

# Hifi Pig

## EXTRA

### & GadgetyNews

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DECEMBER  
2016

## HIFI REVIEWS

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## CLASSIC ALBUM



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ALBUM AND LIVE  
MUSIC, PLUS  
WARSAW AUDIO  
VISUAL SHOW 2016

BEHIND THE  
BRANDS  
With Alan Clark of  
Kralk Audio





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- Jon Myles, *HiFi World* 2015

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- Awards Edition, *HiFi World* 2015

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- Mono & Stereo, 2015

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**Stereo Times**  
The Complete Audiophile Magazine

**BEST PRODUCT 2015** High Fidelity.pl

**HI-FI WORLD**







## WELCOME

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It's been another incredibly successful and busy month here at Hifi Pig as we draw close to the end of the year.

The highlights of this month was a fantastic visit to the Warsaw Audio and Video Show in Poland and inside this e-magazine we've got loads of photos from the show and of course our Hifi Pig Loves You winners.

For those of you who haven't ventured out and bought your Christmas gifts yet we've also got a Christmas gift guide promotion with some very cool products.

We've got a few announcements to make in the coming months and new members of the Hifi Pig team to introduce to you. In this issue Lauren Coombes makes her debut writing album reviews and interviewing the metal/punk band LACK. James Fleming also makes his first contributions with an album review and the first of his Rants, Raves and Rock n Roll column that is sure to upset a few people.

Enjoy!

## GADGETYNEWS

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## HIFI NEWS & REVIEWS

### NEWS

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FROM THE VAULT - ZETA ZERO VENUS PICOLLA LOUDSPEAKERS

### GADGETY REVEIWS

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Anki Overdrive Supertrucks  
Revell Control Spot 2.0 camera drone

### WARSAW AUDIO VIDEO SHOW 2016



## MUSIC

### ALBUM REVIEWS AND LIVE MUSIC REVIEWS AND INTERVIEWS



### CLASSIC ALBUM



Marianne Faithfull celebrates her 70th birthday on the 29th of December. John Scott takes a listen to her 1979 album Broken English

## COLUMNS

**RETRO BITES** - Janine Elliot takes a look at the Meridian M2 active loudspeakers

**BIRDS EYE VIEW** - Linette tells us that music is a universal language

**THE VIEWS OF STU** - Potrzeba Jest Matką Wynalazków

**RANTS, RAVES AND ROCK 'N' ROLL** - James Fleming does a bit of Soul Searching and is likely to ruffle a few feathers along the way

### INTERVIEW - Hifi Pig goes Behind The Brands Alan Clarck of Kralk Audio



### FROM THE VAULTS

ZETA ZERO VENUS PICOLLA LOUDSPEAKERS





THEY DON'T FEEL  
WHAT YOU FEEL  
THEY DON'T SEE  
WHAT YOU SEE  
THEY DON'T HEAR  
WHAT YOU HEAR  
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## Monitor Audio Buy Roksan

Premium loudspeaker specialist Monitor Audio has acquired leading audio manufacturer Roksan. Monitor Audio and Roksan are both British companies committed to superior audio performance with a reputation for design excellence, premium quality and exceptional value. Established in 1985, Roksan is a well-respected manufacturer of amplifiers, loudspeakers, turntables and streaming products which are designed and manufactured at their London headquarters. This purchase will add greatly to Monitor Audio's portfolio.



With the launch of its premium Platinum II loudspeakers and the growth of its custom install series and other award-winning speaker ranges, Monitor Audio has had a very successful 2016. The acquisition of Roksan reflects this success. The two companies will continue to run as separate entities but under common ownership. "The synergy between the two brands will create exciting possibilities for both Monitor Audio and Roksan" say representatives from Monitor Audio.

## Atlas Mavros Ultra SE Interconnect

Atlas Cables has introduced a limited edition of its reference Mavros analogue interconnect – the Mavros Ultra SE. Only 50 sets of this Special Edition interconnect have been produced. Featuring unique gold-plated Ultra RCA plugs, each Mavros Ultra SE pair features a unique sequential serial number, a hand-signed limited edition authenticity certificate and comes packaged in a specially-created Atlas presentation box.

Hand-built in Scotland and available now, prices start from £1495.00 inc. VAT for a metre pair.

Commenting on the launch of the Mavros Ultra SE, Kevin Kelly, Managing Director of Atlas Cables, said, "We have been overwhelmed by the success of the Mavros range, so it was only fitting for us to highlight this success with a limited run of Special Edition analogue interconnect cables in recognition of the global accolades it has achieved. Mavros epitomises the Atlas DNA – a great-sounding cable created through true scientific research using the very

## New Onkyo Soundbars



Onkyo has unveiled an LS7200 3D Soundbar System that combines Dolby Atmos and DTS:X audio playback with next-generation network casting via DTS Play-Fi technology\*, AirPlay, and FireConnect\* multi-room distribution.

An Onkyo Controller app brings together wireless casting technologies, simplifies access to the included TuneIn and TIDAL services, and centralises housewide audio distribution to optional FireConnect-compatible wireless speakers. The app complements the on-screen GUI with comprehensive system remote controls. As well as discrete dialogue volume adjustment for DTS:X soundtracks, DTS Neural:X is included to up-mix standard multi-channel audio to 3D sound. Dolby Audio adds a new Surround Enhancer technology that wraps sound around the audience by creating virtual rear speakers. Other practical inclusions are Direct Mode for high-quality stereo sources,

Price: Onkyo LS7200 3D Soundbar System – £899, available in the UK in January 2017



latest materials designed specifically for the job in hand. Hand-built at our dedicated factory in Scotland, we are proud to present this Special Edition version of the Mavros Ultra, which showcases the very best performance we have achieved with copper cable technology to date."



# Aequo Audio

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## Aequo Audio presents: the Ensis loudspeaker

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](http://www.aequoaudio.com)



## Karma-AV Adds New JBL Monitors To Synthesis Range



**K**arma-AV has added two new JBL studio monitors to its high-end JBL Synthesis range. Created to bring professional-grade JBL performance to home audio, the JBL 4367 and 4429 studio monitors rekindle a classic lineage by combining new acoustic systems with the company's iconic pro-audio design, featuring blue front baffles and exposed mid/high-frequency horns.

The JBL 4367 incorporates drivers and technologies derived from the company's M2 Master Reference Monitor. It utilises JBL's patented D2 compression driver technology featuring the D2430K dual-diaphragm/dual-voice-coil driver, which employs two annular (ring-shaped) diaphragms and two voice coils to deliver high frequency response to 40kHz with low distortion even at high volume levels. The annular diaphragms are not subject to the break-up modes of a conventional dome surface, and the use of two voice coils yields a dramatic increase in output and power handling. The D2 driver operates into JBL's newly developed High-Definition Imaging (HDI®) waveguide, which provides a neutral frequency response both on and off-axis in vertical and horizontal planes, together with a seamless frequency blend with the woofer. JBL's 2216Nd 380mm Differential Drive® cast aluminium frame woofer from the M2 is modified with a new spider and surround treatment. It employs a pure pulp cone material, dual 75mm voice coils and dual neodymium motor structures to deliver low-frequency performance down to 30Hz. Drawing on its control monitor design heritage, the JBL 4367 features front-panel high frequency and ultra-high frequency trim adjustments for the fine-tuning of audio response according to the system and room. Its heavy-duty dual binding posts allow bi-

amping or bi-wiring while its 94dB sensitivity and 6-ohm impedance enable the 4367 to be driven to generous volume levels by up to 300 watts maximum amplifier power. The 4367's bass-reflex enclosure includes dual front-firing ports and is internally braced at critical points. Available

in a choice of furniture-grade walnut or black walnut finishes, the JBL 4367 can be used in 2-channel Hi-Fi stereo systems as well as JBL Synthesis applications in a 2.2 configuration with S2S-EX subwoofers, or in an LCR configuration as part of a complete JBL Synthesis theatre.

The JBL 4429 system is an updated version of the company's 4425 studio monitor, introduced in 1985. The 4425 was the first JBL design to combine a compression-driver and Bi-Radial® horn with a large-format woofer for true studio performance in a transportable size. The new JBL 4429 incorporates a number of important improvements over the 4425 and its successors. Its acoustic design benefits from the addition of a 19mm titanium diaphragm, ultra-high frequency compression driver (138Nd), which joins an improved 50mm titanium diaphragm high frequency compression driver (175Nd-3) in a one-piece SonoGlass® horn system. A new crossover network provides a smooth handover with a 300mm JBL pure-pulp cone woofer (1200FE-8) augmented by twin reflex ports in a braced cabinet. Built for high sensitivity (91dB (2.83V/1m)), and high (200W) power handling, the 4429 is designed to reproduce the dynamic richness and detail of the original performances at all listening levels. Available in walnut veneer, the 4429 system includes front mounted MF and HF attenuators and dual gold-plated five-way binding posts.

The JBL 4367 and 4429 studio monitors

Typical retail prices inc VAT (pairs):

4367: £11800.00

4429: £5800.00

## Noble Launch Sage & Kaiser Encore IEMS



**N**oble Audio has launched Sage, a new universal-fit IEM which represents the most affordable proprietary-driver IEM in Noble's range (£549)

The new Sage from Noble Audio is a US-made multi-driver IEM (In Ear Monitor) which features the company's new proprietary driver technology. Sage offers the performance benefits of Noble's bespoke drive units, as seen in its flagship nine- and ten-driver models, Katana and Kaiser Encore, but with an entry-level price tag.

Sage is a two-driver design which sits squarely in the middle of Noble's five-strong universal-fit Classic line. It directly replaces Savant, one of the Californian company's most popular IEMs, but introduces a raft of key updates. Sage also manages to retain many of the musical hallmarks that popularised its predecessor.


The new Kaiser Encore (£1699) from Noble Audio is a US-made, 10-driver design that builds on the strengths of Noble's ground-breaking original flagship, the Kaiser 10U (K10U), which it directly replaces. The new model retains the musical essence and engaging presentation of the K10U and now introduces proprietary-Noble drivers throughout.

Kaiser Encore's predecessor, the K10U, was Noble Audio's most acclaimed IEM, but the introduction of Noble's own balanced-armature drivers is set to increase performance to the next level. The proprietary drive units introduce improvements to the critical midrange, adding additional clarity whilst bringing a more neutral tonal balance. The redefined midrange integrates seamlessly with the rest of the frequency spectrum as with Noble's other multi-driver IEMs and CIEMs (customs).

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## McIntosh Announce Firmware Update For MX122 A/V Processor



McIntosh has announced the release of a free firmware update that brings full support for both DTS:X and Auro-3D\* object-based 3D audio to the MX122 A/V Processor. Since its release earlier this year, the MX122 has had full support for Dolby® Atmos and now with this update, the MX122 supports all the leading object-based 3D audio technologies. The free update also adds DTS Neural-X as well as other minor improvements.

The MX122 can serve as the brain centre for an advanced home theatre system for years to come. It is fully compatible with modern 4K Ultra HD video sources and can upscale lower resolutions to 4K Ultra HD for the best possible picture quality. It combines the “best-in-class audio performance” of the legendary McIntosh Reference System with the latest in home theatre technology.

To perform the update, the MX122 must be connected to a router that has internet access. This can either be a wired Ethernet connection or a wireless connection using the MX122 Wi-Fi capabilities.

## Rupert Neve Headphone Amp Comes To UK

Russ Andrews has entered into a distribution agreement with world famous pro-audio designer, Rupert Neve, to bring the company’s RHNP Precision Headphone Amplifier to UK audiophiles.



Rupert Neve is a legend in the world of professional studio equipment. Having founded The Neve Company in the UK during the 1960s, he designed and manufactured mixing consoles for some of the world’s biggest names in the recording business, including George Martin and AIR Studios, London. Today these original consoles are highly sought after, with, for example, the console originally from AIR to be found in Bryan Adam’s Vancouver studio. Now residing in Texas, Rupert runs Rupert Neve Designs and continues to produce high quality analogue studio equipment that is very highly regarded.

The Rupert Neve Headphone Amplifier has been designed for use in studios and homes for tracking, mixing and listening to music. Based on the headphone circuit in the company’s 5060 Centerpiece Desktop Mixer, the RHNP is a dedicated 24V reference-quality headphone amplifier with specifically-calibrated XLR/TRS +4dBu balanced line, unbalanced RCA and 3.5mm inputs. Suitable for use with a wide variety of sources, from professional mixing consoles, to DACs, to portable audio players and laptops, its effortless, wide-open sonic performance and the ability to drive any pair of headphones without compromise, allows users to enjoy their music with a new level of clarity. Rupert Neve Designs created the RNHP to accomplish one simple purpose: making any headphones sound their best.

Simon Dalton, marketing strategist at Russ Andrews says, “Rupert Neve believes that the headphone amplifier is just as important to the final sound quality as the headphones. Yet he was astonished by the number of headphone amps with compromised sonics, headroom and power. So he set out to create his own, based on the very highly regarded circuit designs of his professional mixers; products that have helped create much of the world’s favourite music.” He continues, “The credentials and pedigree of the RNHP couldn’t be better and we are delighted to be able to bring this product into the homes of UK audiophiles and music loving headphone users. We were blown away by the performance of this compact headphone amplifier when we first heard it and are sure our customers will be too.”

The Rupert Neve RNHP is available now for £469 inc. free UK mainland delivery direct from Russ Andrews and is covered by the company’s 14-day home equipment trial and 12-month warranty.

## SCV Announce Benchmark DAC 3

Implementing the latest ESS Technologies ES9028PRO DAC chip, Benchmark is once more raising the bar for the performance DAC market says the company’s recent press release. The DAC3 retains the form factor of the DAC2, including HGC, L and DX versions in silver or black, but achieves some considerable performance improvements.

RRP prices in the UK will be as follows.

DAC3L (no headphone amp) - RRP £2099inc VAT

DAC3DX (no preamp, pro features) - RRP £2199inc VAT

DAC3HGC (headphone amp and pre) - RRP £2349inc VAT



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## Cary Audio Introduce AiOS



Cary Audio has introduced the first product of the new Lifestyle Series, the AiOS (All-in-One-System). Cary say that 'AiOS is a new kind of music system for a new generation.'

'What does that mean? Simply put, music lovers and audiophiles alike have many more choices today when it comes to how they listen to music. As a music system with 150 watts of Class AB power, AiOS combines sources and inputs designed around this new age. Connect AiOS to your home network (Wi-Fi or Ethernet) and stream all of your digital music stored on your networked computer(s) or NAS drive(s) with simple plug N play UPnP, DLNA, and SMB connectivity. Also, available through your home network connection are integrated internet music streaming services, Spotify, TIDAL, and others being added. For those that may find a home network connection too intimidating, AiOS allows you to insert a SD Card into the front SD Slot. You can also use a USB flash drive or USB hard drive loaded with digital music files directly to AiOS' three USB-A inputs, all without a computer or network connection for direct playback! How about Bluetooth? Today, Bluetooth is ubiquitous and AiOS can certainly connect to your smartphone or tablet using the latest Qualcomm aptX® Bluetooth technology. However, AiOS has an extra trick up its sleeve. AiOS can SEND any of its selected sources to Bluetooth enabled headphones or speakers for a completely wireless music system.'

Cary also say that AiOS is 'visually transformative'. With the touch of a button, AiOS can change its backlit keys/buttons and centre LCD display (together or individually) to six different pre-set colours including one custom colour pre-set, or adjust any colour as you see fit within the entire colour spectrum. AiOS comes with aluminium Gunmetal Grey chassis and side panels and AiOS offers five additional side panel colour options. Finally, AiOS includes multiple analogue and digital inputs and outputs, including subwoofer output, preamplifier output, and more.

The AiOS comes with standard Gunmetal Grey side panels. Spring Green, Deep Plum, Cary Blue, Candy Red, and Champagne Gold side panels are sold separately.

Retail Price: \$2,995

## Heco Elementa Arrive In UK

Pure Sound, in their recent press release, say they are pleased to announce the UK arrival of HECO Elementa, a new range of loudspeakers offering "good sensitivity and excellent reproduction of tone and dynamics and

that they do partner very well with both valve and transistor based electronics".

Elementa 700 £1899.95, Elementa 300 £699.95, Elementa Centre £379.95, Elementa Sub £1049.95

## Spotify Now Available On OPPO Sonica WiFi



Spotify Premium subscribers can now listen to any song in the Spotify catalogue on Sonica. Sonica is a WiFi speaker in a compact package. With the addition of the Spotify Connect support, customers can transfer and control their listening experience from the Spotify app to Sonica — just select Sonica from the list of available devices within the Spotify app. If you don't have Spotify Premium, new users can try Spotify Premium free for 30 days by visiting Spotify's website.

Sonica comes equipped with WiFi, AirPlay and Bluetooth capabilities, and the companion smartphone and tablet app makes it easy to manage multiple speakers on the same network. Sonica can be further optimised with for different room sizes, speaker locations, and listening preferences using the Sonica app.

Sonica is available in black or silver colour for \$299 from OPPO Digital and authorised OPPO resellers.



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# PMC Backs Film To Document London's

A movie charting the history of Denmark's Street's Tin Pan Alley now has the backing of PMC, which has donated to a crowd-funding campaign aiming to raise the £28,000 needed to get the film made. PMC say they are helping out because they are "passionate about preserving Britain's hugely important musical heritage".

**Tin Pan Alley Tales – The Documentary**, produced and directed by Save Tin Pan Alley campaign founder and chairman Henry Scott-Irvine, is a modern-day Canterbury Tales that focuses on the street's history including its importance to music business. 10 people with 10 different jobs will tell 10 stories across 10 decades, giving viewers a remarkable insight into the life and workings of this unique location. Over 17 hours of interview footage has already been shot with the likes of Glen Matlock from the Sex Pistols, writer Will Self, skiffle pioneer and music agent Chas McDevitt. Dave Davies from the Kinks has shot a short sequence of himself in Tin Pan Alley, exclusively for the film and there is also interview footage with composer and musician Patrick Campbell-Lyons, whose UK band Nirvana was the first British group to release an album on Island Records in the summer of 1967. A regular at the Gioconda Café at No.9 Denmark Street, he reminisces about his friendship with David Bowie who used to park his touring vehicle – a World War Two US military ambulance – outside the café.

Henry Scott-Irvine is already half way towards his £28,000 target but is hoping that more backers will come forward over the next few weeks to enable him to complete the film. "I've had support from many music industry people – both for the film and for the original campaign to save Tin Pan Alley," he says. "In the last few weeks alone we've been given rare and valuable original acetates that were donated by Suggs from Madness. Producer Clive Langer has also given us a 12" white label master of a limited edition vinyl pressing of David Bowie's song Absolute Beginners, which topped the UK charts



in 1986. These will be auctioned on Ebay to raise money for the film." Scott-Irvine adds that the importance of making the documentary cannot be underestimated. "Denmark Street was the epicentre of London's music scene for so long, but now, because of the development of the area, much of the history is being lost. We need to preserve and archive the story of Tin Pan Alley, as well as continue the fight for it to be protected with musical heritage zone status."

Tin Pan Alley's musical heritage dates to 1911 when it was the birthplace of sheet music publishing, and subsequently the birthplace of the music charts. The NME and The Melody Maker began life there, and for many years it was the place to have an office if you were a music publisher or an artist's manager. The campaign to save Denmark Street from property developers has already had huge success, gaining Grade 2 listed status for various historically important buildings, including an 18th century Forge that was literally lifted by crane so that a pair of subterranean venues could be built beneath it. Eight music retail outlets and 11 music spaces above shops have also been protected and a Fair Rents scheme has been put in place to protect existing businesses.

PMC sees the preservation of Britain's musical heritage as a cause well worth supporting. Peter Thomas, PMC's founder, has long been a collector of music and important artefacts of the British music industry. His own personal collection, soon to be housed in a museum PMC is setting up at its headquarters in Hertfordshire, contains a history of British Loudspeakers, along with examples of pro audio technology through the years such as microphones, mixing consoles and tape machines. Commenting on the Save Tin Pan Alley campaign, he says: "The sheer numbers of music publishers in Denmark Street gave huge opportunities for young songwriters to develop and make their way in the music industry. Without it, so much of the music we enjoy today would never have been composed or recorded. My record collection would certainly be significantly smaller, and the pleasure of listening to so many classic albums would have been lost. Denmark Street has been the home of UK music for over a hundred years. Let's make sure we document it properly with this film and, equally importantly, that we support the Save Tin Pan Alley campaign so that we don't allow the birthplace of UK music to disappear."

## The National Audio Show Relocates To Birmingham From 2017



**A**long with Bristol, the National Audio Show, which we covered extensively in 2016, is amongst the longest running shows of its kind in the UK: and having spent 7 years in London then 7 years in Northamptonshire it's now ready for another relocation.

The show organisers, The Chester Group, got in touch to let us know that from 2017, they are off to Birmingham, a City that has never previously enjoyed a major event of this kind and, say The Chester Group, "more importantly this is an untapped and virgin territory".

For 2017 they are using two linked Venues, THE ICC and The HYATT REGENCY BIRMINGHAM. They go on to say: "We will continue to preserve our established calendar date of the 3rd weekend in September: for 2017: the 16 – 17th September. Keeping to a set date is very important for two reasons: The industry knows when this show takes place and they have to consider other events around the world, plus and just as importantly 'show goers' also diarise this show at this time." The show will be renamed with initial discussions leading to The National Audio and AV Show or something similar.

## Audio Research Adds New VT80 Power Amplifier To Foundation Series



**A**udio Research has introduced the latest component to the Foundation Series, the VT80 Power Amplifier. From the same engineering and design team responsible for the Reference Series, the Foundation family of vacuum tube components has been created, say Audio Research "to provide incredible musical experiences. Spatial definition, dynamics and detail abound while providing the most natural musical experience".

Introduced earlier this year, the first three Foundation components include the LS28 line stage preamplifier, the PH9 phono stage, and the DAC9 digital-to-analogue converter. The new VT80 is the much-anticipated amplifier that allows the Foundation series to be shown as a complete system. Combining a new aesthetic with simple operation the VT80 is a vacuum-tube amplifier that will "open doors to a new listening experience". Audio Research go on to say: "Since 1970, High Definition has been more than Audio Research's trademark; it has been the guiding principle for all products. The Foundation Series continues this passion and philosophy, offering the listener stunning playback, great value, and unparalleled long-term support".

## Audio Technica ART-1000 Cartridge At Vinyl Passion

**V**inyl Passion got in touch to let us know that The Vinyl Passion Music Room is the very first UK Audio Technica Excellence retail centre, and one of only three dealers in the UK to be selected to demonstrate and stock the ART-1000 flagship cartridge.

This is a design the Mark at Vinyl Passion has been very excited about since its official launch at Munich High End 2016 and he says "In our humble opinion, in the time we have spent with the pre release models since May, this is the finest cartridge in the world today that we have encountered". The Flagship ART-1000 is only available for



demonstration and purchase from Excellence retail centres of which there will be 50 world wide.

Audio Technica ART-1000: £4,450 inc VAT



# Wire on Wire

REDpurl™



Variable Geometry

UK patent pending GB1602578.5

EU Registered Design No. 002544171

## Experience680

Reference Audio Cable

The **Experience680** from Wire on Wire is a reference-level audio cable. With its REDpurl™ variable geometry (UK patent pending), it uniquely permits the user to alter its wire spacing, allowing the character of the interconnect to be tuned.

### Experience680

The Experience680 uses carefully chosen PTFE-insulated silver-plated copper conductors. Different diameter multi-stranded conductors add dynamic weight and timbre throughout the frequency range, whilst capacitance is kept low, thanks to our REDpurl™ geometry.

Of course, there is no need to do anything with our cable; it performs beautifully straight out of the box. However, if you think you would like to make changes, the REDpurl™ geometry allows you to alter the wire alignments, changing capacitance and inductance at individual nodes along the cable. It is up to the listener to say which they prefer, but being able to make a difference can be profoundly important when it comes to creating an involving personal experience.

**Conductors:** Silver plated copper

**Insulation:** PTFE

**Capacitance:** 69pF/m variable

**Connectors:** WBT 0114 phono plugs

**Geometry:** REDpurl™

For further information contact:

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## TAGA Harmony HTA-2000B v.2 Class A/B



**T**AGA Harmony, a European manufacturer of speakers and audio electronics, has unveiled a new flagship hybrid amplifier HTA-2000B v.2. TAGA Harmony HTA-2000B v.2 is a 150W high-end hybrid integrated amplifier utilising a 12AX7 tube preamp section with a cathode type amp circuit and a 12AU7 SRPP stage serving as a buffer amplifier.

High-performance tubes and precise high voltage transistor hybrid power supply provide voltage stability and very low AC ripple current. High-power transistors utilised in the 0dB current amplification circuit drive even very demanding and powerful speakers. The tube circuit cross-connected with audiophile grade MKP capacitors ensures stable playback improving music tone and sound field depth.

Audiophile grade Japanese ALPS volume potentiometer provides minimal noises and channels crosstalk and has excellent operational feel and limits errors between the two channels. Oversized aluminium heat sink system

helps to disperse internal heat and allows for long term high power playback with limited distortions. The high-end class, gold-plated speaker terminals offer almost lossless audio signal transmission to speakers. Analogue inputs with high-end solid machined brass RCA sockets can accommodate up to 3 stereo devices including a turntable (both MM and MC cartridges). You can connect a range of digital devices and a built-in premium high-resolution 32bit / 384kHz DAC will always provide the best sound performance. A USB DAC input is a perfect choice for playing digital music from computers, servers or compatible smartphones. The HTA-2000B v.2 is also an ideal companion for mobile devices – stream music from smartphones, tablets or computers compatible with Bluetooth®. For those who prefer discrete listening TAGA Harmony equipped the HTA-2000B v.2 with a high-end headphone preamplifier. A preamplifier output is dedicated for an optional external power amplifier or powered subwoofer and speakers.

## Chord Electronics Free Mojo Case

**T**he Mojo DAC/headphone amp from Chord Electronics is being supplied with a free protective case\* throughout the holiday season in store at participating retailers, internationally. The promotion offers



the protective case (worth £65) with all new Mojo purchases bought in retail stores up until 14th January 2017.

## Metaxas Marquis Headphone Amplifier

**N**o one could ever accuse Kostas Metaxas of creating something "boring". Yet again, this eccentric artist has presented us with his unique take on a very utilitarian subject, the headphone amplifier. Combining a historic art oeuvre - "memento mori", contemporary sculpture and technology, his latest Marquis "Memento mori" is a minimalist Preamplifier-Headphone amplifier designed, says Kostas, "for music-loving audiophiles who require few functions but insist on the purest sound".



Kostas goes on to explain further, "Memento mori means "remember that you must die" in the language of Latin. For men living in antiquity all the way up until the beginning of the 20th century, death was seen as a motivator to live a good, meaningful, and virtuous life. It served to remind us of our own mortality, of our mistakes and failures and of the shortness and fragility of human life.

Like all Metaxas & Sins amplifiers, the CNC-machined "head block" can be finished in a choice of 10 aluminium colours, or automotive painted. As well as a dedicated headphone amplifier and headphone stand, the Marquis also can be used as a preamplifier with a choice of 3 line-level inputs (RCA connectors) and a set of RCA outputs to connect to a power amplifier to drive a pair of speakers. The solid CNC-machined base encloses the power supply to keep all stray RFI and noise from the delicate low-level signal stages, but also can be offered with optional "battery-pack" so that you can use the Marquis for over 5 hours before needing a recharge.



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## Indigo Silverwave Cables Launched

Black Cat Cable's resident artisan, Chris Sommovigo says that there is much more to hear. After nearly a decade of experimenting with a concept that he had codenamed "Superleggera" due to its lightness, it seems he's ready to release the first fruits of his unreasonably long development cycle: Indigo "Silverwave".

"This project runs counter to just about everything folks seem to think when it comes to what makes audiophile cable better, given that they are accustomed to big and heavy cables, as if sheer quantity or heft or girth somehow equates to increases in performance," shared Chris. "That way is, and always has been, a recipe for madness."

"With Indigo the development cycle was very long, labour of love, and it always seemed that I was near breaking through, but never quite there. With the recent development of the Silverwave conductor, and the last iteration of it, all the veils just dropped, and there was everything just hanging right there in the space between and around my speakers. Pure, effortless coherence." At ¥800,000 per 1.0m pair (+ ¥250,000 per 1/2m pair), Mr. Sommovigo knows that these won't be flying off the shelves - and that's just as well, as far as he's concerned. "The final version of the Silverwave conductor is very difficult to make, as I've got to process it in-house using strange tools that I've adapted for the purpose. Making pair of these interconnects takes a tremendous amount of time, skill,



and patience. But once you hear the result ... you can't unhear it."

The Indigo Silverwave interconnect uses RCA connectors that were designed by Mr. Sommovigo especially for the Indigo project, developed under his sub-brand, XOX, and not available on any other cable that he makes. As with his Black Cat Cable products, Mr. Sommovigo personally builds these cables, starting only with raw-materials, in his seaside workshop in Yugawara, Kanagawa, Japan

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a straw hat, a white t-shirt, denim shorts, and brown boots, is walking away from the viewer on a dark road that stretches into the distance. She is carrying a brown suitcase in her right hand and a wooden acoustic guitar in her left. The background is a dramatic sky with clouds and a bright light source, possibly the sun or moon, creating a silhouette effect. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

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MUM HEARD ME SING  
SINCE THE TUMOUR,  
SHE TRIED TO HIDE IT  
BUT I COULD SEE SHE  
WAS CRYING.”**

[www.nordoffrobbins.org.uk/eviesstory](http://www.nordoffrobbins.org.uk/eviesstory)

**WATCH**  
**#EVIESSTORY**



# Hifi Pig Supports Nordoff Robbins

**N**ordoff Robbins is the largest independent music therapy charity in the UK, dedicated to changing the lives of vulnerable and isolated people.

They support thousands of people through their own centres and by working in partnership with a wide range of organisations including care homes, schools and hospitals.

Music therapy is a specialist use of music that aims to facilitate physical and emotional wellbeing, and to promote the development and retention of key communication skills. A wide range of instruments can be used in music therapy, including the voice, and the music created is often improvised. Music therapists support people to develop their own ways of being musical in order to explore their potential and connect with the world around them.

In the hands of a trained practitioner, music therapy can be used to support people living with a wide range of needs. It can help a child with autism to communicate, unlock forgotten memories for those living with dementia or provide comfort and celebrate the life of someone facing a terminal illness.

Nordoff Robbins' vision is a world where music therapy is available to all who need it. Through the delivery of high-quality music therapy services across the UK, their Masters-level music therapy training and their dedicated

research to enrich, strengthen and demonstrate the effectiveness of their work, their mission is to bring life-changing music therapy to as many people as possible.

If you are able to help and support the charity then please click on one of their adverts that you will see around the Hifi Pig website and which we have donated freely.

The charity's Christmas appeal this year is centred around [Evie's Story](#). Evie was 17 years old and studying for her AS Levels when doctors found a tumour on her brain. They told her that they would have to operate within days. She was just a teenager, enjoying life and now her world had been turned upside down.

When Evie awoke from the operation she knew something was wrong. The procedure to remove the tumour had left her partially paralysed and taken her voice. Evie loved to sing, it was such a big part of her life. She was devastated.

Bev, a Nordoff Robbins music therapist, worked as part of a team to support Evie



through her cancer treatment and helped her to regain her singing voice. Music took her mind off the pain and provided comfort; it helped her to express her feelings and focus on what was still possible.

After a six-month stay in hospital, Evie is back at home with her mum and sister. She is still undergoing intensive chemotherapy but remains positive. [Read Evie's full story here.](#)





# 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.

Our new 'Transpose' modular connection system simplifies the plug assembly process, fewer steps allowing us to ensure not only higher performance and reliability but also maximum flexibility.

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# The Hifi Pig Christmas Gift Guide Promotion

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Christmas is coming and whether you are wanting to find those special gifts for your nearest and dearest, or you want to treat yourself, you are bound to find some inspiration in our Christmas Gift Guide Promotion!



# THE HIFI PIG CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE PROMOTION

## Chord Mojo

Hear more from your music – from your smartphone, tablet or computer – and drive your headphones to new heights. The Chord Mojo is the ultimate DAC/headphone amplifier; a pocket-sized metal marvel that allows you to hear more from your headphones, anywhere.



Designed and built in England, every element of its design has been engineered to deliver exceptional sound to your ears. And with support for almost any audio format – including DSD – up to 32-bit/768kHz, multiple inputs and dual headphone outputs, it's a highly flexible friend.

Here are some of Mojo's sonic secrets:  
Custom made Digital to Analogue Converter (DAC) chipset  
Custom-coded Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA) circuitry, several times more complex – and accurate – than a standard DAC chipset.

500 times the processing capacity of a standard DAC chip  
20 times the frequency of regular DACs  
750mW output power; 0.075 ohms impedance; 125dB dynamic range

Ready to use with any smartphone – including the iPhone 7. Adding Mojo to your smartphone is an instant upgrade to power, quality and sheer enjoyment – it even turns it into a high-resolution music player.

Discover more about the Mojo's Award-winning excellence – and your local stockist – at [chordmojo.com](http://chordmojo.com).

## Meridian Audio Explorer<sup>2</sup>

The Meridian Explorer<sup>2</sup>, provides a sound so natural and nuanced, it will render your headphones impossible to put down!



**LOSSLESS AUDIO** – Explorer<sup>2</sup> plays high resolution 24-bit/192 kHz files at their native resolution without downsampling and is MQA ready.

**INTELLIGENT** – Meridian's unique Apodising filter can actually fix errors in digital recordings, making them sound more alive.

**ABSOLUTE CONTROL** – Ultra-low impedance and 100dB advanced volume control provide exceptional control for the most sensitive headphones.

**WINTER PRICE PROMOTION – CONTACT YOUR MERIDIAN RETAILER TO FIND OUT MORE**

## Meridian Audio Prime Headphone Amplifier and Power Supply



# THE HIFI PIG CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE PROMOTION

Meridian's Prime Headphone Amplifier is for those who seek the highest possible performance from conventional analogue audio sources.

'OUTSIDE THE HEAD' EXPERIENCE – Analogue Spatial Processing (ASP) allows for complete immersion, blending the left and right channels to help you forget that you're wearing headphones

DIGITAL & ANALOGUE INPUTS – Input either computer audio sources via USB or analogue sources such as your phone, tablet or Hifi – all of them sound great and it's MQA ready.

ALL HEADPHONES – Two 6.3mm sockets for separately-wired and conventional headphones, while a 3.5mm headphone socket is perfect for in-ears.

