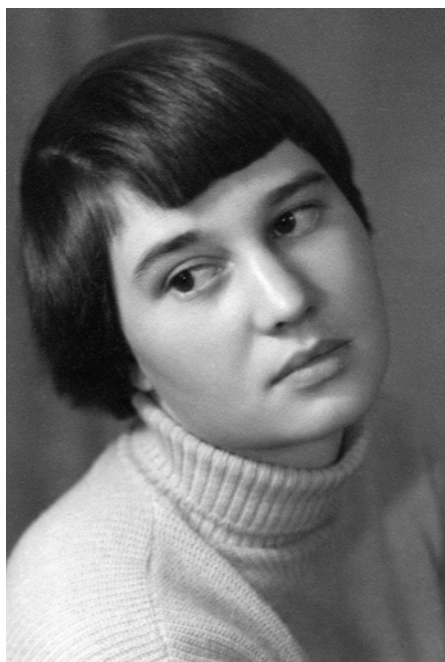
by the likes of X Factor are even worse. They're happy to sit back and let the tide of filth wash over them, blissful in their ignorance that out there in the real three dimensional world there exists musicians creating music that is original, vibrant and innovative. There was a time when entertainment involved a degree of interaction, and I don't mean uploading some pathetic video of yourself and your significant other miming along to some dismal pop ditty whilst the clever fellas that make the app you have to download pop all kinds of clever graphics over your collective bonces. No, I'm talking about getting out, getting yourself in front of some live music and leaping about like some deranged nut job that's just been given a day release pass from the local nut house (I'm not sure you're allowed to call them that any more...sorry) and has forgotten to take their medication that keeps them sedated and calm.

Come to think of it, isn't that just what this senseless, moronic dross that oozes into our living rooms is – a drug to keep us safe and out of harms way. Off the streets and happy to be spoon-fed whatever Simon Cowell and his minions deem to think will be marketable and will sell to the sheeple out there in television land. The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy had it about right with their ditty 'Television, The Drug of The Nation' when they said "One Nation under God / has turned into One Nation / under the influence of one drug / Television, the drug of the nation" Of course the clever marketing types at TVHQ, with their demographic charts and their sharpened pencils will allow you to cast your vote so you maintain the illusion that you are actually having a say in the outcome of the spectacle that is laid before you. Spectacle?...it's a smorgasbord of blundering ineptitude on an epic scale and the sad thing is we've

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

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fallen for it. We've taken the worm and swallowed the hook, line and the sinker. Wasn't it Emma Goldman who said something along the lines of "If voting changed anything, they'd make it illegal!"?

And many of these acts don't care a hoot about their audience so long as the cash till keeps ringing and the money keeps on flooding into their already overflowing pockets. Look at Bieber and his pathetic flouncing off stage at a recent Manchester gig because his prepubescent, subordinate fans couldn't control themselves from screaming. These people paid good money to see you perform and you should have had the courtesy to afford them some consideration and play your pitiful music for them. Then again, I'm sure many of the acts these days play to a backing track and have their voices so mangled by the Autotune algorithms that it may as well be some automaton up there on the stage...oh hang on a minute!

Music should be revolutionary; music should make you move and should inspire you to question the status quo...not the twelve bar blue specialists, the other one. But no, we're sat in our little bubbles, on our overstuffed sofas, with our bursting at the seams backsides, filling our faces with over-processed, potentially lethal sustenance and

washing it down with the intellectually bereft cocktail of, as Zappa may have said, "The best that the 21st century has to offer" and we're loving ever bit of it and consuming it faster than the money men can count. I confess to watching the aforementioned carnival of bunkum recently and there's a rapper on the UK version that goes by the name Honey G or some such and she is the most abhorrent example of this watered down pith that presents itself as edgy and street I've yet to see. No doubt she's living the dream, but when the dream is sugar coated guano you have to ask what kind of nightmarish cesspit have we painted ourselves into.

It doesn't have to be like this! There's live music on all the time and in most towns. Even if it's an old fella on some spoons and his mate wailing drunkenly along on a miserable, rainy afternoon in a scruffy back street pub, at least it's live and at least it's real! There really is no excuse for this apathy people. Take back your lives, take back your right to dance like a gibbon with Tourette's and take back the music from these parasitic leeches that are sucking the very lifeblood out of what we hold so dear. What is stopping you? There is life beyond the bubble and the sinister glowing fiend in the corner of your living room, go and take a peek. You never know you just may enjoy it!

And it doesn't stop there! Refuse to be hoodwinked by this subterfuge and don't buy the records, don't push the button and download the mp3s of these puppets of pop. Say no to their app, decline their YouTube snippet and reject their advances on social media. Search out real musicians that believe in their art and who put their lives and souls into laying bare their emotions in front of you when you play their music.

Back in the dim and distant past some music was difficult and did take, just like The Incredible String Band mentioned in my opening salvo, time to get into and fully appreciate. But we did take time and we did search out music that was a bit leftfield. It was almost a badge of honour to play your friends some obscure and incomprehensible

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piece of music that they'd never heard before and I for one took great delight in this whole process. And friends would do likewise, as if to say "Yeh, your taste is a bit out there but mine's completely away with the faeries!" Where would the likes of Captain Beefheart have got had people not embraced their inner weird and taken his music to their hearts. I'm ranting like a loon I'm well aware and I'm also well aware that candy-coated pap has been peddled by the record companies for years, but it's more menacing now. We know collectively that we've been manipulated and that we've been sold a clever package of carefully positioned product and yet we still allow it to perpetuate through our lack of willingness to stand up and collectively say "No more!"

Stuart is on holiday and his head has been temporarily used to house the previously missing brain of Ulrike Meinhof (pictured).

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

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Luke Haines – Smash The System (Cherry Red)



LUKE HAINES

box at the University of Tübingen) and from the off you know you're in for a sonic and lyrical treat – "There's a hullabaloo at Stasi HQ" being one line that stands out. Black Bunny ("I'm Not Vince Taylor") comes next and has a synth noise that is

What I do know about Smash The System is that on first listening I played it from end to end three times in immediate succession

I've had this for a good few weeks now and it was released to the public on the 7th October...and, despite the bump that came with the CD declaring it a "none concept album", I've been frantically analysing and trying to work out what the concept is or what the hell Mr Haines is on. There does seem to be a thread running through the album; Is it about ritual magick, is it about radical Marxist groups or is it just a collection of random tunes that could only be the product of an absolute genius?

You may or may not be familiar with Haines' work, but you may have heard in passing the bands he was associated with - Black Box Recorder, The Auteurs and Baader Meinhof... you may have even seen the film made about him called Art Will Save The World. None of this need concern you!

What I do know about Smash The System is that on first listening I played it from end to end three times in immediate succession.

Smash The System opens with the tremendously catchy broken pop of Ulrike Meinhof's Brain is Missing (it had previously been kept in a cardboard

immediately just so right but at the same time slightly off-kilter and disturbing. Ritual Majick is possibly the pick of the bunch for me, but the Power of The Witch is a close contender too. The superbly filthy tribute to female sex organ, done in an almost too lifelike to be true Marc Bolan parody, is a sing along stonker of a tune and the songs just keep coming.

Whether it's the slightly whimsical "The Incredible String Band" ("They might take a while to get into, but you should give them a go"), or the closing track "Are You Mad?" and its slightly melancholic air, Smash The System is 'all winner and no filler'.

I was raving about this tune to one of the guys at an agency recently and he said he'd go back to the office and have a listen, contacting me a few hours later with a "not for me!" comment and I suppose that's the thing with this record – not everyone is going to get it. I do!

Yes, this is the best record, bar none that I have heard this year!

Stuart Smith

God bless post- alt- country

Julia Jacklin – Don't Let The Kids Win (Transgressive Records)

Everything these days is 'post-something', don't you think? Post-rock, Post-punk, post-everything. That being the case, Julia Jacklin's debut album 'Don't Let The Kids Win' should possibly take the mantle of 'post-alt-country', whatever that means. The album's a lively mix of laid-back guitar-driven songs which lie somewhere between Laura Marling, Faith Over Reason, Eileen Rose and Patti Smith. She certainly has a voice that would melt butter – 'Leadlight' is one of those gorgeous summery anthems which you often hear when abroad, being both bittersweet in lyrical content and smooth as silk in the vocal department.

Other tracks see a much more relaxed vibe. 'Elizabeth', for instance, takes those same honey-doused vocals and a simple acoustic guitar for instrumentation. It's beautiful. Many of the tracks here tell interesting stories which made me first imagine dusty streets of some American hick town, but Jacklin, it turns out, hails not from the States, but from the Blue Mountains, located a few hours North-West of Sydney, Australia. Many years ago, I was lucky enough to see Aussie band The Church playing live in Sydney and I discovered that Sydney-siders have a very

diverse palette when it comes to music. Well, there are certainly alt-country undertones within Jacklin's music, but the album actually consumes several styles.

It's also a sombre listen, wearing its heart on its sleeve, 'LA Dream' coming across not so much as a dream but more as a reflection of a broken dream which was trashed by a boyfriend who chooses to walk out – "Why'd you go to the grocery store on the day you planned to leave? Left me here with all this food my body does not need".

Occasionally, Jacklin sounds angry at her lot, other times more sad and reflective. She certainly packs a lot of emotion into these eleven songs, which makes for a compelling listen. God bless post-alt-country. You read it here first...

Paul Lockett



Jah Wobble – In Dub (30Hertz)

Now to me whenever the word dub is mentioned I immediately think of Jamaican dub reggae, as I'm sure many do, but Wobble's take is somewhat more eclectic. For example CD 1 opens Cleopatra King Size which is recognisable as what I'd instantly think of as being dub, but then later on you have Blacksmith (both straight and dub versions) which, whilst still having the effects on effects you expect to hear in dub, has a very English folk feel to it.

Wobble manages to borrow styles from around the world, including eastern sounds, but all the tunes, to a greater or lesser extent, have that dub feel to them and as a whole this collection works very well.

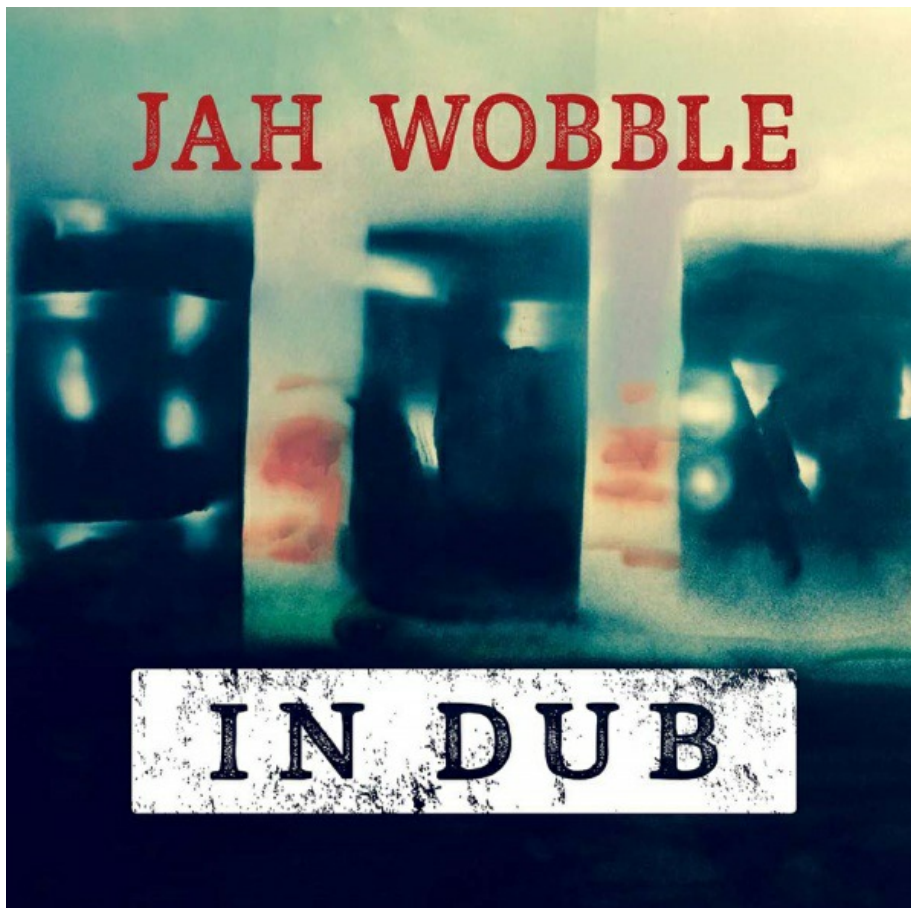
You have tunes here from a host of collaborations and bands including ones with Bill Laswell, Temple of Sound, The Invaders of The Heart, The Chinese Dub Orchestra and The Nippon Dub Ensemble and you also get a handful of new recordings and previously unissued tunes too.

Mr Wobble introduces the album in the booklet and the cover includes some of his paintings

This is good stuff and if you don't know Wobble's work this is an excellent introduction. You will need to leave your preconceptions of what dub actually is at the door, but if you do you'll be rewarded with an eclectic, interesting and unusual collection of music that, to me, is pretty difficult to pigeon hole...and that's a good thing!

Stuart Smith

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Another great release on the él label!

José Feliciano – El Fantastico & Sombras...Una Voz, Una Guitarra (él)

José Feliciano, no me neither, and so here's a bit of background. Feliciano is Puerto Rican and was born blind as a consequence of congenital glaucoma but never the less he is regarded by some as the world's greatest living guitarist.