**WINTER PRICE PROMOTION – CONTACT YOUR MERIDIAN RETAILER TO FIND OUT MORE**

## Meridian Audio MS200

Enjoy your music in any room. The MS200 from Meridian is the perfect high-resolution partner for any analogue or digital system.

HI RES – Get Meridian's High Resolution up-sampling in all your rooms and from all of your music with Meridian Sooloos.

MULTIPLE OUTPUTS – Analogue, digital and SpeakerLink outputs allow the Media Source 200 to work with any system.

ABSOLUTE CONTROL – 3rd party control options plus IP control via the free Sooloos app.

**WINTER PRICE PROMOTION – CONTACT YOUR MERIDIAN RETAILER TO FIND OUT MORE**



## Meze -99 Classics



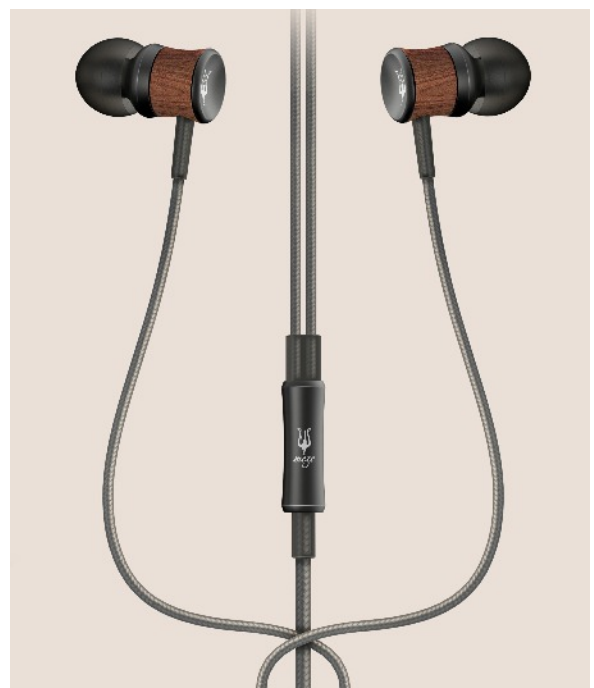
Placing a pair of the **Meze 99 Classics** on your ears often results in a, 'Wow – I didn't expect them to sound so good!' Sometimes a product gets the balance just right.

With the **99 Classics**, **Meze** achieve a sound that offers enough detail and neutrality to appeal to the audiophile ear, whilst maintaining a warm and fun sound that won't ever get too analytical.

They are just as happy connected to a smart phone, playing back an MP3, as they are plugged into a DAC for hi-res listening. Add to this a striking design, with beautifully finished walnut or maple cups, and you have a headphone which is at once visual stunning and a great all-round sonic performer.

Price – £279

## Meze 12 Classics





# THE HIFI PIG CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE PROMOTION

Following the Meze ethos of ‘perfectly natural sound’, the 12 Classics follow in the footsteps of their elder brother, the 99 Classics.

Featuring the same walnut housing, the 12 Classics offer surprisingly impressive sound from a relatively inexpensive in ear.

Presented in an attractive hard box, with hard carry case and a broad range of ear tips, including a Comply foam option, the 12 Classics offer great value for money.

If wood isn’t your thing you can save a few pounds and get the same great Meze sound with the 11 Neo (£49) – available with Gun Metal or Iridium grey aluminium housings.

Price – £69

## Benchmark DAC3HGC



With the DAC1 Benchmark captivated the ears of audiophiles looking for a no-nonsense high performance DAC.

Still used in Abbey Road today the Benchmark DAC is a highly flexible and hugely revealing professional device.

With their HGC and L models Benchmark added features in reply to demands from audiophile users, who found Benchmark DACs a great fit in their home systems. These models are carried through to the latest series 3 DACs.

Utilising the very latest ESS Technologies ES9028PRO chip, Benchmark have once more raised the bar in mid-range DAC performance. As always with Benchmark they are keen to

share their philosophies and professional approach to product design.

Price – £2349

## Fostex HPA4BL



Fostex, often known for their multi-track and studio recording products, can be a much misunderstood brand. Their parent company Foster, a huge Japanese OEM driver manufacturer employing over 30,000 staff in 20 countries worldwide, has been in the driver business since the 1940s. A Foster speaker was used in the first Sony portable radio!

Fostex is going through an evolutionary change. Returning to their roots in transducers (many of which were, and still are, often found in other well-known brands) Fostex are turning their attentions to audiophile headphone and speaker design. Alongside these are some very capable DACs and amplifiers, developed and tested at Foster’s extensive facilities in Tokyo, Japan.

The HPA4BL offers generous output levels and a meticulously implemented Burr-Brown PCM1792A DAC chip, offering 192 kHz PCM and 11.2 MHz DSD support.

Unusually at this price, the HP-A4BL also offers a 4-pin balanced output for more demanding headphone listening. Early reviews and feedback suggest that Fostex have hit on a winner with the HP-A4BL, which offers outstanding performance and features at an entry level price.

Price – £395

## PMC twenty5.21

The twenty5.21 is proof that great things come in small packages. Don’t let its compact size fool you; this loudspeaker is nothing less than remarkable.

Its complex ATL and Laminair vent mean that you get speed, weight and transparency, with the greatest bass extension of any loudspeaker this size.

Whether on a shelf or its performance-enhancing stand, the twenty5.21 excels with all types of music. Its articulate mid-range, clear, open highs and profound bass mean it can fill rooms both medium and small with astonishing ease.

# THE HIFI PIG CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE PROMOTION



The twenty5.22 is not only made for music's visceral qualities, it is equally capable when it comes to resolving the fine details that produce realistic and finely nuanced performances of the utmost delicacy.

## PMC twenty5.23



Arguably the most elegant model in the range, the twenty5.23 takes the speed, transparency and sophistication of the twenty5.21 and adds greater bass extension and power. And yet its slim-line form doesn't mean it can't move you.

No matter what type of music you love, the twenty5.23 will let you absorb the quietest and most dramatic moments without missing a beat, and its realism with vocals puts you in the best seat in the house.

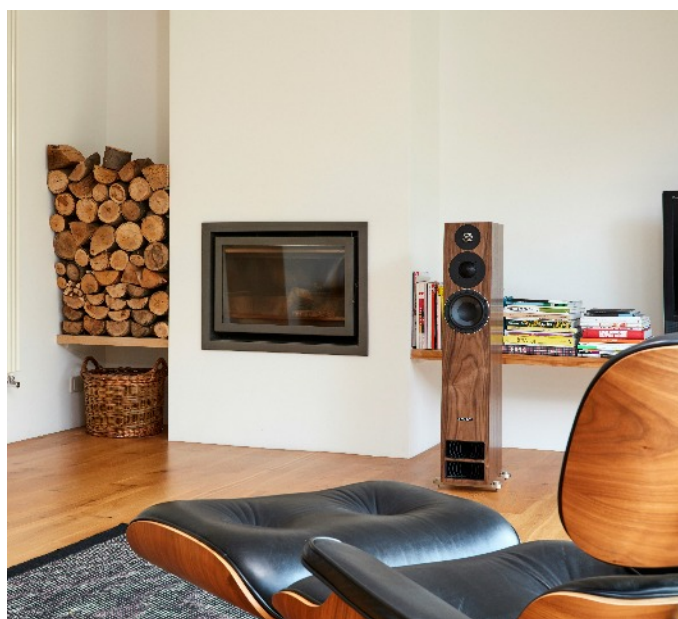
## PMC twenty5.22



The more substantial standmount in the twenty5 range is a force to be reckoned with.

The larger, potent g-weave bass driver, together with the new Laminair vent and an ATL of surprising length given the cabinet dimensions: all combine to give the twenty5.22 bass weight, punch and dynamics that are unmatched in its class.

## PMC twenty5.26



The flagship model in the twenty5 series is also the most capable. The mid-range dome driver makes it the most revealing while the substantial bass driver coupled to an extended ATL produces tangible bass that brings music and



# THE HIFI PIG CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE PROMOTION

movies to life. The twenty5.26 was created for people who want the full immersion experience, and its feeling of limitless headroom allows it to reproduce all the majesty and dynamics of any great work. And then there's its ability to unearth depth and detail that makes the experience so incredibly real.

## Auralic Aries Mini



ARIES MINI is a powerful, wireless streaming node designed to connect to an existing home audio system. It not only shares all the software and hardware functions of the award winning ARIES, but is also equipped with additional high quality analogue output and will accommodate an additional internal hard drive with no capacity limitation. TIDAL, Qobuz music service embedded. AirPlay and Bluetooth connectivity.

**ARIES MINI** can stream high-resolution music quickly and wirelessly in virtually any sampling rate, even the latest Quad-Rate DSD and DXD. It is powered by AURALiC's proprietary Tesla hardware platform that includes a Quad-Core ARM Cortex-A9 processor running at 1GHz, 512MB DDR3 onboard memory and 4GB internal storage.

Lightning Streaming offers several innovative and unique features such as Gapless Playback, On-Device Playlist, Memory Cache and Bit-Perfect Multi-Room functions.

Available from specialist Hifi retailers.

## Auralic Altair Wireless Streaming DAC

This is a perfect single-box music source. It combines a High-End DAC with a world class wireless streaming solution. The 15 input sources including streaming capability from a Network Shared Folder, USB drive, Internal music storage (optional), uPnP/DLNA media server, TIDAL and Qobuz



streaming, Internet Radio, AirPlay, Bluetooth, Songcast and RoonReady.

Digital inputs are AES/EBU, Coaxial, Toslink, USB device to computer, 2 USB host for storage and external DAC. ALTAIR is developed based on AURALiC's award-winning VEGA Digital Audio Process and AURALiC's award-winning Lightning Streaming Platform. Launched in 2014, Lightning Streaming is the industry's first streaming solution that supports Quad-Rate DSD, PCM up to 32Bit/384K through Wi-Fi network.

Lightning Streaming offers several innovative and unique features such as Gapless Playback, On-Device Playlist, Memory Cache and Bit-Perfect Multi-Room functions. This on-going platform is maintained, and continually developed by AURALiC's in-house software R&D team to ensure customers are regularly updated with new features through the product's automatic software update system.

Available from specialist Hifi retailers.

## Auralic Aries



The ARIES serves as a "bridge" between music files on network storage or high quality online streaming services and the consumers' DAC — enabling DACs for the first time to stream high-resolution music quickly and wirelessly in virtually any sampling rate, including DSD, Double-Rate DSD and DXD. TIDAL and Qobuz music services embedded.

# THE HIFI PIG CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE PROMOTION

AirPlay connectivity. Lightning Streaming offers several innovative and unique features such as Gapless Playback, On-Device Playlist, Memory Cache and Bit-Perfect Multi-Room functions. This on-going platform is maintained, and continually developed by AURALiC's in-house software R&D team to ensure customers are regularly updated with new features through the product's automatic software update system. Available from specialist Hifi retailers.

## Auralic Polaris



POLARIS defines the AURALiC brand: innovative technology, great sound, superb user experience, and excellent value.

It is a wireless streamer, a music server, a DAC, a pre-amplifier and a stereo power amplifier – the ultimate solution for music lovers seeking high quality streaming from a single, compact audio component. It has seventeen inputs channels comprising streaming, digital and analogue sources.

The internal DAC, incorporating AURALiC Flexible Filters and Femto Master Clock, supports Quad-Rate DSD and PCM up to 32Bit/384K. The powerful internal stereo amplifier module can deliver 120 watts per channel into 8 ohms, 180 watts per channel into 4 ohms continuous power with exceptionally low distortion.

POLARIS utilises AURALiC's award-winning Lightning Streaming Platform. Launched in 2014, Lightning Streaming is industry's first streaming solution that supports Quad-Rate DSD, PCM up to 32Bit/384K through Wi-Fi network. Lightning Streaming offers several innovative and unique features such as Gapless Playback, On-Device Playlist, Memory Cache and Bit-Perfect Multi-Room functions. This on-going platform is maintained, and continually developed by AURALiC's in-house software R&D team to ensure customers are regularly updated with new features through the product's automatic software update system.

Available from specialist Hifi retailers.







*"This amp was otherwise able to present differences between strokes and differentiated tonal differences between detail fine. This effect was obvious not just with overtone-rich piano but also older recordings like Music For Prancing from the Warne Marsh Quartet." ~ Wojciech Pacula, 6moons.com*

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# AVID Hifi Pellere Phonostage

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By Janine Elliot

**At £2500 the AVID Hifi Pellere Phono-stage borrows a lot of its make up from its more expensive sibling costing £4300, but does it cut the right kind of groove? Janine Elliot finds out.**



# AVID HIFI PELLERE PHONOSTAGE



**A**VID Hifi might be best known for their excellent turntables, but this company has over the last 6 years been vastly extending their expertise into other areas such as loudspeakers, preamps, power-amps, cables, alignment equipment, racks, and particularly phono-stages. Indeed, their first foray into electronics was the original Pulsare phono-stage in 2010. I remember this model receiving universal praise in the press, with its high level of adjustment of input, gain, plus capacitance and resistance loads, as well as an exceptionally good sound. Four large 1950's style knobs allowing a degree of fine-tuning to your input and output that put most other mid and high-end photo-stages to shame. So to be delivered a Pellere in 2016 with no buttons on the front of either box was quite a shock. All that tweakery in this, the second-from-the top-of-the-line machine from AVID, needs to be done via a forest of colour-coded micro-switches underneath one of the two boxes.

That box, the gubbins behind this phonostage, now just visibly sports a red light switch and a front panel etched deeply with a large "A" to show that AVID is also a major force when it comes to the art of metalwork. The Pellere and Pulsare II both use a 300VA supply dedicated to each channel in a matching box connected by umbilical

cord. The all-important button is the on/off rocker-switch which sits under the front of this unit. Like most discerning manufacturers the power-supply is becoming a major part of the whole "package" and usually sensibly in its separate box, something AVID has always taken seriously with their turntables. I remember Cyrus and Naim, back in the 90's, really pushing the idea of upgrading the on-board power supply with an external box to improve the performance. Not surprising this is now a major part of any hifi that is worth its price tag. Without a decent mains, little is possible, whether a power amplifier or turntable or phono-stage. Bearing in mind the high amount of amplification needed in a MC phono-stage it is important that the electronics are quiet, and because in simplistic terms the signal is simply modulated on the mains supply to make it louder it means that this mains supply needs to be as perfect as possible to get the most faithful audio. The four phono-stages in the range all have Latin names beginning with the letter 'P' and use words to do with music, such as "pulse" and "drive"; though these could equally apply to the mains supply.

So far so good. But would I then be disappointed that the standard multi-switch knobs in the new Pulsare II - which operate relays meaning that there is no outside interference to inhibit the

Like most discerning manufacturers the power-supply is becoming a major part of the whole "package" and usually sensibly in its separate box, something AVID has always taken seriously with their turntables

# AVID HIFI PELLERE PHONOSTAGE

The Pellere might be cheaper than the Pulsare, but considerable effort has been put into match it in terms of sound quality, design and components. £2500 is a very competitive price...

audio signal - would were removed in favour of micro-switches hidden under the phono unit, just as in the cheaper Pellar and Pulsus? Those knobs and relays do put up the price considerably, so removing them is vital in making this phono-stage accessible to more people. Just as the first Morris Minor didn't have synchromesh on first gear to save 2/11d, Conrad Mas, CEO of AVID, has needed to make these changes to keep that price point down. The Pellere does have the same circuit board just that the Pulsare has some higher grade components and a double-regulated power supply having greater storage capacity, though they are both rated at 300VA. Other modifications to keep that all-important price point down include missing out a few 'Deluxe Model' extras such as the subsonic filter, mono switch and even a custom facility to match cartridge load resistance precisely, should you have required that. Little sacrifice, because this phono-stage is by no means the economy edition. This is a serious piece of kit. Only that it is £1800 cheaper. By starting with the best and adapting it to the price point this is a Bentley, and not an Austin Allegro.

Even with these changes the Pellere is an exceptionally quiet phono-stage with an equally good specification, comprising a fully balanced architecture meaning that whether using balanced XLR or unbalanced RCA inputs, the internal circuitry is balanced at all times, and with a switchable floating or grounded earth facility in case there are hum problems; something turntables and arms can often suffer with. And should your arm cable, like most, be unbalanced then AVID are happy to rewire it so that the XLR input can be

used. There are excellent balanced phono-stages from companies such as Boulder and Ayre who also see the definite advantages of true balanced wiring in the tonearm, and most arms can be adapted to balanced if not already done. Selection of balanced or unbalanced input is done by the DIP switches, one set for each leg. The other DIP switches alter input gain depending on whether you are using MM, MC low, med or high (40dB - 50dB - 60dB - 70dB), and a high degree of fine-tuning of capacitance and resistance loading to match your cartridge. Output is balanced or unbalanced. For my Kontrapunkt b cartridge I selected medium gain, 100pf and 100Ω.

## Sound

Once I got accustomed to the new looks and lack of easy access to the controls I could sit back and admire the simplicity of looks. The Pellere might be cheaper than the Pulsare, but considerable effort has been put into match it in terms of sound quality, design and components. £2500 is a very competitive price, but there are plenty of other manufacturers at this price competing for business. I needed a product that not only allowed good tailoring to my other components but also offered a musical rendition of all types of music I played. My initial observations were of a tight and very flat response, via the passive RIAA Neumann HF correction, as used in all their phono-stages.

Pink Floyd's The Division Bell starts with seagulls, extremities of bowed double-bass and bass guitar going all the way to the bottom and ride cymbal repetition, both effortlessly played with no sign of harshness, and a speed





# AVID HIFI PELLERE PHONOSTAGE

allowing perfect timing of the rhythms. All instruments played with a clear-cut clarity that in track three 'Poles Apart' allowed the solo voice and vocal backing to work together in close harmony, but still with a good degree separation allowing both – competing with different notes and words – to be easily distinct and ordered.

Mike Valentine's new Clare Teal/Syd Lawrence tribute to Ella Fitzgerald, who would have been celebrating her 100th birthday next year had she stayed around, gave a smoothness of Clare's voice in clear contrast to the speed and power of the 'blasts' from the trumpets and trombones. 'I've Got You Under my Skin' was toe tapping time for me; something I try not to do. The distinctive melancholy Glen Miller harmonies from the woodwind section in 'Begin the Beguine' were clearly separated from the less relaxed trumpet and trombone blasts. Hearing page turns between tracks just helped this direct cut disc to sound even more real; How Clare could get through four tracks on each side of the disc without a cough, splutter or hitting a wrong note just showed how professional she was, as were all the musicians in this excellent album. 'Ding Dong the Witch is Dead' starts with powerful blasts from the very start, showing the music is very much alive. This was a particularly well performed track. The split notes from the top (concert) D from the trumpets showed a clear control of extremities of dynamics in this piece. All performed with a clarity that showed this phono-stage

wasn't vexed at anything I threw at it, nor did it add anything to the sound, as many phono-stages will do. This phono amplifier was not harsh in its playing, rather giving a neutral balance of sound at all times.

For that reason I thought I would play an album that really does cry out for a phono-stage with its own audio signature to improve a bad recording. Putting on my 70's short skirt I began to listen to mine - and Conrad's - least favourite band Steely Dan and "Do it again" ('Greatest Hits' album); a track that combines a highly compressed and excessive reverb and double tracking in the vocals competing with strong rhythms and guitar solo, a double-tracking mono synthesiser melody plus even a bell-tree making an appearance at the end of a few phrases which sounds as if it belongs to a different piece of music. This album has tracks from 1972-78 hits combining lots of instruments and mixing styles that, I have to say, was never particularly recorded with hi-fidelity listening in mind, but the Pellere was as honest and as clear as I could have ever wished any phono-stage to be. If you want a machine to make awful recordings to sound good, look elsewhere. This one is about honesty and accuracy. Moving into the 80's, "Sky 3" 'Moonroof' has powerful drum stabs that compete with gentler acoustic and electric guitar tunes that some phono-stages can't play without me gritting my teeth and heading for the volume

control. The speed of these combined with the ease of performing kept me intent on playing through the entire side of this album. John Williams's guitar playing is clear and precise. 'Sister Rose' with its Premier drum-kit playing with passion one minute and then with gusto the next was powerful but controlled and musical when it needed it. "Hello" is one of my favourite tracks from the Sky repertoire, with long vibrato's from the acoustic guitar melody and piano accompaniment, only to be interrupted with powerful drum and electric guitar riffs as they get emotionally engrossed. The drum kit really is 'in your face' in this album – but the Pellere just kept everything in its correct place and time, with a high degree of space and positioning and allowing all notes to sustain and release fully. This phono-stage really does work. Only the lowest notes weren't quite as gutsy as I would perhaps have liked.

As a complete contrast Ravi Shankar 'Tana Mana' is an excellent mix of Indian Sitar, synthesizers and early digital sampling that is very ethereal and ambient, full of detailed rhythms and high pitched phrases that some phono-stages would make sound harsh and top-heavy. In contrast, the Pellere kept it controlled and clear, opening up all the instruments with clarity and passion that made me realise why this phono-stage wouldn't feel out of place attached to their top Acutus Reference turntable. Each instrument appeared in its own



# AVID HIFI PELLERE PHONOSTAGE



ambient space, both 'front and back' as well as 'left and right'. This album has many quiet sections as well as thumping tabla drum finger-work, and all hand-hitting was allowed to decay perfectly, something a valve phono-stage might be less controlled in doing. Despite all signals travelling through the DIP switches, the unit was exceptionally quiet in operation being able to give a big blast from vocals and instruments in the Tala's and Raga's when required.

## Conclusion

This might not be the top model in AVID Hifi's line-up, but this is no less a model, following very closely the design architecture of its bigger brother. Not a shade of harshness from the solid state circuitry and with a passion and musicality I expect in valve. The fiddly DIP switches were soon forgotten as soon as I started to get engrossed in the music I was playing. Once you have selected the right settings for your cartridge you never need to perform any settings other than switching the Pellere

on and off. If you cannot make the move to buy the Pulsare II, then this model should perhaps be your next move. The fact that the phono-stage works in balanced mode means it will be ready should you ever decide to go balanced in the future. With an extremely transparent and neutral presentation of music with extremely low distortion, and an extended and flat frequency response, I found nothing that I could criticise. Perhaps it is just a little too 'safe' in its portrayal of the music, and not quite as engrossing as my phono-stage of choice, though that particular one is 3 times the price. This is a very revealing cartridge, and perhaps for that reason it could be too perfect for some.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality: Bomb proof construction typical of AVID. Available in black or silver.**

**Sound Quality:** Precise, accurate and captivating sound. Flat frequency response, and very quiet in operation

**Value For Money:** With design closely taken from the top £4300 Pulsare II but is only 60% of the cost. Now that's a bargain!

### Pros:

Based on the Pulsare II gives it a calibre  
Balanced in and out  
Neutral portrayal of the music  
Flat frequency response  
Extremely quiet  
Good amount of control in matching cartridge load

### Cons:

Could be a little too revealing and neutral for some  
Fiddly DIP switches

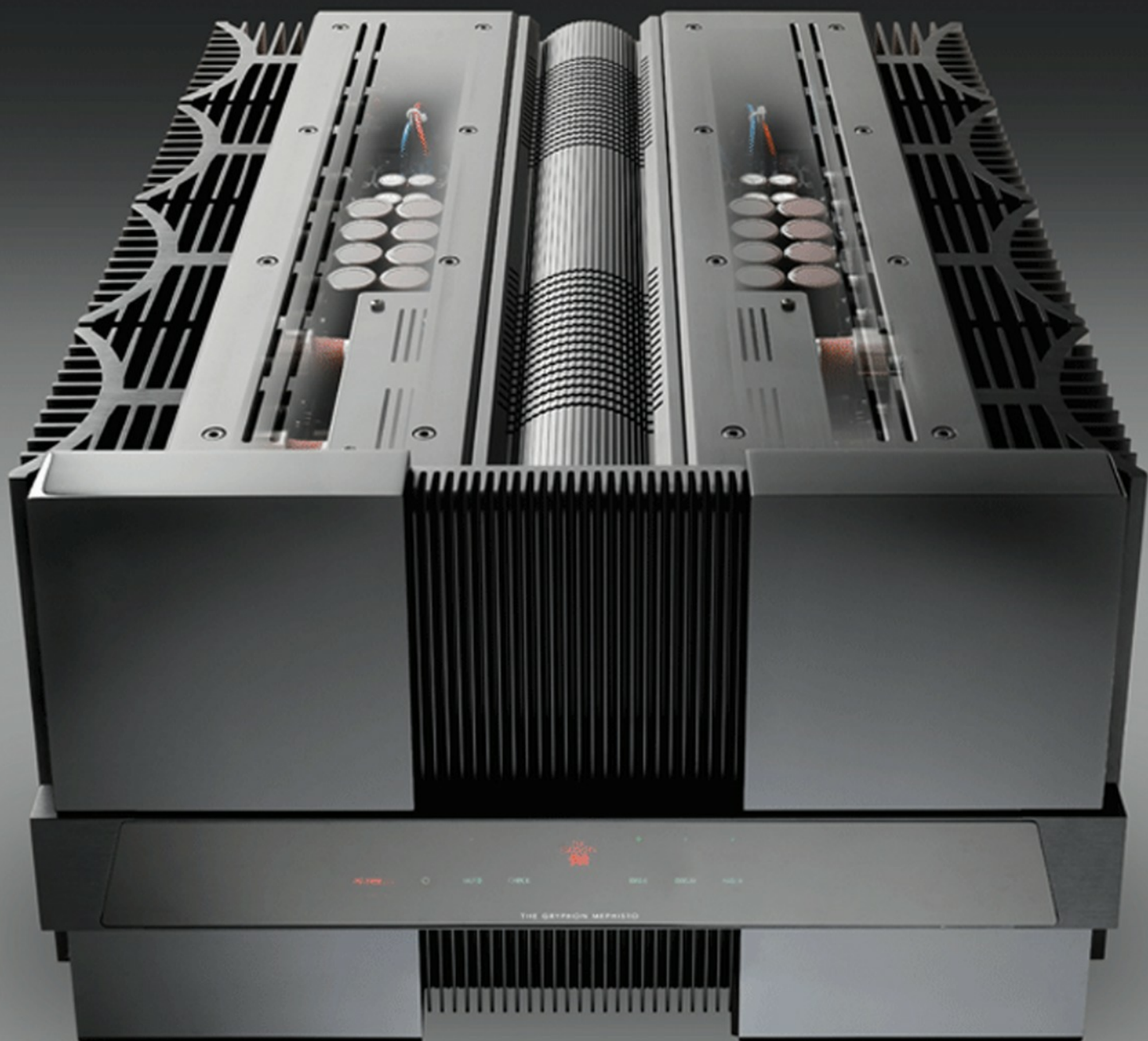
**Price:** £2500

## SPECIFICATION

**Noise:** < -81dB MM < -67dB MC  
**Distortion:** < 0.001%  
**RIAA:** 5Hz - 70kHz +/-0.5dB  
**Gain:** 40dB - 50dB - 60dB - 70dB  
**Resistance loading:** 10R - 30R - 100R - 300R - 500R - 1k - 5k - 10k - 47k  
**Capacitance loading:** 100pf - 200pf - 500pf - 1.5nf - 10nf - 20nf  
**Power supply:** Regulated with 300va transformer  
**Voltage input:** 100-240vac 50/60Hz 10 watts max. (depending on region)  
**Dimensions:** 290 x 240 x 100mm (WxDxH)  
**Net weight:** Control unit - 3.8Kg (8.4lb) PSU - 6.4Kg (14lb)  
**Packaging:** 360 x 310 x 290mm (WxDxH)  
**Shipping weight:** 12.0Kg (27lb)



# THE GRYPHON



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# Trafomatic Belus Power- amp

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By Janine Elliot

Trafomatic is a relatively recent addition to the high-end hifi fraternity and perhaps best known for the £100,000 Elysium monoblocs. This is a Serbian company that exudes quality, detail and perfection. The Belus power amplifier up for review here might not be as expensive as the Elysium, but at a more attainable £3250 this is no less a product says Janine Elliot.



# TRAFOMATIC BELUS POWER AMPLIFIER



This was  
industrial  
grade  
build,  
something I really  
liked

When I hear the words “Hybrid” I think of conventional looking cars with electric engines and petrol backup; cars that say they have impressive consumption levels, but in reality are never quite as good as you would hope for. So to be sent a Serbian Hybrid amplifier I expected perhaps a Class D plus valves to make it more musical. This amplifier is instead more straightforward Push-Pull (class AB) but with the surprise of a single C3m valve working as a single ended class A voltage gain in triode mode for the first stage.

Exicon ECX10P20 transistors and EXC10N20 MOSFETs are at the output, two pairs per channel, working as four transistors per channel in a mini-paralleled push/pull array. The 100 watt into  $8\Omega$  power amplifier ( $140W/4\Omega$ ) works as pure Class A for the first 5-6W and then A/B for the rest. Power is provided by a 400VA toroidal with 8 smoothing capacitors per channel.

Before starting to make amplifiers the company Trafomatic Ltd, set up in 1997, began by making toroidal transformers and electronics for industrial use. From around 2000 they began to make output transformers, only beginning amplifiers in 2007 as Trafomatic Audio, a venture of friends and hifi lovers Saša Čokić and Milorad Despotovic. So, the toroidal transformer and the two high-current chokes in this design are all made in-house, with great knowledge of design, which greatly impact on the sound that this £3250 amplifier produces. Indeed, this amplifier was packed to the hilt with the transformer, coils and capacitors, with the MOSFETs tightly screwed to the heatsinks at the side.

It is so good to see manufacturers today moving away from the usual ECC83's, 6550s and 300Bs. Saša Čokić really likes the C3m valve (along with the similar C3G) and he is presently working on another product using these tubes. This tube has a good life span, guaranteed for 10,000 hours, which would mean 5-10 years if using them for a reasonable time. The C3m is a vacuum pentode looking unlike normal valves with its black metal cover, rather than the usual glass. Whilst I love looking at valves lighting up through the glass covered vacuum, they will always suffer microphony, so a metal cover reduces this making this one of the lowest sufferers and one of the quietest tube you can buy. And, if you don't like the metal cover you can remove it to show the glass tube, though because the tube is hidden inside this solidly built and heavy metal topped amplifier with side-fins for the MOSFET heatsink, there won't be much point.

Made by Valvo and Siemens, the C3m tube was intended for the German telephony system which required audio travelling long distances, so they needed valves with high output and low noise. These were never made for general sale, so the Belus uses NOS tubes. The power amp has a gain switch on the back to adapt to any speaker system; 'normal', 'low' and 'high', all derived from different negative feedback values. So, at the 'low' setting 22dB of gain is available (with -9dB of negative feedback and 1.2Vpp input sensitivity), and gives the best signal to noise ratio of the three settings, at 90dB. At the medium setting there is 25dB of gain (with -6dB of NFB, 0.9Vpp input sensitivity) and 89dB S/N ratio, and at the 'high' gain setting produces 28dB of voltage gain (with -3dB of NFB, 0.6Vpp

# TRAFOMATIC BELUS POWER AMPLIFIER

There was a density to the sound that made this amplifier feel it wanted to give its soul to the music

input sensitivity) and 85dB S/N. Output impedance at 100Hz is  $0.01\Omega$  for low gain,  $0.0116\Omega$  for normal gain and  $0.085\Omega$  for high gain. I chose to use the unit at the medium setting for the review. The Belus is available in two colours; either black, or silver which has a contrasting brass coloured face plate.

This amplifier looks anything but a valve amplifier; just like those electric hybrid cars looking nothing like I'd expect an electric car to look like. Not that it bothered me in the Belus. This was industrial grade build, something I really liked.

Belus was, so I am told, the son of Poseidon and Libya, one of the demigods and rulers of Egypt. Being half human and half celestial therefore this is an appropriate name for a hybrid amplifier. As Saša told me; "It's half tube (as God) and half Mosfets (as human!)". From that I can guess which end he likes best! Mosfets can have a bad temper and be unpredictable, just like humans, though in the Belus they were very much in a controlled, solid state.

## Listening

I always make sure that I am not influenced by looks and weight; both of which with this product are first-rate.

After all, how many times does a good looking meal appear to taste better than a bad looking one! But the quality of work in the Belus was certainly food for thought; I really was impressed by the detail of build in this model. It even arrived in a wooden crate with handles, all screwed up on each side.

First impressions on listening were of class. This was a smooth operator with guts and reserve. Music sounded very real and that valve really fed an honest sound, but perhaps it was just too honest. There was nothing that, through my Graham LS5/9s, sounded radical or risky. Connecting to hybrid speakers, in the form of the Eminent Technology LFT8b ribbon, planar and 8 inch woofer speakers at £2500, which I was reviewing at the time, gave a quicker sound whilst still maintaining full frequency and excellent noise floor. Similarly using the appropriate cables was important, too. Ecosse SMS 2.3 give excellent bass and a huge soundstage, so these well-used cables worked well in conjunction with the LFT8b's.

Rush's live recording at Kiel Auditorium, Missouri, 14th February 1980 has been remastered on a 180g RoxVox vinyl. A Canadian band set up in 1968 has produced a number of famous tracks that include a myriad of





# TRAFOMATIC BELUS POWER AMPLIFIER

styles and instruments culminating in a progressive rock of occasionally grandiose height - a mix of Led Zeppelin, Cream and King Crimson. This amplifier played it all with musicality and care, though lacked a certain amount of pizzazz that I wanted to hear. This amplifier is more on the cautious side of great; a bit like that boy or girlfriend that you sometimes wish would actually start an argument with you, rather than agreeing with everything you say or do. Whilst still full-bodied, sometimes the music was just too tame for me, though listening to London Grammar gave it a chance to show just how good that C3m valve is in focusing everything. "Stay Awake" from their superb album 'If You Wait' (vinyl, again) kept my attention with solid bass and a gorgeous voice. Each individual line of script was perfectly formed and jelled to form a uniform whole. There was a density to the sound that made this amplifier feel it wanted to give its soul to the music.

Listening to the remaster of Dvorak's Symphony No 9 "From the New World" (Herbert Von Karajan, Berlin Philharmonic, HiQ Supercuts) recorded in the Winter of 1957-8 gave me a chance to test out a very mid frequency emphasised recording, which many amplifiers would give off a very "tranny" sound and rather limiting soundstage. The brass can sound very brash, but this amplifier toned it down to be surprisingly musical and easy to listen to. Similarly "La Maja de Goya" by Granados for three guitars (Opus 3 records, on my aged Ortofon 1980's Pick Up Test Record) gave a very mellow and pleasing listen, particularly with the guitar's nylon strings. Similarly the next track on the album of Telemann's Sonata in C Major first movement for recorder and harpsichord gave a fluid performance, but perhaps just missed out slightly on the gusto that some amplifiers have shown to this piece.