He's been a major star in Latin America since the mid sixties and in 68 had his first chart success in the US with his interpretation of The Doors' Light My Fire where it reached number 3. He's had other hits in the States too including his version of The Star Spangled Banner and Feliz Navidad. He's released over sixty-five albums and has forty five gold and platinum albums and sixteen Grammy nominations. So, really we should have heard of Mr Feliciano before now and it is all credit to the brilliant él label for bringing this previously unknown to me artist to my attention.

Here we have the two albums El Fantastico and Sombras...Una Voz, Una Guitarra and musically what you are presented with is down-tempo, Latin soaked easy listening, with flamenco and boss-nova flavours. The guitar playing is tremendously accomplished and whilst this style may not be to everyone's taste the virtuosity herein really cannot be ignored.

Feliciano is now 71 and released new material as recently as 2012.

Another great release on the él label!

Stuart Smith



Allah-Lahs - Calico Review (Mexican Summer)

The Allah-Las latest CD “Calico Review” promo landed on my desk yesterday (it was released on Sept 9th) and despite this band having been formed in 2008 and having a couple of albums out previously (Allah-Las (2012) and Worship The Sun (2014)) I must confess they are wholly new to me.

As soon as the opening track (Strange Heat) began I thought this was very much like elements of Spacemen 3 with barely sung vocal and wistful minor lead guitar and we were trying to second guess where this band were from. Listening in the car both of us went for Liverpool or perhaps Manchester. How wrong could we have been, but listen further into the album and it becomes clear that this sound could only be the product of the much warmer and sunnier climes of California.

I may not have come across them previously but the Allah-Lahs wear their influences very much on their sleeves and for this reason they feel comfortable and like a band you’ve known for years. Think mid-sixties West Coast pop-psychodelia and all its sun drenched optimism that a cold and wet swinging London could only have dreamed about and you’re getting there. But The Allah-Lahs are much more than mere pastiche of the Golden State’s forerunners and Calico Review manages to feel fresh and original.

In the main Calico it’s a collection of dreamy, blissed-out numbers with a production that is going to sound immediately recognisable to anyone who has a passing acquaintance with surf rock, psych rock and 60s garage, but there’s slightly darker moments and the albums closing track (“Place In The Sun”) takes a more contemplative and pensive air.

Standout track for me is the somewhat Donavanesque “Warmed Kippers”, or perhaps it’s Could Be You that for some reason has me thinking of Dylan’s It’s All Over Baby Blue...and this is a good thing!

Actually there’s not a bad track on Calico Review and for anyone looking to inject a bit of sunshine into a cold and miserable autumn day you could do much worse than pop this into the CD player (it’s out on cassette and vinyl too) and be immediately transported to a world of brightness and youthful confidence of a time past.

Stuart Smith

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Clustered round a central microphone, the trio conjure up harmonies so close that an anorexic amoeba would struggle to squeeze between them without having to say “excuse me”

The Stray Birds – Soundhouse at The Traverse, Edinburgh



Every now and again I go out at night and see a band that reminds me exactly why I go out at night to see bands. The Stray Birds are one of those.

The Stray Birds formed in Pennsylvania around 10 years ago when Maya de Vitry returned to her home town from a vacation in Spain and met Oliver Craven. The pair were both fiddle players, guitarists and songwriters and began performing together at open mic nights. Before long they roped in bassist Charlie Muench and the trio have been performing, writing and recording ever since. Tonight they are augmented by drummer Dominic Billet whose understated contributions add an extra dimension to the band's songs without ever threatening to overpower them. On their new album *Magic Fire*, the band have added some new elements to their sound including keyboards and electric and pedal steel guitars, giving them a more contemporary Americana sound but tonight, even with the benefit of Billet's drums, their performance is stripped back to reveal their core strengths.

Those strengths are evident as soon as The Stray Birds open with the title song from their 2014 album, *Best Medicine*. Craven's dazzling dobro is supported by de Vitry's guitar and Muench's agile stand up bass. Clustered round a central microphone, the trio conjure up harmonies so close that an anorexic amoeba would struggle to squeeze between them without having to say “excuse me”.

Centring around the new album, the band play two 45 minute sets, offering

no end of opportunities for the band to showcase their skills. Both de Vitry and Craven switch between guitar and fiddle with Craven adding dobro and mandolin in to the mix; both providing lead vocals on their own songs. And their songs are The Stray Birds' secret weapon. From *Best Medicine* onwards, these are songs that seem as familiar as old friends, even on first time of hearing. The chorus of *Mississippi Pearl* has

been a constant ear worm for over a day now. A special mention is also due for Charlie Muench whose bass lines often incorporate a touch of Southern soul, reminding me of Muscle Shoals veteran David Hood or The Band's Rick Danko. The spirit of The Band is also present in Dominic Billet's loose-limbed, Levon-esque drumming.

Covers of Townes Van Zandt's Loretta, The Louvin Brothers' When I Stop Dreaming and Jimmie Rodgers' Blue Yodel #7 – “NOT #5” Muench reminds the band, probably somewhat unnecessarily, just before they start – provide a bit of variety, not that any is required. The final song, *Sabrina*, is dedicated to the young girl sitting next to me – not because her name is Sabrina but because she went to school with Maya de Vitry's brother. This turns out to be another ear worm that is drilling its way through my head right now. The night ends with an encore of *When I Die*, a track from the new album that Oliver Craven brought to the band as “a piece of homework”, each band member being instructed to write and sing their own verse. Apparently, this instruction has been extended to guest vocalists from fellow performers so that the song often takes on a new life of its own. As there are no guests tonight, the extra verse is provided by drummer Dominic.

This is not the band's first visit to Edinburgh and on the strength of tonight's reception I certainly don't think it will be their last. I really can't recommend The Stray Birds highly enough. If they are playing near you, you should, er, flock to see them.

John Scott

Furnace Mountain – Soundhouse at The Traverse, Edinburgh



If you like a
bit of
Bluegrass,
keep an
eye out for
Furnace
Mountain

Furnace Mountain are a four piece bluegrass band from northwestern Virginia. Dave van Deventer on fiddle and vocals, Danny Knicely on fiddle, mandolin and vocals, Aimee Curl on bass and vocals and Morgan Morrison on bouzouki and vocals bring a modern twist to some old songs and tunes while providing plenty of their own.

Comprising two married couples – “Just like ABBA” jokes Knicely – the band exhibit a kind of musical telepathy, tossing licks around between Dave’s fiddle and Danny’s mandolin while Morgan’s bouzouki and Aimee’s upright bass provide a solid rhythmic backing. Furnace Mountain are not just about dazzling instrumentals though; both Morgan and Aimee have fine voices. In particular, Aimee’s voice has a gentle, breathy quality that is positively alluring - don't tell her husband I said that though. Dave and Danny are no slouches either and when the four all sing together the harmonies are something special.

Tonight the band are featuring songs from their new album *Shadow Of Plenty* along with songs from previous albums *The Road To Berryville* and *Fields Of Fescue*, and some traditional material. Songs like *Barney* and *Virginia Girls/Sandy Boys*, don't go out of their way to portray men in a particularly favourable light. “We don't really hate men” Morgan notes, “blame these old songs.” *The Crow On The Cradle* is paired with the instrumental *The Road To Berryville* in which I thought I may have detected a hint of John Coltrane’s *Afro Blue* along with a snatch of *My Favourite Things*, but maybe I imagined it.

The highlight of the evening for me was a cover of The Barr Brothers’ *Ooh Belle* that knocked spots off the original but really every song and tune was a winner. If you like a bit of Bluegrass, keep an eye out for Furnace Mountain.

John Scott

Steve Howe – The Queen's Hall, Edinburgh

Steve Howe is, of course, the lead guitarist in Yes. Although Yes were one of the main targets of the punk wars way back in the Seventies, the band has remained incredibly popular, despite line up changes and their own internal conflicts. Even the sad passing of pivotal member, bass player Chris Squire, has not daunted them and the band will be setting sail once more, quite literally, as they headline their annual Cruise To The Edge cruise ship festival in February next year.

You might think that after fifty years as a rock musician Steve Howe would take it easy in between Yes-related activities, but clearly not. Here he is, out on the road on a small UK tour, despite not having an album to promote – evidently just doing it for the sheer fun of it.

Howe has drawn a small but enthusiastic crowd to The Queen's Hall tonight, one that is, on the whole, familiar with his solo output as well as his work with Yes and the set list tonight draws on all

aspects of Howe's career. The word in the bar before the show is that he's not feeling too well and that the show was almost cancelled but if Howe is feeling poorly, he makes no mention of it and his playing is certainly not affected.

Perhaps his singing voice is not all it could be but, then again, even if he was fitter than Usain Bolt after a five day work out, his voice would never be a thing of beauty. Let's be blunt: Steve Howe cannot sing. If there were a bucket on stage, he would be unable to carry a tune in it. But to his credit, he gives it a good go. I doubt if there is a single person in the audience who would be disappointed if Howe had elected to stick to instrumentals but in the service of the material, he gives the vocals a fair crack.

Opening with Mason Williams' acoustic guitar showcase Classical Gas, Howe moves on to Intersection Blues from his album Natural Timbre and then Mood a For A Day from the classic Yes album,

Fragile. In between songs, Howe tells us a little bit about his personal musical history and the guitars that he is playing. At ease with the audience, he is a surprisingly comfortable raconteur, if not in the same class as former Yes-mate Rick Wakeman.

Howe takes us right back to the start of his musical career with My White Bicycle, a slightly psychedelic single from his pre-Yes band Tomorrow before bringing the set to close with a couple of Yes's most popular songs I've Seen All Good People and Roundabout for which the audience are more than happy to help out on vocals. The encore is, inevitably, The Clap, Howe's tour-de-force from The Yes Album. While a solo Steve Howe gig is unlikely to attract many people not already familiar with his music, tonight's performance shows that he still offers plenty to please the fans.

John Scott

EVENTS

Jazz At The Conservatoire

Every year Hifi Pig is invited to the Conservatoire de Musique at Saint-Brieuc in Brittany, France for an evening of jazz presented by the association Jazz Angle. It's always an entertaining and well attended evening and, as relative newcomers to Jazz, it always throws up something new and unexpected that we've not heard before...and this year was no exception.

The line up of vinyl this year was truly spectacular and the knowledge that Alain Loguillard

and Christian Harle have is nothing if not impressive with them giving a full and detailed introduction to the recording and the artist. In amongst the line-up below was a couple of mystery tunes to keep the audience on their toes.

The line-up for this evening's entertainment was as follows:

Sonny Rollins With Coleman Hawkins "All The Things You Are" and playing the title track (RCA) 1963



Miles Davis "Miles Davis At Carnegie Hall" and the track "Oleo" CBS 1961

Miles Davis "Miles Davis Directions" and the track "So Near So Far" (CBS) 1963

Miles Davis "Miles In Tokyo" and the track "Walking" (CBS) 1964

LIVE MUSIC

Miles Davis “Miles In Berlin”
and again the track “Walking”
(CBS) 1964

Joe Henderson “Mode For Joe”
and the tune “Black” (Blue Note)
1966

Shorty Rogers “Shorty Rogers &
His Giants” and the tune “Bunny”
(RCA) 1953

Bill Evans Trio With Lee Konitz
& Warne Marsh “Crosscurrents”
and the tune Night and Day
(Fantasy) 1978

Old and New Dreams “Old and
New Dreams” and the tune
“Guinea” (ECM) 1979

Jack DeJohnette “Special
Edition” and the tune “Central
Park West” (ECM) 1978

After a break we were treated to a
demonstration of the gear used
this evening by Gilles Milot the



creator of the Leedh brand of
speakers. Tonight was to be the
first public demonstration of his
E2 loudspeakers, that feature
HPAB drivers with glass
diaphragms, in France. Yes you
read that right, glass. The
speakers are €32 000 with the
matching sub unit costing a

further €6000. Of course it's
difficult to pass judgement in
such imperfect conditions as this,
but having heard the standard E2s
in our home a few years ago all I
can say is these are similar in
presentation but just more so!