Listening to Dire Straits Brothers in Arms "So Far Away from Me" wasn't actually so far away from where I really wanted this amplifier to be; detailed and showing no sign of stress, one of the reasons I like MOSFETs in the right setting. But in this Hybrid I did feel that actually the tube was the selling point, those bass thumps and vocal lines and guitars were detailed and performed with an ease and musicality. That C3m tube really does improve things! "Your

latest Trick" and "Why Worry" (track four and five) were so laid back I just drank coffee and enjoyed.

## Conclusion

I really did enjoy playing this amplifier in the few weeks I had it connected up, and in some respects it reminded me of an iconic amplifier I modded a few years back; full weighted and meaty sound with lots of class. This amplifier is extremely easy to listen to, at both low and high sound levels, and works well with all types of music, only perhaps just a tad too slow for some. However, this does mean this amplifier is epic for long periods of listening, something that cannot be said for many amplifiers. For £3250 this is actually extremely good value and well worth trying out.

## AT A GLANCE

**BUILD QUALITY:** Excellent, industrial quality build including even a wooden box to deliver it to you in.

**SOUND QUALITY:** Low distortion and very quiet amplifier offering 100 Watts of full-bodied sound, working well at all volumes.

**VALUE FOR MONEY:** At just £3250 this is an extremely good valued offering

### Pros:

Accurate but slightly laidback musical performance  
Low microphony and long-life of C3m tubes  
A well thought out design  
Works well on all types of music  
Solidly built and with good looks

### Cons:

Might be rather slow performance for some; some might prefer a brighter and faster sound.

Price: £3250

## SPECIFICATIONS

Output power: 2x100W (8Ω)

However, this does mean this amplifier is epic for long periods of listening, something that cannot be said for many amplifiers

Class of operation: Push-Pull (class AB)  
Tubes complement: 2x C3m  
Inputs: 1xRCA, 1xXLR  
Speakers DC protection  
Input sensitivity: 0.6Vrms , 0.9Vrms , 1.2Vrms (selectable by toggle switch at the back side)  
THD %: 0.03% – 1W/1KHz, 2% – 100W/1KHz  
Frequency bandwidth: 10Hz(-1dB)-40KHz( -1dB)  
S/N Ratio: 88dB  
Input impedance: 100K  
Power consumption: 300VA  
Input voltage: 230VAC-50Hz /115VAC-60Hz selectable at back side  
Size: 360 x 300 x 100 mm  
Weight: 15kg



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# Nord One UP NC500 DMST Power Amplifier

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By Lionel Payne

**Class D is gaining a good deal of momentum in the audio world. Lionel Payne listens to the the Nord One UP NC500 DMST stereo power amplifier costing £1409.**



# NORD ONE UP NC500 DMST POWER AMPLIFIER

---



The Nord One UP power amplifier is the brainchild of Cheltenham based designer Colin North and designed around the Hypex nCore NC500 modules. Built within a three-quarter width all aluminium case, this Class D power amplifier is a true dual mono design. The 10mm front panel is available in standard black or silver, or for a relatively small cost premium, numerous exotic veneered finishes are available. Mine arrived with a very attractive American Black veneer which I felt easily warranted the small surcharge. There is a solitary on/off button to the front fascia which is surrounded by a blue LED light and to each side of this are three parallel grooves. Above the power button lies the Nord logo badge. Around the back are solid brass gold-plated quality binding posts for 4mm banana plugs, spades or bare wire (up to 8mm) as well as an IEC socket, an on/off switch and XLR sockets (note : no RCA inputs here). The Nord One UP can deliver up to 400watts per channel at 8ohms resistance, 700watts at 4ohms and 550watts at 2ohms and despite the Class D generation of amplifiers being renowned for their efficiency and low running costs this power amplifier does run a little warmer than one would expect. However, the casework is well designed and allows airflow through vents on the bottom as well as the top panel. New casework has been announced.

## Sound

When I first received the Nord One UP it was in Revision B form and came to me with Burson V5 and Sparkos Labs SS3602 as alternative op-amps. These

op-amps are interchangeable internally through an eight pin DIP socket and it takes literally a few minutes maximum to change over. I found the Burson op-amp very similar to my old feelings of Class D amplifiers; all being rather cold and clinical affairs, albeit with a fabulous tonality. I'm pleased to say that none of the old feelings arose when listening through the Sparkos op-amps as I now found the music took on an all new feeling of tremendous organic quality. A sound I have to say that really impressed me, particularly given the asking price.

A short time after receiving the amp I happened to bump into Colin North at a hifi show in the Midlands, and we had a good discussion about his product. He explained to me that the product's design was still evolving and he had discovered an even better op-amp but unfortunately it was adding unwanted noise to the circuit. He explained that he felt the voltage regulation board was at fault and was working on improvements to make the circuit silent with this new op-amp. I suggested, if possible, that I would love to hear this new version of the product when he had cured its teething problems. A short time later the Nord was sent back to Cheltenham and returned to me in Revision C form with an upgraded (and, I'm told, more costly) voltage regulator with the new Sonic Imagery 994 op-amps installed. Colin had promised a similar sound but with more air around instruments and a much better soundstage with the trade-off being a slightly less fulsome bass response that the Sparkos op-amps could provide.

I now found  
the music took  
on an all new  
feeling of  
tremendous  
organic quality

# NORD ONE UP NC500 DMST POWER AMPLIFIER

The amplifier appeared to be playing music with the same qualities it had shown before – namely, a superb tonality with great dynamics and a wonderful ability to shift scale and weight with tremendous athleticism

On being re-acquainted with the Nord One UP I immediately found that the soundstage had, indeed, improved with Revision C and the Sonic Imagery 994 op-amps (pictured above). Playing Sting's "Live In Berlin" disc through the Acoustic Precision Eikos CD player resulted in startling imagery as well as superb tonality and timing. I went on to play quite a few of my favourite and most well-known CD's back to back. I loved the air around instruments and the 3D soundstage which was so much better than I remembered but something kept tugging at my consciousness to tell me something was missing, and try as I might, I didn't immediately recognise the missing element. The amplifier appeared to be playing music with the same qualities it had shown before – namely, a superb tonality with great dynamics and a wonderful ability to shift scale and weight with tremendous athleticism. Crescendos are replayed with fabulous enthusiasm with the Nord. Listening to Nick Cave's "Red Right Hand" caught me out one time as it followed a quietish acoustic track on my playlist and the opening bell on the track had me jumping out of my skin !

Unfortunately, when the amplifier was returned to me, the inclusion of the Sparkos Labs op-amps had been overlooked and I was left to ponder whether the missing element was linked to the Sonic Imagery op-amps. I contacted Colin for the Sparkos to be sent over and within a few tracks after swapping the op-amps I finally recognised the difference. To my ears, and your opinion may vary from mine, the difference was

almost completely visceral. The Sonic Imagery op-amps are very good and I'm sure some will find that they prefer them in their system. However, I found the Sparkos op-amps to be more organic in quality and they would draw me far deeper into the emotion of the music. There is a little more fullness to the lower regions with the Sparkos but it's far from a chalk and cheese situation. In fact I found the Sonic Imagery to be perfectly acceptable in all areas of the sound spectrum, but emotionally I was drawn in by the Sparkos. This may be a result in my favoured genres of music that I prefer to listen to, as I prefer a good amount of acoustic material mixed mainly with Indie and rock music, although my overall collection is extremely eclectic.

I have to admit that this review has been quite a prolonged one, and that is partly due to how much I have enjoyed the Nord One UP within my system. It also proved to be a godsend as my own trusty Musical Fidelity Tri Vista 300 integrated amplifier blew a channel during the review period. This required an extensive repair (my grateful thanks to John Sampson of jsaudiorepairs.co.uk for a fantastic job) but while I had the Nord One UP I was never left wanting for more. In fact, as it is a very even-handed, neutral sounding amplifier it proved an invaluable asset during it's time as my substitute reference.

## Conclusion

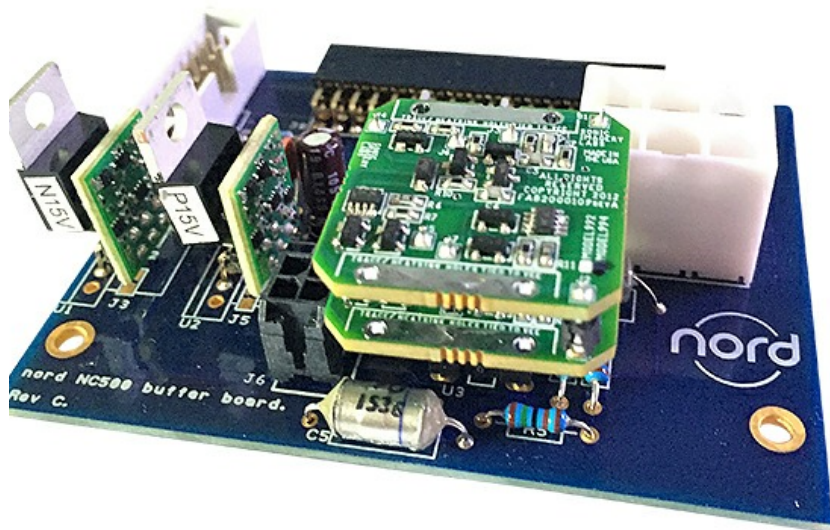
Having this power amplifier within my system for so long has certainly allowed





# NORD ONE UP NC500 DMST POWER AMPLIFIER

When subtle  
is required, the  
Nord delivers  
with equal  
control and  
finesse



me plenty of time to analyse its strengths and weaknesses. I have also used it to drive a fair few pairs of loudspeakers, not all of them an easy drive, and I have to say it has proven to have the grip of an Olympic shot-putter on steroids! It drove Shahanian Obelisks with ease and also, when partnered with PMC FB1+'s delivered a soundscape better than any other amplifier I had ever tried with them.

However, having superb grip and drive is not the only strength of this power amplifier. When subtle is required, the Nord delivers with equal control and finesse. As previously stated it also has a wonderful control of differing dynamics within a mix and delivers crescendos with superb precision. I used even-handed as a description earlier in this review and that is exactly what you get with the Nord. To reveal any weaknesses is a difficult proposition as I feel it has none at all, and at this price point must resemble extremely good value for money. Another selling point is the opportunity to try different op-amps which can tailor the sound to your tastes. It is even an economical amplifier in use, using far less electricity than most other amplifiers with this quality.

What's not to like? If you are looking for a new power amplifier in this area of expense, get this one on your audition list!

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Good with well laid out internals

**Sound Quality:** Can sound a little clinical in some systems but the op-amps will help  
Wonderful even-handed presentation in the right system

**Value For Money:** An astonishing price of £1409 this power amplifier represents a true bargain buy

**Pros:**  
Wonderful soundstage  
Even-handed with all types of music  
Sound can be tailored with differing op-amps  
Powerful with frugal running costs  
Fantastic grip for even difficult loads

**Cons:**  
Nothing at all at this price

**Price:** £1409

## SPECIFICATIONS

Two Hypex NCore NC500 Module  
Two Hypex SMPS1200A700 Power Supply  
Two Nord One UP Input Buffer Board Choice of Sparkos SS3602 or Sonic Imagery 994 Op Amps  
True Dual Mono Design  
Distortion: THD+N - - 0.001 % 20Hz  
Frequency Response: 0 - 50k Hz +0/-3dB  
Low Distortion: THD+N - - 0.001 % 20Hz  
High Input Impedance 51K  
26 dB Gain  
Ultra High Damping Factor  
High Current 28A Output capable of driving 2ohm  
550W 2ohm  
700W 4ohm  
400W 8ohm  
Frequency Response: 0 - 50k Hz +0/-3dB  
Case W 340mm D 280mm H 90mm  
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W340mm D340mm H95mm  
Weight 5Kg  
Idle power 36W





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# **Simaudio Moon Neo ACE**

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By John Scott

**The £2800 Simaudio Moon Neo ACE is a versatile, all-in-one solution that you need only add speakers to...there's even an on-board moving magnet phonostage. John Scott finds out just how ACE it really is.**



# SIMAUDIO MOON NEO ACE



Having reviewed Naim's Superuniti all-in-one streamer/DAC/amp/tuner last summer, when I was offered the opportunity to spend some time with Simaudio's own single box offering I naturally grasped it with both hands. Like the Naim Superuniti, the Moon Neo ACE combines a streamer, DAC and amplifier in one box so that all the user has to do is connect it to a network, either via Ethernet or wirelessly and add speakers. The ACE will then stream music stored on the user's home network, eg on a PC or NAS. Internet streaming from services such as Tidal and Internet radio is also available. In addition, the ACE also has a moving magnet phono stage, something missing from the Superuniti.

Canadian manufacturer Simaudio have been producing audio equipment since 1980, originally as Sima Acoustics. The company became known as Simaudio in 1990, first launching the Celeste range and then, in 1997, the Moon series of products. Over the years the company have developed and released a range of products under the Moon banner for both 2-channel audio and multi-channel home theatre use.

The ACE (which stands for A Complete Experience) falls into the Moon Neo "affordable luxury" range and provides a one box option from that range's amplification and streaming DAC products; a true "just add speakers" solution to anyone short of space or not looking to build a system out of individual components.

## Unboxing, Setup and Appearance

The ACE arrived in a standard cardboard shipping box, albeit Moon branded, and was internally well protected. A user manual and set of quick start guides provide all the help you need to get the ACE up and running. If you have previously used a streamer connected by Ethernet then this really involves nothing more than connecting the Ethernet cable, attaching your speakers and plugging it in. If you also want to connect a turntable, then a moving magnet phono stage is also provided. Wireless setup is achieved via the display screen, a couple of buttons and a rotary dial on the front of the unit, which also doubles as a volume control. The process of entering your network password with the dial and buttons is very intuitive compared to some other

The ACE's compact dimensions meant that it was equally at home on my television unit as it was on my hifi rack

# SIMAUDIO MOON NEO ACE

I firmly believe that to be the case. MIND is one of the best apps I have so far encountered

streamers I have tried and I had the unit up and running in a matter of minutes.

The ACE's compact dimensions meant that it was equally at home on my television unit as it was on my hifi rack. The ACE comes in either all black or black and silver options. The ACE II was supplied with was all black and I think this would be my choice. The aluminium case has an attractively curved front plate. The black front plate is accented by seven silver buttons, a silver logo and a monochrome OLED display panel. The whole thing whispers understated elegance (it would scream understated elegance but it is far too refined to do anything so vulgar). The five buttons on the left hand of the display control power stand by, volume mute, display brightness – with an option to turn the display off completely

and the final two buttons toggle backwards or forwards through the inputs. The two buttons on the right side of the display provide navigation through the set up options. The front panel also has a headphone output and an input for a mobile media player.

The rear panel contains a wealth of inputs and outputs of a variety and sufficiency to put the ACE at the heart of your audio setup. Round the back we have the moving magnet phono input plus an USB input, 2 SPDIF inputs, an Ethernet port and 2 optical inputs. The ACE also accepts Bluetooth connection along with wifi. So, whether you want to play vinyl, stream from a NAS or a USB drive, connect to your phone or tablet by Bluetooth or hook up the audio from your TV, sat alive box or blue ray player





# SIMAUDIO MOON NEO ACE



The ACE is a stylish, compact, well built single-box design that provides everything you need to deliver a high quality streaming solution

you are covered.

Control of the ACE is either by the front panel buttons – apart from using these for the initial setup I had no need to use them again but I guess they are a handy option to have; by the attractive supplied remote or by MIND, Simaudio's control app for android and iOS devices.

The remote provides comprehensive control of the ACE and its slimline styling complements the unit well. My only criticism would be that I found the flat-profiled buttons a little difficult to read but it wasn't a major issue. I have said in previous reviews that a streamer is only as good as its app and I still firmly believe that to be the case. MIND is one of the best apps I have so far encountered. It is intuitive to use and

offers full control of the ACE including volume control and selection of inputs. Access to Internet radio stations and Tidal (if you have a subscription) is also included. Every app has its own way of doing things and some can take a while to get used to but with MIND I was quickly using my tablet to browse the files on my NAS, create playlists on the fly and explore new releases on Tidal. Compared to Naim's app for the Superuniti, the display is perhaps a little cramped but in terms of functionality, the MIND app did everything I wanted it to do in an intuitive fashion and, being generally highly critical of these types of app, I was very pleased with how it operated. Like the Superuniti, the ACE uses the UPnP streaming protocol and how the app displays your music library depends on the UPnP server that you

have installed on your PC or NAS. I have Minim Server, Logitech's LMS server (in UPNP mode) and Synology's Audio Station server installed on my NAS and each presented the contents of my library slightly differently. My preference was LMS but all were acceptable, with the caveat that Synology's server does not support gapless playback.

## Sound

So far then, the ACE is a winner on looks and functionality but how does it fare on sound? It handles PCM up to 384kHz and DSD up to DSD256 (should you be able to find files at either of these highest resolutions). Not all resolutions are supported on all inputs. As I didn't have access to a turntable with a MM cartridge during the period of the review, the phono input was not tested.

Perhaps influenced by the ACE's elegant looks, I started off my listening with nothing too raucous. Shelby Lynne's *Just A Little Lovin'* is a first rate recording – a tribute to Dusty Springfield in a soulful and sophisticated style. The ACE allowed all the dynamics and subtleties of the recording to shine. The drums on the title track are understated in quantity but not in quality, each cymbal stroke gangs in the air with a realistic decay and every snare thwack resonates with the shell of the drum, not just the skin. During the song, Lynne pauses between lines and the print through on the recording tape results in a pre-echo of the line she is about to sing. The ACE picks this detail up effortlessly.

This gets me in the mood for a bit of Dusty herself so it's time for a spot of the classic *Dusty In Memphis* album. On *Son Of A Preacher Man*, the ACE has no problem conveying the live feel of the performance. In particular, the intricacies of Tommy Cogbill's bass line which maintains a kind of inverted dialogue with Dusty's vocal are handled deftly.

Moving on to something completely different, solo piano can be tricky to realistically reproduce. Streaming Khatia Buniatishvili's version of Mussorgsky's *Pictures At An Exhibition* via Tidal, the ACE conveys a realistic sense of the performance space and keeps the piano locked down solidly within it. And proving that this is not a one off, the ACE also comes up trumps

## The ACE matches sophisticated looks with an equally sophisticated sound and comes highly recommended

with Alice Sara Ott's live recording of *Pictures At An Exhibition* from St Petersburg's White Nights Festival.

One of the qualities I really liked about the ACE was its volume control. I occasionally find that some amplifiers lack subtlety in volume control – 12 may be just too loud for some situations but 11 not loud enough, for example. Whether operated manually by the volume knob on the unit, by infra red through the remote control or via wifi by the MIND app, increase or decrease in volume is handled in smooth half steps and I never had a problem finding a volume level that suited my requirements.

## Conclusion

The ACE is a stylish, compact, well built single-box design that provides everything you need to deliver a high quality streaming solution. The inclusion of a moving magnet phono stage and a variety of inputs provides added flexibility, giving it the opportunity to become an all-singing, all-dancing entertainment centre, handling vinyl, an external CD player and audio from TV, satellite or Blue ray. Just add the speakers of your choice.

If I'm forced to make comparisons with the Naim Superuniti, and I suppose I am, then in terms of absolute sound quality the Naim wins out. But, and it's an important but, there is around £1000 price difference between the Superuniti and the ACE, and that could buy you a nice turntable or pair of speakers. You need to hear both and decide where you need your money to go. If you do go for the ACE though, I doubt you'll end up feeling short changed sound wise. The ACE matches sophisticated looks with

an equally sophisticated sound and comes highly recommended.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Attractive and well put together unit that is complimented by a well thought out app.

**Sound Quality:** Dynamic and detailed, yet subtle when needed. A sophisticated sound.

**Value For Money:** If there is a single box solution out there that offers better value for money than the ACE then I really need to hear it. I get the feeling I may be wailing a while though.

### Pros:

Good looks  
Compact size  
Competent control app  
Detailed, involving sound

### Cons:

I honestly can't think of any

**Price:** £2800

## SPECIFICATIONS

**Output Power at 8Ω:** 50 Watts per channel

**Input Sensitivity:** 370mV - 3.0V RMS

**Input Impedance:** 22,100Ω

**Gain:** 37dB

**Frequency response (full range):** 10Hz - 80kHz +0/-3dB

**Crosstalk:** -100dB THD (20Hz - 20kHz @ 1 watt / 50 watts) 0.02% / 0.02%

**Intermodulation distortion:** 0.005%

**PCM Bit-depth range / sampling rates:** 16 - 32 bits / 44.1 - 384kHz

**DSD sample rates:** DSD64, DSD128 & DSD256

**Shipping weight:** 24 lbs / 11 Kgs

**Dimensions (width x height x depth):** 16.9 x 3.5 x 14.4 in. 42.9 x 8.9 x 36.6 cm



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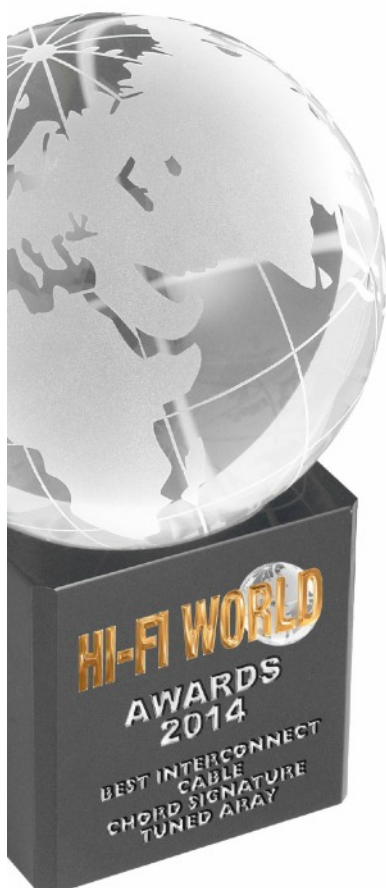


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# Roksan K3 Digital to Analogue Converter

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By Dominic Marsh

**Dominic Marsh takes a  
listen to Roksan's £1250  
K3 Digital to Analogue  
Converter**

# ROKSAN K3 DAC



**T**he more I do this reviewing job, the more I am convinced that there is no such thing as the “perfect” hifi component. It cannot be, because everyone has different hearing acuity and personal preferences for the sound that pleases them, so if any hifi manufacturer lays claim to producing that “perfect” component, we should be wary of accepting that notion. So where do we go from that starting point then? We end up with the current sets of “different flavours” of sound, wrapped in a set of compromises which will please some or many but not others, which I see remaining for the foreseeable future and I have no personal issues with that. That is why I believe reviewers are a necessity, to give you the consumer an indicator of what particular “flavour” of sound any component is imbued with when set before us to evaluate, then you the consumer has a foretaste of what to expect sonically from any given component.

When you have listened to as many DACs as I have over the years then you may have come to the realisation that there isn’t in truth a massive amount of sound differences between them all until you reach stratospheric price tags and some of those have been hard to listen to, because relentless details and dynamics to me are so wearisome and often fatiguing. The cheap ones in particular powered by puny wall wart

power supplies are very disappointing with their anaemic bass and shrill treble. Between those two extremes the sound differences to me are in the low percentages rather than any quantum leaps. What I do tend to get excited over then is any DAC that possesses that magical “X Factor” ingredient that sets it apart from the herd.

“What is Dominic softening us up for?” I hear you ask. The key word to this review will be “compromises” which can either be a blessing or a curse, depending on what your point of view is.

Enter then the Roksan K3 Digital to Analogue Convertor as the subject of this review and it is good example of how a set of compromises ends up as a positive entity bigger than the sum of its components. Intrigued? Read on.

## Construction

No surprise here that the K3 DACs case visually matches it’s other K3 series stable mates in a choice of Anthracite, Charcoal and Opium colour finishes. You might think otherwise of course, but I don’t personally think that these colours clash too much in the rack if the rest of your system is finished in the traditional black or alloy because tonally the Roksan K3 colours range from light to dark, so adding any K3 component to a non-Roksan system shouldn’t cause

The K3 DAC also has a wireless transmission system to connect to your home computer in addition to Bluetooth connection



The Roksan K3 DAC allowed me to hear the clapping, whistling and cat-calling very clearly as if I was sat in amongst the audience

much concern on the aesthetics front either.

There isn't much to keep the knob twiddlers amused with this component, with just two bright silver coloured push buttons on the front panel to increment up or down the source selection. To the left hand side of the front panel there is a USB socket and that's just about it. Around the back however, we find no less than two pairs of single ended RCA outputs, a pair of balanced XLR output connections, then an XLR AES/EBU connector, an RCA socketed SPDIF digital input, a TOSLINK digital input and yet another USB input for good measure. But, where be the on/off power switch? Not on the front panel, not on the rear panel either (one of my pet hates) but concealed from view underneath the chassis behind the front panel on the left hand side. It is mounted east/west too so when the K3 is sat on a flat surface a finger easily slips under the edge of the front panel to locate the switch, but if you stack your components and the item beneath has a front panel that that extends higher than it's lid even by a few millimetres the switch becomes less accessible. I would much prefer a north/south orientation of the switch parallel with the chassis side. Gripe aside, it makes it much harder for curious little fingers to go venturing into how much noise your hifi components can go while adults are absent.

The K3 DAC also has a wireless transmission system to connect to your home computer in addition to Bluetooth connection. Supplied with the DAC is a USB dongle and some software that has to be downloaded from the Roksan website. I download the software, plugged the dongle into a USB socket on my PC and pairing is achieved by

pressing and holding one of the input selector buttons and pressing a button located on the dongle. I spent a comfortable 20 minutes scooting back and forth from rack to computer and "pairing" wasn't what was happening between the two devices. I tried pressing dongle first, DAC first, it was having none of it, so thinking there was too much delay between button presses I asked my wife to press the dongle button while I held the input selector button and between much hand waving and some bellowed commands pairing was finally achieved. Despite that, it was a joy to finally have a good solid wireless connection betwixt DAC and PC without too much fussing, given that some other wireless systems I have experienced require passwords, IP addresses and other complex technical procedures entered into to get them functional.

## Sound

There was no area of the Roksan K3 DACs sonic characteristics that offended or annoyed, indeed I could listen for hour after hour and not become fatigued or left wanting which I do become vigilant towards when I initially find something just a bit too smooth and relaxing. The entire sound palette was defined and refined, be that bass, treble or midrange, it just produced effortless music with no grating or grinding and some of my listening sessions went way past my normal bed time let me add, because the music was so pleasurable to listen to. I fed it some complex tortuous music to try and wrong foot it, but it just shrugged it all off and was left unfazed. Treble was always precise and crisp, not competing with the best DACs out there in terms of resolution and details of course and for its asking price I



# ROKSAN K3 DAC

wouldn't expect it to anyway, but it was in perfect equilibrium with bass and midrange, likewise with bass that was fulsome and rich, yet fleet footed, lithe and engaging at the same time. Sat between those two ends of the spectrum the midrange was very clean and free of congestion, female voice in particular being rendered naturally. The noise floor was commendably low too, never intruding even when very quiet passages of music were being played and especially so in allowing full width, depth and height to the soundstage to be portrayed. Imaging and instrument placement were rock solid and real, again attributable to a highly controlled noise floor. But yet, none of those attributes reached the extremes, each being just that little small soupcon off top notch performance.

Of course I played my reference recording of Fink's "Wheels Beneath My Feet" live album during my extensive listening sessions to see if it could meet my benchmark sound quality expectations. The drummer's cymbal strikes in the intro to "Biscuits" was satisfying and without complaint rather than exceptional, which in reality is commendable. Bass kick drum was propulsive and solid, the timing being spot on. The acid test for me is listening out for the drummer's rim shots on the snare drum. Very difficult to put into words that you dear readers can relate to easily, so the closest I can get is to say that they have to sound "real" as if you are sat next to the actual instrument being played. The strikes must not sound at all thin, you can note the different energy put into each strike and you should be able to hear the shell of the drum for sure and if you cannot, then something is amiss. Given these are live recordings the venue's ambience should also capture these snare drum rim shots. Most hifi components struggle with recreating the sounds an audience makes during a performance and it usually gets conveyed sounding like frying pan cooking bacon, with sizzling and sloshing sounds that really annoys me. The Roksan K3 DAC allowed me to hear the clapping, whistling and cat-calling very clearly as if I was sat in amongst the audience. The resolution wasn't fine enough to hear the annoying idiot behind me crunching on his popcorn though (This is a jokette as it's not in the recording, but you get the picture I'm sure), but I have heard other more expensive DACs claw more details

from the audience in this particular album.

Still with me? Hope so, because the Roksan K3 DAC passed all the standard benchmark tests for me.

## Conclusion

There seems to have been a sort of revolution going on at Roksan, because evidently much more attention is being paid to how a product actually SOUNDS before it leaves the factory and the new products I've reviewed lately for Hifi Pig have shown that there is someone with a very critical ear paying close attention to the final sound being produced and that is no bad thing.

I began this review by saying nothing is perfect in the world of hifi and the K3 DAC is far removed from that, so let me make that clear. But, and this is the big but, it has a superb balance of 'imperfections' that complement each other and the final blended result left me speechless with its beguiling addictive sound. Within a very short period of time I had completely erased from my mind where the shortcomings were and settled back to enjoy what I was hearing, unable to pinpoint where I could level any serious criticism at and that both surprised and pleased me. The evidence for that is not wanting to switch the system off and go to bed at a sensible hour, but glancing at the clock soon brought me back to reality and if this DAC didn't possess that "X Factor" those situations simply don't occur. The burning question then is would I buy one for my own use? Yes I would, because at the price I don't think another DAC could get me to be so entirely immersed and absorbed into the music as much as the Roksan K3 DAC did and I will admit I sorely missed it when it was returned to Roksan, so it would be rather churlish then not to give it my unreserved recommendation.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Perfect match for other K3 series components and the Roksan colour choices would clash too much with the standard silver or black in a rack. I wish though Roksan would move the ON/OFF switch to the side of the

...at the price I don't think another DAC could get me to be so entirely immersed and absorbed into the music as much as the Roksan K3 DAC did

chassis instead of the front where it is currently located.

**Sound Quality:** Not 'perfect' but it has a well thought out set of compromises, providing a detailed refined sound that you can listen to for hours and yet still be fully engaged with the music.

**Value For Money:** Offers a balanced sound to pound ratio that few rivals can match.

### Pros:

Solid build quality, very good sound quality and value.

### Cons:

If my only real gripe is the power switch.

**Price:** £1250



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# **Code Acoustics SYSTEM-1 Active Speaker System**

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By Ian Ringstead

**SYSTEM-1 from Code Acoustics is a high quality 3-way active speaker, with off-board electronics module including crossovers and amplifiers. It is UK made and costs £6350 direct from the manufacturer. Ian Ringstead turns up the volume and puts the SYSTEM-1 through its paces.**

# CODE ACOUSTICS SYSTEM 1 ACTIVE SPEAKER SYSTEM



The first I had heard of Code Acoustics was at the recent National Audio Show. Code are a company founded by an enthusiastic Ceri Thomas, whom I talked to at length at the show. Ceri has a background in automotive design engineering, having worked for some of the UK's most prestigious automotive firms, such as McLaren, Williams and Jaguar-Land-Rover. However, his first love has always been audio and speaker design.

Ceri's philosophy is that he wants to offer an alternative design approach and personal service to his customers, so he decided to sell direct and therefore retain excellent value for money rather than go through dealers.

SYSTEM-1 is a high quality 3-way active speaker, with off-board electronics module. It consists of 'TOP-1', which reproduces the mid and high frequencies plus 'BASS-1', which of course covers the bass region. Then there is 'CONTROL-1', which contains a 6-channel DSP crossover, pre-amp and 6-channel power amplifier. Just add a source, such as a CD transport, turntable with a phono stage, music server, laptop etc. and away you go!

Now the concept of an active system is not new and there are several ways that this can be achieved. In my retailing days, I sold active systems from companies such as Linn and Naim, Arcam, Meridian and Nitech Audio. The reasoning behind active systems is that the electronics are tailor made to match the loudspeakers and that the crossovers are electronic and designed to match each drive unit perfectly. That's the theory, but it takes a lot of careful design and understanding to achieve good results. With matched amplifiers and dedicated electronic crossovers, compatibility is not an issue unlike a passive set of loudspeakers and an amplifier. The designer is therefore making life easier for the listener to do just that, listen and not worry about mismatches. Also, distortion figures can be lower so improving the sound quality.

Ceri has designed the SYSTEM-1 to be very easy and straight forward to set up. He personally delivered the review system and showed me how to set it up. The speaker system consists of four boxes, two per channel of course made up of a BASS-1 and a TOP-1. The BASS-1 is a heavily braced speaker, deep route veneered enclosure made of mdf with four internal voids for sand and with extensive use of sound

SYSTEM-1 is  
a high quality  
3-way active  
speaker, with  
off-board  
electronics  
module



# CODE ACOUSTICS SYSTEM 1 ACTIVE SPEAKER SYSTEM

First impressions were very good with a good tight low end response that didn't dominate the room given the size of the bass units and their quality

deadening panels and melamine damping foam. They weigh 28Kg each when loaded with sand. The drive units are made by Volt and are 8 inch connected in parallel.

The TOP-1 contains a 1 inch Scan Speak Classic tweeter and 4inch Scan Speak Illuminator mid-range unit. These are both excellent units from a renowned manufacturer with a fine pedigree. Again, there is extensive use of sound deadening panels and melamine damping foam in the smaller 3Kg cabinets.

Each cabinet can be isolated by using the dedicated isolation brackets which are X shaped metal plates with four sorbothane feet. The bracket is bolted to the bottom of each cabinet using the dedicated bolts into the relevant bushes. They allow the TOP-1 speakers to be safely mounted on the BASS-1 and for the BASS-1 to be isolated from the floor without damaging it. I like this idea as it worked well with my hardwood floor and the lack of spikes meant I didn't have to worry about protecting the floor.

Speaker connection to the amplifier is via Neutrik Speakon connectors wired with Van Damme 4mm Black series cable of 2m lengths or up to 6m if required. The TOP-1 requires 4 pole connectors because of the tweeter and mid-range units in them, whilst the BASS-1 use 2 pole connectors. The Speakon connectors make for a very simple, safe and relatively fool proof way of connecting the speakers to the CONTROL-1 and although purists may wish that standard 4mm terminals had been used, in the context of this system I feel Ceri has made the right decision.