Stuart Smith



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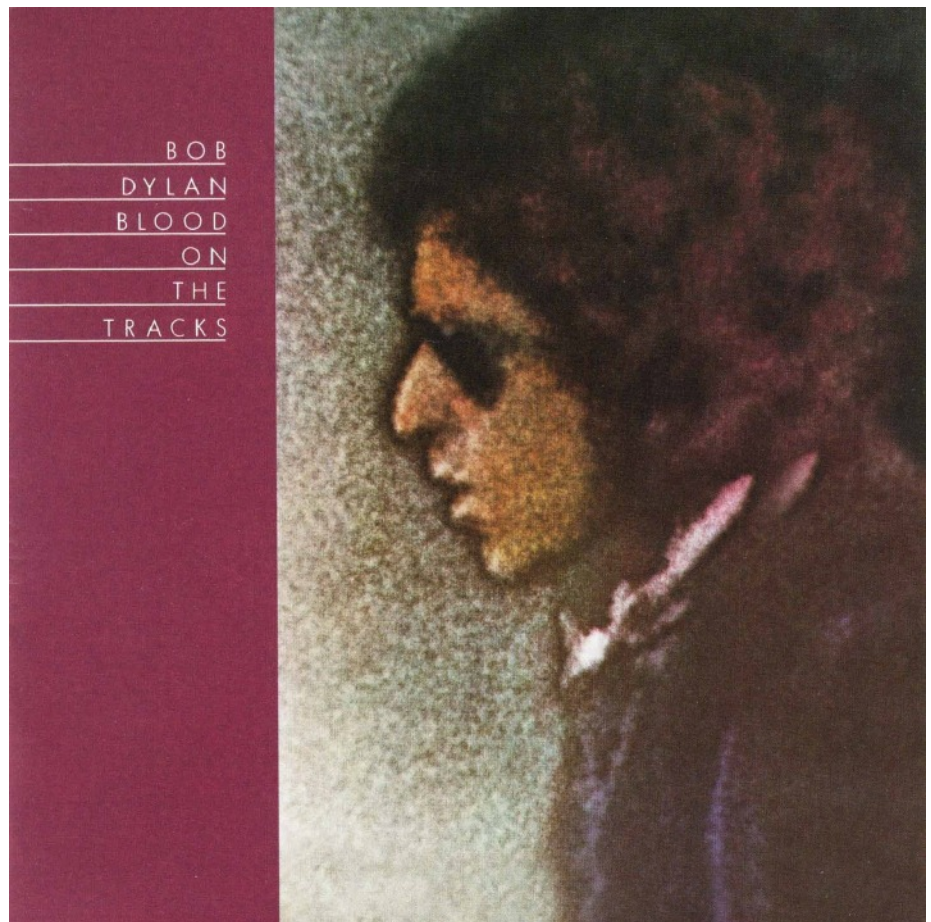
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Bob Dylan – Blood On The Tracks

Earlier this month, Bob Dylan became the first musician to be awarded a Nobel prize for literature. John Scott celebrates by having a listen to Dylan's 1975 album *Blood On The Tracks*.



If any living lyricist was going to be awarded the Nobel prize for literature it was surely always going to be Bob Dylan. 75 year-old Dylan was awarded the prize for “creating new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition.” Dylan may not be the rock era’s most poetic songwriter - I’d argue that Leonard Cohen deserves that accolade – but there is little doubt that he is the most innovative and influential.

Right from his debut as a 21 year old protest singer in the thrall of Woody Guthrie, Dylan was a songwriting whirlwind, constantly honing his craft and refusing to stand still. Within three years he had taken ownership of the protest tradition on behalf of his generation, grown bored of it, and then alienated a large proportion of his fans by strapping on an electric guitar and belting out a new kind of photo-punk protest with a level of lyrical sophistication that was streets ahead of his contemporaries. In doing so, he made it almost obligatory for bands and solo artists to write their own lyrics, and for those lyrics to strive to be more than trite teenybop love songs.

From 1965 to 1969, Dylan spat out a run of three of the most brilliant albums that rock music has ever produced in *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde On Blonde*; changed direction with the almost biblical bleakness of *John Wesley Harding* and practically invented country rock with *Nashville Skyline*.

Something had to give. 1970’s *Self Portrait* was almost universally vilified on release (although it has been recently reassessed) and *New Morning*, *Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid*

and *Planet Waves* – all of which have much to offer – were seen as lacklustre efforts. At the beginning of 1974 Dylan ended a seven year break from touring as he set out on a 40 date excursion, accompanied by The Band. During this time Dylan’s relationship with his wife Sarah became strained and the couple separated at the end of the tour. Pouring his thoughts into a series of notebooks, Dylan sketched out the songs that would become his next album *Blood On The Tracks*.

A large part of Dylan’s artistry lies in the ambiguity of his lyrics; by leaving room for interpretation, Dylan allows the listener to make the song what they want it to be. In *Blood On The Tracks*, Dylan takes his most personal lyrics and creates a series of songs that speak universally about love and loss.

On first hearing, the album can seem underwhelming. There is none of the barely-contained chaos of *Blonde On Blonde* or stylistic artifice of *Nashville Skyline*. The album was recorded in two four-day sessions; the first in New York in September 1974 and the second in Minneapolis in December – just three weeks before the record’s release- after Dylan decided to record five of the New York versions, having been persuaded by his brother David that they were too stark. The final version of the album consists of five of the New York songs and five from Minneapolis.

Dylan has denied that any of the songs on *Blood On The Tracks* are autobiographical. He inhabits most of the songs as the narrator of a story; sometimes in the first person,

CLASSIC ALBUM

sometimes in the third; sometimes switching from one to the other. Opening track Tangled Up In Blue takes a series of vignettes and weaves them into a whole. The characters in the verses may be the same all the way through or each verse may be a new scenario inhabited by new players. The events may be taking place in the narrator's past or present. The whole becomes more than the sum of its parts and this is also true of the album itself.

Simple Twist Of Fate tells the tale of a couple brought together briefly by chance. Dylan's character is left feeling that he has lost his "twin" after she leaves and he is doomed to wander through life hoping that fate will bring them together again. This theme is echoed later in the album in If You See Her, Say Hello in which Dylan asks a third party, perhaps anyone listening, to say hello on his behalf; to remind the unnamed "her" that he is still around, doing okay (but maybe not really). Like the character in Simple Twist Of Fate, he is searching on the off-chance that their paths might cross but this time the hope seems more forlorn and it seems obvious to everyone, apart from Dylan himself, that the contact he hopes for will never be realised.

There are not a lot of laughs on Blood On The Tracks but some light relief is offered in Lily, Rosemary and The Jack Of Hearts. This is a sprawling tale told almost in the form of a film synopsis – a style Dylan would revisit in Hurricane – set in an anonymous Western frontier town and featuring a complicated plot involving a gang of safe crackers, a diamond mine owner, his wife and his lover and the mysterious Jack Of Hearts whose presence triggers a series of events culminating in jealousy and murder. I used to think this was just a throwaway song but the characters are drawn with such deftness that when I hear the song now a little film plays in my head. Like much of the album, it takes time before its qualities really become apparent.

This "slow burn" effect did the album few favours on its release. The use of anonymous session musicians and the lack of a defining style led to the album being described as "trashy", "shoddy" and "incompetent". Other critics, more perceptively, identified the album as signalling a new level of maturity in Dylan's writing; he was no longer the spokesman for a generation, a responsibility that he had been burdened with and the expectations of which had no doubt contributed to his early-seventies slump. Dylan's concerns were now closer to home and had sparked a new intensity in his writing.

Blood On The Tracks is now regarded as one of Dylan's greatest albums. Over the following forty years he has continued to delight and infuriate fans and critics by refusing to be pinned down. With what appeared to be characteristic iconoclasm, Dylan took a couple of weeks to acknowledge the Nobel committee's award but has now come forward to say that he was rendered "speechless" by it. And just as he has always done since that debut album 54 years ago, Dylan is polarising popular opinion; can rock lyrics be classed as literature? Perhaps the answer is best left blowing in the wind.

John Scott

AT A GLANCE

Released January 20, 1975

Recorded September 16–19, 1974, at A & R
Recording in New York, New York and December 27–30, 1974, at Sound 80 in Minneapolis, Minnesota

Genre Folk rock

Length 51:42

Label Columbia

Producer Bob Dylan

TRACK LISTING

1. "Tangled Up in Blue" December 30, 1974 in Minneapolis 5:42
 2. "Simple Twist of Fate" September 19, 1974 in New York City 4:19
 3. "You're a Big Girl Now" December 27, 1974 in Minneapolis 4:36
 4. "Idiot Wind" December 27, 1974 in Minneapolis 7:48
 5. "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go" September 17, 1974 in New York City 2:55
- Side two**
- | No. | Title | Recorded | Length |
|-----|-------|----------|--------|
|-----|-------|----------|--------|

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The Indulgence Show London

Stuart & Linette Smith

The capital hasn't had a proper Hifi show for a number of years and so Indulgence is a welcome addition to the audio calendar. Of course there were a few teething problems as there is always going to be when organising an event of this scope and scale, but, on the whole, we reckon it was a success.

The venue is good, well catered and the show organisers had ensured that signposting within the event was clear and plentiful, so there was no members of the audio public wandering around looking lost and perplexed as to where to go next. The show guide was also well laid out and nicely done.

What really impressed was the effort that the vast majority of the exhibitors had gone to in kitting out their rooms and exhibition spaces. They had clearly taken a great deal of time, money and trouble to ensure that rooms were as good sounding as they could be and they were also welcoming to the public. We attend a good few shows and the quality of the rooms at Indulgence was up with the very best!

There was an excellent line up of seminars throughout the weekend and live music too. Time constraints meant we didn't see much of this live music, but what we did see was pretty amazing, particularly the pop up Marquee Club event on the Friday night – fabulously talented musicians and great classic rock tunes to boot!

The Indulgence Show was billed as a lifestyle event with a whole area given over to "Pure Pleasure". Here visitors to the show had the opportunity to indulge in a spot of wine tasting, a look at a handful of rather nice vehicles, home cinema experiences, the chance to learn to play the blues in five minutes, excellent photography from Ross Halfin and some great drums and keyboards from Yamaha that you could get hands-on with. Personally I'd like to see this area of the show expanded upon to pull in people specifically for the "lifestyle" factor, but then take in the audio too.

The venue was huge and there were lots of rooms to see so it never seemed crowded, and, from speaking to a good number of exhibitors, the people that were there were keen to be involved and talk about the products on show. Talking to one of the organisers they said they'd pre-sold over 2000 tickets for the weekend and one exhibitor had 400, 600 and 300 people on each of the days respectively.

Next year we'll make sure we have a full two days at The Indulgence Show as we simply did not have time to see all the exhibitors, specifically in the headroom area...so if you are going next year, book a two or three day pass to ensure you get to see everything!

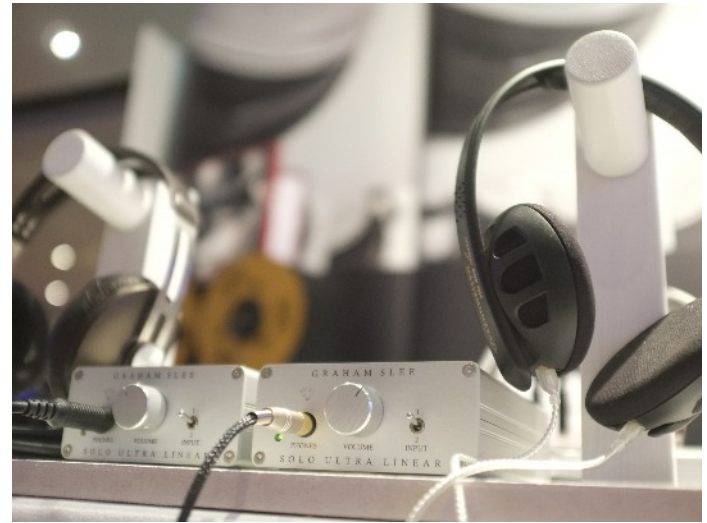
THE INDULGENCE SHOW LONDON 2016



THE INDULGENCE SHOW LONDON 2016



THE INDULGENCE SHOW LONDON 2016



THE INDULGENCE SHOW LONDON 2016

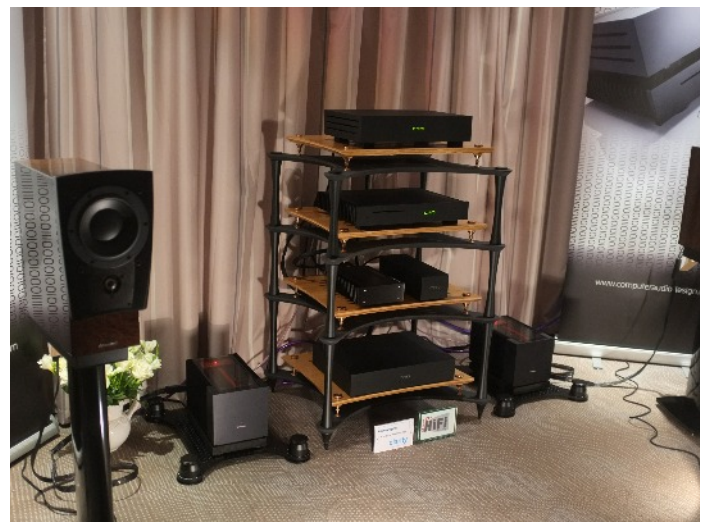
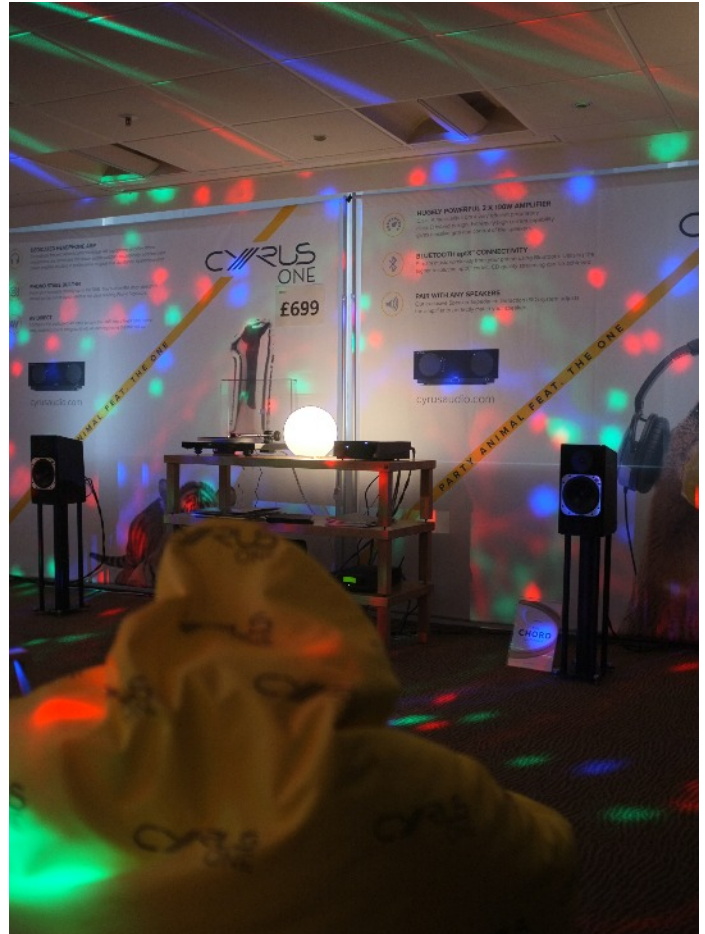