Like the brackets the speaker cables are an additional extra supplied by Code Acoustics and I think they are well worth having for a fuss free life.

The CONTROL-1 is a remote controlled digital pre- amp, 6 channel DSP crossover and 6 channel power amp all in one unit. There are 4 balanced analogue inputs on XLR and 4 digital inputs giving a choice of AES/EBU, optical, SPDIF and USB. Outputs are AES/EBU and SPDIF. Power amps are 6 Hypex class D modules giving 180w into 4 ohms. The power supplies, one per channel, are Hypex switch mode 1200w peak modules. The DSP is a Hypex 6 channel module with a sample rate of 24bit/96 KHz. The unit is housed in a smart looking wooden case which contrasts well with the extensive metal work of the panels and heat sinks on each side of the unit. It is neat and compact weighing in at 5Kg, so it is easy to accommodate on a shelf or unit. The controls are minimal with the front panel sporting an illuminated power button on the left, a central display panel and to the right 4 control buttons shaped in the form of a diamond. The control buttons are used to control input selection and volume up and down. The display is quite small, so from a distance can't be read easily, so a minor bugbear for me. Power connection is by a dedicated powercon cable that is supplied. The remote control is a simple, small plastic unit supplied by Hypex that controls volume, standby and input selection.

## Sound

As you can see the SYSTEM-1 is quite complex under the skin, so how does it



# CODE ACOUSTICS SYSTEM 1 ACTIVE SPEAKER SYSTEM



sound? After initial set up and a bit of tweaking with positioning Ceri and myself sat down to assess the overall sound as Ceri wanted to be sure I was happy before he left me to play for a few weeks. First impressions were very good with a good tight low end response that didn't dominate the room given the size of the bass units and their quality - testament to the Volt driver's excellent reputation and build quality. The mid and top end were open and smooth, again down to the superb quality of the Scan Speak units which don't come cheap, but are certainly worth including in this design.

Ceri kindly let me borrow his iPad and an Auralic streamer to try out digital high resolution music files as I use CD and turntable, being a traditionalist and stuck in my ways. The streaming worked well with the system, but I must say I was more than happy with the results I got from my Sony CDPXE3000ES using the SPDIF input. The turntable was more of a challenge if only because the analogue inputs are XLR rather than the standard RCA phono sockets, which meant I had to obtain some Neutrik XLR to RCA adaptor plugs. Once acquired my Project Extension 9 and Ortofon Quintet Black via the Tisbury Audio Domino phono stage worked a treat with no hum

or level issues.

Many CDs were tried and I put on Paul Simon's "Concert in the Park" (Central Park New York) from August 1991 as I am going to see him soon here in the UK, and so wanted to remind myself of his classic songs. As live concerts go this is a good recording and all the detail of the band's musicians and singers were clearly portrayed on stage with the very realistic sound and ambience of the crowd and their rapturous applause at the end of all the songs. The line-up of musicians is stellar with the likes of Steve Gadd on drums, Michael Brecker on sax, Chris Botti on trumpet, Richard Tee on keyboards and a host of African, South American and US musicians and singers. The influences of Paul Simon's fascination with third-world country rhythms is abundant and blends beautifully with his original folk background of the sixties and his development in the seventies and eighties. With such a wide range of instruments and vocals on offer this CD was a joy to listen to on the SYSTEM-1 as it was very capable of bringing out all the different nuances in the performances of the artists and the songs. Detailing was first rate with all the subtle touches the musicians add easily picked out, something you would miss out on in poorer systems with inferior resolution.





# CODE ACOUSTICS SYSTEM 1 ACTIVE SPEAKER SYSTEM

Another album I had to try was Livingstone Taylor's CD "Ink" recorded on the Chesky label which is a lovely recording that on a good system allows me to shut my eyes and imagine I am in the recording venue. Suffice to say, this CD sounded sublime, especially in the evening with the curtains closed and the lights turned down low. It has sounded great on other systems, but somehow had the edge through the SYSTEM-1.

When I tried the turntable, it was a pleasant surprise that a mainly digitally focused system worked so well with vinyl. Steely Dan are a favourite band of mine that I grew up with and their debut album from 1972 Can't Buy a Thrill brought back many memories. Donald Fagen and Walter Becker are sticklers for perfection and sound quality, and even on this early record it shows. The clarity is spot on with tight rhythm sections, superb musicianship and clever vocals. Do it again and Reelin' In The Years are probably the best known songs from this album, but all the tracks displayed excellent playing ability and really made me want to dance or tap my feet. I particularly noticed how clear the cymbals and tambourines were on several tracks. Now I've listened to this record many times over the years on many systems in my home, but I don't recall the top end detail being so good before.

I dug many CDs and records out during the time I had the SYSTEM-1 and they all performed well. They weren't all audiophile recordings by any means and some I hadn't listened to for a long time. Finally, what impressed me was how good the dynamic capability was of the SYSTEM-1. Usually when I listen to many systems there seems to be a point in the volume level when the system suddenly comes to life and starts to sound more interesting. I talked to Ceri about this phenomenon and he agreed that a lot of ported speaker systems can have this loudness affect where the port is fighting against the air coming out of the cabinet (turbulence) and so affects the sound. The SYSTEM-1 seemed to manage the trick of sounding good and holding my attention at whatever level I tried, especially lower levels where many systems seem to sound flat or uninteresting. I suspect a combination of excellent drive units, careful cabinet design and electronics all play their part.

Class D amps have now become far more popular than they were a decade

ago and it shows how they have come on when companies like Jeff Rowland and Audio Research use them in some of their models. I had a Flying Mole CAS-10 amp for some years which I enjoyed, as did a friend of mine who borrowed it, and we were both impressed by its clarity and detailing. Not everyone agreed, but that's hifi for you. Hypex are a popular choice with manufacturers and designers and I can see why Ceri chose to use them in his system. They are compact, very efficient and powerful, so ideal when you need 6 of them.

## Conclusion

At £5850 for the main system and another £500 approximately for the isolation brackets and speaker cables, which I feel are essential, you are looking at £6350. This is not a cheap system, but when you factor in the build quality and components used and the fact Ceri sells direct with a 30-day money back guarantee if not satisfied, then this is a system for those who want superb sound without bankrupting themselves, with only your sources to add.

Finishes are cherry, oak or walnut in high quality veneers.

Shipping is by arrangement with Code Acoustics and starts from £65 for UK mainland. Elsewhere please ask for a quote.

Hypex are a popular choice with manufacturers and designers and I can see why Ceri chose to use them in his system

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Very good with a nice blend of wood and metal for both the speakers and control unit.

**Sound Quality:** Well controlled tight dry bass with a very clear detailed sound stage and smooth top end.

**Value For Money:** £6350 for the whole package isn't cheap, but then quality never is.

### Pros:

Well built, and good looking design that is easy to use and set up  
Relatively neat and compact which would blend well into many rooms I would say  
For an active system, compared to the competition this is very good value  
Excellent component quality for the drivers and electronics

### Cons:

The display is basic and small with a simple remote, but not a deal breaker I feel as the unit functions perfectly well  
Inveterate system upgraders won't be interested, but this is a great fit and forget system to enjoy

Price: £6350



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# **Russ Andrews BMU3000 Balanced Mains Unit**

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By Janine Elliot

**Balanced Mains Units are used extensively in professional studios and are starting to make their mark in domestic audio situations. Janine Elliot gets her life in balance and plugs in the Russ Andrews BMU 3000 costing £3599.**



# RUSS ANDREWS BMU3000 BALANCED MAINS UNIT

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Reviewing cables, mains conditioners and balanced mains units is bound to irk some hifi addicts, particularly engineers. I, like most reviewers, have suffered the displeasure of the few who believe all wire sounds the same and that travelling past your local Homebase for mains taming devices is quite simply a waste of money and petrol. Luckily my ears, like I'm sure yours, can perceive the finite differences in sounds between cabling to see that there is more to creating a good audio set up than tons of flashy lights and chrome knobs. So, to be asked to review the Russ Andrews Balanced Mains Unit coming in at 100 pennies short of £3600 is probably going to cause a few swear words from a few non-believers.

Russ Andrews (and me, too) has had his name bounded about internet forum sites enough over the years to take it all in his stride, as he – like I – can hear for himself just how effective products like these are in controlling and ultimately upgrading your hifi. And that is it; these heavyweight (23.4kg) boxes don't profess to do anything other than feed you pure mains. Yes, the mains supply

travels numerous miles to get to your house, so why should the last few feet matter at all? Well, quite simply the last few feet make the most difference because of interference from your freezer and hair drier, and God forbid, those of you pushing audio, wi-fi or HDMI around their 13A mains sockets. Whilst you can use mains conditioner to remove RFI's and EMIs, they are really like Paracetamol; they make something painful a little bit more manageable, but only when you are able to actually replace that defective liver or kidney, will all things be totally well again. And that's what the Balanced Mains Unit does. For this reason, professional recording studios around the world use balanced power supplies to ensure the purest starting point for their music, speech or video.

In its simplest form, normal mains is single ended, with around 230V at the live terminal and 0V at the neutral. By changing to a balanced unit you can split the 230V mains signal into two halves, putting +115V on the live and -115V in the neutral. These add up to 230V, but any noise or distortion in the mains will have appeared in both legs and will be

And that is it;  
these heavyweight  
(23.4kg) boxes  
don't profess to do  
anything other  
than feed you pure  
mains

# RUSS ANDREWS BMU3000 BALANCED MAINS UNIT

Each transformer is individually wound on a silicon steel core and all is wired internally with Kimber Kable, obviously

cancelled out when joined together, similar to the process used in noise cancelling headphones.

The BMU3000 is like the [BMU1000](#) I reviewed a while ago, which I hinted then that whilst being an effective upgrade for your hifi, was limited in only having two 13A sockets. Daisy chaining extension leads will only undo any good you have done. This unit therefore has five, which should furnish all your hifi needs. With two separate 1500V 'SuperSilent' transformers; one for two and the other for three UK or Euro (Schuko) UltraSockets giving a total of 3KVA of power across the five sockets, this should be more than enough for most people. Each transformer is individually wound on a silicon steel core and all is wired internally with Kimber Kable, obviously.

This heavyweight is actually very good looking and looks petit considering what is inside, and it even comes in a plastic suitcase to protect it all in transit, which you can then use when you go to off to Menorca. It does require a 16A IEC socket to use it, as opposed to a conventional 13A 'kettle lead', and so a PowerKord 300 was kindly packaged for my review.

This unit is in many ways identical to the BMU1000. You can adjust the unit to your incoming voltage without the need for meters, simply by listening to any "hum" caused by mismatching of input to output voltage. The unit comes as standard at 225V but this can be

adjusted in small increments with TAP connections inside the unit. The brown live cable is connected to a grey/white cable, and can be reconnected to purple, black or yellowappings on the secondary for 240V, 250 or 260V respectively. At the default 225V setting I found it was too noisy, though this reduced when I set up as 240V. The process for doing this is fairly simple though does mean undoing 12 Phillips screws and pulling out the right-hand ABS plastic top panel. The unit comes supplied with the live brown connector connected to the white/grey cables, so, with the unit switched off and unplugged I swapped the white/grey leads for the purple. This didn't totally reduce the humming but brought it to an acceptable level, especially when I placed a heavy rubber mat on top of the unit. Whilst I love the ease of access to the top by removing the ABS panel - and they are held fairly tightly in place - they still do vibrate and so it will be a good idea to put something on the top to catch that sympathetic vibration. ABS is chosen by Russ not to keep the weight down, but due to him and his team finding that it gave a better sound quality than metal boxes. I have always been confused about whether there should be any form of metal Faraday cage to prevent further EMIs in a balanced MU, or indeed whether there was any point, it being self-cancelling. Russ agrees, and the team having done extensive testing on this. The "SuperSilent" transformers are particularly well made with very few stray fields. It actually sounds better without any cage or foil, which is why



# RUSS ANDREWS BMU3000 BALANCED MAINS UNIT

there's isn't one.

“We've long been fans of the use of non-metallic boxes for equipment - in terms of sound quality, subjectively the sound becomes more open and spacious, and metal casework sounds rather 'closed-in' in comparison.”

Russ therefore chose ABS and I measured no EMIs. After setting the unit voltage correctly there were still quiet hum noises, but these are due to several reasons. Firstly, any object with wire, metal, current and magnetic field is going to act like a speaker. Also, I mentioned in the BMU1000 review that some hum is caused by the fact that the core laminations in the transformer are extending and contracting as they are magnetised, called Magnetostriction, and that this will happen twice in each 50Hz UK current cycle giving a gentle 100Hz hum. Getting the correct voltage reduces this, though there is still a minute amount of residual hum, but importantly it was considerably reduced further with damping of the cabinet. Placing the unit on a solid base or rack, preferably not of glass, and also placing the unit on more generous rubber feet will absorb any of the vibration from the rack and other audio equipment. Plus, if your hifi has good power supply stages, it almost totally disappears. The unit will look great in the lowest part of a rack with the mains leads from hifi equipment being fed neatly into it from above and this, too, will aid in reducing induction between cables and more important to audio cables close by. But, if the unit is on the rack it is therefore essential that you spend all the time to set it up correctly. For example, the 8 rubber feet on the BMU3000 are less deep than the lower lip of the front Aluminium faceplate, so if you sit the unit faceplate within the shelf, you need to use bigger feet. In my case I used

four 30kg strength rubber semi-circular pods. Also it would perhaps have been better, bearing in mind the anorexic feet, that the 13A IEC sockets were designed fitted upside down, since they would be fed from your components above.

Having them with the earth 'pin' at the top means the cable exiting the inserted mains plugs is bent around tightly and can touch the shelf, and can therefore act as a carrier of vibration from the BMU. In an ideal world you should in any case place the unit away from your rack and hifi, though looking as good as it does you might be tempted not to.

Once I set up the review sample on my own pods all was good and I had no worries about the noise, nor did I need to add my own mains conditioners. Indeed, should you really, really feel the need to add a RA or other mains conditioner – Russ recommends you don't use any, even though he makes a number of them – then you should only use them before the BMU3000. Also, the unit is fitted with an internal and resettable thermal breaker on each of the transformers. If the unit trips, then you need to unplug everything, get out a Phillips or Pozidrive screwdriver and unscrew 12 screws from the back panel to get inside the unit and reset it. I still wish a thermal breaker unit could be fitted to the rear of the box.

With its twin 15000VA transformers, totalling the 3kVA for the five sockets, I had no fears in winding up my power thirsty Krell power amp and connecting the multi power supply equipped KPS20i CD player. Wow, I always thought the KSP20i was one of the best ever CD players, and still very analogue and musical playback, particularly in the bass, but connected to the BMU3000 showed me why I needed to have a balanced life. The extra detail, speed and most important, the extra bandwidth of

The extra detail, speed and most important, the extra bandwidth of sound particularly at the top end was quite extraordinary





The amount of extra information, precision, depth of sound and frequency extension at the extremes that I got from my kit was audible, and should be considered as a very cost effective upgrade for all your kit

sound particularly at the top end was quite extraordinary. The difference between this and the 1000VA version was really evident in my power-thirsty American kit. Where a lower specified unit could cause the audio to sound a bit compressed or even to add mechanical noise, this was like an over-specified engine in a car; there was always something in reserve when you needed it. Playing vinyl the result hinted at better speed accuracy and an increased excitement and improved timing. Everything was tight, controlled, and exact. Interestingly, whilst the sound was more clinical and flatter, the lowest-frequency pedal organ notes when playing Saint-Saens Organ Symphony (Jane Parker-Smith, LPO, Serge Baudo) through my Wilson Benesch Torus subsonic generator as indicated by 2 blue flashing lights was greater through the BMU than solely through my own designed mains conditioner which showed just one blue light, but which appeared to have the greater lower bass. The BMU quite simply made the sound clearer and more accurate. And then, connecting up my old Quad 303/33 wired up to my aged iconic Chartwell LS3/5a's for use in reviewing the new Graham Audio Chartwell LS3/5 I couldn't believe just how deep that bass could get.

## Conclusion

So, would I recommend the BMU3000? Well, it's a bit like choosing between Sainsbury's Basics custard or Birds. Whilst both will work well with mum's apple pie, the latter taste better and has more goodness. But it is more expensive. Ouch. So it is too with the BMU3000. Yes, some engineers and non-believers will suggest going to the local DIY or electrical store, and yes, you will get a knockdown price and it'll be okay. Most likely the internal engineering won't be so exact, the amount of effort put into its design and suitability for audio/visual probably won't have been in the forefront of its build, and – for me very important – it won't look so drop dead beautiful in its rack-friendly 10mm thick anodised aluminium front panelled box. Perhaps their 13Amp sockets won't be as classy as the five SuperSilent's, but most importantly the cabling and cores probably won't be as good, and there is an awful lot of wiring in these toroidals. Each of the two transformers within the unit use 77m of wire on the primary and a total of 80m of wire on the secondary.

That all adds up to a total of 314 metres, meaning the BMU3000 costs just over £11 per metre, which in context actually isn't an awful lot. As Russ explained to me;

"The wire is carefully chosen for its performance – the primary wire, for example, is of a type that allows 11% increased density than conventional wire, leading to better performance and a quieter operation. The secondary wire consists of two trifilar wires (ie six in total), again chosen specifically for its performance"

I liked the BMU3000 more than I thought I would. The amount of extra information, precision, depth of sound and frequency extension at the extremes that I got from my kit was audible, and should be considered as a very cost effective upgrade for all your kit. If you are spending a lot on your hifi, that probably means your cables as well, so it should also include your mains taming. But, if you still are sceptical, buy one from Uncle Russ and if you still aren't impressed he gives a money-back guarantee.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** High quality build throughout but would have preferred better and more substantial feet

**Sound Quality:** A significant improvement with more detail, speed and bandwidth in evidence

**Value For Money:** Not cheap but then not cheap to build

**Pros:**  
Speed and detail of sound  
Lower noise floor and a cleaner sound  
Excellent components including mains sockets and wiring  
The best looking mains adapter

**Cons:**  
Expensive  
Some will still need converting to the benefits

**Price:** £3599



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# **Zeta Zero Venus Picolla Loudspeakers**

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By Janine Elliot

**At just under £20 000 the Polish Zeta Zero Venus Picolla are a substantial investment, but they are gorgeously built and something of a work of art Janine Elliot thinks. How do they sound?**

## FROM THE VAULT

Tomasz Rogula takes after my heart. He is a sound engineer and owner of a recording studio, unadventurously named TR Studios, apparently very major in Poland. More than that, he is chief designer and founder of Zeta Zero. Zeta Zero is an audio manufacturer from Warsaw, Poland, specialising in multi-ribbon tweeters with large woofer loudspeaker systems, whilst also branching into original powerful monoblocks offering damping factor of 1600 at  $8\Omega$  (that is over 1000W RMS!).

Tomasz' heart and soul is really in the speakers, and having seen them and heard them in a recent UK show I wanted to take them for a ride myself. My own reference system includes a

Townshend ribbon supertweeter and the Wilson Benesch Torus subsonic generator, so I wanted to test for myself an all in one offering using similar technology of carbon (though smaller at 12") woofer, and this time no less than three ribbons.

The Venus Picolla comes in a choice of four finishes (Black, Mahogany-Brown, Sahara Sand and Transparent) with other colours on request, all artistically designed curves of hundreds of beautiful layers of wood all braced together with hundreds of screws at more than 200 points, forming a design inspired by architecture and sculptures. The shape is also based on musical instruments and with the absence of any parallel points

Apparently  
the shape  
is also  
based on  
the female  
form



# All Zeta Zero speaker systems employ ribbons for the high frequencies

the design effectively diminishes harmful effects of standing waves or resonances.

Lionel Monageng from Superior Hifi (UK Distributor) delivered the beautiful work of art to my living room, making my house look more like it was Tate Modern. Apparently the shape is also based on the female form. Being a Venus, I guess that relates to a woman's beauty, as captured by Paleolithic sculpturers of the past. As long as that is not how the designer sees me; its large bottom, holding the 12" carbon woofer built to Zeta Zero's specification, looks like it seriously needs to go to weight-watchers. Whether or not you like the looks, this certainly is a radical speaker, reminding me of Vivid and other radical enclosures, and perhaps Lawrence Audio Cello or Double Bass.

The Zeta Zero models (presently a range of 4) are all designed not just for aesthetics, but to get the best sound. Quoted at 26-50,000Hz this 3-way

design of a single bass, two mid-ribbons and a super tweeter allows short-term peaks up to 1000W, meaning your house, or rather mine, was filled with music with no signs of stress or pain. Indeed, these 65kg speakers can cope with rooms of up to 100sq metres quite well and delivering in excess of 130dB peak SPL, not that I tested this.

All Zeta Zero speaker systems employ ribbons for the high frequencies. Tomasz is passionate about ribbons. Indeed, his latest offering, after 6 years of development, has no less than a 360 degree array of a single ribbon and single magnetic ring, the "Orbital 360°" creating omni-directional sound. What makes the Piccola special is the fact that the ribbons can handle such high levels of sound. These are constructed using nano technologies and the most advanced components which – Tomasz says – are usually only found in military applications. These help to keep down the temperatures.





# FROM THE VAULT

As well as four terminals allowing biwiring, there are two port holes at the back; one a tuned hole, and the other holding a potentiometer to vary the volume level of the HF above 14dB in a range of +/- 2dB. Also in this port is an RCA socket for a small box housing a 9v battery, supplied with the speaker that activates the computer on-board the Piccola to view the history of overloads on all speaker drivers. The display panel for this is located in the Super tweeter and flashes one of three colours; amber, green or red. Amber means you are still within recommended wattage levels for this model. Being fed with more than 800Watts will turn it red, though I didn't want to try to test this out. Usually this computer is activated by the signal fed to the speaker when playing music too loud and works as defence mechanism to protect and record overloads. As Lionel told me; "The speaker owner can happily go on holiday and be able to check if the kids had a party while they were away. A 'Big Brother' in the Speakers!" (or rather, big sister, going by my earlier comments). Bear in mind the top frequencies only use 1% of the power of the lower frequencies, the highest ribbon would probably only be fed 1 – 5Watts from my own listening tests, so there was no chance of overloading it. The mid ribbons, well

perhaps 10 Watts max. I do have neighbours...

This was an interesting review. At £19,990 these are not cheap. They sit alongside B&W, Focal, Kef, Sonus faber, Wilson Audio, Wilson Benesch, Vivid and many other makes of top-notch loudspeakers, so this is a serious review. For just short of twenty thousand pounds this is a lot of money for speakers, but the design and build is certainly worth every penny. There is no MDF or plywood in this model. It was beautifully carved and glossed by a carpenter and is therefore necessary to be part of the cost of owning the artwork, taking considerable time to build each pair.

## SOUND

Once set up and toed into my sitting position and around a metre from walls and anything else, I began my listening. The sound was very large, covering the soundstage with mighty detail and with smoothness only ribbons can do. Vocals were precise and inviting and all sounds carried a good depth in front and behind, and a reasonable width. Some people see in colours and for me the colour was a healthy green; not red or yellow brightness or a dull or boring blue or

grey. This was exact, just as it should sound. The woofer is so close to the ribbons there wasn't even a separation of sources or frequencies like some well-known and very expensive speakers that I could name.

Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique* (Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Robin Ticciati, Linn 24/192) was exact and not showing any stress when the music gets excited, and this and anything else I played had sounds that were fast and with an ease of driving that only ribbons can do well.

Passing to David Gilmour's latest offering, 'Rattle that Lock', showed the 12" woofer and ribbons at their very best. I don't normally like large woofers, preferring a smaller bass or two or more in parallel, but these Carbon fibre bass units are very light, and actually don't move a great amount, so the sound is still quite quick. From the bird atmosphere at the start of the first track "5 am", to the bass pizzicatos under the string line followed by the electric guitar, to the broken chords on the acoustic guitar that followed, everything was there, and so very clear.

Even with all the power I needed to feed this Venus I could still have played this at 5am without annoying the neighbours,



it was so beautiful. Indeed, a test of a really good set of speakers is your ability to talk over loud sections and still be heard. "Rattle that Lock" is very bright and with complicated harmonies, but it was still so clear. Whatever I played gave an authoritative and clear rendition from the very lows to the highs. I only at times found the music lacked the stereo spread I was hoping for that I get from my Wilson Benesch/Townshend Supertweeters, but it was only a small criticism. Everything else was there. And that's just it; it was all there, very clear, just like I would expect in a recording studio, or even Tomasz's own studio for that matter. Gilmour "The Boat Lies Waiting" sounded too clinical for me. Perhaps I was missing something that wasn't there. It was just too easy for me. This album is very top heavy and I could feel it being slightly emphasised by the ribbons; it wasn't adding anything, just showing the album as it was. I was sitting in a Rolls Royce with beautiful wood veneer, and I really wanted a Ferrari for my bucks. I wanted more excitement.

Switching to the Zeta Zero 1175 poweramps the sound was a different experience, actually working better than the Krell Class A amplifier I normally use to heat up my house. Although at first thought these are Class D, they are claimed as "operating on the principle of continuous (non-digitised) modulation of signal in a purely analogue manner". Whatever magic is inside the box these amps are very efficient with my electricity supply, which is always a good thing, and with so much oomph available to pump up the Piccola they form a good partnership, though the sound from the amps didn't work so well when I connected them to my Wilson Benesch. These mono-blocks are really good looking and have connections for single-ended RCA or balanced XLR, with sockets hidden under a flap so you only need to open the one you need, just in case your partner is keen on tidiness.

## CONCLUSION

This is a really good offering, particularly if you place importance in the looks of your hifi. You would pay thousands for a work of art such as this, and on top of this it is a pair of loudspeakers. They work well in large or small rooms alike, though if a small room you might not have room for the

settee. The sound should be the very best bearing in mind great bass and ribbon tweeters, and whilst it is excellent, it didn't warrant a 9 from me (I rarely give a nine). There is indeed brilliant harmony between the drivers, particularly bass and mid. But, £19,990 is a large amount of cash to spend, so I would listen to these and a few alternatives before you spend your hard earned cash.

## Designer's Notes

The beginning of Zeta Zero was over 12 years ago but I have been building loudspeakers for over 40 years now. The roots of the design came from pressure from my friends and family to build for them very special and rather unique in sound quality. My wife was a very sensitive audiophile but also business a woman in Citi Corporation which meant she was very tough in her demands and so she was very demanding for the overall quality of the speakers, but also regarding the ART shape design.

One day she said to me: "Thomas, I want for my living room something that is the best not only in a quality, but also very very beautiful in its styling. I will never allow a ..." wooden rectangular coffin in my house". This order drove me to join my ribbon drivers with unusual shapes. Fortunately for me I found shapes that are different to traditional, rectangular boxes are much better in sound quality.

For thousands of years humankind has known very well that non-rectangular shapes are good for music and sound reproduction – look at nearly all instruments and nearly all sources of sound including percussions, pianos, guitars, violins, cellos etc. We do not need a university degree to understand that gently shaped loudspeakers will be better than traditional, rectangular shaped speakers.

Unfortunately contrary to real instruments most loudspeakers are the opposite of acoustic instruments in the respect of the shape. Most loudspeaker designers are probably simply ...very very lazy and they prefer to build "simple coffins" because they are very easy and much cheaper to build than gently shaped or with streamlined bodies as with violins etc...

Any simple  
shape or  
parallel walls  
or planes  
are strictly  
forbidden in  
any good  
acoustic  
designs

Of course some may say 'but a trumpet or a horn is very directional so what?' Ok... but don't you know that all professional musicians NEVER direct their horn at you directly during the performance?? They always try to move the horn around higher or lower "above your head and into the sky" when they play, but never directly at you as a listener. So they try to create multi directional emission of energy depending on played notes.

In 90% of world class recording studios you will also not find parallel walls or any parallel windows! Any simple shape or parallel walls or planes are strictly forbidden in any good acoustic designs. Unfortunately in most of loudspeakers this simple rule is forgotten, missed and omitted.

So streamlined Zeta Zero shapes were developed and patented.

Mr Tomasz Rogula



# RETRO BITES

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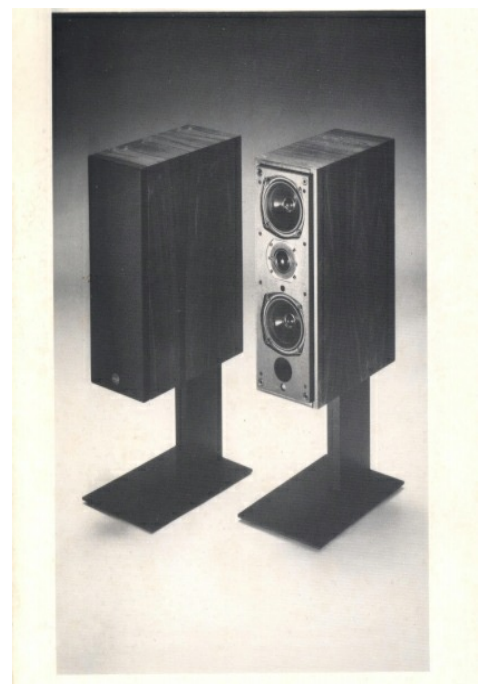
Continuing her excellent series focusing on vintage and classic hifi, Janine Elliot takes a look at the Meridian M2 active loudspeakers

The 1970's brought a number of iconic hifi separates, and some even looked beautiful. Two such products were the Lecson AP1 tower power-amp and rainbow coloured fader adorned AC1 preamp; both making their way to the New York Museum of Modern Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum London, and winning a British Design Council Award in 1974

With electronics by Bob Stuart and industrial design by Allan Boothroyd this amplifier and preamp was like nothing else, beautiful though not quite in the petite scale of B&O. This was a statement. The company was sold in 1974 to an Indian who was more used to selling sugar, as the AP1 was rather unreliable, leading then to the more reliable AP1X and AP3. The FM1 with

its multiple LEDs and massive tuning wheel was even more amazing to my young eyes in 1978 when it hit the stores. A very rare product if you can ever get your hands on one. Only by looking at the inside of the AC1 repairing one for a friend, did I realise the infancy of the company; the multi-coloured slider controls were held together with matchsticks and the multi coloured sliders had magnets glued on their underside that controlled magnetic switches to turn functions on and off as moved them up and down. This was no mass-produced Japanese design. This had the markings of human love and sweat.

The company, formed in 1972, was Bob Stuart and Allen Boothroyd's first major project, though they had been working



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# RETRO BITES

as consultants since the early 70's. They were joined by John Greenbank (later of Tangent Acoustics). These three left the company in 1974 when it was saved from bankruptcy, to be replaced by Stan Curtis (from Cambridge Audio) as Managing Director, plus Mike Harris. I loved the look of this AP1/AC1 when I first saw it. Whilst its reputation wasn't quite as long-lasting as its looks, this gave the original designing duo a foothold into the audiophile almanac. Luckily Bob and Allen didn't end their exploration there but went on to initially to make Orpheus amplifiers (1975) and then to set up Meridian in 1977, just before their original company Lecson died in 1978 to be revived temporally by Stan Curtis again and then bought by Debenhams who killed it off when they themselves were bought out. Such is the jungle of the business world.

Bob and Alan's new company equipment was to be badged as 'Boothroyd Stuart Meridian', rather than simply their company name 'Meridian Audio Limited' just to be even more confusing, or to remind us who the designers were. The name "Meridian" arises from their factory was on the Greenwich Meridian, being based in Huntingdon, just south of that line, in Cambridgeshire, winning more than 165 awards, including three Design Council Awards. Very importantly the products are hand-made in the UK.

Boothroyd was also famed for designing the BBC Micro Computer in 1981 (which he says took him a day and a half) and the Pioneer Elite speaker system. His and Stewart's expertise in the digital world led to designing Britain's first CD player in 1983 (based on the Philips CD100, and for whom Bob Stewart had done digital work for) then the 1985 MCD Pro at £675, the first digital surround processor, the first DSP based digital active speakers and the lossless audio format called MQA. Meridian even made some of the first CD recorders, aimed particularly for recording studios, and let's not forget some of the best looking remote controls.

The duo's first ever loudspeaker was not the Meridian M1 or 2, but the Lecson

HL1, the SP1, and finally the HiFi Pig friendly name of LB1 Lynette, whilst under the Lecson label. This very advanced 'angled' shape speaker was actually Lecson's most successful, though it could have flopped had they stuck with the originally intended name of "Lecson Lillette", sounding more like a ladies sanitary product than a piece of hifi! This speaker used a Dalesford 8 inch bass driver in the pre-production model but was then changed to a KEF B200 plus a T27 KEF tweeter, and unusually with two front ports; one at the bottom and one next to the tweeter. Both were filled with straws, working as a resistive loading to the motion of the horns, something I will mention again later, which controlled the lowest frequency sounds, prevent a sort of 'honking' horn sound. When Boothroyd Stewart set up Meridian in 1977 their first product was the M1, a large wedge-shaped floor-standing speaker (literally sitting on the floor) with the power-amp sitting in a gap at the bottom. Not many still exist today; indeed Meridian didn't even have a working model of their own until 25 years later a past customer offered them his own when moving to a smaller house.

Their fifth attempt at speakers in 1979 was the one that turned Meridian into a household name. High Fidelity magazine referred to it as "An astonishing speaker from Great Britain" when it was priced in high \$/£ exchange rates at \$2900 in a gorgeous rosewood or \$2700 in walnut or black. While that meant the product was around £750 in Blighty for each of the 7 finishes or £825 in beautiful Rosewood or Yew in 1979, this was still a relatively expensive price to pay. Meridian claimed that it was actually cheaper than it could be based on the fact that with the amplifiers (two of them) inside the speaker, then there was no need to pay extra for a separate box. It also meant that the amplifiers could be tailored exactly to give the best sound for the speaker design, matching the characteristics of the drivers. I drooled at it in KJ LeisureCentre and even doodled the front baffle on numerous pages of my school books. I had never seen a speaker with a KEF T52 tweeter stuck between two B110 woofers, and a port

filled with those drinking straws, or that the whole speaker's footfall was thin and deep with speaker stand screwed into it. I eventually bought one second-hand in the noughties. My speaker is in the most common walnut wood- grain-matched veneer. The wood itself was A-grade Birch plywood of 14mm width, braced and damped internally.