THE INDULGENCE SHOW LONDON 2016



THE INDULGENCE SHOW LONDON 2016



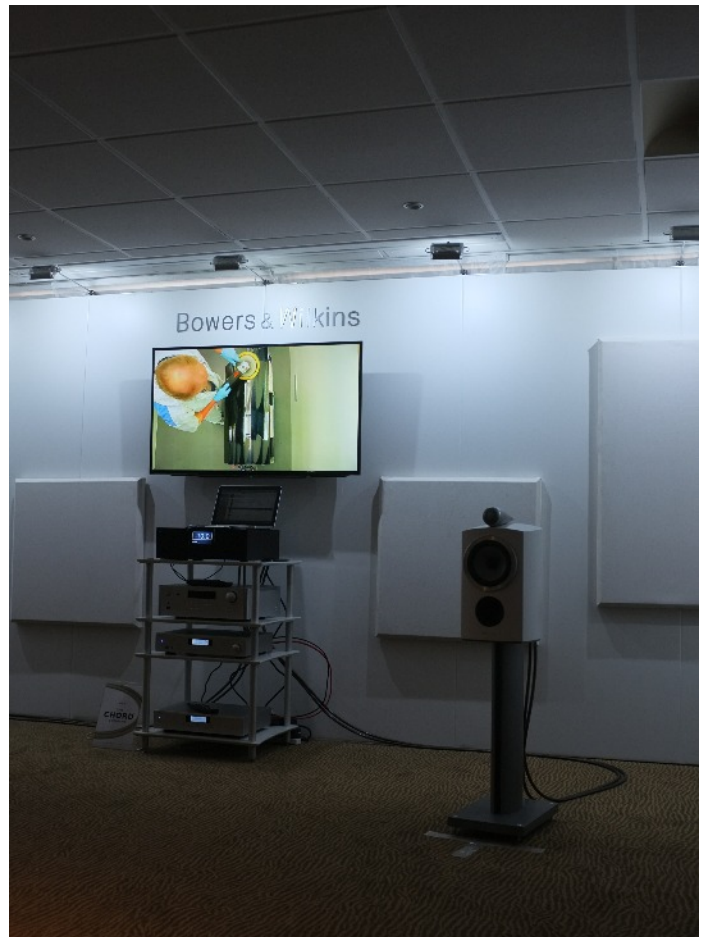
THE INDULGENCE SHOW LONDON 2016



THE INDULGENCE SHOW LONDON 2016



THE INDULGENCE SHOW LONDON 2016



THE INDULGENCE SHOW LONDON 2016



Windsor Show 2016

Photographs Boban Djurdjevic

**Photographs from this
year's Hi-Fi News show in
Windsor courtesy of
Boban Djurdjevic**

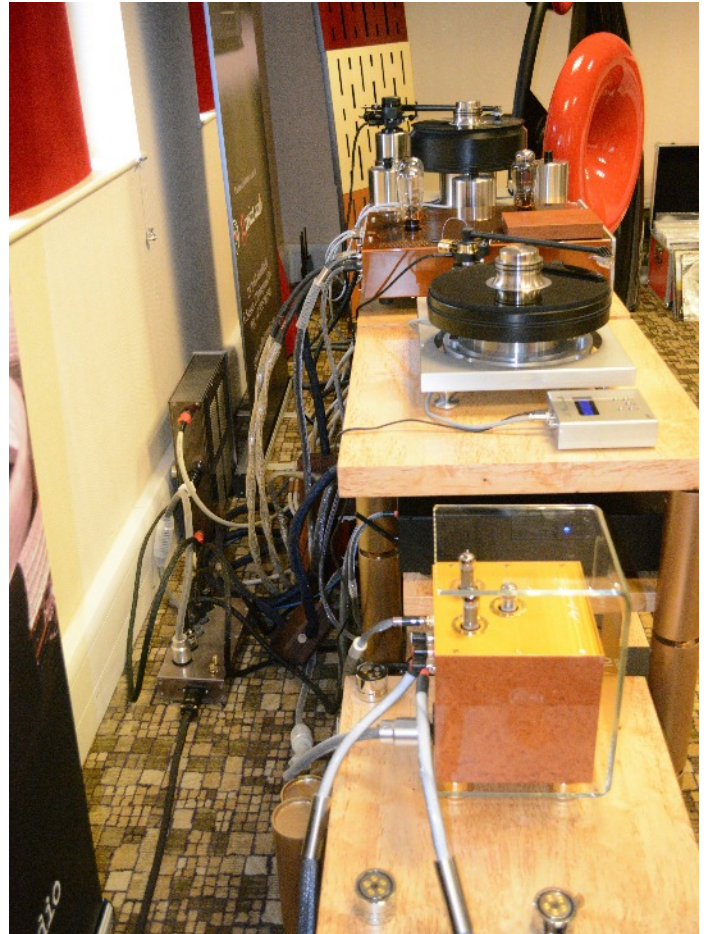
WINDSOR SHOW 2016



WINDSOR SHOW 2016



WINDSOR SHOW 2016



WINDSOR SHOW 2016



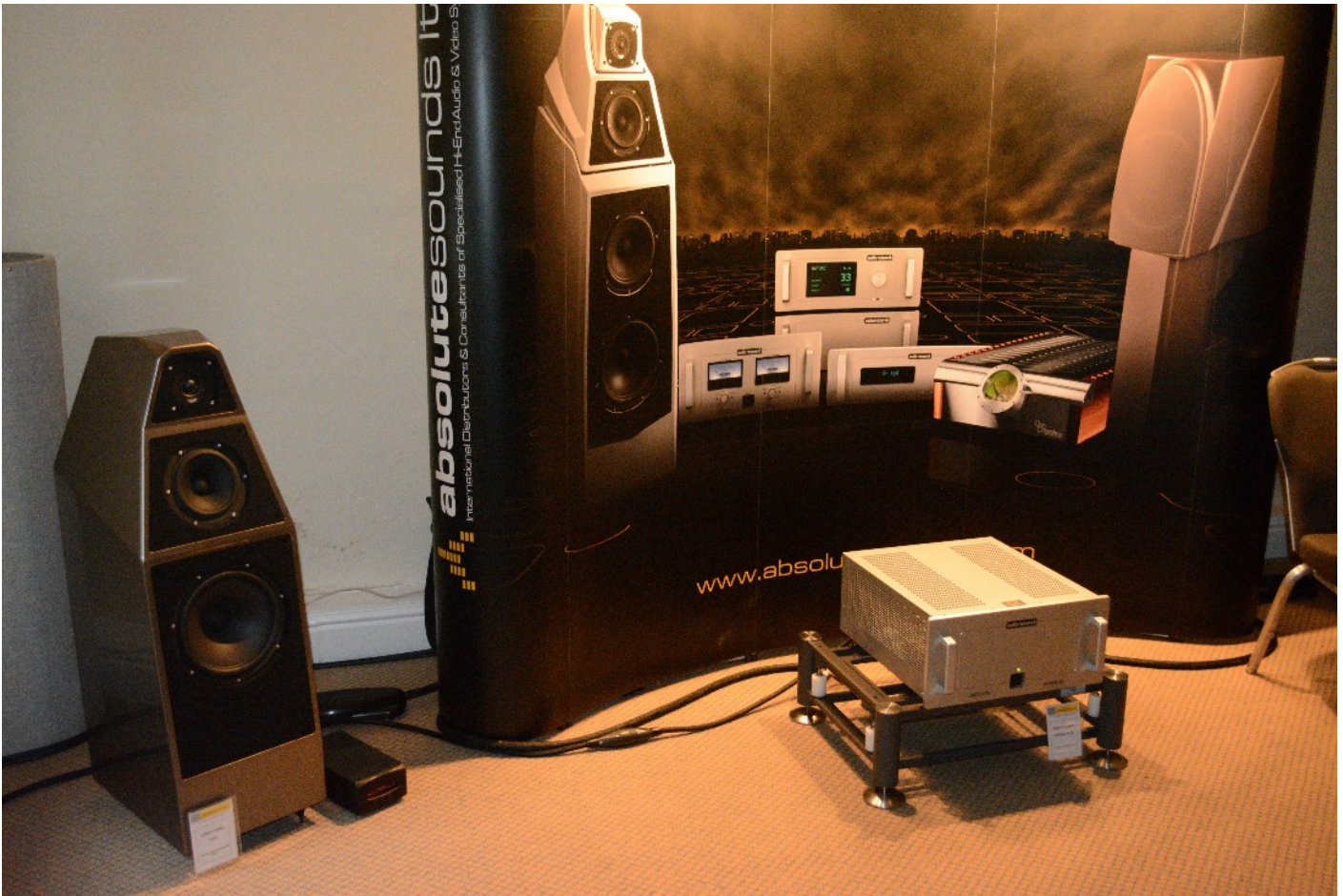
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WINDSOR SHOW 2016



WINDSOR SHOW 2016



WINDSOR SHOW 2016



WINDSOR SHOW 2016



Acoustic Energy Aego Sound3ar

I first met the Acoustic Energy Aego at Sound and Vision (The Bristol Show) back in April and wrote up about the release of the Sound3ar a few months later. I am pleased to say that I have spent a while with the home cinema set up and am ready to share my opinion about it.

The Acoustic Energy Aego Sound3ar piqued my interest as the actual soundbar part of it is relatively tiny. But can it still do the job?

Let's have a look and a listen.

Aego Sound3ar design

The soundbar element of this dynamic duo measures just 500mm wide. This is buddied with a more conventionally sized powered subwoofer.

The subwoofer is the brains of this partnership. This is where all of the connections that matter live, as well as dishing out 65W of amplification.

The passive soundbar connects to the subwoofer using the supplied RCA analogue cable, which cuts the amount of untidy wiring around the TV.

The soundbar's compact dimensions (500 x 70 x 70mm



(WxHxD)) takes up very little space in front of the TV. Great news for those who don't like that hi-fi showroom vibe.

Just look at it in comparison to my own Panasonic soundbar (which I love) later on in this review.

The materials used for the Acoustic Energy soundbar was a lot better than I was expecting at

this price point. You are treated to a solid aluminium alloy body that not only looks the business, it feels like a quality item.

Thought has obviously been put into its design too. Instead of just a nice looking box, the Sound3ar has rounded edges and rubber end panels just to finish things off. The soundbar sits at a 30 degree angle when on a flat surface. This



Acoustic Energy Aego Sound3ar

ensures a decent projection in to the room.

There are mounting points for those who wish to bolt it to a wall though.

Other than the Acoustic Energy logo, there's nothing much more to say. There are no lights, controls or notification panels here. Just a pair of RCA ports around the back.

The subwoofer is equally well made but more stealthy. It wears a dappled black finish and pairs curved edges with a front-facing black grille.

It is a fairly standard size for a compact sub. Not in Damson's league of miniaturisation, but still easy enough to hide.

At the rear of the woofer is where you'll find those

aforementioned connections.

These have been nicely recessed and are downward pointing to keep things tidy and allow positioning up against a wall or unit.

Here you have a optical digital and 3.5mm minijack inputs. There is also left/right speaker outputs to connect to the soundbar. Oh, and a place for the power lead.

There's built-in Bluetooth for easy music streaming too.

Aego Sound3ar performance

Setup

The Sound3ar is really simple to set up. This is partly helped by the amount of input and output options – or lack thereof.

Run the RCA from the output of the woofer to the soundbar and then hook up the soundbar to the TV using the optical input. Then, Robert is your mother's brother.

If you want to use the other inputs, shove in a 3.5mm cable in to the

Above the grille of the woofer are some LED indicator lights that flash when you change the volume – the left two for down, the right two for up. The unit beeps when you reach the maximum limit. The same lights also display the bass level, which can be adjusted using the tiny remote.

Sound quality

The Sound3ar certainly generates a sound bigger than its diminutive dimensions would suggest.

The sound won't have the room shaking but the sub is plenty eager enough and the soundbar is clear and exciting.

Explosions rumble convincingly and throaty V8s are pleasing to the ears.

Playing with the positioning (cables allowing) of the sub can work wonders. It took me

about 10-15 minutes to get something I was really happy with but it was worth it.

I managed to get a really good balance between good slab of low end and pin-sharp mid-range attack. These resulted in awesome action sequences as well as clear dialogue.

I was impressed by the overall soundstage of the Sound3ar. Little details such as rain hitting foliage or gravel under foot came through nicely.

As dialogue was so clear I found myself leaving the unit running



sub's input and you can hook up portable devices to play through it.

While this might suit someone with enough space around their television, the way the Sound3ar is set up means that you have to have your sub near your telly. How far away you're able to go is determined by the length of optical cable you have as well as analogue going back to the bar.

My Panasonic unit hooks up with optical to the bar but the woofer is Bluetooth and so can be hidden away anywhere in the room.

Acoustic Energy Aego Sound3ar

when just watching the news or sketch shows.

Although it is a competent performer the Sound3ar was never going to fill a larger room. I think my London living room is probably getting close to its limits. The soundbar, as lovely and compact as it is, can't quite chuck the effects very widely. In a film where I have got used to hearing a key in the door over to my far right, this now presents just to the right of my telly. It's still effective but it didn't get me looking over my shoulder.

Playing some choice cuts from my phone through the Sound3ar showed it to be quite the performer here too. The sub isn't overbearing and the presentation is detailed and precise.

Acoustic Energy Aego Sound3ar review conclusion

The Aego Sound3ar looks great and performs well. The soundbar portion will not clutter up your TV area and the woofer is potent

enough to give your listening a decent punch.

Yes, the cable running from your telly to the sub does restrict your positioning choices but, as I found, the pairing of the woofer and bar does perform better when close to each other.

This system is certainly a step-up from using the tiny speakers in your skinny googlebox. The aluminium soundbar also has the looks to match even the latest top-flight 4K TV. More than I can say about the remote control.

The real selling point for the Aego Sound3ar is its level of performance at a really competitive price point. Its looks and performance has nudged my



previous favourite sub £200 set-up down a peg or two.

I can safely say that this great looking compact soundbar and sub pairing offers superb value for money.

Acoustic Energy Aego Sound3ar price and availability

You can purchase the Aego Sound3ar now for the remarkable price of £199.99 direct from Acoustic Energy or Amazon.

Overall score: 8.2

Build quality 8/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Sound quality 8/10

Value 8.5/10



Vivitek Qumi Q3 pocket projector

The Qumi Q3 certainly answers one of today's demands; smaller tech. Phones have to be thin and light. Cameras have to be powerful yet tiny. Vivitek has listened and have come up with a projector that can not only fit in your pocket, it can cast an image equivalent to a 100-inch TV!

There is a problem with miniaturising some tech. Like the iPhone 7, something has to go. Or has it?

Looking at the Qumi Q3's spec list, it almost seems that Vivitek has managed to add a bunch of features whilst keeping the projector's frame tiny. The thing is, how does it perform?

Qumi Q3 design

Upon opening the box I liked what I saw.

The Qumi Q3 looks every bit the professional's portable buddy. I can imagine high-power execs rocking up to a business meeting, opening up their expensive case and unleashing the Qumi Q3 to confused looks. That confusion soon turns to amazement when our travelling friend switches on the projector without the need to locate a power socket. Only then to navigate to their presentation which is stored on the Q3 and get straight on to business, moving through slides using a tiny Bluetooth remote.

Yes, gadgety faithful, the Qumi Q3 can do all of that right out of the box.

The projector measures just 176 x 103 x 28 mm and weighs just under 0.5Kilos (0.460Kg) – so not



much more than a rather chunky smartphone.

It has a neat industrial look to it which I really like. The cooling grilles at either end look like they've been taken from a classic British Grand Tourer.

The lens is protected by a sliding cover. The Q3 uses LED lighting rated at 500 ANSI Lumens. This not only enables the projector to be this small and still throw a bright image, but LEDs are a darned sight cheaper to replace than regular projector bulbs.

Around the rear is where you'll find a healthy array of ports. HDMI, Composite Video (via 3.5mm mini jack shared with audio out port), Audio-Out (Mini-Jack), two USB A, and microSD card slot are all present. Do you

really need any more than that from a pocket projector?

But there are further ways to connect which this device. This has the added bonus of both Bluetooth and Wi-Fi! This just

seems to get better and better doesn't it? I have already mentioned that it has a rechargeable battery, haven't I? I should add that this also has a pair of 2Watt speakers on-board though.

The projector also has a little kickstand which angles it slightly upwards.

I was sent the gold one but there are a whole load of colourways to choose from.

Qumi Q3 performance

Apps

The Q3 runs on the Android operating system and so share's the OS's flexibility. It also allows you to use the Play Store.

The Qumi projector also has its own preinstalled apps that allows you to view photos, videos, play music, access documents, and so on. Thanks to its Wi-Fi skills there's even a web browser.

All of that means there's no need to drag around your laptop or any other device as the Q3 can pretty much cover all those bases. Just switch it on watch YouTube, Netflix or play something from your Amazon Fire Stick. That's

Vivitek Qumi Q3 pocket projector

what I did. I also downloaded ShowBox but selecting a video wasn't happening. I think a Bluetooth mouse might work though.

Flicking through settings and the app menus is fairly slick with hardly any lag.

The picture mode offers Movie mode, Bright, a custom user option and Presentation mode.

Picture quality

The photos here really don't do the picture quality any justice really. My bad photography must be excused – low light, shortness of time and poor eyesight are my excuses.

The Qumi Q3 automatic vertical keystone works incredibly well.



Watching a film from Amazon Prime and the action was clear with very little noticeable blurring or hazing. I kept on having to look at the size of the device that this image was being sent from.

PowerPoint presentations were excellently clear and crisp. Charts readable and still images popped with strong and vibrant colours.

Sound quality

The speakers aren't going to shake your foundations but I dare say that they'll wake the people in the next tent. Yup, I have already mulled over the thought of taking a Q3 on camping

Qumi Q3 review conclusion

The Qumi Q3 really is a great little device. I can really see this coming in to its own in a professional scenario but I can't ignore its usefulness for leisure too. Who can resist an alfresco summer screening of a classic flick? As I've already mentioned, taking a Q3 on holiday would ensure no evenings of boredom.

If you travel as part of your job and have to make regular presentations, you really need a Q3 in your life. Me? I'd have one just to watch films wherever I want to – on a 100-inch screen.

Qumi Q3 price and availability

The Vivitek Qumi Q is available now for £429. Check out their website for listed stockists.

Overall score: 8.1

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Sound quality (internal speakers) 7.5/10

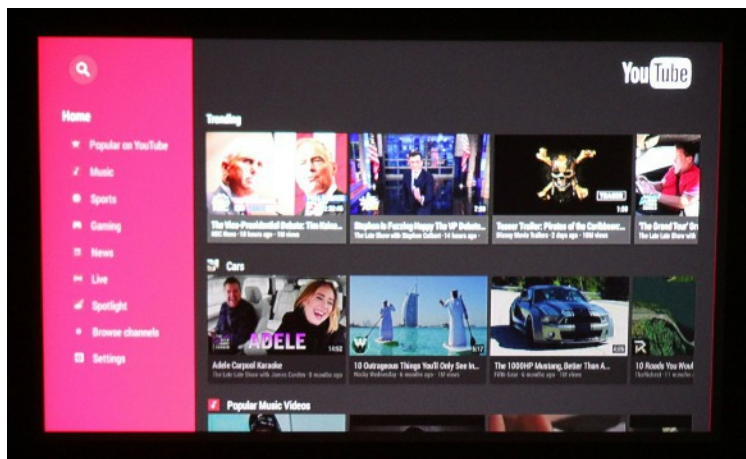
Value 8/10

This means no matter what angle the projected image hits the surface, the picture will always present as a rectangular viewing area.

The LED light source is very bright, even in a lit room the picture is clear and watchable. The projector's light is good for 30,000 hours before you need to start thinking about replacements.

holidays, using the tent as a screen.

Watching a few videos in my quiet living room and the speakers were passable. Hooking up the Dali Katch (review soon) or the audioCube and things went up a notch. Where sometimes mumbled dialogue was difficult to discern, all becomes a lot clearer.



Udoq universal phone and tablet dock

Whether in the office or at home, keeping all your gadgety loveliness charged can be a chore. If you do have enough plugs you end up with phones, tablets and chargers strewn about the place. Udoq wants to solve that in a very stylish manner.

The German-built Udoq is a universal charging stand that not only welcomes all manner of power connections, it will also neatly organise up to eight devices.

Udoq design

This cunning carved piece of aluminium known as Udoq charges all your devices along a single, rubber-backed aluminium shelf.

I really like the look of the Udoq and the aluminium finish will work well with your Apple products.

It doesn't look too shabby on my desk next to my aluminium Corsair K60 either.

Thanks to a clever slot and sliding connectors you can position your tablets and phones however you need them.



The Udoq I have been sent to review is fitted with a Lightning connector, Micro USB, USB Type-C and Apple's 30-pin connector for older iPads and iPhones. The Apple connectors are all certified, apparently.

Of course, you can order different connectors to suit your requirements.

Each connector has its own 5-foot cable with a standard USB-A plug at the end. This is where my Suaoki 6 port USB power brick comes in handy. It is a shame that something similar isn't included in the bundle just to keep things tidy.

The Udoq comes in four different lengths: 250mm, 400mm, 550mm and 700mm.

The smallest Udoq will accommodate an iPad and iPhone (or four iPhones). The largest will fit an iPad, six iPhones and an iPod.

As you can see, there's plenty of room for a couple of fruity devices next to my Shield tablet and Nexus 6P in the 400 version.

Udoq performance

The Udoq works well and looks good doing it. The cables are easily hidden out of site and the dock certainly keeps the devices handy.

The dock comes with a small tool to pop off the end caps so that you can add/remove/change the connectors you have installed in the Udoq.

The cables are fitted in to a barrel-style runner that allows the connectors to run up and down the slot. As you can see in the image above, you can change the



Udoq universal phone and tablet dock



height of the connector to allow for chunky cases and bumpers.

The cables all seem to be of good quality and I've not had any issues with charging my devices. Some of the guys at work used it to recharge their iPhones and iPads and all did as they should.

Udoq review conclusion

This is a well-built and stylish addition to anyone's home or office. The fact that it can be offered with legacy as well as up-to-the-minute connectors will no doubt be good news for many.

For me it's a bit of a shame that something with such clean lines still could have 8 individual leads

trailing out from it. Up front, really pretty. From behind, some cable Cthulhu chaos.

That said, it certainly beats a desk full of devices plaited together.

I reckon that this would be a great buy for neat freaks and high-end hotels alike.

Udoq price and availability

Udoq debuted on Kickstarter with a 50% discount and, by October 12th, successfully raised €64,836 thanks to 644 backers. By October 25th they had assembled 1500 Udoqs in all sizes ready for shipping.

Well done!



Overall score: 8.4

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Performance 9/10

Value 8/10

Prism Sound Callia DAC/pre/HPA



Back in August I was fortunate to be invited to the launch of Prism Sound's Callia DAC. Prism Sound might not be a familiar name to most but they have been producing top-end kit for recording and mastering studios for years. I have had the added bonus of living with the Callia for a while.

Prism Sound, the UK-based audio manufacturer has made highly regarded studio products including its premium analogue Maselec mastering EQ to a variety of multichannel Analogue/Digital and Digital/Analogue converters. These would not be found in every studio though. We are talking high end, and with a price tag to match.

This year, Prism Sound has not so much dipped its toe in to the

domestic market, but dived right in. Will the Callia make a splash?

Prism Sound Callia design

The Callia unit is clothed in a dark-grey and measures 285 x 242 x 50mm (including its rubber feet). These dimensions are pretty much a 3/4 of a rack space wide by 1 U high, in studio speak.

The front panel is tastefully anodized and the whole look and feel of the DAC is elegant whilst retaining a functional air about it. I can certainly see that it is related to the Lyra from the front.

The uncluttered look lends itself to both high-end Hi-Fi enthusiasts and new-comers alike. The controls are simply a large line-

output volume control, a separate, smaller headphone volume control, and a standby/input selector switch. Other than that, there is the headphone jack and a series of indicator lights and nothing much else to report.

One bank of LEDs indicates input: Auto, TOSLink SPDIF, RCA SPDIF, USB. The second bank of separate LEDs reveal the audio input status — a DSD LED and a PCM LED. More about those later.

I/O panel

Connectivity is taken care of by a set of balanced XLR line outputs, a pair of unbalanced RCA line outputs and three digital inputs (SPDIF TOSlink, SPDIF RCA, and USB 2.0).

The 32-bit PCM audio path and sample rates higher than 192 are only active if you go via the USB input. The Callia comes with a rather nice-looking USB stick that contains the required software to run on your laptop or PC.

While we're around here, it makes sense to also point out the series of small DIP switches. These allow you to cater for headphones that need a bit more grunt. The other switches puts the Callia in to pre-amp mode with the main volume being controlled by your main amp.



Prism Sound Callia DAC/pre/HPA

Prism Sound Callia performance

Input status lights

Righty, let's get the read-out sorted before we start. Stick with me and we'll get through this together.

The DSD (Direct Stream Digital) sample rate is indicated by the DSD LED being lit plus one of the following. If the 2X light is not illuminated it signifies 2.8MHz; if the LED is lit this indicates a 2X 2.8 MHz DSD sample rate — 5.6 MHz.

When playing PCM (Pulse Code Modulation), the sample rate is indicated by either the 44.1 kHz or 48 kHz LED being illuminated, plus either the 2X or 4X LED.

This means that 24/96 will be indicated by the illumination of the 48K LED and the 2X LED ($48 \times 2 = 96$), plus the 24-bit LED.