The M2 is unique in a number of areas. Firstly the crossover frequency is down at 1900Hz, below that all important 3KHz area that fails in so many 2-ways, something that could only be done in an active speaker design. Not only this, but the two iconic KEF B110's are mounted in line either side of a T52. The two B110's were needed in order to get the low frequency power down to the claimed 38Hz at -3dB. 38Hz from 5" midrange speakers was unheard of. Adding an electronic crossover adjusted to produce an acoustic 4th order crossover shape, and with a time delay of 76 microseconds so that it is in phase with the woofers, creates a unique radiation pattern. Indeed Bob and Stuart designed the M2 so that at low frequencies the three drivers combine through acoustic coupling to produce the equivalent of a single driver of around 12" x 5". With the tweeter at the centre the aim was to produce a single point of reference (any of you remember those EMI elliptical drivers with centrally fixed 'bridge' holding a tweeter 50 years go?) To be able to do this, though, they needed to have an integral amplifier system, hence the 70W bass and 35W tweeter Class-A amplifiers. The amplifiers inside are affixed to the back plate of the speaker and are similar to the 105 power amps, and create less than 0.01% distortion, which was still very good in its day. The wiring using DIN sockets allowed at pins 1 and 5 balanced input from the 101B balanced pre-amplifier. Bearing in mind the long cable runs between the speakers and pre-amplifier, the unit preferred the balanced approach, though interestingly is the fact that there are only two wires (one red and one white). The clever design in the M2 was to reduce the size of the M1 down to 17 litres. This was not simply an amplifier and speaker literally bolted together; the amplifier was not merely the 105 power amplifier, but rather a

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well-designed engine built solely to make the M2 sound good. The electronic crossover had components tailored to match exactly the drivers (drivers are habitually variable in sound one to another, by as much as 1 to 3dB), and the design allows the bass to go down to 38dB. Had just a 105 been connected then that bass end would end at around 60dB. That interactive crossover employed originally in the M1 worked so very well, and so was used in this, their next speaker. The advantages of being active speakers is not only in the reduced price of combining speaker and amp, but also that the amplifiers can be tailed exactly to the speakers; tweeters do not need such high power as woofers, so a smaller tweeter amplifier is perfect, rather than using a single amplifier for all frequencies. Also, because the crossover built in most speakers is post-amplification, they need to be fairly high grade and expensive passive components. Since the signal into either amplifier in the M2 is at much lower level a much more elegant cheaper array of semiconductor filtering to the respective amplifiers can be used. It means the amplifier, the crossover module and the speakers work together in better harmony. Also, the beauty of having amplifiers on-board the speakers meant that the drivers could never be overloaded, fed wrong impedance, or more importantly not match the speaker design itself.

The sound itself could be described as very precise and forward, with a deep bass that sounded somewhat “created” rather than natural of which some listeners could find slightly coarse. There are impeccable imaging and dynamics, and a very transparent sound but all these added together would please some listeners but not others. The sound is very marmite; you either love the detail and timing or you find the sound tiring and unreal, or a mixture of all four. Mid-band detail is excellent, largely because of the lower crossover point, but sometimes the top-end can sound lame. The accompanying 101 and 101B preamplifiers were ‘miniature’ designs taking the industry by surprise at a time of silver fronted (and then black fronted) butch 17” wide separates. The preamp had only a dual volume control

(allowing alteration of left and right independently) plus switching on of this and the M2 powered speakers linked from the 101’s output, a bit like as in a Quad 33 or Leak Varislope preamplifiers. It had just 3 switches to alter between phono and radio (the 104 tuner) and tape output plus mono/stereo. The inside was similarly modular with the supplied MM cartridge module being switchable to the MC version (which also worked with high output MM’s). Something that has regularly annoyed audio fans is the use of DIN plugs in their equipment, just as Naim, Linn and B&O has done in their products, though their use has meant the foot-fall of these products could be therefore reduced. Whilst suitable audiophile cables are not so easily accessible, they are still available for significant upgrading over the OEM cables supplied. The mains and line-out cable to the respective speakers is considerable length, allowing them to be tucked well out of the way, but this has meant a certain amount of sound degradation, though the balanced architecture reduces this, and in the 1970’s cable choice was of course not such a major concern as it is today. There is a common toroidal power supply for both the 70W and 35W amplifiers. Typical of the 101/101B preamp is a plug-in electronic crossover inside the speakers to allow replacement with an alternative if the speaker is to be sized as a bookshelf (the shelf would have to be very deep!)

I am an avid fan of amplified speaker designs, since the first Philips Motional feedback speakers, which pre-date the M1 and M2, beating them to the post by a few years. Actually, professional musicians have had powered speakers for many, many years and the first powered speaker designs actually go back to 1930’s but it seems the M2 is the one that will stick in the minds of audiophiles as the one that began it all. The M2 was soon to be joined by stand mount M3 and the iconic floor-stander M10, leading to the first of the digital active speakers, the P10, and then the DSP series to this day. The M2 might well have been Bob and Alan’s Fifth Avenue, but it certainly laid the foundations for their road to success.

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# BIRD'S EYE VIEW

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

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## The Universal Language

A couple of things struck me when we started Hifi Pig and I got involved with going to Hifi Shows and talking to other like-minded people on the interwebs. Those things were that, firstly, there didn't seem to be a lot of women around and secondly that everyone involved was 'of a certain age'. That was five years ago and things are changing. Every show we go to I see more women and we are starting to see a younger audience in attendance. Which is how it should be. When it comes down to it, Hifi is about music and music is "a universal language, spoken and understood by all" (OK, that quote relates to House Music...but you get my drift).

When you are young you form your taste in music, that taste develops and changes, but you always have roots in the music that you loved as a teenager or in your twenties. People often say that music is about that younger generation, probably because that is where it comes from...that fire, the passion, the anger, the love that all seem so extreme when you are young. Music is tribal. The young find their tribe and draw themselves to people who are like them with same likes and dislikes. This shapes their musical and fashion taste, creates their identity. Whether you are a Goth, Metalist, Punk or House Music fan you define yourself by your tribal instincts and reinforce your identity with the music that you listen to.

So what happens? Life. We grow up and life can enslave us with responsibilities. Time becomes your most precious commodity and music can be squeezed out of it's priority

position in your life by the daily grind of going to work, earning a living, paying the mortgage, having a family. Other things take priority. It's no wonder that, if you do have time to listen to music, you reach for the old classics that you loved from years ago to subconsciously travel back in time to when your responsibilities were less binding. I'm just as guilty as anyone, early 90s dance music does it for me every time, I was a raver back then, that was my tribe.

This explains why, when we go to Hifi Shows, we would traditionally see the same kind of people. Older guys into Pink Floyd or Jazz perhaps. Then what do you play to these people? If you are exhibiting at a Hifi Show the chances are that your collection of music that you have brought along is likely to be heavily made up of music that will appeal to an older generation because they want to listen to the music that takes them back to their youth. Jazz was the Techno of it's time, music to dance to, music that offended the sensibilities of the older generation. It shocked the parents, it was underground and tribal...and that's why young people loved it. Whatever generation you are you probably heard "Turn that bloody racket down" or "Do they think that they are playing music, that's just noise" or words to that effect, shouted upstairs by your irate Mum and Dad. Music in the context of its time is rebellion, Jazz, Punk, Rap whatever tribe it was from it was there to upset the order and the oldies. Over time that sense of



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# BIRDS EYE VIEW



rebellion becomes familiarity, the shock and the upset that it caused wears off. “Anarchy in the UK” doesn't have the same impact as it did in 1976, when it's found today on “Now That's What I Call Fathers' Day 35” along with tracks by Westlife and Craig David. So if we are playing only music for an older generation at shows then that of course can alienate other ages. Even if those younger people actually quite like that music it doesn't necessarily have the same impact as when it was 'born'. There is nothing wrong with cherishing music from times gone by, but by closing ourselves off to what's new and happening now, we miss out. Music is the voice of youth, to protest to shock to enjoy and if you do a little digging you can unearth today's generation of music

and as well as the old favourites, which will always be there for you, you can find some amazing gems from new and upcoming artists. If the Hifi industry as a whole doesn't connect with the younger generations then it will die and music is that connection to the younger generation. Changes are starting to happen, we are seeing that by the younger people attending shows and discussing Hifi online. Playing music to appeal to younger people will draw those people in and make them feel that Hifi is something for them, not just for the old guy tapping his foot to Louis Armstrong. And the Louis Armstrong fan may well find new music that he likes too. Music IS a universal language and it can connect the generations.

You may have noticed some subtle changes at Hifi Pig recently. We have never toed the line of the establishment and have a wide variety of people writing for us. We know that at it's core, Hifi is about music, so we are expanding our music section with more music news, music reviews, gig reports and more exciting things to come. We also have new, young writers who are joining our team of enthusiasts and experts and bringing a fresh and youthful vibe to the site, expressing their tastes and opinions. We believe that this approach is the way to get new people into buying and using Hifi and Headfi and we hope that our amazingly loyal current readers will enjoy this too, and who knows, hopefully find new music that they love.



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# THE VIEWS OF STU!

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



In Association With



## Potrzeba Jest Matką Wynalazków

**W**e recently spent a very good weekend as the guests of the Warsaw Audio Show and one thing that really stood out for us was how knowledgeable and passionate the people were about music and audio. This got me thinking as to why this should be and I formulated a couple of opinions and how this reflects on other countries way of consuming music.

Poland has had a turbulent recent history with the most obvious being under the control of USSR from 1945 to 1989 when Solidarity gained power, heralding a collapse of the communist regimes across Europe. Personal freedoms were limited previously and whilst Poland was considered one of the least oppressive states under communist rule, the people had limited access to information and media from outside the soviet bloc. Before communism jazz and American music was in great demand but in 1945 jazz and other music was repressed, condemned and banned from the radio. The only way people could listen to jazz was by listening to the shortwave broadcasts by Willis Conover

and his Voice Of America Jazz Hour. There was also a market for smuggled records from outside the country, despite the obvious dangers this had associated with it. After Stalin died Jazz was given more freedom and the scene blossomed, creating its own style in contrast to the American style.

So much for the history lesson! The point I'm making is that if something is forbidden it makes it more attractive, more sweet and in many ways more enjoyable, edgy and a badge of honour displaying your personal independence from what authority wants you to think and enjoy. Look at Rock and Roll in the US and further afield. This was the music of the newly defined teen generation and frowned upon by parents, teachers and the unhip and because it was frowned upon it struck a chord with the youth of the day. Rebellion! When the BBC bans a record it's a sure fire way of getting it to the number one slot. If we look at Punk in the UK that was about rebellion, and doing something that was socially unacceptable and as such a bit dangerous. However, in

Poland the dangers were very real in the Stalinist period and listening to the wrong kind of music or reading the wrong kind of literature could get you in serious trouble, not just with disgruntled parents, but with the state. Folk music is also strong in Poland and this comes out of a need for people to come together, to feel as one and people do this by singing and sharing songs they know from their childhoods and which have meaning both personally and as community – a sort of middle finger to the oppressor and his regime.

It's also interesting to note that money was obviously tight in Poland and again this makes your personal connection with something all the stronger once you own it. Think back to when you were a teen and saved pocket money to buy the latest releases. Because you saved and scrimped you played your purchase over and over and became more emotionally attached to it. Now imagine saving for a cassette tape or record and then playing it in your home with the knowledge that at any moment the door could be banged down and you locked up. The

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

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# VIEWS OF STU

connection to the music is going to be multiplied ten-fold.

I remember seeing an article in the early 90s in DJ magazine about a young Russian DJ who had heard the new techno and house records on radio but had no opportunity to buy the records in his homeland. What did he do? He got two tape machines and a home-made mixer, modified the machines so he could alter the pitch and he recorded tunes off the radio and played them out at parties. Necessity is the Mother of invention!

Now let's turn our attention to the 'decadent' West and the now easy access almost everyone has to pretty much every release that is out there, despite it being in crappy MP3 or whatever. People CONSUME music

now rather than treating it as a thing to be cherished and loved...obviously if you are reading this article you're going to treat music slightly differently to the masses, but the point remains. If something is easily obtained it is easily forgotten!

If you look at the hifi products that are now coming out of Poland you'll also understand that there are years and year's worth of experienced engineers' knowledge going into the products. These people didn't have access to the latest off the shelf shiny amplifier or the newest pair of loudspeakers but had to innovate and create systems and circuits from what they had to hand or could procure on the black market. At the Warsaw show there was a fabulous room dedicated to the biggest audio DIY forum in Poland and it was brilliant to

see this part of the hobby so vibrant and so accepted. There were valves aplenty, single driver speakers and all kinds of things that made you look up and take notice. In another room there was a whole host of vintage gear lovingly restored and still in use. If you don't have the money to buy new you make good and make do. This is no bad thing in many ways.

Of course Poland is changing and becoming more affluent and as it does, things will of course change. People will see and want the latest gadgets and doodads, they will want their music for free and they will consume more, but look a little deeper and there is always going to be a heart that is defiant, passionate and fanatical over the love of music and the gear you play music on and I hope this heart continues to beat



"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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# Vangelis Announces 13 Disc Box Set



Modern music visionary Vangelis has announced the release on 13rd February of a new 13-disc box set entitled “Delectus,” featuring a chosen selection of his early discographic work. The mammoth collection will include all of his albums on Vertigo and Polydor, recently signed by Universal and remastered for the first time ever under the legendary composer’s own supervision.

Presented in a lavish box with an essay and a plethora of rare photographs, the discs are housed in two die-cut, gatefold disc holders within a rigid 242mm square slipcase, and accompanied by a 64-page book illustrating a period of his prolific career of the iconic Maestro.

“I always welcome remastering my old work for two basic reasons” – explains Vangelis – “firstly, I get the opportunity to bring the sounds to today’s standards, secondly, it gives me the chance to go through the experiences and memories of the time.”

“Delectus” gathers together Vangelis’ seminal albums “Earth”, “L’Apocalypse Des Animaux”, “China”, “See You Later”, “Antarctica”, “Mask”, “Opera Sauvage”, “Chariots of Fire”, “Soil Festivities” and “Invisible Connections”, plus his collaborative recordings with Jon Anderson as ‘Jon & Vangelis’ – “Short Stories”, “The Friends of Mister Cairo” & “Private Collection”. The remastered

In his illustrious discographic career he has composed and performed numerous albums covering the most diverse assortment of genres

In 2008 Vangelis received the America Hellenic Institute “Hellenic Heritage Achievement Award” for his exceptional musical achievements and lifelong dedication to the promotion of Hellenism through the arts

originals will be complemented with rare B-sides and 4 previously unreleased tracks.

Vangelis is regarded a pioneer in the evolution of modern music. In his illustrious discographic career he has composed and performed numerous albums covering the most diverse assortment of genres. He is most popular for his movie scores including Antarctica, Blade Runner, Missing, 1492: Conquest of Paradise, Alexander and the 1981 Academy Award-winning soundtrack for Chariots of Fire. ‘Titles’, the theme for ‘Chariots of Fire’, was later chosen as background to the 2012 Olympics winners’ medal presentation ceremonies.

Six years after turning down the opportunity to join Yes, Vangelis joined forces with Jon Anderson in 1981 and the duo released 3 albums under the Jon & Vangelis moniker to critical acclaim. “The Friends of Mr Cairo” included

celebrated single “State of Independence”, which also reached chart success with its 1982 cover by Donna Summer and again in 1992 with a Moodswings version featuring Chrissie Hynde released as “Spiritual High (State of Independence) Pt. II”.

Vangelis’ pioneering work is recognised beyond record sales and music awards. In 1992, the Maestro was nominated Chevalier de L’ordre des Arts et des Lettres, and in 2001 Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur from the President of French Republic. He was the recipient of a Public Service Medal from NASA in 2003 and had a star named after him by the International Astronomical Union’s Minor Planet Center at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory for the international impact and appreciation of his work as well as his rapport with the Universe. In 2008 Vangelis received the America Hellenic Institute

“Hellenic Heritage Achievement Award” for his exceptional musical achievements and lifelong dedication to the promotion of Hellenism through the arts. The same year he also received an honorary doctorate at the University of Athens – Faculty of Primary Education and in 2009 he received the University of Patras Greece Honorary Doctor/Professor Emeritus of the Faculty of Physics.



## Mother's Cake – The Killer (Membran)

New single, out now, by Austrian psych/prog trio taken from the album 'No Rhyme No Reason' released 27.01.17

Founded in 2008, the Austrian psych/prog trio Mother's Cake are set to unleash their third studio album, 'No Rhyme No Reason', in late January. Newly signed to the Membran label, it is their first record to receive a dedicated UK release and those new to the band will be blown away by its quality. Songs such as first single 'The Killer', 'The Sun' and album opener 'No Rhyme Or Reason' create an immediate impact via an explosive alliance of psych, indie and blues rock (in no small part due to the voice of frontman Yves Krismer), while lengthier sonic excursions such as 'Streetja Man', 'Enemy' and 'H8' delve deeper with elements of psychedelic, progressive and space rock mixed into compelling sound palettes.

Mother's Cake have also developed into a phenomenal live prospect. Extensive touring as a headline act in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, coupled with support slots further afield for AC/DC, Iggy Pop, Deftones, Wolfmother, Anathema, Pentagram and Omar Rodriguez Lopez Group, has left many attesting to the raw, pure energy transmitted by the band that has affected audiences on a primal and collective level.

Mother's Cake have released two previous studio albums: 'Creation's Finest' (2012) and 'Love The Filth' (2015), as well as a 2014 live album entitled 'Off The Beaten Track'.

Drawing comparisons to the likes of Mars Volta, Jane's Addiction and Led Zeppelin, these records have helped set the scene for what is now their best work to date.

Yves Krismer (vocals, guitar) / Benedikt Trenkwalder (bass) / Jan Haussels (drums).

## Oriental Sunshine – Dedicated To The Bird We Love



The long and winding countryside of Norway in the late sixties was hardly the ideal time or place to be playing psychedelic folk music. But the teenage duo of Nina Johansen and Rune Walle, aided by their friend Satnam Singh, triumphed over high odds to make one of the most spellbinding albums in the genre made in any country.

Johansen and Walle met at a Peoples College in 1968 in the rainy small town Manger outside of Bergen, and discovered a shared love of The Beatles, Joni Mitchell and eastern sounds. They soon started playing and writing songs together. Then they met Satnam Singh, one of the very few people of colour living in Norway at the time, and luckily he turned out to be an excellent flute and tabla player. It was meant to be — Oriental Sunshine was formed.

A sole album was made, released on Philips in 1970, with the trio joined by accomplished jazz musicians Espen Rud (Min Bul), Sture Janson, and Helge Grøslie (Junipher Greene). The album was recorded by the legendary Norwegian producer and recording technician Jan Erik Kongshaug. After the death of Johansen's father and with Satnam Singh facing deportation the band lost contact for 35 years and no music has been produced by the group since. This truly is a one off, and a key, unique record in Norway's psych history.

Round 2 are proud to present this long out of print rarity, with remastered audio, exclusive poster and liner notes by Richard Morton Jack.

Deluxe reissue out 2nd of December on Round 2 Records



# Woes Drop New Single



Edinburgh pop-punk four piece Woes have dropped their passionate and powerful new single 'Winter Sun' with the German station, Radio Fritz.

Speaking about the single the band said, "Winter Sun is our love letter. Relationships are rarely easy and we wanted to explore the emotional journey that people take together and not leave out the difficult parts. That might sound grim, but it's a happy, introspective song about love and how it will change your life."

Woes have also now signed to Rude Records (Set It Off, Zebrahead, American Hi-Fi, Knuckle Puck, Less Than Jake), and have announced details of their forthcoming five track self-titled EP, which is due for release on 25th November 2016 via Rude Records.

The band's debut single 'Worst Friend' dropped little over a month ago and has since received critical acclaim from the likes of Kerrang! (in On The K! Stereo), Kerrang! TV (Incoming), Rock Sound (Exposure), Upset, Alt Press, Punktastic and many more...

Music had always come easy to the members of Woes, who had toured the UK and Europe multiple times in previous bands. All while holding down serious jobs, supporting loved ones and carving a name for themselves as talented performers in their own right. Creatively spent and losing focus, towards the end of 2015, they turned a mirror on themselves and decided to make a change. At the beginning of 2016 Woes was born, with one goal. To do absolutely everything involved in being a musician with 100% effort and application, no excuses.

The early part of 2016 was spent writing, the band turned to Seb Barlow (Neck Deep, ROAM, WSTR) to help them realise their vision in the studio. Often working 19-20 hour days recording and perfecting songs, making alterations minutes before parts were recorded to create a 5 track EP that truly reflects the best they have to offer. Songs that veer from buoyant messages of hope to crushing despair and back again, without ever losing direction.

With years of touring experience their shows are full of anthemic choruses, tight vocal harmonies and huge, thundering drums. Woes are ready to blow all expectations away with an EP that pushes genre forward with new layers of intricacy and depth, whilst packing in the youthful energy and massive choruses fans of the genre have come to know and love.

## Beachheads Unveil First Single From Upcoming



Beachheads have unveiled the first single from their upcoming debut album. "Moment of Truth" is an honest and soulful track, perfect for cold days in Oslo, and the rest of the world says the band's recent press release. Beachheads will release their debut on Fysisk Format on February 3rd.

The spark that became Beachheads was first ignited on a tour bus, as Kvelertak members Vidar (guitar) and Marvin (bass) fantasized about the endless potential of fuzzy guitars, energetic drums and strong melodies. The two hard-working Kvelertak musicians had little time off, and Beachheads endured as more of a dream for their days off, rather than the real band they wished for.

## Thom Hell Video '1985'



With three Norwegian Grammys to his name and one of their most established writers and producers, Thom's releasing his new album, Happy Rabbit on 16th December and has been featured in the likes of MOJO in the past. His music is rooted in the sweeter side of 60s and 70s pop – think John Grant and BC Camplight – and this new track's retro buoyancy is a great little listen! [See what you think...](#)

## Mouse On The Keys 'Out Of Body' Out January



Formed in 2006 and combining elements of classical, jazz and electronic with the urgency of math-rock, hardcore and heavy metal, Japanese instrumental trio Mouse On The Keys defy categorisation, says their recent press release.

... through my experience of suffering from asymptomatic brain infarction, I came to feel death familiar

Based in Tokyo, the group consists of two former members of influential Japanese underground band, Nine Days Wonder: Akira Kawasaki and Atsushi Kiyota, as well as Daisuke Niitome, who has played drums and composed music for countless jazz-funk and hip-hop bands. Their unique sound, comprised of two minimally phrased pianos, two keyboards and dynamic drumming – amalgamated with the pursuit of a live experience composed of visual and audio expression – sees the trio stand at the forefront of the Japanese music scene.

Speaking on the concept behind the new record, Akira Kawasaki said, “After the disaster of Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in 2011 and through my experience of suffering from asymptomatic brain infarction, I came to feel death familiar. I have been influenced by the book ‘Near-death experience’ by a Japanese journalist Takashi Tachibana and the documentary TV program about it.”

Out of Body will be released January 25, 2017 via Topshelf Records.

## consumer Announce Debut EP – Shattered Fruit



Raised in the claustrophobic backwaters of Hereford, young two-piece consumer play a raucous set. Inspired by the sheer volume of Melvins, the raw power of the Stooges and the bleak doom of Sabbath, consumer create a brutal, nihilistic sound, steeped in a raw energy and honesty that could shake even the most apathetic listener. With a huge string of UK live dates under their belt including a Birthday’s headline show and an acclaimed first single, the band are now ready to release their debut EP ‘Shattered Fruit’.

consumer’s forthcoming EP exhibits their unique brand of disparate and desperate noise rock, which could be equated to the sound of early-Nirvana meets Big Business meets USA Nails. Tracks such as ‘radio’ showcase their detached and frenetic guitar work which seamlessly transforms into crushing riffs that drive the controlled yet wild drum work. The entire EP is flooded with acerbic vocals, which serve up acidulous would-be adages and moments that can’t be explained as anything other than explosions of pent up rage and emotion. At other times, you can hear a much heavier set of influences such as at the end of title track ‘Shattered Fruit’ where fuzz-drenched guitars descend into doom-

inspired riffs, or in ‘axe’ where the vocals become more caustic and lean more toward the sound of Eyehategod or Unsane than that of earlier comparisons.

‘Shattered Fruit’ is a masterfully vexatious collection of songs, which combines the angst and fuzz of mid-90’s grunge aligned against abreactive passages of noise. Speaking about the concept behind the EP, the band say, “I think that as a whole the EP works within themes of being young, confused and uncomfortable, both of us work jobs we hate to fund doing the thing we love and I think that the frustration of not being where we want to be and not necessarily being comfortable in our own skin made the record quite cathartic for us.”

Overall ‘Shattered Fruit’ conveys the sound of a two friends that are driven to boiling point by a continuing nihilism and generational self-loathing, and by reaching this point consumer have produced a debut which is accomplished as it is expressive. As far as introductions go ‘Shattered Fruit’ is a burst of sardonic fury that is over before you know it, but luckily this is only the start of their journey into powerful self-expression.



## Kairon; IRSE! Announce New Single And Album

Finnish prog outfit Kairon; IRSE! premiere new single and Announce new album 'Ruinatation' and reissue of debut album 'Ujubasajuba'



Progressive shoegazing? Music of the outer spheres? An irrevocably mentally unstable Gentle Giant and a severely alcoholic Todd Rundgren having a love child which, after being adopted to Russia, finds himself performing a rock opera in the Ural Mountains? It is typical of the human mind to try and classify things, but when confronted with Kairon; IRSE!, many are at a loss for words.

The band describe their music as an appreciation of the ideas and overall mentality of experimental pop musicians of the 60s and 70s, combined with a modern approach and original musical vision. Whereas the debut album was largely born out of improvisation and jam sessions, Ruination is the fruit of two years of careful composing and arranging work, taking control of the chaos. Though often bundled with the shoegazer movement, Kairon; IRSE!'s music has since the beginning been a rare bird inside the scene: it rings out with a different tone, and already on the first album the influence of classic progressive rock was evident. On Ruination the curiously named quartet heads further, beyond the point of no return, into their own world of sound, where power chords, arpeggios and quirky vocal harmonies flow.

New album + reissue due out 3rd February 2016 via SVART Records

## Deluxe Cream Reissues And Vinyl



**L**ate January 2017 sees the deluxe edition release of Fresh Cream, the debut album by British, blues power trio, Cream.

The 3-CD + 1 Blu-Ray Audio disc come housed in a gatefold sleeve within a rigid slipcase and includes a 64-page hardback book, featuring new sleeve notes by respected Rolling Stone writer, David Fricke. The set comprises various alternate and new stereo mixes plus several, previously unreleased BBC sessions.

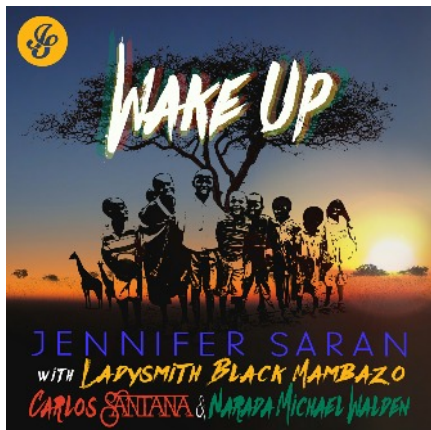
A special 6LP 180g Vinyl edition of Fresh Cream will also be released in April 2017.

Originally released in 1966, at the height of the UK blues boom, Fresh Cream showcased the not inconsiderable talents of three of the then music scene's brightest lights: Eric Clapton fresh from John Mayall's Bluesbreakers; drummer, Ginger Baker straight from the Graham Bond Organisation and versatile bassist and musician, Jack Bruce who, at the time, had just left Manfred Mann. Collectively the three had decided to give up their roles as much sought after sidemen to form their own super group.

Coming together as Cream in the early summer of 1966, the trio moved at impressive speed to make the release of Fresh Cream in December of the same year. Highlights include the racing harmonica work-out and the call and response excitements on Muddy Waters' Rollin' and Tumblin', a spine-tingling vocal on the Willie Dixon classic, Spoonful, as well as the self-penned Sleepy Time Time, which gave Clapton a free hand to wake up all and sundry. Their rousing treatment of the traditional standard, Cat's Squirrel alerted listeners to just how well Clapton, Baker and Bruce musically complemented each other.



Jennifer Saran To Releases  
“World Peace Anthem”  
‘Wake Up’



Carlos Santana, Ladysmith Black Mambazo and Narada Michael Walden join Jennifer Saran in an Inspiring World Peace Anthem “Wake Up” with all Proceeds from Sale of New Track to Benefit the Desmond & Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation.

Alt-pop/adult contemporary singer-songwriter Jennifer Saran has teamed up with South African Grammy-winning male choral group Ladysmith Black Mambazo and Grammy and Emmy-winning producer, drummer, singer and songwriter Narada Michael Walden (Producer/Co-writer), known for his work with Whitney Houston, Aretha Franklin, and Mariah Carey, to create her newest single, “Wake Up.” Making a special guest appearance on the track is Grammy-winner and legend Carlos Santana (Featured Guitarist), whose guitar licks generate inspiring vibes. The collaboration is a heartfelt appeal to the world to recognize and address inequality and impoverishment. “Wake Up” will be featured on Saran’s third album, produced and co-written by Narada Michael Walden, which will be released in early 2017.

Proceeds from sales of the song, which is available now on iTunes, will go directly to the Desmond & Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation. As an outspoken defender of human rights and campaigner for the oppressed, Nobel Peace Prize-winner Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu is one of the world’s most revered peacemakers. The mission of his US-based nonprofit is to support and promote the creation of a culture of peace throughout the world.

# Lauren Coombes interviews UK Punk-Metal outfit LACK



### How/when did you guys meet?

- Jay: I’ve known Steve for 10 or so years now and Rob for a couple more.
- Rob: I’ve known Steve for about 25 yrs. Me and Jay were in a band and we needed a drummer, I gave Steve a shout ... the next thing you know LACK was born.
- Steve: Me and Rob have known each other for years. He got me an audition with the last lot and then we started LACK after.

### How long have you been playing music together for?

- Rob: Just the 3 of us as Lack about 2 ½ years we were in a different band for a few years before that.
- Jay: Yeah, we’ve toured, recorded and written with each other for around 7 years before getting LACK together.

### How would you describe your sound?

- Jay: The ‘official’ line is a punk soul with a metal heart...
- Steve: ‘kin awesome!

# INTERVIEW



– Rob: Metall-punk I guess but there are all sorts in there if you listen carefully enough.

## **What/who are your musical influences?**

– Slayer, Metallica, Misfits, Ramones, Black Sabbath, Leatherface, Killing Joke, Flipper, Refused, Wildhearts, Iron Maiden...

## **What's your favourite track you've written/recorded so far?**

– Rob: The latest one

– Steve: The next one

What has been the best moment so far?

– Steve: Every gig. Getting on stage with my mates. Can't beat it.

– Rob: Stowfest '15

– Jay: I loved opening for D.O.A after seeing them play earlier that week. Mind blown!

## **What has been the worst/hardest moment so far?**

– Rob: None I can think of... empty gigs suck though of course

– Jay: We've been pretty lucky so far. It helps being with your mates all the time. We tend to face the tricky stuff head on, with a grin and a pint.

– Steve: Going back to the real world.

## **With the new EP coming out soon, which sounds great, what's next on 'the list' for you guys?**

– Jay: We've got our last show of the year on December 3rd at The Cavendish Arms in Stockwell, South London. Then we'll have a bit of a break over Christmas and New Year's. We're looking at getting out further afield next year.

– Rob: ... yeah get the ep out early in the year then play a load of gigs to let folk know about it. We're really looking forward to getting it out there.

## **Thanks for doing this guys it will be great for the review! Much appreciation!**

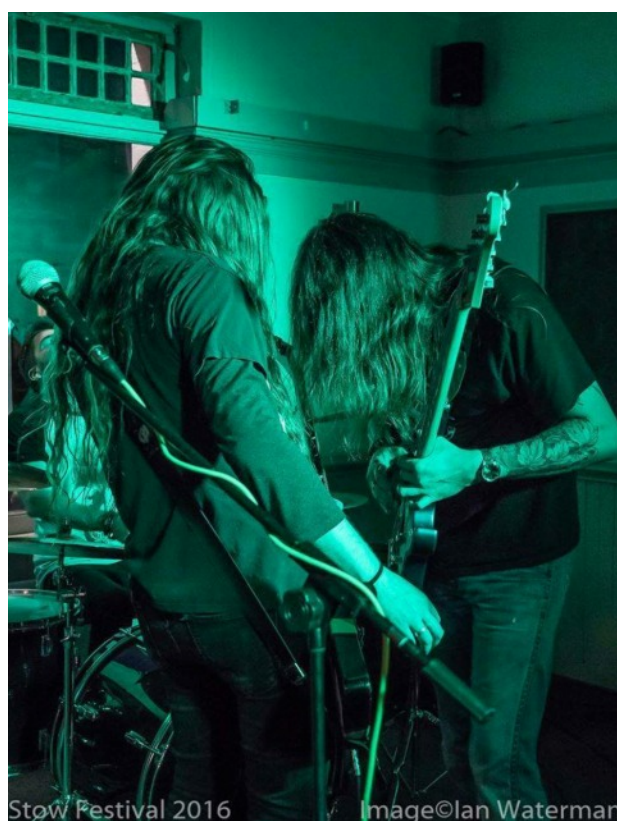
– Rob: Our pleasure!

– Steve: Nice one.

– Jay: Any time.

Well, there you go! Safe to say if you didn't know lack before then you sure do now. In total, I really enjoyed listening to what LACK had to offer and they are a genuine group of guys doing what they! I look forward to seeing how they do in future and I will certainly keep my eye out for the new album.

Slayer,  
Metallica,  
Misfits,  
Ramones,  
Black  
Sabbath,  
Leatherface,  
Killing Joke,  
Flipper,  
Refused,  
Wildhearts,  
Iron Maiden...



Stow Festival 2016

Image©Ian Waterman

## LACK – Anthem and a Sneaky Peek Of Their New Album

**L**ACK are a Bedfordshire based British Punk trio, consisting of Rob, Jay and Steve. After 9 months, LACK were off to Wallington to record their first album, Anthem, and are soon to release their second album, which I was lucky enough to gain early access to.

### Anthem

I kicked off getting a taste for the bands work by getting to grips with their first album. Anthem

being a 5 track album made for a quick but great listen. I was almost immediately reminded of the classic sounds of The Clash and Sex Pistols within the vocals and the British flare they offered. This along with the simple, yet highly effective, guitar riffs as well as the prominent drums and bass meant that the tracks did really feel Anthem-y. In that after the first chorus or first playing I was happily singing and had my feet thumping.