24/192 material shows the 48K LED, plus the 4X LED ($48 \times 4 = 192$) and the 24-bit LED.

A 384 sample rate is indicated via illumination of the 48K LED, the 4X LED, plus the 2X LED ($48 \times 4 = 192$, and $192 \times 2 = 384$).

Real 32-bit integer audio is indicated by the 24-bit LED glowing red instead of blue. When a 16-bit recording is played, the 24-bit light does not glow at all.

Yes, this looks a bit convoluted and complicated but you soon start to recognise the read out at a quick glance.

Digital analogue converter

The Callia is loaded with an ARM Cortex digital processor, but with Prism Sound's own circuit architecture and reclocking stages. The latter is the aptly named

CleverClocx hybrid phase-locked loop. This acts as clock recovery taken from either local or S/PDIF input.

Thanks to that tech, you get ± 50 ppm local clock accuracy and a greater than 60dB/decade above 100Hz jitter rejection. The DAC boasts a noise spec greater than -115 dB (20 Hz-20 kHz), according to Prism Sound's specs.

Sound quality

Set up was simple. There was just a bit of guesswork required to get the DIP switch right for it to run as a pre. There may well be a guide in the production boxes but I scampered away with this model from the press launch. When you run the Callia in this way the main volume lights stay off as this control is disabled.

I had it running from my Lenovo Yoga 2 Pro via the included cable playing files stored on my QNAP NAS in no time. Being Windows, it needed the USB-packed software which was sorted quickly.



Prism Sound Callia DAC/pre/HPA



Wow! I never thought that my digital library could sound so much better simply by putting the Callia in the chain.

I feel that I must point something out though. The Callia is truly studio-grade gear. This means poor rips or dodgy records will be shown for what they really are. There is nowhere for your digital recordings to hide.

If you are looking for added warmth or something akin to a 'beauty' filter, look elsewhere. Instead Prism Sound's Callia will give you the unedited truth. With that comes more insight into what the engineers, producers and artists had in mind when the tracks were being recorded.

I found myself entranced and genuinely more involved in the

listening experience. This was especially true when using the Callia's headphone port with my Oppo PM-1 headphones.

I actually just sat there for the entire night with a bottle of wine and tune following tune. It was as if I was listening to 'Rumours', 'The Fragile' and 'So Far, So Good.... So What?' for the first time.

Prism Sound Callia review conclusion

The Callia is open and detailed with plenty of width and depth in the stereo presentation. To say that I was impressed by this piece of equipment would be an understatement. My home Hi-Fi is fairly decent but the Callia made it

sound so much better. Truer: more dynamic.

The DAC is worth the not inconsiderable sum just by itself but, with that headphone amp, it is almost a bargain if within your price range.

I so would if I could!

Overall score: 9

Build quality 9/10

Design 9/10

Ease of use 9/10

Sound quality 9.5/10

Value 8.5/10



Garmin DriveSmart 60 Satnav

Recently I became a car owner once again. My first run in it was on the way back from collecting my Japanese vehicle from the importer in Norwich. Thankfully, I had the Garmin DriveSmart 60, part of the DriveSatNav range (GadgetsNews was at the launch earlier in the year), to help me back home in London.

I've had the car a fortnight or so now and managed to clock up 800 miles already. Every inch of that has been guided by the capable DriveSmart 60 GPS.

Let me take you for a journey around this driving aid.

always worth remembering that these detach from their stand for a reason.

Everything feels solid and the Satnav clicks on to the mount securely. The suction cup has not failed me yet.

The power cable plugs in at the

daunting, knowing that I had around 160 miles ahead of me. Thankfully, the DriveSmart 60's notifications are clear and clever.

The smart notifications are also really handy. Whilst on my way to an event in Surrey, enjoying the turn-by-turn navigational skills on the unit's 6-inch screen, I got an

email from my contact.

The notification popped up on the DriveSmart on the right-hand portion of the screen. The mapping goes from full screen to about 60 to 70 percent, creating the space for the message to appear as a smart notification.

Calls and texts work just as seamlessly.



DriveSmart 60 design

The DriveSmart 60LMT-D sports a 6-inch widescreen format touchscreen.

There is minimal bezel so the focus is definitely the clear and bright display.

The rear of the device curves nicely and a circular recess is present for the mounting plate.

The mounting plate allows the DriveSmart to lock on to the ball-end of the suction-cup equipped arm.

The Garmin DriveSmart is quite slender and will slip in to most bags and even jacket pockets. It's

rear of the device. There is also an SD card slot beneath the mount. The mount plate includes a cable tidy.

DriveSmart 60 performance

Smart and accurate

Smart notifications

Before my trip, I synced my Nexus 6P with the system via Bluetooth. This was completed in a matter of seconds. This, of course, means you can't stream music to your stereo at the same time.

Pulling out on to a strange road in a strange car could have been

When someone calls you are offered the option of answering or ignoring it right on the DriveSmart 60 device itself.

The unit touts a nice, clean speaker that allows the call to be clear on both ends while driving. Volume is adjusted via the main Settings function.

Accurate GPS

This is the main point of the DriveSmart 60 after all. I really cannot fault the pinpoint accuracy of the device's navigational mapping but there's more.

The DriveSmart 60 comes equipped with voice-activated navigation. This allows drivers to change routes or destination by simply shouting orders at it. Nice. Not only does this work (even

Garmin DriveSmart 60 Satnav



with a Yorkshire accent) it means that the driver doesn't need take their eyes off the road.

Using the car park that is the M25, having timely alerts as to the state of the traffic ahead is really handy. As is the alternative route suggestions.

On the B Roads of Wales the DriveSmart 60's notifications as what to expect on the road came in to their own. Sharp curves, speed limit changes and even rail and animal crossings are all indicated.

Heads-up for traffic lights, speed cameras and roundabouts are also shown.

I particularly liked the Real Directions system. This provides verbal commands that use landmarks as supplied by Foursquare. So, on driving through Seven Sisters I had the "turn right at the council building". I found this really useful as, on larger roads, you can't always discern street names.

The speed read out is also spot on.

Garmin DriveSmart 60 review conclusion

This is, quite literally, a very smart device.

I am glad I checked it before heading off as I had to update the device and add maps to it via the Garmin Express PC application. This took a while but, after that, the GPS has been faultless.

cars but I bottled it and went another route.

If you are looking for a well-priced navigation unit with clear, real world, directions the Garmin DriveSmart 60 should be on your list, without a doubt. Add the hands-free skills of the smart connectivity and voice commands; it's practically a no-brainer.

I have actually put my money where my mouth is and bought this very model!

Garmin DriveSmart 60 price and availability

You can buy the DriveSmart 60 right now for £240 with maps covering all of Europe.



The smart functions are really handy and the notifications happen in a timely manner. I have to admit

that I have become dependent on the DriveSmart, to the point of almost driving down what appeared to be a footpath in a country park. There were no signs stating no

Overall score: 8.5

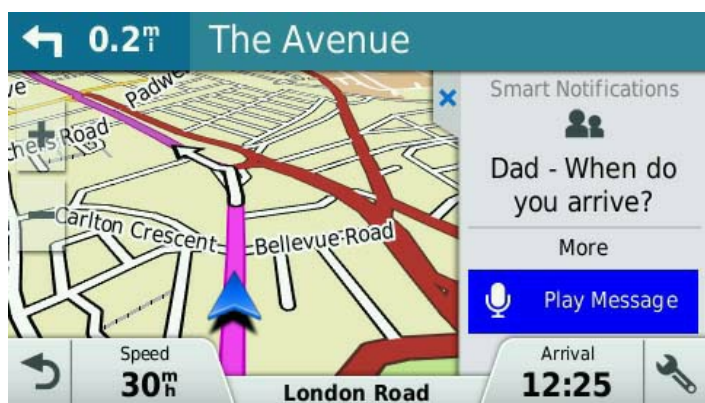
Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Performance 9/10

Value 8.5/10



Skullcandy XTfree sports earphones

One thing that sports earphones have to be able to do is stay in your ears. Yes, sounding amazing is all well and good, but not if the earbud keeps dropping out. Skullcandy are obviously staffed by gym bunnies as their XTfree Bluetooth earphones come packing three proprietary designs – FitFin, StickyGels, Fix – all to ensure that you get the best fitting earbuds on the market.

Skullcandy appears to be quite sure of themselves with their take on sports earphones. The XTfree wireless sport earbuds promises that you'll be free to move through your workout and, thanks to TripleLock security; your earphones will stay put.

Let's have a look how the XTfree performs in reality.

Skullcandy XTfree design

The Skullcandy XTfree sport earbuds have been designed to be your go-to workout bud(s).

For a start, the only wire is the one that joins the earphones together.



This features an in-line remote and mic, complete with skull logo.

The earphones themselves have a small rectangular outer that stores all the tech. The left side is equipped with the status light and, at the top, the USB charging port which is covered by a flap.

Looking at the business end you can tell that quite a lot of thought has gone in to keeping these things in your lugholes.

To start with the earbuds use 'StickyGels' tech. Skullcandy says that this particular silicone and shape is 30% grippier than regular gels.

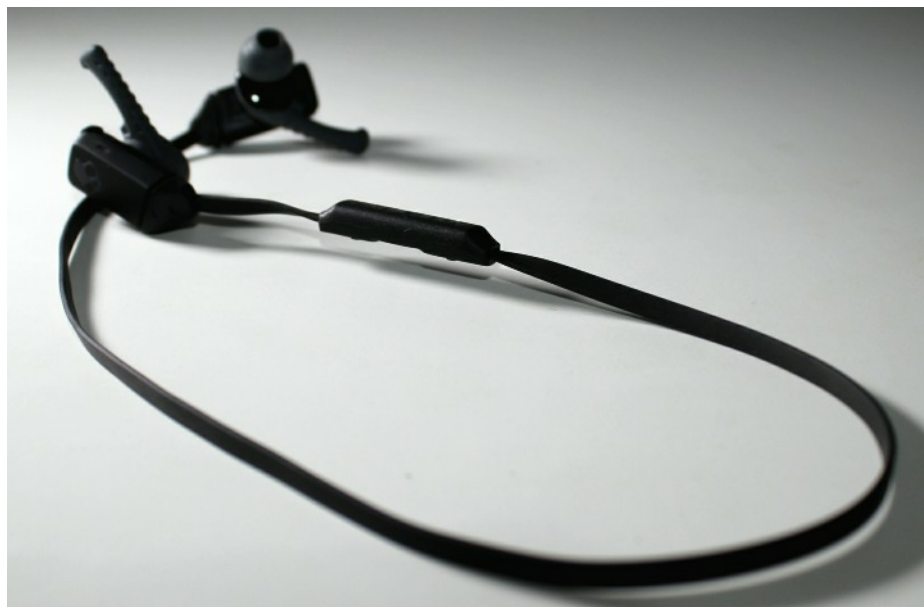
Then there's the 'FitFins'. These grey wings gently push against the contours of your ears. This pressure also keeps the buds where they should be.

As you are expected to be wearing these when working out, Skullcandy uses their 'PureClean' tech. This is blended into their silicone ear gels to keep your gear feeling and smelling fresh.

They also come with a natty little mesh-covered pouch to store them in.



Skullcandy XTfree sports earphones



Skullcandy XTfree performance Stamina

The earbuds feature MicroSport Bluetooth technology that is built into the earbud so that it allows for a lower profile and a less intrusive set of earbuds.

Skullcandy states 6 hours of battery life and I have to agree with that. My review device got me through 2 lunch breaks and 5 commute journeys which all adds up to just over 6 hours, to my reckoning.

I found these really comfortable, as well as secure. There are multiple earbud sizes to choose from to ensure you get you the right size gel for your ear.

Thanks to the FitFin, StickyGels, and Fix technology they certainly provided a snug fit. At no point did the XTfree plop out of my ears. Granted, I don't run or use a gym but they withstood my 'headbang challenge'. Classic moshing,

circle/windmill, and pogoing could not budge these buds.

Sound quality

Skullcandy didn't forget about making these sound good just because they spent time on the fit.

I can't say that these are audiophile IEMs but they do have great sound for pumping out your motivational playlists.

Bass is rich and firm but not as heavy handed as some sports/urban earphones. There's decent isolation but Skullcandy's ambient ear gels purposely allows some outside in to keep you safe on your run or cycle.

Skullcandy XTfree review conclusion

The Skullcandy XTfree are a sensible purchase for active types. I have been impressed by how these stayed in my ears. They are sweat and rain resistant and, thanks to the PureClean tech, will not get funky in the wrong way.

Sensibly priced with good audio, I can heartily recommend the XTfree to all you gym bunnies out there. To my mind, their only real rival is the Gibson Trainer, and they're about 20 quid more.

Skullcandy XTfree price and availability

You can buy the XTfree now for €99.99 direct from the Skullcandy site. They are available in either Navy/Blue or Black/Grey.

Overall score: 8.3

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Sound quality 8/10

Value 8/10



MVR Ascend Virtual Reality kit

I was kindly invited to test some pre-production kit ahead of MVR's Kickstarter campaign that started the next day.

Virtual Reality (VR) is currently *the* hot thing right now for gamers, as well as other artists and training facilities.

The main drawback, if you already have the PC or gaming console that can power the kit, is that you need to be cabled in to the source. Both the headphones and the optics need to be plugged in to something like the PCs available from

Maingear and the like or your PS 4 or Xbone.

Another important thing to factor in is the cost of these headsets. With the PlayStation VR going for £350, the Rift £550 and, what I consider to

be the current benchmark, the HTC Vive £800.

So, if you have to upgrade to get in to VR and then buy a headset, I can see a very poorly bank account in your future.

VR is currently limited

I think we can take the fact that VR is not exactly cheap to get in to as read.

Yes, there is quite an investment to make if you want to give it a go

but that is always the way with the latest tech. Unfortunately, not all cutting-edge tech makes the grade. Mini Discs, Laser Discs, 3D TV... all had much promise but are now cast aside.

Coughing up a whole lot of money for something that currently has limited support can be scary. We have all seen decent smartphones fall by the wayside because of the lack of apps. The PS Vita (PSP) had a very difficult time because of the slow uptake of games.

The range of tailor-made VR titles,

The way MVR has managed to accomplish this is through using a smartphone in the visor. Before you start shouting about Gear VR and other Google Cardboard-based viewers such as those from ViewMaster and even Brian May, stay with me.

Yes, they all use your smart device but the MVR Ascend utilises this tech in a different way.

MVR Ascend – how it works

Use your Sony Xperia Android phone with the free Remote Play app to stream the PS4 to your phone and you are ready to go or, if you're on the Xbox One, this version comes with a device so you can stream your favourite Xbox One game to your MVR Screen using Windows 10 streaming technology.



at the moment is pretty thin on the ground. Dropping the wrong side of £500, as a PC gamer, is not something I'd do lightly.

MVR Ascend – different VR

I went to investigate what promises to be a new approach to VR. This not only promised to be more affordable, but also gives the user greater freedom thanks to wireless operation.

PC owners can use either the PS4 or Xbone versions. All we have to do is download the free Moonlight App on our smartphone.

This hands us a wireless screen for our PC. The app implements Nvidia GTX's proprietary GameStream technology which means low latency wireless game play. Both the P1 and X1 controllers are compatible with the PC.

It's also a great deal more compact than the MSI VR One backpack.

MVR Ascend Virtual Reality kit

MVR Ascend – H1 headset

The first thing I noticed about the headset was that you can flip up the visor and see the real world. Handy when you want to grab a cuppa, select another game or just give your eyes a rest without having to take the headset off.

The H1 has interchangeable lens adaptors. These give you the option of both 2D and 3D experiences, augmented and virtual reality scenarios.

Naturally, the headset offers a dial to adjust the Inter Pupillary Distance (IPD) to optimise your visual comfort.

The biggest thing for me is that the H1 is designed for comfortable use by spectacle and non-spectacle wearers alike. Very handy for all those like me who need glasses and don't wear contact lenses.

MVR Ascend – external head tracking sensor

The, patent pending, MVR external sensor allows you to step into the game by using your head movement. This controls the look around function in first person games (Sensor supplied with controller). This worked incredibly well with Project Cars and Call of Duty. It does take some getting used to but soon becomes as natural as looking around the really real world.

The H1 headset also comes fitted with its own dedicated stereo headphones with built in volume

buttons. It also features call answer buttons for easy access to your phone.

MVR Ascend – first impressions

The Ascend, even in its per-production guise is really impressive.



The dangling screen and game selection panel will appear in the underside of the controllers.

This will look awesome.

As the PC screen was being sent to the 3 year old Xperia in the headset I was expecting lag aplenty.

I am relieved and happy to say that my poor performance on the games was purely down to my lack of skill. I must add a caveat here – I generally play Project Cars with a wireless controller and not a steering wheel and pedal set-up.

Being able to look around by moving my head really made the experience a lot more immersive. Call of Duty will take a little more time to get used to but, again, hardly any noticeable lag.

The hardware looks and feels quality. The optics seems spot on, as does the audio.

MVR Ascend game compatibility

Here is where the Ascend trounces the current crop of VR headsets.

You can play all the current and future games in VR! Play all First Person and Open World PS4, Xbox One and PC Games in VR from day one.

All existing first person games, that have a "look around" function, have already been pre-programmed into the P1 (PlayStation) and X1 (Xbox) controllers.

MVR are also in talks with a number of games developers to add native MVR sensor support to new games. This is in addition to developers releasing patches for

existing games, adding the MVR Ascend VR system as a mapped controller input for enhanced accuracy.

MVR Ascend price and availability

The Kickstarter project for the MVR Ascend started at 00:00:01 on Tuesday October 18th.

With bundles starting at **£129** you'd better head over to <http://kck.st/2eclCIA> quickly!

The shop RRP's will be as follows:

- The PS4 one will retail at £199
- The Xbox One version will retail at £249 (because this will come with a phone-sized tablet in the package)

Parrot Minidrones first look

I was invited to take Mambo and Swing, Parrot's new minidrones, for a test flight in the heart of London's financial district.

I was in the City to meet the Parrot Mambo and Swing. These comparatively inexpensive minidrones are said to pack much of the tech found in the premium flying machines. As someone who has crashed many a more budget-friendly quadcopter, I was interested to see how much better these are.

Parrot recently announced the release of their Disco fixed wing drone. Flying under the radar, though, was Mambo and Swing.

Parrot Mambo

The Mambo looks like the kind of quadcopter most will be familiar with. No bad thing.

Up close though, I could tell that the body looked a bit more sorted than others. Rolling the Mambo over I found the camera and, what I was told to be, an ultrasound sensor. These both work to keep the drone level.

The camera can also take snapshots. This might appear to be an obvious statement but that wasn't what the lens was there for initially. But, the developers thought *"there's a camera, why not let people take photos?"*

Grabber and cannon

The neatest thing about Mambo though is that it comes with acces-

sories. These add-ons enable the drone to shoot at things as well as carry stuff.

Here is the Mambo taking pot shots and some cups. I actually managed it too, which is testament to how easy it is to use. It has a 6.5-foot range and the cannon carries 6 BB pellets.

In this clip (<https://youtu.be/F1nHrIK7qY>), the lightweight (2.2 oz.) flying toy uses the Grabber to drop a jelly bean in to a container.



The Mambo can carry up to 0.14 oz.

These accessories are powered and controlled by the Lego-esque mount on the top of the drone. The cannon fixes on to this directly.

The Grabber, however, fits to the underside of the drone and a small cable links that to a special backpack affair that clicks on to the mounting station.

It works really well and is great fun. You could spend all day pestering someone with the cannon and then, at the end, deliver a sorry message.

Parrot Swing

Parrot boasts that the Swing is *"the only [drone] plane with autopilot and a vertical take-off and landing mode."*

Is that statement true? I don't know. What I can say is that it looks like nothing else I've flown – and I've seen a flying egg!

The Swing is a pretty clever design. This drone can switch from

being a quadcopter to plane – or X-wing fighter, as far as I was concerned. Basically, you get the benefits of both in one rather neat package.

Weighing in at only 2.6 oz it is really nimble and fast – in the right hands.

Flying in quadcopter mode is familiar, especially using the bundled controller. The controller is just like a gaming handset, complete with shoulder buttons. You can use the controller with your smart device to pilot the Mambo too.

The X-shaped wings allow for both vertical and horizontal flying modes. In fact, the Swing's ability to go back to the vertical position in quadcopter mode is very useful. Not only does it serve as a mid-air brake, the copter mode is better for manoeuvring in tighter spots.

Parrot Minidrones first look

In aircraft/X-wing mode the drone can reach 18 mph. The Swing can perform U-turns, half-flips and loops at high speed.

The most daring I got was flying it through hoops (<https://youtu.be/UPVLeW4ByEY>).

Autopilot or AutoParrot?

What separates these minidrones from anything we've tested of a similar size is their 'brain'.

Parrot Swing and Mambo are very clever little flying machines. I dare say that these drones have benefited from some of the tech developed for the Parrot Disco.

In the minidrones you get an intelligent automated stabilisation system, as well as automated take-off and landing.

These add up to a truly enjoyable out-of-the-box flying experience. No need to chalk up hours of trial-and-error crashing before being able to hover or timidly exploring your airspace.

How it works

The drones are fitted with a 3-axis accelerometer and a 3-axis gyroscope. These measure the motion and the angle of the drones. The autopilot adjusts their position. In the Swing, this also maintains the mini aircraft at a constant altitude in plane mode.

The camera constantly compares the current image of the ground to the previous one, every 16 milliseconds, to calculate the speed. As I have mentioned before, the camera can also take VGA (460×680) photos of the ground or the land-



scape. The 1 GB internal memory stores up to 400 pictures.

An ultrasound sensor captures the flight altitude up to 13 ft, and at higher altitude a pressure sensor helps to control the drones.

Controller and app

The FreeFlight Mini app is available for iOS and Android. The app puts 'joysticks' and buttons on your device and is fairly easy to use. Using this app you can configure the minidrone, even when it is offline, and activate all the accessories on the Mambo.

If you need a stable connection at long distance (up to 60m/196ft), the optional Parrot Flypad remote control is what you're after. The joypad adds those shoulder buttons too. These can rotate the drones (Swing in quadcopter mode), as well as activate the Mambo's accessories.

The main thing though is that the experience is so much better when using the Flypad. It comes bundled with the Swing as the shoulder buttons controls the three plane mode speeds. It is an optional extra for the Mambo.

Battery life

You can get around 7 or 8 minutes of flying time from a single

charge. The great news is that the charging time for the ultra-light-weight 550 mAh battery is a mere half-hour.

Mambo and Swing first impressions

I must say that I was considerably impressed by these minidrones.

The Mambo is perfect for indoors flying but can also go outside as long as it's not too windy. The Swing really needs room to reach its full potential.

The price, given the software, number of sensors and the engineering that has gone in to these is also fair in my opinion.

Mambo and Swing price and availability

You can buy the Parrot Mambo and Swing minidrones now.

Parrot Mambo – £100

The bundle includes the Cannon, Grabber, USB cable and 50 cannonballs.

Parrot Swing – £120

The bundle includes 4 Additional propellers, a Parrot Flypad controller and a Smartphone mount.

Parrot FlyPad – £40

Dali KATCH Bluetooth speaker

DALI Katch. Now, this could either be one of the Spanish surrealist's lesser-known works or something new from Denmark.

Danish Audiophile Loudspeaker Industries' latest is a break from the norm for them.

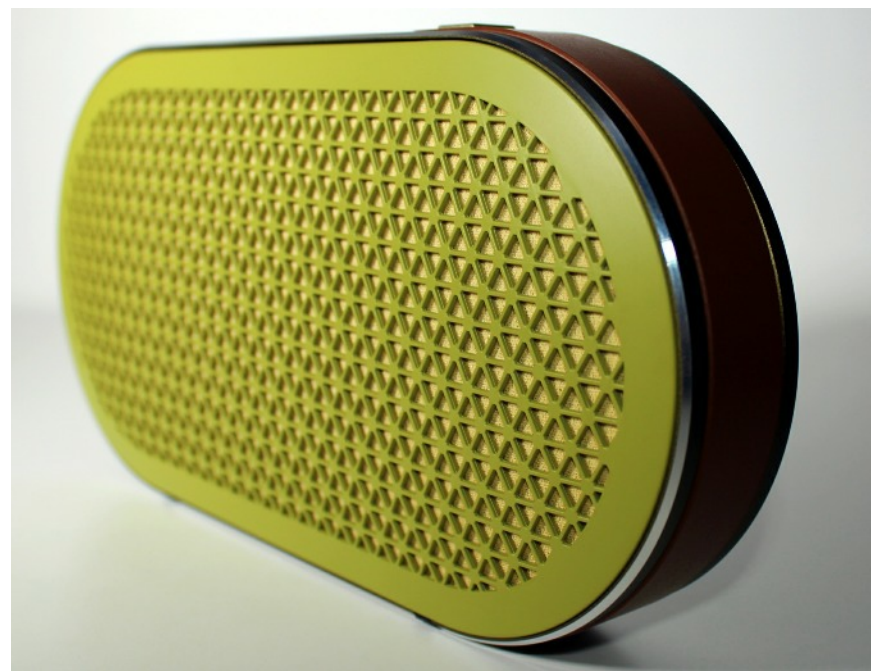
The Dali Katch is a Bluetooth speaker that promises to deliver audio quality not usually found in portable sound slingers.

Now, we've had all manner of Bluetooth speakers through GadgetyNews but, for £330, is its cover price the only Katch?

Dali Katch design

As you probably saw in my unboxing of the Katch, the premium experience starts right from the outer box.

The speaker is made up of a solid aluminium body and a mixture of polycarbonate and ABS (a thermoplastic polymer). The latter



is the plastic-y looking stuff used for the grilles and such.

The aluminium edges are not only exposed, but nicely chamfered. The grilles might not be to everyone's taste but, on the Green Moss version I have here, I think the two-toned grille and mesh looks cool. Dare I say a little military, too? Not the utilitarian thing, but the kind of camouflage that appears on high fashion.

Another nice touch is the brown leather edging. This is an integrated carry strap. This easily slides out of its stowed position to form a handle.

The buttons on top of the Katch take care of the on/off, Bluetooth pairing, volume up and down, and EQ preset jobs.

I like the design. The way the indication lights around the power button either shows volume level or charge left is pretty neat. Does it scream high-end? The fit and finish certainly does in my opinion, but I can see how some would expect more flash and bling.

Dali Katch performance

Where the design might be to everyone's taste or not, the sound definitely will be.