I also liked how they played with their sound openly on the album, with tracks like Bombay's Miles Away blending odd hints of reggae styled guitar with alt-rock to make for an occasionally odd, but totally unique sound to listen too. I call albums like this one 'warmers', where it may take a listen or two but once you get into it... you're hooked!

### HAVE A LISTEN

### New Album Taster

Now these tracks were love at first listen for me. One thing I loved about them was how varied the level of 'hardness' of punk was. With tracks like Show Me Consideration giving off a softer side of the genre along with those killer Clash-like vocals, making for a great listen that wasn't a slap in the face if you don't listen to this genre normally. This and 'harder tracks' like Autumn, means that you can have a listening session that warms you up to the sweet spot where you just got to head bang or pogo, and after all isn't that what punk should do?

I also loved that the play with sound was still present, as shown by the track Easy and its dips into those reggae flavours that were present in the first album, which of course added to the variety in sound that was unique but still kept punk at its heart.

### Final Thoughts

These albums are an excellent example of the sort of thing I would recommend to a friend who has listened to all those classic punk artists and is looking for something to branch out. Something that is modern in the genre, which has its twist and turns but still harks back to those classic and iconic sounds.

**Lauren Coombes**



These albums are an excellent example of the sort of thing I would recommend to a friend who has listened to all those classic punk artists and is looking for something to branch out



## Honeyblood – Babes Never Die (Fat Cat Records)



Let's get one thing straight from the off about Honeyblood, and this, their second album on Fat Cat Records... I am clearly not the target audience for this record, but that didn't stop me from absolutely adoring this terrifically entertaining slab of indie-punky-poppy wonderfulness!!!

Honeyblood hail from Glasgow and consist of just Stina Marie Claire Tweeddale on vocals and guitar, and Cat Myers on vocals and drums. They've supported Foo Fighters in the past but this album was recorded at London's fish Factory studio, aided and abetted by James Dring who's worked with Gorillaz in the past. Dring adds some synths as does Matt Jones, but the raw essence of Babes Never Die is the Scottish duos superbly crafted, sing-along, three or four minute blockbusters that feel instantly fresh and yet like you've known them all your life!

This is what music should be about – explosive, stimulating, provocative and above all entertaining! There really isn't a track on Babes Never Die that doesn't fit the previous statement and playing it (it's been on repeat for a few hours) I feel like John Peel must've felt hearing Teenage Kicks for the first time.

This is perfect and I cannot recommend it enough! Out now!

Stuart Smith

## John Paul White – Beulah (Single Lock Records)

John Paul White was one half of The Civil Wars, the other half being Joy Williams, but that all went horribly wrong and the breakup of the alt-country duo, despite the mega-stardom, not to mention the soon to be released second album that lay before them, was a magnificent demonstration of how to spectacularly implode in public. Cancelled tours and studios paying no attention to each other followed and continues to this day as far as I'm aware.

Time moves on and Beulah is released on White's own label that he shares with Alabama Shakes keyboard player Ben Tanner and Shoals native Will Trapp. I'd love to say that it appears that Mr White has cheered up and become a bit more upbeat when compared to The Wars' eponymous second album...but I can't.



# Beulah is a collection of songs that are bitter and introspective in lyrical content and not a little down beat in musical structure

Beulah is a collection of songs that are bitter and introspective in lyrical content and not a little down beat in musical structure. Look at the titles and you'll get an idea: I Want To Make You Cry, Hope I die, Hate The Way You Love Me...dinner time round the White's must be a real barrel of laughs and not a little uncomfortable given the content of many of the tunes herein.

However, no one ever said that music had to always be cheery for it to be enjoyable, and whilst Beulah is never going to win any prizes in the bright and breezy stakes, it is an artist bearing his soul. But it's also pretty accessible stuff in an alt-country kinda way for when you're in the mood for a bit of self wallowing...or perhaps it may cheer you up knowing someone else is having a hard time of making relationships work.

Actually it's a very good record; just hide the razorblades before you press play.

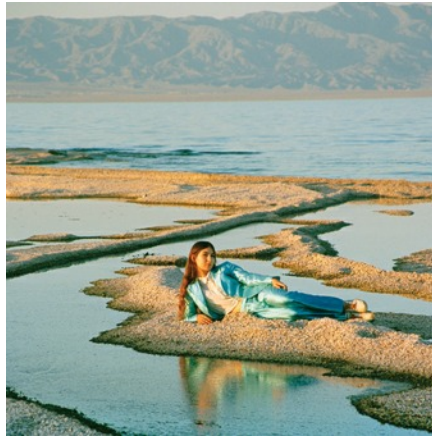
Stuart Smith

## Weyes Blood – Front Row Seat To Earth (Mexican Summer)

Twenty Eight year old, Californian singer songwriter Natalie Mering throws back to a psychy-folk feel of the sixties, with a Gallic touch thrown in there for good measure...but then she doesn't at the same time.

She has one hell of a voice without sounding twee or as if she is mimicking those singers of the past and she never feels as if she is trying overly hard despite hitting some pretty spectacular notes.

Front Row Seat To Earth is an epic record that is deceptive in its simplicity... it really is superbly recorded and the songs each build from humble beginnings to spectacular, and yet never overdone endings...case in point being Do You Need My Love.



Mering's phrasing is definitely in the folk tradition, but the music and the presentation feel both ancient and thoroughly up to date at the same time which is quite something

Generation Why has an oddly ethereal and weirdly affected opening note sung by Mering which then fades into a most beautiful vocal and simple instrumentation that makes up the rest of the song...I'm reminded a tad of Cocteau Twins.

Front row Seat To earth is a difficult record to pigeon hole and that's a good thing. Mering's phrasing is definitely in the folk tradition, but the music and the presentation feel both ancient and thoroughly up to date at the same time which is quite something. Yes, there are lots of acoustic instruments used here, but there is also a sense of modernity even on the more overtly folky numbers like Away Above.

Front Row Seat To Earth ends with the mostly instrumental and very disconcerting Front Row Seat, and whilst this seems a pretty odd way to end such a gorgeous record but the opening tune Diary and this bookend the album really nicely.

I sort of didn't want to like this record but ended up loving it!

Stuart Smith

## Whyte Horses – Pop Or Not (CRC Music)



Whyte Horses are from Manchester and this album came out earlier this year, but only just landed on my desk a few days ago. The band is the brainchild of one Dom Thomas who runs the Finders Keepers record label that re-releases obscure records from around the world – check it out, there's some crazy assed stuff on there!

The above information about Thomas is important in understanding Pop Or Not as it is both quirky, but at the same time really well informed musically.

On first listen I was immediately reminded of Nico era Velvet Underground and particularly tunes like I'll Be Your Mirror and this is in no small part down to the inclusion of Julie Margat on the record. She sings in both French and English throughout Pop Or Not and her idiosyncratic delivery is barely sung but whispered, conjuring mental images of mid to late sixties, jangly and slightly Rive-Gauche proto-psych-pop music, though trying to pin a genre on this eclectic and diverse record is all but impossible.

There are seventeen tracks on Pop Or Not and whilst it's not going to be on the radar of those buying into Cowell-Fodder, it should appeal to those looking for interesting and stimulating "pop" music that is a little left of centre and at times harks back to a different era.

Stuart Smith



# ALBUM REVIEWS

## Herbie Hancock – Sunlight & Feets Don't Fail Me Now (RobinSongs)

Herbie Hancock rose to fame as a member of Miles Davis's Acoustic quintet, whose music helped define a new kind of Jazz. He's perhaps best known for his record Canatloupe Island from the album Empyrean Isles and sampled on the US3 tune Cantaloop (Flip Fantasia) but he is known as being a crossover artist blending jazz with elements of funk and here he takes on the disco genre, infecting it with electronic jazz elements...and controversially at the time, vocoders.

Sunlight and Feets Don't Fail Me Now were originally released in 1978 and 1979 with Sunlight featuring the UK Top 20 single I Thought It Was You, and whilst it is a bit disco-lite for my tastes, it is very clever musically with the emphasis being on jazz breaks rather than a standard four to the floor disco beat. The music on these two records remains funky, intelligent and soulful.

Feets Don't Fail Me Now also had a Top 20 single You Bet Your Love and the album also went Top 30. This RobinSongs package also includes the 7" single versions of 'I Thought It Was You', 'You Bet Your Love', 'Ready Or Not', 'Tell Everybody' and 'Honey From The Jar' as bonus tracks, along with 12" versions of 'You Bet Your Love' and 'Tell Everybody'.

Whilst the music herein isn't as true to disco's roots as it could be, it remains a valid and enjoyable example of how musicians with roots firmly set in one particular genre can bring their



own stamp to other genres and create something wholly new from the melting pot.

Stuart Smith



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# ALBUM REVIEWS

## Ian Campbell Folk Group – The Complete Transatlantic Recordings (Cherry Tree)

This is a collection of six studio albums, plus some other related material, from the period 1963-1968 and covering the groups entire catalogue recorded for Transatlantic Records (whose first releases were a trio of sex education records).

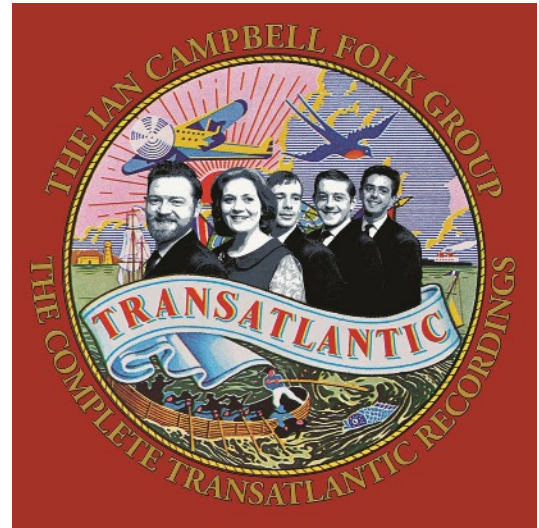
For those that don't know the Ian Campbell Folk Group they were one of the most respected, influential and well known British folk groups of the era. They topped the bill at the Albert Hall, appeared on TV numerous times, played at the Newport Folk Festival in 1964 and were prolific live performers throughout Europe.

Disc One features the bands debut 18 track album 'This Is The Ian Campbell Folk Group' and the follow up 'Across The Hills'. Disc Two has the 1965 'Coaldust Ballads' (on CD for the first

time) and 'Contemporary Campbells' from the same year. Disc Three has the album 'New Impressions' and 'The Circle Game' with the latter again being the first time on CD. The final CD in this collection contains all the tracks recorded by the group in the period but which did not make it to the albums above.

Campbell's family were originally from Aberdeen but due to 'militant' activities family members were blacklisted in their home town and relocated to Birmingham and it was here the young Ian Campbell first made music.

The music herein is a mix of traditional and original folk tunes and it is all very much in the real tradition of folk music...music that working people enjoyed listening to and sing along with, though many of the alterations to words and melodies make the tunes unique to the group. Throughout the records there



is the feeling that there is still the family trait of radical socialist politics and it's interesting to note that Campbell's sons Ali and Robin were founding members of the band UB40.

The clamshell pack comes with extensive liner notes and is to be recommended to folk that know their folk...and perhaps others who would like to explore the genre further.

**Stuart Smith**

## Electric Six – Fresh Blood for Tired Vampyres

Electric Six is a six-piece band from Detroit, Michigan. Their style is a brand of rock music infused with elements of garage, disco, punk rock, new wave, and metal all forming a very unique and at times odd sound. The band hit the big time in 2003 with the singles "Danger! High Voltage" and "Gay Bar", and subsequently recorded eleven full-length studio albums. However, a twelfth was announced July 2016 with its name being 'Fresh Blood for Tired Vampyres' and I just so happen to have been lucky enough to review said album!

The variety of sounds on this album makes for a great listen. With the track Acid Reducer and its synths making for



an atmospheric intro to the album; it lays the perfect ground work for one hell of a journey through the tracks this album has to offer. Tunes such as The Number of the Beast, Mood Is Improving, Space Walkin' and many others, alongside the unmistakable vocals of Dick Valentine, show off the bands killer ability to blend the styles they are so well known for.

The blending of styles also meant this album was great for different listening sessions too. By which, I meant that whatever mood I was in there was something on this album that I could enjoy. If I fancied a bit of a pogo or dance tunes like I'll Be In Touch and Lottery Reptiles gave me the perfect

In total, this album has a lot offer and it left me hungry for more

soundtrack, and if I just wanted to lay on my sofa and relax then tracks like Greener Pastures and The Lover's Pie let me do this too. If an album can do that then it's a winner for me!

Admittedly, if you are of a delicate nature then maybe this album may not be for you, but if you are willing, know the offerings the band have made before and are out looking for something new, then you will no doubt love hearing how the groups sound has developed over time and led to this album and all the flavours it has to offer.

In total, this album has a lot offer and it left me hungry for more. So, if you want something different that will give you a walk on the weird side with a great sound to boot, then you will certainly develop a taste for Fresh Blood!

**Lauren Coombes**

# ALBUM REVIEWS

## Hawkwind – The Charisma Years 1976 – 1979 (Atomhenge)

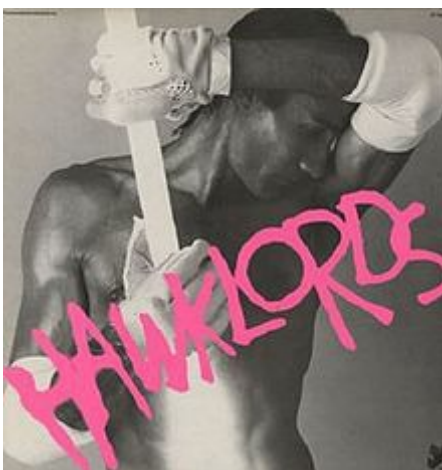
I've sat on this for a while and it's now out there for you to get your hands on but it's very difficult to write a balanced review of what represents four of your favourite albums of all time by your favourite band of all time. Yes it's a boxset re-release from the late 70's but hey, I don't care! So, let's throw balance out the window and say from the off that this re-release package of four albums represents some of the finest music ever made and I know each track like the back of my hand; they have been played so often over the years. This is Bob Calvert, who was by this time the band's vocalist in residence, era Hawkwind and his way with words is, to my mind second to none.



The first album chronologically is *Astounding Sounds, Amazing Music* which is named after the sci-fi magazine of similar name and it has a hippy trippy vibe throughout, particularly the tracks *City Of Lagoons*, *The Aubergine That Ate Rangoon*, *Kadu Flyer* and *Chronoglide Skyway* that each develop into sprawling instrumentals that just demand 500 mics of Owsley's finest to be ingested. But there is a dark edge to *Astounding Sounds* and *Steppenwolf* is a step into a demimonde of city life where the shadowy edge is only slightly concealed beneath a thin veneer of normality. *Kerb Crawler* is a rock out number that seems at odds with the rest of the album in some ways but it's the obvious single from the record.

*Quark, Strangeness and Charm* comes up next and is perhaps the most accessible of Hawkwind's output in many ways, despite it having a more ominous and prophetic science fiction edge to it than its predecessor. *Spirit Of The Age* opens the album with its morse code

theme that permeates throughout and tells the tale of a cryogenically frozen space fairer whose android replica of his then underage, but now long gone, earthbound girlfriend is playing up again, "Ah, it's no joke, when she comes she moans another's name, but that's the spirit of the age". *Damnation Alley* is inspired by the book of the same name by Roger Zelazny and Hassan I Sabbah has an eastern feel to it and talks of Middle Eastern tensions and issues of the day. Musically this is tighter and more honed for a wider audience but remains to this day still as fresh in its flesh as when I first heard it.



*Hawklords: 25 Years On* is actually not a Hawkwind record, though it obviously is, as the band couldn't use the name Hawkwind for whatever reason. *Hawklords* is a very different record and perhaps the least typical of the band they have done, but Calvert's lyrics and the finely crafted songs still manage to carry it off brilliantly. The cover is also a departure and is somewhat homoerotic in its styling... i think. *Psi Power* talks about circles, squares, triangles and

waves, the cards used to detect telepathy and how the gift soon turns sour, but overall the album is pretty upbeat, yet stark, and where *Quark* explored more negative subject matter of a future time, *Hawklords* is more of the here and now to my mind. *Flying Doctor* is a hilarious respite of a drug addled Australian outback doctor whose supplies are running low...you can see where they go...and whilst it shouldn't work on this record it does!

*PXR5* finishes off this collection magnificently, though in fact it was recorded before *Hawklords*. Lyrically and musically it is clearly the bridge between the *Quark* and *Hawklords* and again you have science fiction themes with songs inspired by Zelazny (*Jack Of Shadows*) Asimov (*Robot*) and Ballard (*High Rise*). How and why the latter wasn't used in the film of 2015 is an absolutely criminal tragedy! The album finishes with *PXR5* and has the band aboard a space craft whose engines have been made to work and sees them moving forward in a more optimistic and



positive tone.

OK, I was never going to be able to write an objective review about these records. Hawknerds will already have the records of course but I'm sure many will go out and buy this too. For those who don't know Hawkwind or have them labelled as lysergic soaked, speed merchants, hell bent on taking their anarchic and self styled space rock to the inner city masses then think again. These are well crafted albums of high lyrical worth and musically they have stood the test of time brilliantly.

Oh, and you get a poster!

**Stuart Smith**



# Ezra Furman – The Liquid Room, Edinburgh



I hadn't heard of Ezra Furman prior to last year's *Perpetual Motion People* album which I described as my album of the summer. I'm glad to say that its appeal has not waned and it still gets regular plays. I haven't heard much about Ezra since the album's release either, so I was quite surprised to learn that his gig here at The Liquid Room had sold out and I'm very grateful to Ezra's management company for supplying a ticket at the last minute. I was even more surprised to see that once Ezra and his band The Boy-Friends hit the stage that the majority of the audience were word perfect with not only the songs from *Perpetual Motion People* but with his earlier material as well.

Ezra Furman is one of the most exciting and individual performers around at the moment

Lou Reed, King Curtis, Jonathan Richman, David Bowie, Bruce Springsteen, Dion, Audrey Hepburn (blame the silky black blouse and the string of pearls): these are just some of

freedom to take the songs wherever he feels like going with them and you get the feeling that on any given night, that could be anywhere at all.

For me the highlights are, of course, the songs that I am familiar with from *Perpetual Motion People* but really every song is a joy. It's impossible not to be carried along on the adrenaline rush of *Restless Year*, *Wobbly* or *Tip Of A Match* and the crowd sing along with nearly every word. As the gig builds to a climax, Furman toys with the pearls round his neck, slowly unwinding them before sending them spinning off into the ecstatic audience and leaving the stage in a howl of feedback from his guitar.

Ezra Furman is one of the most exciting and individual performers around at the moment. As a self-styled cross dressing, manic depressive, observant Jew, mainstream superstardom may not be quite his style but pop music certainly needs him around and he deserves to be better known than he is. Hopefully, those that know him will be spreading the word.

**John Scott**





## Sarah Jarosz – The Queen's Hall, Edinburgh



I only came across Sarah Jarosz a couple of weeks ago when I heard her excellent cover of Bob Dylan's Simple Twist Of Fate from her album Build Me Up From Bones but I quickly fell in love with both the track and the album. A quick Google revealed that she was playing here and so I had to go see her.

Opening for Sarah tonight is a young singer songwriter from Pennsylvania by the name of Deitrich Strause. At first

sight, Deitrich may look around 15 years old but his songwriting craft and skilled guitar picking indicate that he has had considerably more life experience – he is actually in his late twenties. Strause is promoting his new album How Cruel That Hunger Binds but has just sold his last tour copy so is offering us the opportunity to buy a hand-crafted download card for whatever price we would like to pay for it. Some less than

subtle hand telegraphing suggests that a payment of around £5 would be considered as a suitable arrangement and as such, represents something of a bargain. He is definitely a talent to look out for.

Sarah opens with Annabel Lee from her second album Follow Me Down. Accompanied by Jeff Picker on stand up bass and Jedd Hughes on acoustic and electric guitars and backing vocals, Sarah shines on both claw hammer banjo and vocals. The remainder of tonight's set pulls mainly from Build Me Up From Bones and the new album Undercurrent, plus a couple of covers. Jarosz is a skilled multi-instrumentalist, moving seamlessly from banjo to guitar, octave mandolin and standard mandolin. Jeff Picker's bass playing provides a solid foundation for Jarosz and Hughes. The latter, having followed in the footsteps of guitar luminaries such as James Burton and Albert Lee by supplying lead guitar for Emmylou Harris, is the perfect partner to compliment Jarosz's playing. When he moves from acoustic guitar to electric and takes a solo, the result is a stunningly intricate piece of playing that totally avoids showboating and is completely in the service of the song. Hughes also gets the chance to take a lead vocal on a cover of Merle Haggard's Workin' Man Blues.

A pair of Tim O'Brien instrumentals, Lands End and Chasin' Talon allow the band to fly with some intricate interplay between the three musicians, Jarosz's mandolin playing being particularly outstanding. I suspect I'm not the only one here who is waiting hopefully for Simple Twist Of Fate to appear and when Sarah announces that she is going to play a Bob Dylan song that she has been playing for years, I can't wait to hear it. It turns out though that she knows more than one Bob Dylan song and it is Ring Those Bells that get an outing tonight. It's a great version so I'm not too disappointed. Jarosz ends tonight's show with a hauntingly unaccompanied electric guitar performance of Jacqueline from her new album. A meditation on Jacqueline Onassis, it brings the evening to a poignant close.

John Scott





# New Hifi Pig contributor **James Fleming** does a bit of Soul Searching and is likely to ruffle a few feathers along the way

“Rock n’ roll is a raw wail from the bottom of the guts,”  
Lester Bangs, 1981

That wail is what they call “passion,” “authenticity,” or “soul.” That ever-elusive and indefinable IT, that something that can’t be pinned down or mass produced. The human factor. And it

could be anything: the death-howls of a mangled guitar, or an intricate tickling of the ivories. The poetic musings of an unsung hero of the underground, or a volume-distorted rave.

And it’s that wail that gets rock n’ roll aficionados of a certain vintage misty-eyed with nostalgia as they recall the sixties,

# RANTS, RAVES AND ROCK 'N ROLL

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seventies and eighties. That wail is part of the attraction, the memory, the myth. Even those of us who weren't there, who couldn't possibly have been a part of the generations that had the good fortune to experience this music as it happened, wax lyrical and, when the chemicals are right, philosophical, about a time we know very little about.

A time of distorted guitars, banshee vocals and drum solos that ruled our airwaves and TV screens with an iron fist for over fifty years. If you repeat a word often enough it becomes meaningless. And that's what has happened to rock: it's become meaningless. The powerchords have lost their power...

Not that they should have. The music may have long passed in to caricature and parody. But, the spirit should have remained.

The "wail," that Mr. Bangs was referring to, as stated, is not necessarily the raw screech of disaffected youth; it's the passion in the music, the soul. And when critics toss that word "soul" around, what they're really talking about is the motivation. Whether it was manufactured to make quick cash, or crafted to make a statement, that's the "soul" in the music. When someone says that pop has no soul, they're wrong.

Pop has a soul, a motivation. Its motivation, is to make money. Has been since they invented it. Even Berry Gordy's much beloved Motown was a self-styled "assembly line" of pop stars. Churned out a dime a dozen so as to rake in the cash.

There are of course exceptions. Brian Wilson made glorious pop music for the love of the art. The Beatles made pop music that has come to define the term. Even the much missed David Bowie reveled in the artifice of Ziggy Stardust and set the world alight with distinctly pop music. Albeit, very sophisticated pop music.

The musical hallmarks of pop have come to be synonymous with artifice and unoriginality, money grabbing and soullessness. Likewise, the earmarks of rock music have "authenticity" "passion" and "soul".

The debate has raged for decades. For the most part, each side's argument has been merely tastes butting heads. Which genre a person prefers, what

characteristics and traits appeal to a person. For when you break them down, that's all they are: characteristics, and traits.

The distorted guitar and the macho drumming are, undoubtedly, a traditionally "ballsier" sound than say, a synthesiser and a drum machine. But are they more authentic? No.

It's not the instrument, the machine, that makes the music. It's the person. A person frets the strings, pounds the skins, pushes the buttons and sets the dials. It's the creativity that MAKES the music; that gives it that power.

The idea that any one set of characteristics is more quote-un-quote "authentic" has only one leg to stand on, and that's tradition.

Guitar, bass, drums and vocals. The traditional instrumentation of a band. Not just a rock band, but country, reggae, pop and countless other genres and sub-genres. The reason that guitars are held up as "real" while synthesisers are "artificial" is TRADITION.

"Tradition is the death of creativity."  
Dan Auerbach, The Black Keys

For years, decades, the instrumentation outlined above has been the norm. And there's nothing wrong with that.

At the same time as Mötley Crüe ruled the Day-Glo eighties, with one guitar, one bass, a set of drums and a vocalist, Black Flag raged on, rebelling against all things banal and mediocre. Their tools? A guitar, a bass, drums and a vocalist. While Rick Astley polluted our airwaves, Sonic Youth unleashed album after album of a glorious alternative. Bon Jovi sold albums by the millions, but Dischord Records provided an outlet for the voices of disaffected youth. Inspiring thousands of kids across the world to get up off their collective arses and do something.

And that carries on to this day. Just because you don't see it doesn't mean it's not there. Legions of bands, solo artists and fans are making exciting, interesting and new music. All with guitars and drums. They're just not on the radio.

Tradition is on the radio. If you listen to rock radio, you'll hear one of two things: the classics, or the new groups. Who all sound eerily similar... Because

Even Berry Gordy's much beloved Motown was a self-styled "assembly line" of pop stars. Churned out a dime a dozen so as to rake in the cash



## Each genre as their own money grabbers, and they're rife in both styles

they're rehashing tradition. Age old chord progressions and lyrical themes. All in the guise of being "authentic".

The reason rock is seen as being "true" while pop is "fake" is down to several reasons: its roots in the blues as music played by oppressed slaves, its dominance for the last 50-some years, and its musical characteristics. Rock's roots in the blues give it a certain working-class (though that's not an accurate term for the generations of abuse suffered by blues originators) pomposity. It can look down on other genres as a sort of "self-made man". Rising from the ashes of prejudice and persecution to become the cultural phenomenon of the 20th century. And as such, it has settled into a comfy little nook of tradition. In traditional Irish music, anything seen as deviating from the music's original form is viewed as "un-pure". Not always, granted. There have been many very interesting progressions in the world of trad' over the years; fusion genres being the notable development. But, it took hundreds of years to reach that level of acceptance. Generations had to die out for this to be achieved.

The musical attributes of rock have become traditional. And, like any tradition, there are those bent and intent on preserving it. Hellbent on keeping it the way it has been for decades.

It's as much this attitude that lends itself to the notion that rock is "real" music as the actual musical features: the distorted guitar, the howling vocals, the monstrous drumming. These features have come to signify authenticity simply because they are the way things were done throughout the latter half of the 20th century. The tradition.

And thus, it was born: rock is more authentic, more passionate, more soulful, than pop.

This idea birthed just as many genres as it set out to oppress. And if that's not an irony; rock music as the oppressor rather than the liberator, then nothing is.

Punk, alternative, hardcore, one of the many things they have in common is that, originally at least, they all set out to escape the confined clutches of rawk. These genres used rock's own weapons against it. The guitar, rather than an instrument of ego, became a humble noise maker or a creator of vivid soundscapes. The drums

metamorphosed from a drooling time keeper/wrecker, into an instrument capable of providing texture, as well as the all important backbeat.

Others moved away from rock instrumentation altogether, gathering new and alien WMDs: the synth, vocal distorters and the oft-maligned drum machine. These seemingly unearthly instruments were instantly deemed "passionless" and a mere imitation of the "real thing". And they are misused just as atrociously as the guitar. Worlds of possibilities were opened up with the invention of these machines, and yet, music makers seem content to use them to create soundalike clones of yesterday's fad.

Neither pop nor rock is more soulful than the other. And it's certainly not down to the instrumentation or the musical characteristics of each genre. Look at the Rolling Stones and then say with a straight face that these are still "street fighting men."

There's just as much soullessness in rock as there is in pop. Just like there's just as much soul in pop as there is in rock. Each genre as their own money grabbers, and they're rife in both styles.

It's just shame that the money is with the money grabbers. All we get to hear is what they put out, what they promote. The airwaves belong to them, as do the screens.

Thankfully, there's a whole culture, a whole world with its own history, fashions and music for us to explore. With just a little bit of digging, the doorway can be found.

Whether the future of music is between the frets or an undiscovered setting on the dials remains to be seen. Maybe it's some unholy combination of the two. One thing's for sure: it'll make all the right fans and piss off all the right people.

Just like rock n' roll did in the first place. And just like the synth-wielding youths of 1978-1984 did. The old guard will change and a new one will step into its place. And, hopefully, we won't march to the beat of the same drum. We'll march to our own, individual beats. As was the original message of rock n' roll decades ago: be yourself, for you have a soul.

# Marianne Faithfull – Broken English



Marianne Faithfull celebrates her 70th birthday on the 29th of December. John Scott takes a listen to her 1979 album *Broken English*

In 1964, The Rolling Stones had not yet ascended to the rock aristocracy that they would come to epitomise. Seventeen year old Marianne Faithfull on the other hand was the daughter of a real-life aristocrat; her mother was a member of the Austrian house of Sacher-Masoch. Faithfull is the great great niece of the author of *Venus In Furs* (Leopold von Sacher-Masoch), the erotic novel which inspired The Velvet Underground's song of the same name, and coined the word "masochism". Not long out of convent school, Faithfull had begun a fledgling career as a folk singer in London's coffeehouse scene when she attended a Rolling Stones record launch party with her boyfriend John Dunbar and was spotted by Stones' manager Andrew Loog Oldham. Shortly afterwards, she had her first hit *As Tears Go By*, written by

# CLASSIC ALBUM

Mick Jagger, Keith Richards and Oldham. Faithfull married Dunbar in 1965 but by the end of the year, shortly after the birth of their son, she left to live with Jagger.

As a couple, Jagger and Faithfull helped to define the hedonism of the Sixties as the Stones moved away from pop music, crafting their blues and rock and roll influences into a new kind of rock. They became famous for more than just the music; newspaper headlines trumpeted drug busts and rock and roll mythology gained a possibly apocryphal confectionary-based scandal. There is a long list of people who have joined the Stones' inner circle and found it a tough gig to handle. Marianne was no exception. Her drug dependency was chronicled in *Sister Morphine*, co-written with Jagger. When the couple split in 1970 she was addicted to heroin, became homeless and although she intermittently released records, it seemed that her career was behind her.

If *Broken English* is famous for resuscitating Marianne Faithfull's career, it is equally infamous for the track *Why D'Ya Do It*. *Why D'Ya Do It* is a frank, brutal, no-holds-barred story of betrayal

Faithfull had lived a lifetime in the ten years between 1969 and 1979 and it showed in her voice. Her sweet, light voice was now cracked and broken, irreparably damaged by years of laryngitis and abuse, but it perfectly suited the character of the songs she had been working on. A band had been put together for a 1977 tour of Ireland and this band – Barry Reynolds and Joe Mavety on guitars, Steve York on bass and Terry Stannard on drums – formed Faithfull's co-writing partnership and became the core musicians for the record. Chris Blackwell of Island Records heard some early demos and funded the recording of the album

As Bob Dylan wrote in *Like A Rolling Stone*: When you've got nothing, you've got nothing to lose. *Broken English* was a make or break effort from Faithfull. She needed someone to help her shape the album, someone with something to prove and she found him in producer Mark Miller Mundy, who was desperate to make a name for himself.

*Broken English* was a complete change of direction for Faithfull. Her previous records had blended pop, folk and, more recently, country influences. *Broken English* was informed by punk and new wave. The songs were raw, like Faithfull's voice. Reynolds' slashing guitar on the title song underpin bleak lyrics about European terrorism. *Guilt* is influenced by Faithfull and Reynolds' Catholic upbringing. A stark cover of John Lennon's *Working Class Hero* was recorded as a tribute to Faithfull's own heroes including Lennon and Jagger. Shel Silverstein's *The Ballad Of Lucy Jordan*, written for Dr Hook and who performed it in their customary country rock style, is given a wintery, futuristic production that underscores the helplessness of a woman whose dreams will never be realised. The production of the album was not without its problems though. Mundy recorded the songs for the album with Faithfull, Reynolds, Mavety, York and Stannard but decided that a more modern sound was

## AT A GLANCE

**Released** 2 November 1979  
**Recorded** May–July 1979  
**Studio** Matrix Studios, London

**Length** 36:25  
**Label** Island  
**Producer** Mark Miller Mundy

### TRACK LISTING

1. "Broken English"
2. "Witches' Song"
3. "Brain Drain"
4. "Guilt"
5. "The Ballad of Lucy Jordan"
6. "What's the Hurry"
7. "Working Class Hero"
8. "Why D'Ya Do It"

required and called in established musicians like Steve Winwood on keyboards and Morris Pert on percussion to provide an extensive overhaul. In particular, Winwoods' sequenced synthesisers added a modern touch that pointed the way to the Eighties and the albums that Grace Jones would record on Island a few years later. Barry Reynolds would also help to shape Jones' sound – the signature guitar sound of the *Broken English* title track turns up again in *Walking In The Rain* from her *Nightclubbing* album.

If *Broken English* is famous for resuscitating Marianne Faithfull's career, it is equally infamous for the track *Why D'Ya Do It*. *Why D'Ya Do It* is a frank, brutal, no-holds-barred story of betrayal. Its genital and oral sex references were shocking, even by the standards of the time, and led to the album being banned in Australia. *Broken English* was a commercial success elsewhere however, going on to sell more than a million copies and re-establishing Marianne Faithfull as a credible artist.

*Broken English* is now available in a deluxe version that brings together the released version of the album with the original mixes, some extended remixes, and Faithfull's own version of *Sister Morphine*. The original mixes stand up really well and are worth a listen in their own right as an alternative version of the album.

*Broken English* probably saved Marianne Faithfull's life. She has gone on to record more than a dozen discs, becoming a respected interpreter of songs by songwriters such as Kurt Weil, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen and Tom Waits as well as working with a younger generation of artists like Jarvis Cocker, Rufus Wainwright and Teddy Thompson. I hope she has something special planned to mark her birthday. She's earned it.



# Warsaw Audio Video Show 2016

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This is the first Warsaw that we at Hifi Pig have attended but we're so happy we made the effort because it has been undoubtedly one of the best, if not THE best we've been to. The people of Warsaw have been wonderfully welcoming, the food and drink has been spectacularly good and the company we've enjoyed has been marvellous.