Sound quality

A Perfect Circle's 'The Package' comes through with a purpose. The bass is delivered with authority. The mids and treble,



Dali KATCH Bluetooth speaker



after about 20 hours of playing, are nicely balanced.

‘Go Your Own Way’ by Fleetwood Mac sparkles in all the right places too.

The sound quality is no doubt down to the twin aluminium woofers and 21mm tweeters aboard. Dali certainly knows a thing or two about speaker design.

The EQ button I mentioned earlier toggles between two pre-sets. This is so you can adjust the output depending on how close the Katch is to a wall.

Unusually, for these days, there’s no app for the speaker. I was expecting some EQ tweaking or something similar. To be honest, I guess that’s the confidence that Dali has with their product.

Strength, stamina and flexibility

Looking for a loud speaker? Well, the Katch is certainly that. I had it in the corner of my living room and it was plenty loud enough for that. Sat on the kitchen worktop it had no problem with being heard over my culinary skills, swearing and extractor fan.

It’s also no trouble carrying around. If it was a little warmer, I

would have tested it at a picnic but... brrrrr...

Bluetooth has been faultless, even with aptX high-quality FLAC and Tidal streams.

Dali says that the Katch can last for 24-hours of non-stop use. I’ve had it running for a few hours every day for a week now and have only just plugged it back in.

Recharging is via the mains port using the bundled plug.

Alternatively, you can actually use the full-size USB port. This is an excellent addition as it means you can charge on the move from a battery pack. The USB port can also be used to drive a Chromecast Audio dongle for connection to a home network.

Dali Katch review conclusion

The Dali Katch really does perform. Even though I shouldn’t really have doubted Dali’s audio expertise, putting that in to such a compact device can’t have been easy.

Add that sound quality to decent battery life and portability, Dali has a hit.

The price tag might give some people second thoughts but you

can’t argue about the Katch’s performance.

Dali Katch price and availability

The Katch is available now from all good retailers for £330. It comes in Cloud Grey, Moss Green and Dark Shadow.

For more information, head on over to the Dali website: DaliSpeakers.com

Overall score: 8.5

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Sound quality 9/10

Value 8/10

Dell XPS 15 laptop

The Dell XPS 15 certainly looks like a killer laptop. Not only does it have impressive specs but Dell is calling it the smallest 15-inch laptop ever made.

If you are looking for a beast of a laptop then there are quite a number of them out there. Is a 15-inch screen part of your wish list? Well, take your pick. If you want a 15-inch screen and plenty of grunt but want it in as small a package as possible, then the XPS 15 might be it.

Read on and see if the Dell XPS 15 is all it promises to be.

XPS 15 design

As this is pretty much Dell's answer to the Apple 15-inch MacBook Pro, they have ensured the XPS looks good on the outside.

The aluminium lid looks good and gives off a serious statement. The underside is matched to the lid. To keep things tidy, the barcodes and serial numbers are hidden underneath a magnetic XPS flap.

I love the carbon fibre-composite wrist-rest, a nice bit of flare from Dell. It's also comfortable, thanks to its soft-touch coating.

All the edges have been finished nicely, so no sharp bits to catch on. The backlit keyboard is neat too.

At only 15.6-inches, you can tell Dell has gone as close to the screen size as possible; more on that later. The XPS 15 is also just 17mm thick when closed. If you ignore the 2Kg weight, this is an extremely portable 15-inch laptop.

for a third on the right hand side but, instead, Dell has installed a battery meter.

You press a button and, via five mini-LED's, you have an indication of battery level.

It's kinda neat but I'd only use that when the laptop is turned off, before heading out. Maybe. Perhaps. Otherwise, the onscreen indicator works fine. I reckon I'd be more inclined to have use of a third USB port though.

Other options are an SD card slot, a full size HDMI port and



I never really found the weight an issue and the laptop slipped in to my STM rucksack without a problem. You might notice it if you have a shoulder-bag and carry it for long distances though.

XPS 15 ports

There are two USB 3.0 ports on this laptop. There is actually room

a Thunderbolt 3 port. The latter is Dell's workaround for the lack of USB ports as this can perform many duties. The Thunderbolt port supports PowerShare, 40Gbps data transfer in both directions, VGA, HDMI, Ethernet and USB-A and C – but you'll need to buy the relevant cables or one of Dell's Thunderbolt docks as extras.



Dell XPS 15 laptop

Oh yeah, you might have noticed that there's no Ethernet port other than via the Thunderbolt 3. It does, obviously, have Wi-Fi and Bluetooth though. There's even a headphone socket.

XPS 15 display

The reason that the XPS 15 manages to be only just larger than its screen is down to the 'InfinityEdge' display.

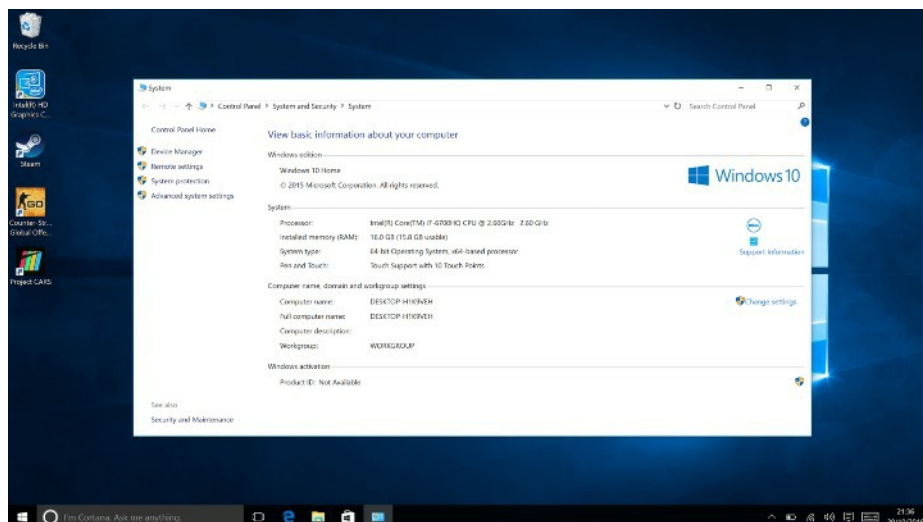
This has such a thin bezel that the total profile of the laptop is only a shade larger than the 15-inch 16:9 display itself.

While a regular laptop may feature a bezel that's around 2cm in width, the Dell InfinityEdge display's top, left and right bezels are only 5mm.

XPS 15 performance

XPS 15 power

The one I have here is packing a Core i7-6700HQ a 4K (3840×2160) touchscreen display,



16GB memory and a 512GB (461GB) SSD. Graphics hit that glorious panel by way of a GeForce 960M GPU.

That's plenty enough for most people, even for mobile video editing and gaming. There are, of course, others in the range with Core i5 chips, and HD displays without the touchscreen powers.

Thanks to the SSD, the XPS turns on and off very quickly, so no hanging around there.

Yes, this laptop is blisteringly fast and powerful but the most impressive feature, for me anyhow, is the display.

XPS 15 4K screen

Having thin bezels is one thing. InfinityEdge also looks fantastic. It is so bright and accurate it really does steal the show.

I can safely say that I have not seen a laptop

screen that even comes close to the one on this Dell. It is practically OLED good.

Contrast ratio and absolute black levels are good, but colour accuracy is bang on. Dell states it can display 100% of the Adobe RGB colour gamut and I believe them.

The screen looks beautiful with plenty of crisp, sharp detail and vibrant colours. It's also one of the best touchscreens I've ever used on a laptop.

It's fast and responsive and good enough to see me reaching for it instead of using other input methods. Something I still don't do with my Lenovo Yoga 2 Pro.

XPS 15 gaming

Are looking to game on the XPS? Well, yes indeed you can.

The 4K screen and GeForce 960M does slow the framerates somewhat. After lowering the settings though, Project Cars is very much playable. CS:GO was even smoother.

XPS 15 keyboard and trackpad

The backlit keyboard on the XPS 15 is super comfortable to type on

Dell XPS 15 laptop



arguably better value for money than a Microsoft Surface Pro 3.

The 4K screen is breath-taking. The thin bezels and

and the keys feel responsive with the right amount of travel. I even typed most of this on the laptop; so, long periods of use is not a problem. If the keys were just a little more grippy, I would say the keyboard was neigh on perfect.

The trackpad is equally as good as the board. The palm rejection technology works fairly well. The pad also supports the multi-fingered gestures that come with Windows 10.

XPS 15 audio

The Dell XPS 15's built-in speakers are surprisingly decent. They are powerful and clear with little-to-no hint of distortion even at maximum volume.

Dialogue is handled well and music is reproduced with plenty of depth. Granted, bass suffers but that's generally the case.

XPS 15 battery life

Dell claims battery life of up to 17 hours, I didn't really get that. Five to six hours was more what I was getting. To be honest, I still rate that as pretty darned good given it has a 4K touchscreen and high spec innards. Gaming or graphics work with screen brightness ramped up; you'll get more like 3



hours.

Dell XPS 15 review conclusion

The Dell XPS 15 is a fantastic laptop and possesses excellent build quality.

It's cheaper and more highly spec'd than a MacBook Pro is

amazing colour accuracy makes it ideal for anyone working with graphics. If I had the coin, this would be mine.

I can definitely recommend the XPS 15 to anyone that needs a high spec laptop and mostly works at a desk.

Dell XPS 15 price and availability

You can buy the XPS 15 now direct from Dell. Prices range from £1,199 for the Core i5 to £1,699 for the Core i7 4K monster as reviewed here.



Overall score: 8.8

Build quality 9/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 9/10

Performance 9/10

Value 8.5/10

Skullcandy Barricade speaker

The Skullcandy Barricade Bluetooth speaker promises to differentiate itself in two main ways. With the amount of Bluetooth speakers out there, these are quite important. The Barricade is not only rugged, but it's buoyant.

To be honest, buoyancy has never been the top of the list when I've been looking at speakers. Although, this attribute does bring along waterproofing as a handy side-effect.

Coming from Skullcandy the sound quality should also be pretty decent too.

Let's have a look.

Skullcandy Barricade design

The Barricade measures 15.4cm x 8.3 x 22.5cm (HxWxD) and so is quite compact. The Barricade sits between its siblings, the Barricade Mini and Barricade XL.

It certainly looks like it's ready for adventure. The one I have here is grey with a lime green backplate. The front is equipped with a steel mesh grille in a gunmetal colour.

Along the top sits minus and plus symbol buttons either side a round multifunction one. The latter also features the skull logo.

Following on from the buttons there is a mic hole and indication light. Finally, literally on the edge, is the power button.

All of the buttons are underneath



the outer skin so as not to let any dust or liquid in.

Beneath the power button is a pale grey flap. Here you'll find an aux in and aux out port, a mini USB port and then a full-sized USB for charging your other devices.

Yup, this speaker is also an emergency charger.

Rounding things off is a webbing carry strap/loop. This is handy for hanging the Barricade off of tree branches, door handles or handlebars.

It all looks and feels really well put together.

Barricade performance

Sound Quality

It is rare, very rare, that Bluetooth speakers are able to wow me, although the Katch did. Most are OK or decent.

The Barricade is loaded with a 10W speaker with dual passive radiators. These all work in concert to create a powerful, dynamic sound. The bass is very impressive, but Skullcandy has form here.

This speaker loves party music. Rock, Metal, Hip Hop, House and Electronica all pump merrily out of this compact speaker. It handles classical reasonably

well but singer/songwriter, acoustic numbers do lose a little bit of character and emotion.

Functionality

This is a go anyway speaker. It is rugged and portable. The fabric strap makes it easy to carry around.

Its rubberised outer skin not only protects it from the wet stuff but it also shirks off any bumps or knocks.

I really like the grille. It looks like it means business and can walk the walk too.

Then there is the water resistance. Many portable speakers lack this feature. The thing is, especially in

Skullcandy Barricade speaker



Skullcandy Barricade certainly gives you plenty of bang for your buck.

It's loud, looks good and seems virtually indestructible.

In fact, I could see the Barricade living in a tradesman's toolbox just as easily as chilling by the pool. The waterproof and highly durable case, along with device charging skills, adds up to the perfect portable party speaker.

Skullcandy Barricade price and availability

The Skullcandy Barricade is available now direct from their

the UK, what's the point of having a portable speaker if have to hide it away when the rain clouds start to loom?

If water isn't your problem then you probably have friends like mine. With that I mean spilled booze is probably more of a worry. So, water resistance is definitely a selling point for any serious party speaker. Being waterproof is even better!

Barricade is rated at IPX7 and so can actually be submerged up to 3-feet. Thanks to its buoyant design, if you dropped it overboard, it pops up and will bob around until you grab it. More

domestically, you can have it float in the bath or pool with you.

Check it out at <https://youtu.be/IahKRRKzazQg>

Bluetooth range is around 30 feet of wireless freedom.

Once paired you can hide your non-water resistant phone away and use the Barricade's on-board controls.

Play, pause and skip tracks whilst your phone or iPod are safe.

Finally, the Barricade has a full 8 hours of battery life when fully charged.

Naturally, this is diminished if you're recharging your phone or other devices from it. I've had it running for a couple of hours each night so far this week and it is still going strong.

Skullcandy Barricade review conclusion

If you're clumsy or one of those outdoorsy types, the



website for €69,99.

Overall score: 8.3

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Performance 8/10

Value for money 8/10