The show itself is over three venues, two hotels (The Radisson, The Golden Tulip) and also at the national stadium. The organisers have ensured that access to each is simple with a free coach service between the hotels and the stadium and turnout was colossal and very enthusiastic.

One of the things that really hit home was how diverse the make up of the crowds has been. This is not just middle aged men turning up and you have couples, families and lots of younger people which is really refreshing and great to see.

Thanks to everyone who stopped to say hello and a really big well done to the organisers of the show, particularly Adam Mokrzycki whose communication and advice has been absolutely spot on!

So without further ado here are our a few hundred photographs that we took at the Warsaw show. We hope you enjoy them! You'll need to go right through to the end to find out who won our Hifi Pig Loves You award!

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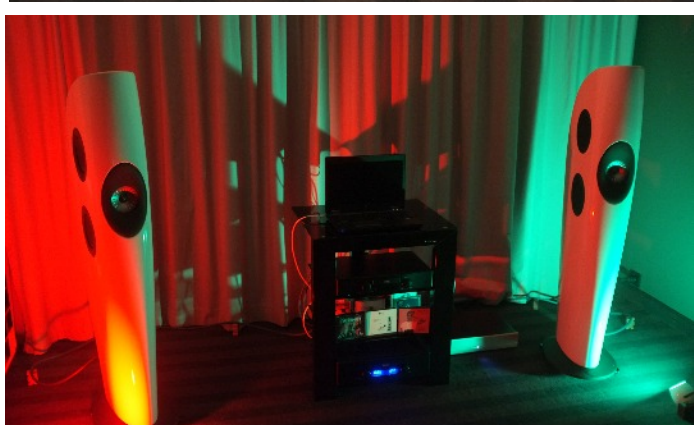
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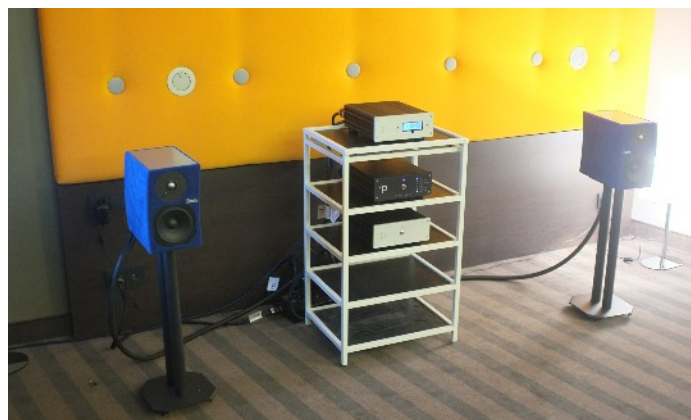
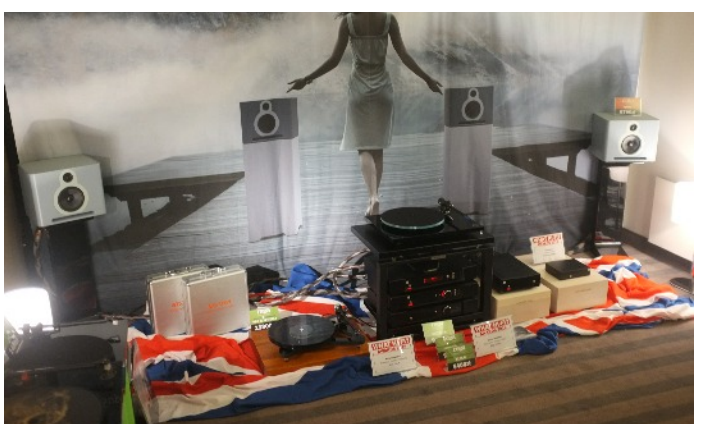
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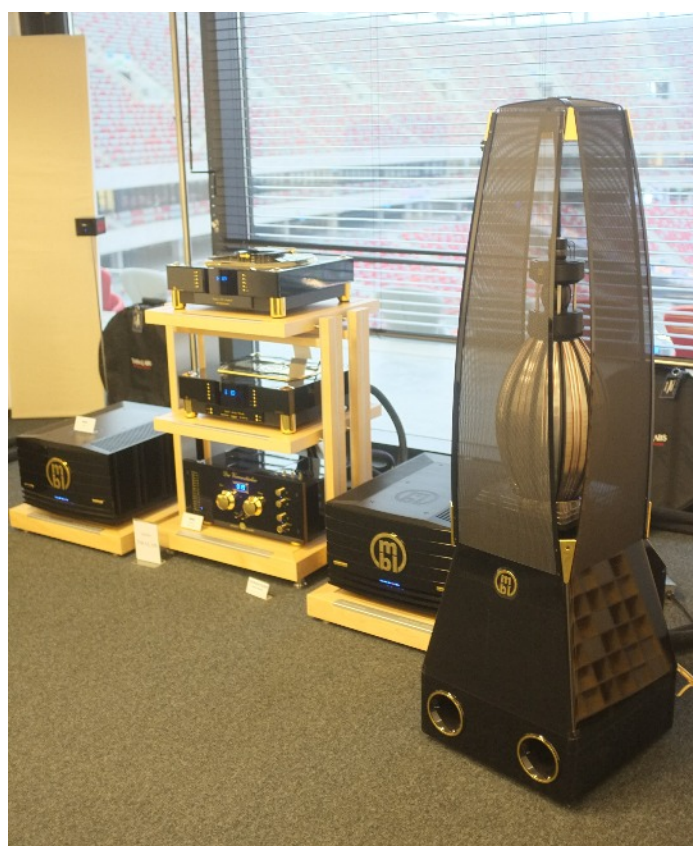
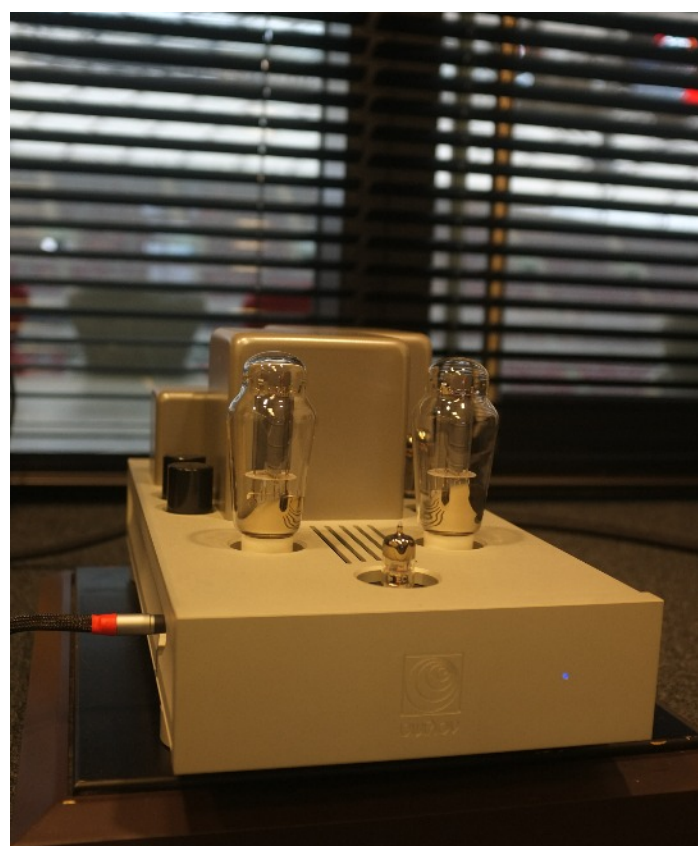
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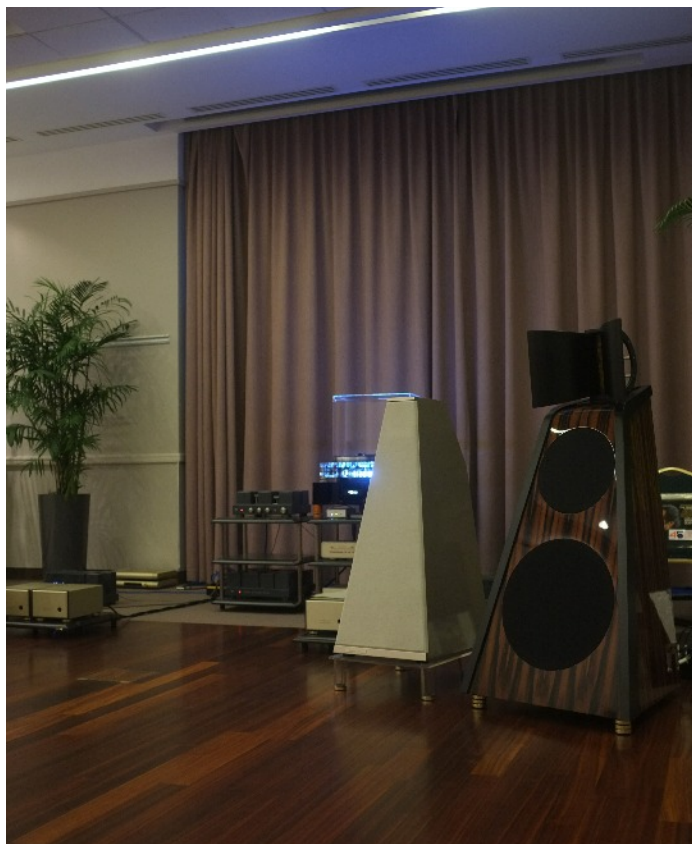
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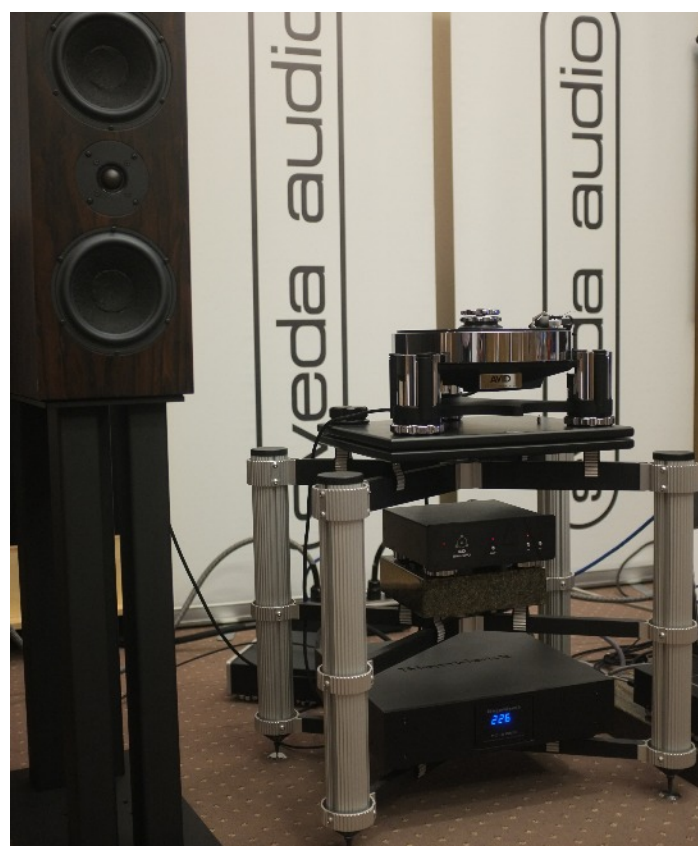
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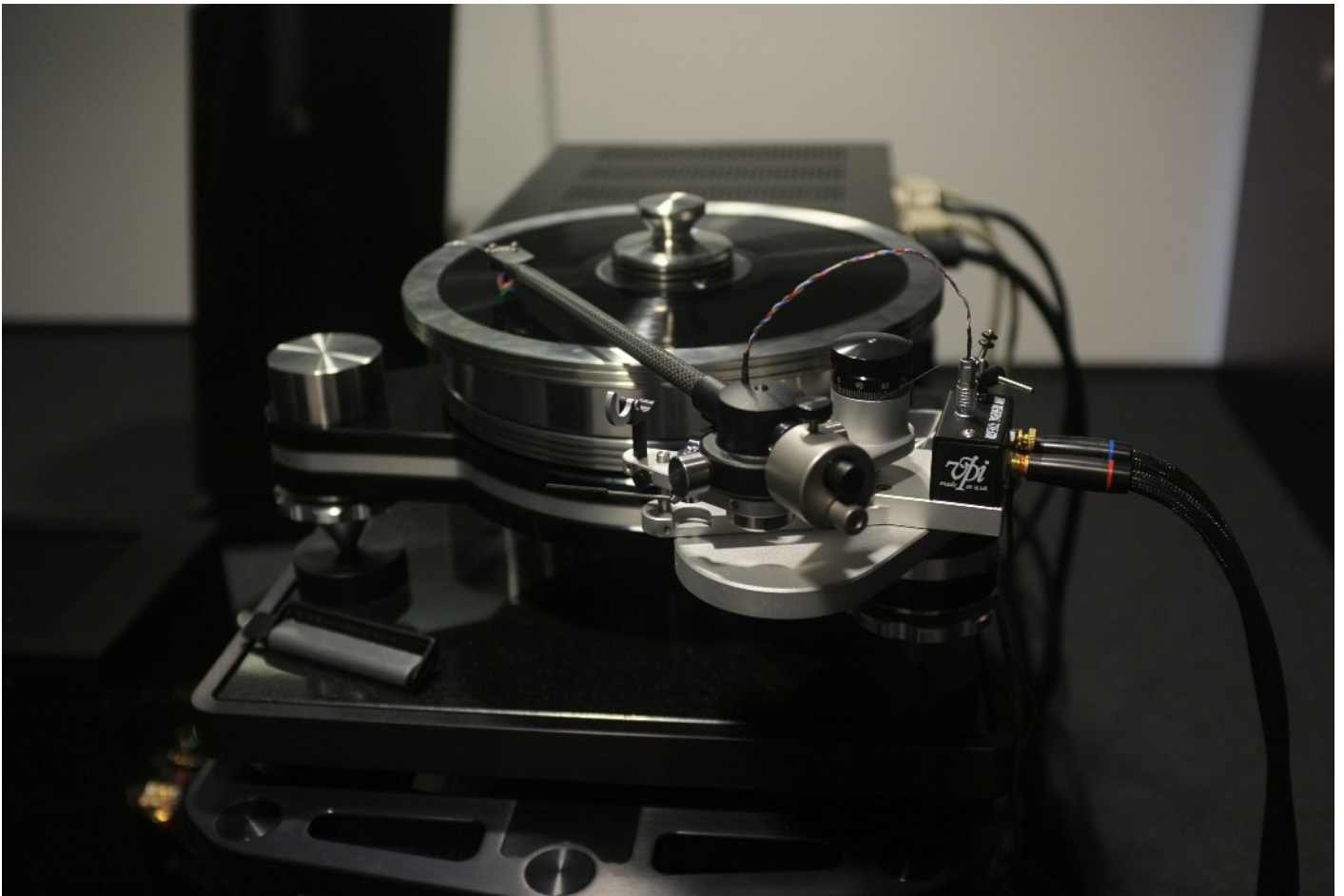
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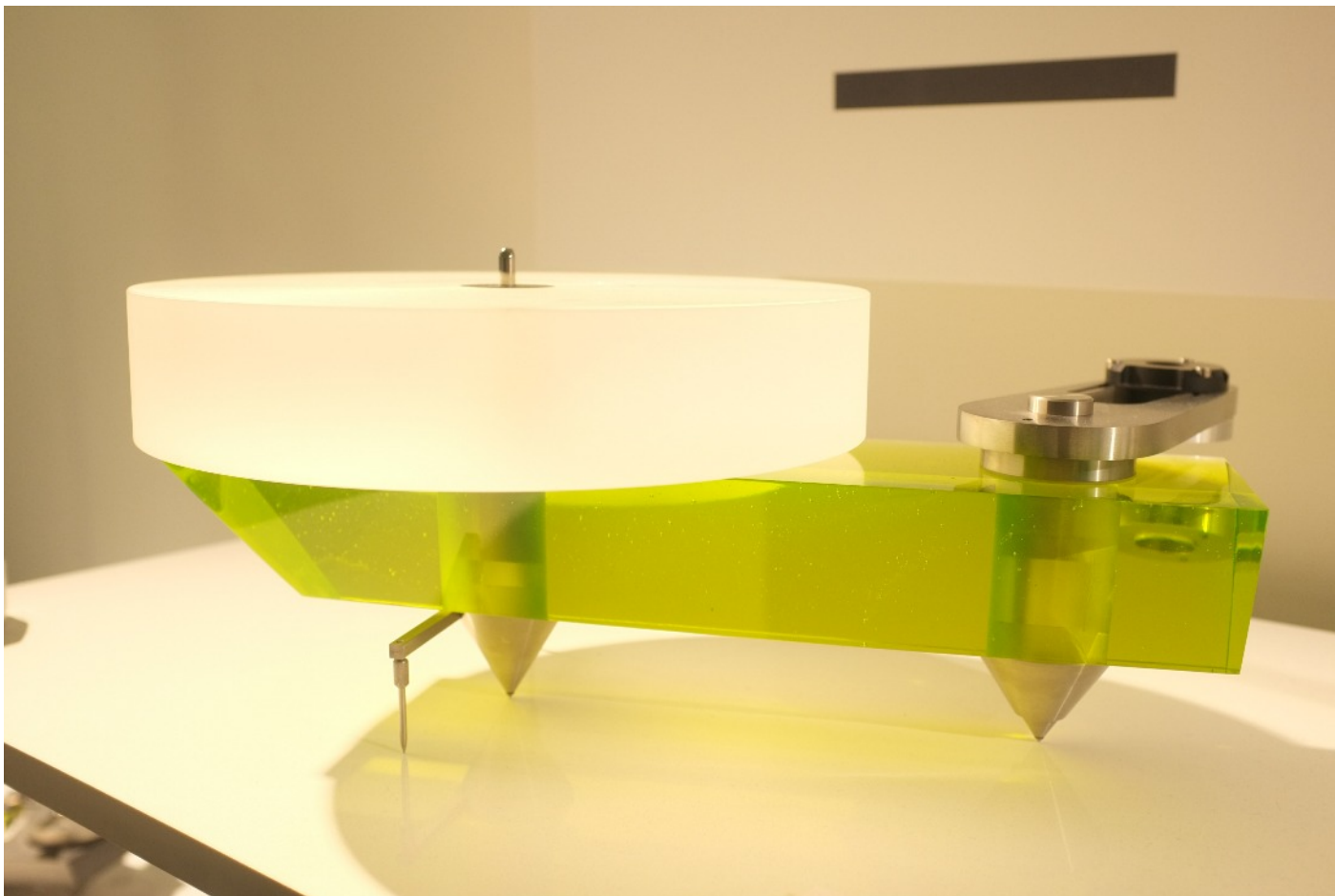
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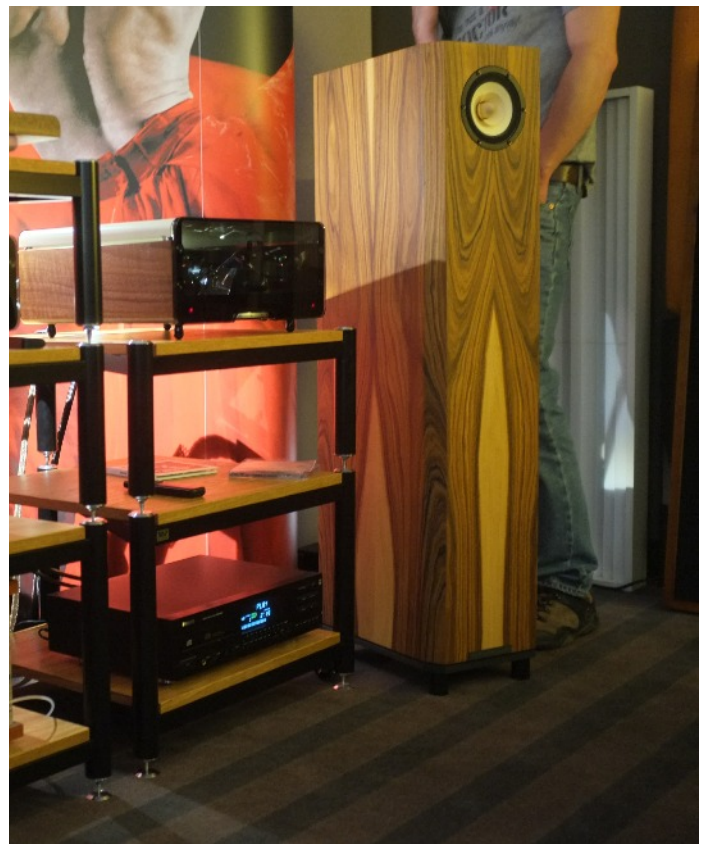
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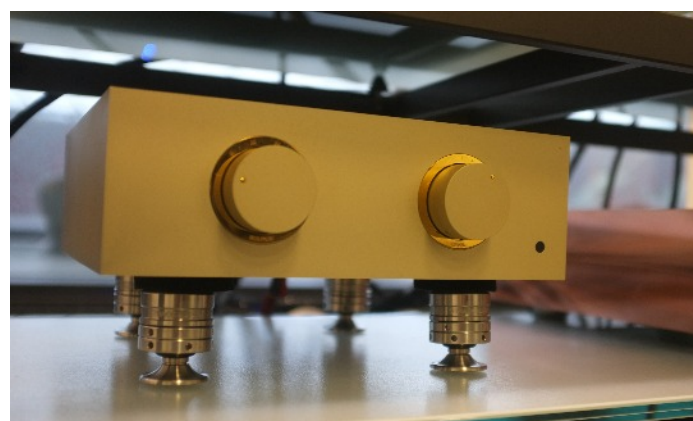
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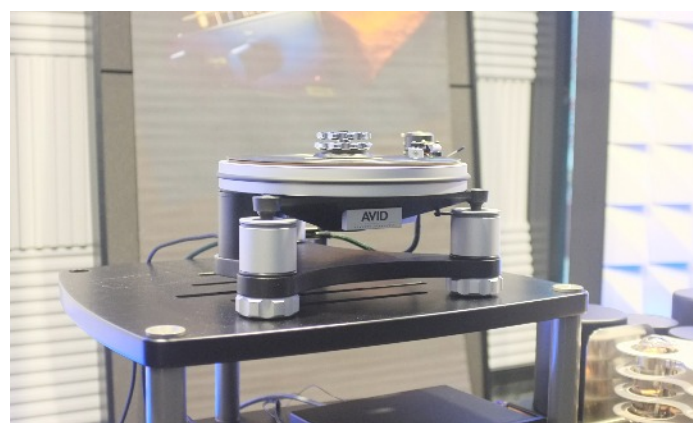
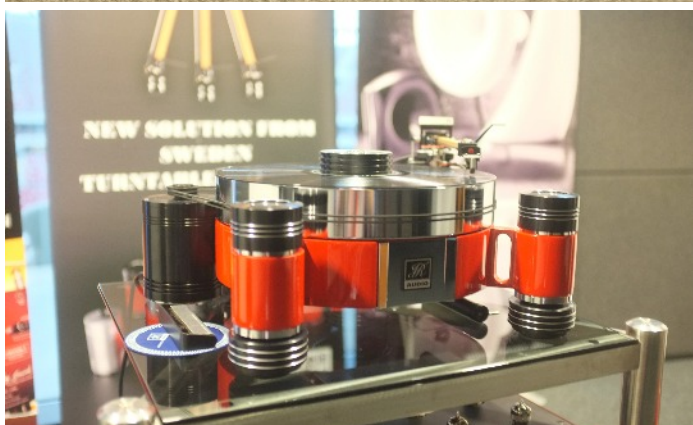
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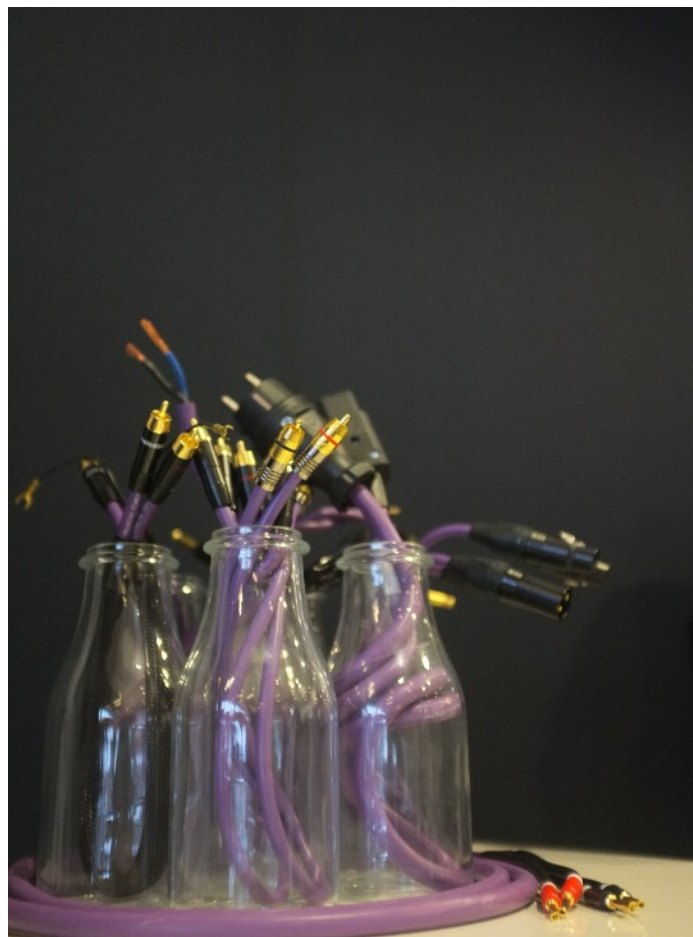
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**T**he now famous Hifi Pig Loves You Award can be quite a tricky thing to actually choose. We thought it was difficult at Munich this year, but the Warsaw show was even harder to decide. The standard of the show was just incredible, the three venues each had a different feel and all the exhibitors had put a lot of effort into making it a spectacular success. One thing we definitely noticed was that all the non Polish brands that we know said that their Polish distributors worked very hard and were incredibly dedicated to promoting them in Poland.

With such a high standard the winning room really had to knock our socks off. We judge the rooms not only on how they sound, but also how they look, how the staff are with people, what kind of music they play and the general feel of the room. Previous winners have included the likes of Avid Hifi, Sound Foundations, BD Audio and Hifi Hangar to mention just a few. By the end of covering even just the first hotel,

the Sobieski, we had several contenders, and that list grew longer as we visited the stadium and the then the final rooms at the Golden Tulip.

Spoilt for choice and just a little concerned that we would not be able to narrow it down, we entered the Gobel High End (Germany) and CH Precision (Switzerland) room. This was a chilled out and airy room, with the stunning and unusual Gobel Epoque Fine loudspeakers, Epoque Baforce Fine compact sub and controller and then CH Precision electronics. All very high end gear so you would expect it to sound very good indeed. We were struck by the fact that you could be anywhere in the room (Stuart was moving around to get photo's while I sat and listened) and still be enveloped by the music. What happened next though decided it for us that this was the room that would get the award. They put on Jeff Buckley's version of 'Hallelujah' which came across as incredibly emotional and really moved us. It was a 'chills and goosebumps' moment and we both, and I

am sure everyone else in the room, completely connected with the music. We discussed it afterwards and both Stuart and I said it was our favourite room. Oliver from Gobel and Florian from CH Precision were both very pleased indeed when we let them know how their room made us feel and said that it was the kind of response that let them know they had got it right.

We caught up with both Oliver and Florian after the show to get some more information about the system they used and their collaboration, so let's kick things off with the kit list and retail prices of just what made up this magical system.

Göbel High End (all prices ex works and ex VAT):

Epoque Fine loudspeakers: 96,640 €

Epoque Baforce Fine subwoofer in the active version: 61,340 €



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Epoque Baforce Controller (the subwoofer controller/crossover): 7,983 €

A full loom of Lacorde Statement cables which consists out of 2 pairs Lacorde Statement Speaker, 11 pcs. Lacorde Statement Power, 2 pairs Lacorde Statement XLR, 1 pcs. Lacorde Statement Digital RCA as clock cable, 2 pcs. Lacorde Statement Ethernet: 118,742 € for the complete loom of cables

CH Precision: (all prices ex VAT)

D1 SACD/CD drive: 26,500 €

C1 D/A converter with streaming input: 25,100 €

L1 line preamplifier: 24,100 €

A1 power amplifier: 48,200 € for one pair

X1 power supply: 12,100 €

Total system price 420,705 € ex VAT

**Hifi Pig:** “As two brands exhibiting together, how do you work together to decide on the system?”

**Oliver Gobel, Gobel High End:** “The room size was the key for what has been decided to show. It has been easy to agree about the shown setup, as the Epoque Fine loudspeaker with one subwoofer are perfectly adapted for room sizes like we had. On the electronics side, A1 power amplifiers have enough energy to easily drive the Epoque loudspeakers, and the latter choice was natural. Otherwise, both of us agreed to use mainly an ethernet-based source to easily allow demonstrations of various music styles.”

**HP:** “Can you tell me a bit more about the technology?”

**OG:** “The heart of each Göbel High End loudspeaker system is our patented and world wide unique bending wave loudspeaker technology. It is based on the principals of sound creations which nearly all music instruments use to

produce their sound. These Carbon Excellence Bending Wave loudspeakers from us are completely developed and manufactured in our premises near Munich and beside the most obvious advantage of producing the sound over this bending wave principle, they have a lot of additional outstanding sonically advantages. Only to name a few:

- A continuous bandwidth from 170 Hz to over 31.000 Hz through one driver!

- An ideal and very even dispersion range of nearly 180 degree through the entire bandwidth.

- Highest dynamic and fastest transient response, as the amplitudes are extremely small and therefore also extremely low distortion.

Furthermore we additionally developed special technologies also for the bass drivers, for the enclosures, for the arrangements of the bass drivers and for the crossovers in order to get the lowest possible losses and hereby reach the best



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possible results and seamless adaptation to our bending wave technology. Through all these efforts, you will experience the music entirely detached from the loudspeakers, with an unbelievable naturalness and speed. You will find yourself in the middle of a real emotional musical event.

After a research time of over 10 years with thousands of listening hours of countless carefully evaluated variations and combinations of different conductor materials, conductor alloy materials, dielectric isolation materials, specific geometries, specific resonance control devices, cable treatments (cryogenic processing, heat processing, ...), connectors, connection methods, ... we developed our world wide unique benchmark cable series Lacorde Statement. Therefore we developed and use some very special technologies like: Our own proprietary alloy, the control over the skin effects especially in combination with the non-linear signal degradation that happen because of the contact between the dielectric material and the conductor, our multiple stranded webbing design, our resonance control devices, the prevention of electrostatic charging effects ..."

**Florian Cossy, CH Precision:** "All products use discrete components on the audio signal path, with as few stages as possible. Furthermore, only linear power supplies with discrete regulation stages are used. On the technology side, some innovative topologies/processing have been developed, here are the main ones for each product type:

## 1. C1 D/A controller

- proprietary connection with D1 drive, which transfers both PCM and DSD streams without bi-phase encoding (like into S/PDIF or AES transmissions).

- signal interpolation to 705.6kHz or 768kHz done into DSPs, with different algorithms the user can choose.

- automatic calibration of all D/A converter chips, with compensation in the digital domain prior conversion.



- mixed analogue and digital volume control when used in preamp mode (which was not the case in Warsaw).

## 2. L1 line preamplifier

- fully balanced circuitry, from input to output.

- discrete R-2R ladder for analogue volume control, with 0.5dB steps from -96dB to +18dB

- automatic correction of signal offset without analogue loop and capacitors on the signal path, for click-less volume changes.

- ultra-high bandwidth of 1.5MHz.

## 3. A1 power amplifier

- adaptive bias for power amplifier's output stage, which keeps the output stages' idle current constant when playing music.

- user-adjustable level of global feedback for power stages for best possible match with connected speakers.

- monitoring of the output power with non-intrusive circuitry (and protection against short-circuits or abnormal DC level).

- many modes to be chosen by the user: stereo, monaural, bi-amp & bridge modes are available."

**HP:** "What do you have in store for us in the future, New products etc?"

**OG:** "Actually only a few weeks ago we introduced our new Lacorde Statement Ethernet and new Lacorde Statement USB cables. Of course these new cables were also part of the setup at this Warsaw Audio show, which in fact was the first exhibition introduction of these new cable models. As we only unveil and announce new products when we are really 100% satisfied with the results, we have a long development period from the first idea of a new product, until we do the official introduction of it. Therefore our products have a very long life span."

**FC:** "Next spring two new products will be available, which are currently at prototype stage at the office. First a 10MHz clock generator called 'T1' will be launched, a companion product for all digital products that accept such a synchronisation frequency (D1 & C1 are ready for it). Then an integrated amplifier called 'I1' with line-level inputs (plus optional phono and streaming inputs) will be released, a real 'all-in-one' box that accepts all sources and connects to loudspeaker. A real 'swiss-army knife'."

We are really please that we picked the Global High End/CH Precision room for our Hifi Pig Loves You Award at Warsaw 2016. Yes this is very, very high end and expensive hifi, but the passion and hard work that is put in by both Oliver and Florian and their teams is palpable. This is true high-end, everything works together in harmony and, when it comes down to it, chills and goosebumps matter, whether you are buying this level of gear or, for most of us, something much more modest.



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# Behind The Brands

**Behind The Brands with Alan  
Clark of Kralk Audio**





# BEHIND THE BRANDS

**Alan Clark is the man behind the Yorkshire based loudspeaker manufacturer Kralk Audio. He speaks with Hifi Pig about his hifi career, his thoughts on the industry and Right Said Fred.**

## **Your History**

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

First real job in the industry is my own company to be honest. I started Kralk audio in May 2011, I had been making speakers for just about all my life, I made them for family and friends, even did a couple of studios and restaurant stuff and people kept saying you should do this for a living so I did.

**Who or what was the biggest influence on your career?**

Biggest influence on my career was my dad, he got me into music and HI-FI at a very early age, if anything I was more interested in the hi-fi rather than the music and was always looking for ways to make the music sound better.

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

Proudest moment was doing the 1st hi-fi show down at Whittlebury hall 2013, my father sadly died 2 weeks before the show so he never got to see the success of his influence he had on me but I'm sure he was watching over us that day.

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

I've never released a product I wasn't entirely happy with and I never would.

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

The next project or phase of Kralk audio is to set up another demo room here with all models permanently on display, as it is at the moment the current demo room is part of the house so I can be challenging sometimes to accommodate the needs of the customer,

Future projects are the new KA2 which I've put everything I've ever learned and more into one speaker, it's an infinite baffle design with an external crossover, a bit like my DTLPS-1 Elite but far more advanced in design,

## **You and your system**

**What was your very first system and how has it evolved?**



My very 1st system age 12 was a Teleton amplifier and speakers with a Garrard SP25 and Goldring G800 cartridge, the speakers were appalling and I soon modified them with some old EMI drive units I found in an old radiogram on the council land fill site, they were 13" x 9" units with 2 tweeters on the front and I mounted them in 2 of my dad's shoe boxes, they sounded mint and from that moment I was hooked on speaker building, with the

help of my school music teacher who was also a hi-fi nut he showed me how to make basic crossovers and filters to correct impedance and stuff, when I left school and got a job I bought my 1st system, it took me ages to save for it, I got a Goldring GL75 Turntable Sansui 9090 Receiver Celestion Ditton 44s, later additions were a pair of Chartwell LS3/5s because the Dittons used to be a bit much when mum and dad were watching the

# BEHIND THE BRANDS

telly down stairs, I still have the Sansui amp and it still works great too, I replaced the 44s with Ditton 66s a few years later and the goldring was replaced by a Linn LP12, the system I have now for normal domestic and party use is Rega 3 Sansui AU517 Roksan candy cd player Tannoy Ardens,

Demo system is Garrard 301 SME Denon, Yaquin MS845 mono block amps and pre amp and Yaquin cd player, the speakers of course are my own Kralk Audio designs BC-30 /BC-30-3/DTLPS-1 and Elite and soon the new KA 2

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

The product I wished I had never gotten rid of was the Linn, it was the time when cd had just come out and everybody was ditching records and going to cds, I know a very stupid thing to do but I got rid of all the records and the player, some of those records would be worth a small fortune today as most of them were 1st pressings and I bet the Linn would be worth more than the £345 quit I paid for it too.

## **How often do you listen to music?**

I listen to music every day without fail, I never watch television it sends me to sleep and I just can't see the fascination of watching it, whereas music is a great stimulant or it can be used to relax and there are always new ways to make it sound even better.

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

Best single component I've ever heard, that's an easy one, without doubt Pioneer HPM150 speakers, I went to a show at a local hotel in my home town of Ossett West Yorkshire, everything there was a bit ordinary until I got to the room with the pioneers in, they were playing night flight to Venus by Boney M and the sound was out of this world, I was 15 at the time and had never heard anything like it the bass and the drums smacked you in the chest it was just awesome I won't ever forget it, I never did buy a pair of them though the Ditton 66 was as close as I ever came to the sound but was still a long way away over the horizon somewhere.

## **The state of the industry**



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

I love the fact that Valves are back, it's a unique sound and one that we should all try, there are some great designs out there and they don't all cost a fortune.

## **Vinyl resurgence... what are your thoughts?**

I love Vinyl too always have and like I said the biggest regret was getting rid of the Linn and selling all the records, stupid stupid mistake.

## **Is CD a dying format?**

No I don't think cd is a dying format

## **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?**

I think the industry will go full circle to be honest, it's a bit like the car shape it sort of goes around jelly mold shape cars are in then they are out for more angular types then the jelly mold ones come back again then the angular, same with house trends carpets and then its laminate floors and then back to carpets again and I think hi-fi is the same, well speakers seem to be anyway, I want to try and deliver products that are timeless and won't go out of

fashion in the blink of an eye, I suppose it's a bit of a safe option but it seems to be working so far.

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

I'm hoping that youngsters get onto the Hifi ladder at some point instead of listening to stuff on their phones all the time, home cinema systems are keeping the Hifi in the home for the time being how this will change in the next few years or so I don't know but I still think whatever happens it will come full circle again with a dedicated 2 channel listening system back in the home at some point.

I have lived through a lot of changes in the Hifi industry from valves to transistors, Quadraphonic systems, mini and midi rack systems, vertical turntables, the rise and fall of the mini disc which I still think was a great idea to be honest and now onto digital stuff with downloads and streamers and stuff, whatever makes the sound it has to come out of speakers and for me speakers are hi-fi and I think youngsters still love to see the cones wobbling in and out

like I did when I was their age so whatever equipment is going to cater for a young person's needs is sure to be a winner for them the speakers will look after themselves.

Online shopping I think is a great thing and provided you are prepared to move with the times and demands of your customers it should work well for everybody, it works great for me because after a long day in the workshop I can sit down and re-order any new stock online at any time of the day, there is no point in trying to hold back progress or you will just get left behind.

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

What's the biggest cons, I would have to say speaker cables, yes up to a certain point they do make a difference, I always do the internal wiring with good quality cable as it's what the customer would expect, but many amplifiers are wired internally with normal 16 gauge cable and I could never get my head around why anyone would think having big fat speaker cables connected to the outputs wired with 16 gauge would improve things but that's my opinion and you know what they say about opinions.

## **The way you work**



# BEHIND THE BRANDS

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

What I look for when assessing products is a good clear mid-range, the midrange is the heart of your system it's what your ears are best designed to translate information from.

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

Sound preference would be foot tapping, because once your foot is tapping you are happy with what you are hearing and your body is starting to enjoy the music as well as your ears.

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

Turntable preference would be idler wheel my opinion again but I've always found them to have far better dynamics and timing than any other design.

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

Speaker preference would be full range floor standers or large stand mounts I've never been a fan of the big sub box in the corner of the room, I've got very funny ears when it comes to stuff like that, I'm very susceptible to phasing issues and it gives me a real headache if it's not right, I remember once going in a clothes shop and the speakers they had in there blasting out the music were out of phase and it was making me feel ill, I told the staff and they let me swap the wires on the unit to make it right amazingly even they noticed the difference and said it sounded much better.

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

**What is your favourite recording?**

Favourite recording is Paul Giamatti's version of Tod Rundgren's Hello it's me, I could listen to it a million times and never tire of it, its on the movie soundtrack Duets, Paul also teams up with Arnold McCuller in the film to sing Try a little tenderness and makes it the best version I've ever heard of this track, check the music videos out to see, amazing stuff.



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

The KA2 is the most ambitious project I have done so far, ive put a lot of work into the project, the cabinet is an infinite baffle design but inside there are special baffles which are very clever, they are based on very old technology that works and basically the baffles kill the standing waves inside the box with the minimum of internal damping, the front baffle is a fully floating design which means that its not connected to the main cabinet, it is instead fully suspended away from the main cabinet using a new system I have developed, the all new drive units have been specially designed for Kralk Audio and feature only in the KA2main bass river has a huge magnet drive with a carbon fibre cone and soft dome dust cap, the tweeter has a copper pole piece with vented magnet and pyramid rear chamber and 25mm silk dome with silver lead wires and a low resonant frequency of 650hz,

The KA2 also features external crossovers like our DTLPS-1 Elite, the difference with the KA2 crossover is they have been designed to look as though they are part of the hi-fi system

and can be placed on a shelf or rack with it, they are fully silver wired with No PCB, everything is hard wired component to component direct to silver terminals, other features of the crossovers are the 24db Bessel design, Clarity cap capacitors, HD Inductor system, treble adjustment, grounding system and a vu meter, the crossovers are passive but have switch and vu meter illumination if required, it's a very tasty looking package at a very competitive price and should be available before the new year, And of course HI-FI Pig will get the exclusive review of them first.

There are also plans for a new Centre channel speakers so that home cinema systems can be made up using speakers from the range to make a custom set up.

**Thanks for speaking to Hifi Pig, Alan.**

**[Read More Behind The Brands Interviews.](#)**

**Tell us about your 3 most trusted test recordings.**

Paul Carrack 'Tempted', Michael Ruff 'Wishing Well', Snowy White 'Keep on Working', I can find out all I need to know about a system from those 3 tracks.

**What are your most embarrassing recordings/guilty musical pleasures?**

Most embarrassing, I quite like right said Fred if I'm honest, deeply dippy is a great test track with great dynamics.

**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?**

One record from a burning building would be Captain Fantastic Elton John, there's not a bad track on it and the cover can keep you amused for hours on end.

**The Future**

# Noble Audio Savanna IEMs

**Noble is a name that most head-fi fans will be familiar with. GadgetyNews has been keeping tabs on the in-ear monitor (IEM) maker for the last couple of years. Back in March the company announced its new range of universal IEMs. Amongst those was the Savanna.**

The Savanna takes place of the Noble 4. Back in the day Noble's IEMs were named after the amount of drivers they were loaded with. At one point only the Kaiser 10 had a special name.

Now Noble has renewed the famous K10 with a fully aluminium shell, as well as redesigning the whole lineup with new shells and names.

Naturally, Noble still produces the custom IEMs (CIEM) that made them famous. You can get CIEMs using any of the universals as a base. You can even purchase special one-offs by the Wizard (Dr. John Moulton).

Universal is the perfect way of testing the water without spending too much cash. Also, you're more likely to be able to sell/pass on a set of universals if you decide to upgrade. But, don't be fooled. We are dealing with high-end earphones here and the prices reflect this.



## Noble Savanna design

I am loving the logo on the plates. The CNC'd aluminium looks really cool and worthy of a premium product. This definitely looks better than the Savant we reviewed.

The colour choice also adds to the high-end vibe. Unlike the top flight K10, which has a full aluminium body, the inside part is plastic. Considering the price difference that's not really a surprise. I do like the sparkly bits in the plastic though.

Everything feels solid and well finished. Yes, the prices have gone up a little bit, no doubt to cover

manufacturing, but I think it's worth it.

## Noble Savanna performance

I tested the Noble Savanna directly with my Nexus 6P and Nvidia Shield tablet via my Oppo HA-2 amp/DAC.

I found the Savanna slightly warmer through the Oppo amp. Saying that, I never found them fatiguing - even when just plugged directly in to my phone.

## Fit and comfort

Noble's universal fit on the Savant was better than most earphones but not faultless. The longer nozzles on the Savanna certainly helps, as does the memory wire. The Savannas still stick out due to their size and shape but they stay in.

I found the foam tips gave the best seal and comfort for me, although I do feel that some of the top end was lost in the process. The silicone tips aren't as good for isolation but you do get better performance.

As with most universal fit IEMs and earphones, it's mostly trial and





# Noble Audio Savanna IEMs



error to find the winning combination. But I am happier with these than I was with last year's Savant.

## Sound quality

The Savanna performs consistently with a good, flat signature. Mids are impressive, so these do love acoustic instruments.

Bass is decent, although I found the low mids a tad recessed but that's preferable to being overblown for me. Treble resolution is clear and open. It might appear a little too forward for those who love a warmer reproduction but I have not found the Savanna cold.

The upshot of this is that you get excellent instrument placement and a great roomy sound. Prince's 'Sign o' The Times' album really shows the spaces in between the instruments. The starkness of the title track is handled as deftly as

the more up-tempo 'U Got The Look'.

There's a good balance and separation through the mids which feels pure and natural.

Bass is there and it is taught and controlled. Bass hunters might be disappointed but rock, metal, jazz, singer/songwriter, acoustic and classical all really work; especially acoustic. 'La Pasionaria' from Charlie Haden's 'The Ballad of the Fallen' really made me sit up and listen.



Soundtracks are really impressive – Star Wars and Jurassic Park both have weight and presence.

Separation and clarity are the Savanna's main plus points. Concert recordings especially

bring this aspect to light. Whether it's a Jazz quartet or an 'Unplugged' recording, you can imagine where everyone is placed on stage. Stereo imaging is the best I've heard from in-ears.

Overall, the quality is excellent with no muddiness, blooming or shimmer.

The Savanna are also easy to drive.

## Noble Savanna review conclusion

There are many more expensive IEMs out there and they may well perform better. The thing is, the Savanna are extremely competent.

With these universal IEMs from Noble you get a clear, flat reproduction.

The Savanna are engaging as well as clear with an extremely impressive midrange.

Low stringed instruments, such as bass and cello are nicely weighted and expressive.

If you are on the lookout for transparency and honesty at under £400 then the Noble Savanna should be at the top of your list.

## Noble Savanna price and availability

The Savanna are available now for £350 direct from Noble.

### Overall 8.3

**Build quality** 8.5/10

**Design** 8/10

**Ease of use** 8.5/10

**Sound quality** 8.5/10

**Value for money** 8/10

# Amazon Echo Dot and Alexa

**Amazon recently released their Echo and Echo Dot in the UK. Their 'Smart Speaker' is kitted out with Alexa, a virtual assistant. I have an Echo Dot on loan to review.**

Amazon's Echo and Echo Dot were released in the States last year. They finally landed here in the UK in September.

As well as looking in to how the Dot performs, I thought it would be interesting to see what 'skills' Alexa has on this fairisle.

## Echo Dot design

The Dot is essentially the Echo but without the speaker. For those of us with decent speakers, wired or Bluetooth, the Dot might make more sense.

With the speaker duties handed to something else, you're left with a smaller piece of hardware compared with the Echo. The Dot has its own speaker, so that Alexa can talk to you, but for music it's *just* about OK.

I dig how the Echo Dot looks. It measures 83.5 x 83.5 x 32 mm (WxDxH) and weighs in at 163 grams.

Its size means that it's much easier to tuck away in your room of choice. All you have to do is make sure that it'll still be able to hear you speak.

On top of the Dot there are buttons for volume up/down, microphone on/of, and then an 'Action' button.

The Dot also has the same light ring found on the Echo. The blue light indicates that Alexa is listening to you through her seven

Testament isn't going to give you excellent results.

I had the Dot sat next to my Hi-Fi rig, close-ish to speakers (roughly 1.5 meters away) and with music at reasonable volume, Alexa could still hear me.



microphone array. The blue ring lights up and a section goes green indicating her 'ears' are pointing.

Naturally, the mics can also be muted. This is handy if playing music or watching telly so that Alexa doesn't mistakenly hear her name.

Around the rear of the device is a micro USB port to provide power to the unit. Next to that is the aforementioned 3.5mm port to allow the Dot to connect to an external speaker.

## Echo Dot performance

The voice recognition of the Echo Dot is extremely impressive. Even when there's music being played it can still discern questions and instructions. Naturally, sitting it next to a speaker blasting out

## Set up

This is a straightforward enough affair. Hook-up the Dot to power using the USB cable and plug and then the lights will start in orange.

Alexa then instructs you to download the Amazon Alexa app on to your

phone or tablet. In the app you hand over your Wi-Fi details and it'll get itself connected.

There's the option to use the device's internal speaker or one of your other Bluetooth or wired speakers. You'll have to provide your own 3.5mm jack lead though if you're going cabled. You can update this later, of course.

## Alexa app

The app is also where you can add skills. The Dot is able to answer some general questions but adding these skills increases Alexa's usefulness. I, of course, added Just Eat, the Wine Assistant, and Tube Status, as well as hooking up my Spotify and Amazon Prime accounts.

There's a whole range of skills that Alexa can gain. Some are more useful than others. On one scale (pun intended) there's the

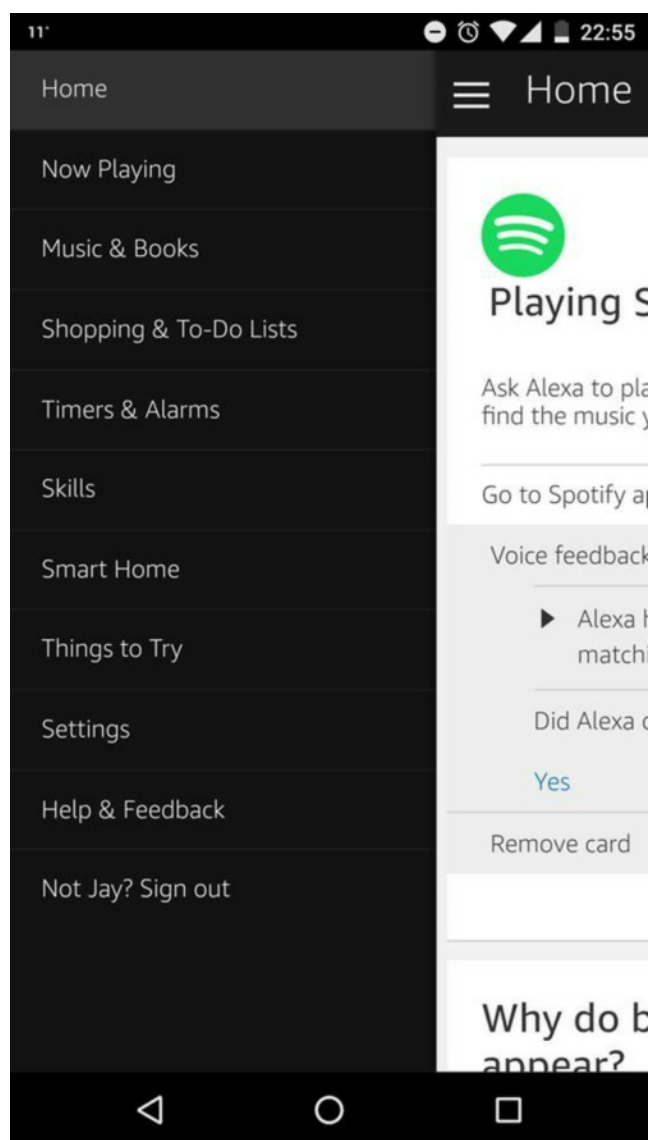


# Amazon Echo Dot and Alexa

musician's 'Interval Trainer' and 'Acoustic Chord' guide whilst, at the other end, there's the virtual cat 'Meow'. I bet President Trump has grabbed that one already!

## Amazon Alexa store

You can also nab skills from the Alexa section of Amazon. The Skills are listed in categories such as Business & Finance, Connected Car, Productivity, Smart Home, etc.



Also on Amazon, you can see your Dot has been added to your devices.

There are plenty of Smart Home skills to be had. Unfortunately,

none for the kit I have which is, to be fair, fairly dated now.

## In use

I was really impressed by the Dot's voice recognition. As someone brought up in South Yorkshire, my accent confuses people, let alone software. Add to the mix that my girlfriend was raised in Birmingham; this had its work cut out in our home.

The only time Alexa got confused was due to the question ("Alexa, should I eat a yogurt now?") being an example), rather than her ability to understand our words.

Your questions are stored in the app. This allows you to feedback on and that Alexa wasn't able to answer. Through this method her knowledge and accuracy will improve.

Playing songs or playlists from Spotify (you need a Premium account) was the only time the Dot shows its Achilles Heel. That weak spot is the in-built speaker. It's pretty much as good as the ones in a smartphone or tablet. Not dreadful but you

wouldn't want to listen to music you cared about through it.

Thankfully there is the option to hook it up to another speaker. In the kitchen the wonderful Dali Katch comes in to its own.

If you open Spotify on your PC when playing music through Alexa, it shows what's playing and that it's happening on the Dot.

Once you have Alexa paired with a Bluetooth speaker all you have to say is "Alexa, connect" and she obliges. I now have Spotify as the default library. All I have to say is "Alexa, play some relaxing music." To this request she replies "Playing the Chilled playlist."

## On/off

Using an external speaker is all very well but that does mean getting up to switch the speaker on. Either that, or leaving a speaker plugged in and on all the time just in case you want to play music. At least with using the Bluetooth Katch I can use the Dot's speaker and just tell Alexa to "Connect" when I want to hear the music played through the external speaker. Using a cabled speaker means that the Dot is always hooked up to the external output. This in turn means that you always have to have your speakers on.

The Dot's internal speaker is fine for most duties, it's just that music playback is better through a decent speaker.

If music playback or listening to podcasts are your main reasons for buying a Dot then I'd suggest stump up the extra £100 for the Echo. It's either that or a little bit of effort switching your speakers on/plugging the Dot in them when required.

It's a shame that you are not able to select an output mode for cabled speakers. Just as you say "Alexa, connect", it would be neat if you could say "Alexa, output to speakers", when you need to.

# Amazon Echo Dot and Alexa

## Skills

After just a couple of days living with the Dot it became natural just to ask questions to the room. Getting the headlines (Flash Briefing), travel updates and diary checks as I iron my things in the morning has become normal.

When cooking I can ask it to set timers. I can get the ingredients required for cocktails, or re-order my last Chinese meal from Just Eat.

I don't yet have an Uber account but to get Alexa to book a cab must be cool.

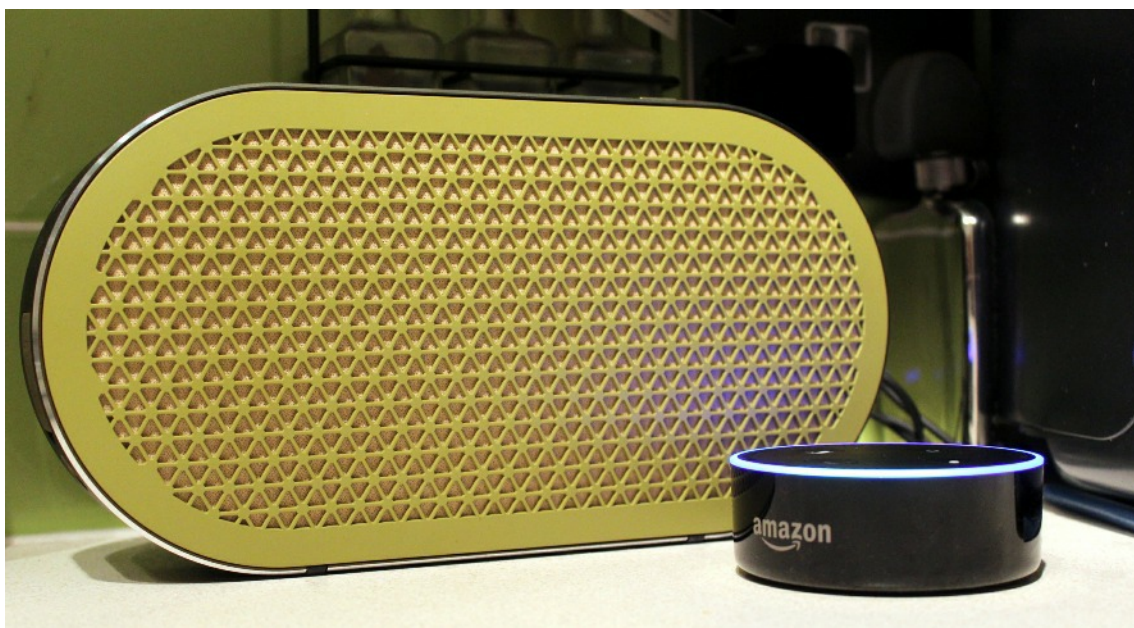
Developers have made around 3,000 'Skills' for Alexa already. There is bound to be more and, as Alexa gets smarter, they can only get better.

For example, after adding the Jamie Oliver Skill I was expecting Alexa to talk me through a recipe. Nope, she sends me an email of it. It would've been much cooler to get step-by-steps as to when to add ingredients.

## Amazon Echo Dot review conclusion

The Echo Dot is a truly impressive little bit of kit. The voice-recognition is excellent.

The internal speaker isn't great for music but hooking it up to an external speaker isn't a huge chore. Bluetooth worked better for me rather than having a speaker switched on all the time.



On the subject of speakers, I was also impressed by how quick Alexa can find playlists and tracks. Brilliant for those bleary mornings.

Its compact nature also means you can hide it out of the way but still within ear shot.

If you're looking to try out Amazon Echo then I can safely say the Dot is the way to go. If you find it as impressive as I did, then you can always add an Echo to your kitchen or bedroom and leave the Dot in the living-room plugged in to your Hi-Fi.

You never know, in a year or two it might be up to Stark's Jarvis levels of cleverness. As with most things, it's all in the hands of the developers now.

## Amazon Echo Dot price and availability

The Echo Dot is available now for £49.99 from Amazon.co.uk and comes in Black or White.

Cases are also available for the Dot so that it can match your decor better. Why not go for a six-pack and get one for free? Just

enter **DOT6PACK** at checkout where you will see the discount applied for a six-pack. Or, get 12 for the price of 10, enter the promo code **DOT12PACK**

The Echo is also available and will cost you £149.99.

## Overall 8.1

**Build quality** 8/10

**Design** 8/10

**Ease of use** 8.5/10

**Performance** 8/10

**Value for money** 8/10



# Stihl Compact Cordless garden tools

After seeing the new Compact Cordless range launched by Stihl at Wisley Gardens, I just had to get my hands on them for review.

That might sound like a strange statement from someone who's in to their geekahol, but I do have previous. I wanted to become a gardener as a career choice. My work experience from school was working with the local Council's team who looked after all the parks in the area. I really enjoyed it but my crippling hay-fever proved to be more than a minor problem.

Fast-forward to now and, finally, at my London home I have a little garden. I have started to revisit my love of plants and, when I can, attempt to maintain my little green place.

Most of the kit I own is either manual (spades, shovels, rakes, shears) or I have acquired them recently from the local ads (lawnmower, long-handled loppers). So, the need to test some up-to-the-minute garden tech was strong.

Stihl arranged it with my local dealer, Seddon's in Waltham Cross, for me to collect some PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) as well as the blower and trimmer. So, I spent some time in the garden.

## Stihl Leaf Blower – BGA 56

I have to admit, when it comes to leaf blowers, I have always felt the same way as William Shatner in his duet with Henry Rollins: "*Leaf*



*blowers. Is there anything more futile?"*

The fact is, it is autumn and with it comes those seasonal tasks that can be done quicker with the right tools. The most persistent job is collecting and getting rid of leaves.

I have a tendency to let the leaves fall and then, when the trees are almost bare, rake them up and put them in the garden waste.

## BGA 56 Compact Cordless Blower review

This year it was time to try something different. The Compact Cordless BGA 56 blower is much lighter than the industrial one I used at the council.

This is a rechargeable battery powered leaf blower. The friendly and helpful folk at Seddon's took me through how to use the blower, but it is truly a simple piece of equipment.

As long as the battery indicator is showing a good charge (just press the button on the rear of the pack) and the battery has been pushed in

to the handle firmly, you're good to go.

It is worth mentioning at this point that the battery has two positions. The first click is for storage, but the battery isn't engaged. Give it another push and click and then you are good to go.

As I am storing these in an outside, locked unit, I have removed the batteries as it's getting cold on an evening now.

## Lightweight

The blower is really light. In fact, remove the battery and it feels like there's almost nothing there. That's not to say that the blower is flimsy.

The body of the BGA 56 is well put together and the extendable nozzle does take a little bit of a firm hand to adjust, but I like that.

I was also blown-away (pun intended) by how powerful the blower is, but how relatively quiet it is in operation. My little plot took almost no time at all and clearing the borders were the best bit.

I usually leave them as getting leaves from in between plants is just too fiddly if I don't have a lot

# Stihl Compact Cordless garden tools

of time to spare. With the BGA 56 leaves were cleared in a breeze, as well other bits of detritus.

The battery lasts for around 20 minutes so it's good for quite a few runs through my garden.

## FSA 56 Compact Cordless Grass Trimmer

Part of the PPE I picked up, as well helmet, boots, gloves and over-trousers, were some safety glasses. Having had some experience with petrol-driven trimmers I know how easy it is for bits of wood and stone to get thrown up. Better safe than sorry folks.



The trimmer, like the blower, is adjustable. The shaft is telescopic so you can make it shorter or longer depending on your height and what feels comfortable.

The FSA 56 weighs 3.3kg including the battery. A lot of that weight is from the cell but the

trimmer is remarkably well balanced when the battery is fitted.

The battery has the same double click system as mentioned earlier.

### Tidy

Whizzing around my borders took no time at all.

I have bricks as well as those log rolls to mark the edges (most of which are hidden in the photos) so breaking the trimming line does happen. Unlike some trimmers the Stihl one does not have a constant feed. Instead, you simply tap the trimming head on the ground and some more line is allowed out. After doing this a couple of times it becomes as natural as reloading your weapon in Counter Strike.

Battery life seems to be even better on the trimmer and it was still showing three bars after my quick test. This included doing the side and front of the house where weeds like to appear.

My only grumble is that the head on the trimmer cannot be positioned vertically as some others can. For me it's not a deal breaker, I just thought that I'd better mention it.

### Well built

This being the second tool I've used from Stihl I am beginning to see a trend. The build quality and materials appear to be top-notch.

These are designed to be used outdoors and tackle regular jobs. Let's face it, you don't want

something that will fall apart after one season. The Stihl equipment will last for years by the feel of them.

## Stihl blower and trimmer review conclusion

Let me kick off by saying, I love not having cables on my garden tools. I now look at my aged Flymo as a relic from a bygone era.

The blower and trimmer I have tested are not only powerful but lightweight. Them being adjustable to suit different people is another plus point.

You may be able to find cheaper alternatives out there but I dare say that they will be lacking in power, build quality, or stamina – most likely all three.

If you're serious about your garden, or simply want to make garden maintenance a little easier, you need some Stihl Compact Cordless love in your life.

## Price and availability

The BGA 56 blower retails at around £199. The RRP for the FSA 56 Grass Trimmer is also £199. You get one AK 10 battery and AL 101 charger in the bundle.

The protective clothing is available separately.

### Overall 8.3

**Build quality** 8.5/10

**Design** 8/10

**Ease of use** 8.5/10

**Performance** 8.5/10

**Value for money** 8/10



# BenQ EW2775 27-inch monitor

**GadgetyNews has reviewed a number of monitors from the lovely folk at BenQ and this time we have the EW2775ZH. The 27-inch monitor boasts an AMVA panel with full HDt 1080p resolution.**

The EW2775 looks to be a well kitted out office monitor. It's packing low blue light modes, flicker-free operation and 'brightness intelligence technology'.

The specs actually go beyond those of a basic office station and should prove useful in most applications. We all know that specs are only half the story though, don't we?

## BenQ EW2775ZH design

The EW2775ZH has a similar vibe to the GW2270 we reviewed a while back.

It has extremely slim bezels around three sides of the panel, with a thicker bezel at the bottom to house the logo, lights and buttons.

The small and circular physical buttons are found on the right underside of the bottom bezel. They're relatively easy to find without looking and operate without any fuss.

The monitor is quite thin as well, thanks to a white LED backlight and an external power supply.

From the side the monitor is impressive; albeit not the thinnest that's passed through our doors (ViewSonic's VX2776 and the AOC Q2781PQ are definitely watching their waistline).

Connectivity comes by a pair of HDMI ports, VGA, a 3.5mm jack and the AC input. The monitor's speakers are rear loaded too.

The stand does offer some adjustment but not as much as we experienced with BenQ's BL-series and XL-series stands. The EW allows for back and forwards tilt, and that's your lot.



## BenQ EW2775ZH performance

The EW2775ZH is a full HD monitor, with a native resolution of 1920 x 1080. A contrast ratio of 3000:1 and a refresh rate of 60hz. The panel is an 8bit AMVA+, with a response time of 12ms (4ms GtG) and comes with some neat features, such as 'Brightness Intelligence Technology' and 'Low Blue Light Plus' mode.

Viewing angles are a good 178° on both the horizontal and the vertical. As this is a BenQ monitor, it features extra viewing technology in the form of a flicker-free backlight.

## Brightness Intelligence Technology

If you're wondering what the heck 'brightness intelligence technology' (B.I.T.) is, it's similar to the 'Black eQualizer' technology that BenQ use in their gaming monitors.

It brightens dark areas of the screen, making them more easily visible. It's great for spotting enemy soldiers hiding in the shadowy areas on CS:GO, as well as highlighting dim areas in photos and videos.

## EW2775 In the office

We mustn't forget that this is an office monitor. Granted, most monitors will cope with spreadsheets and documents, but these workhorses might get tasked with more demanding jobs.

## Colour and contrast

These tasks mean that colour accuracy and contrast are of equal importance to resolution. This covers general photo editing through to colour grading, video production, through to 3D modelling.

The EW2775ZH produces with good contrast and decent colour accuracy. Although, I did notice that colours looked slightly differently depending where it was on the screen. On the device I had to review a block of colour seemed a different shade in the top left to

# BenQ EW2775 27-inch monitor

the bottom right. I realise that this monitor has been passed around, visiting at least my friends over at Tech Addicts before me, so it might be the signs of a tough life. But, on this occasion, the colour uniformity could be better.

Ignoring that small foible, the EW2775 is plenty good enough for general photo editing and video editing requirements. Perhaps not at a professional level, but I found it good enough for my needs and dare say that the average office user will find it a great tool.

## Resolution and eye care

The 1080p resolution might seem a tad pedestrian these days. At least it means that there's no scaling required to fill the 27-inch display.

The EW2775ZH's high contrast with the B.I.T. ensures that darker areas of photos and videos are still easily visible.

The Low Blue Light modes are great for avoiding eye-strain and seem to minimise disruption to your sleep schedule as well.

Watching films on this BenQ was nice enough, handling bright colours and inky blacks pretty well.

If only it had the BL-series' adjustable stand but, even without it, the EW makes a great office screen.

## EW2775 Gaming

I know, I just can't help myself. But when I have a 27-inch screen sat on my desk the temptation to test it with some gaming cannot be ignored.

1920 x 1080 resolution is the minimum acceptable for gaming

these days, as is the refresh rate of 60Hz.

So, I am not expecting fireworks here. But then, this is aimed at workers rather than gamers. On that score, don't be expecting any FreeSync or G-Sync tech here either.

Saying that, I realise games have moved on quite a bit, but I remember the specs of the monitors I was using to game 10 years ago. The EW might well have been a dream machine for me back then.

I have to say that the EW2775ZH performed remarkably well with some casual gaming. It kept up with Project Cars without any noticeable lag in-game and the colours looked pretty good. CS:GO was equally well handled.

It might not be up to the standard of pure gaming monitors but, for jumping on and off for a quick session, the EW2775 will be enough to scratch that itch.

## BenQ EW2775ZH review conclusion

The EW2775ZH is a stylish and thoroughly modern looking monitor. It also dishes out a clear and bright picture. It does lack the adjustability options of other screens though.

My model did seem to have a slight colour uniformity issue. On the other hand, its colour accuracy and contrast means that photo and video work is easily handled.

HD movies are also a joy to watch thanks to the high contrast ratio and 'Brightness Intelligence Technology'. The Low Blue Light mode looks after your peepers when having to put the extra hours in to meet your deadline.

The EW2775ZH offers a good amount of ports and a lot of monitor for the money. Overall, its colour accuracy and contrast are the winners here for a great office monitor. It will even sate that quick gaming frenzy when it hits you.



## BenQ EW2775ZH price and availability

You can buy the BenQ EW2775ZH for an amazing £180 right now on Amazon.

**Overall 8.3**

**Build quality 8/10**

**Design 8/10**

**Ease of use 9/10**

**Performance 8/10**

**Value for money 8.5/10**



# Astro A50 wireless gaming headset

**Back in July we let you know about the updated Astro Gaming A50 headset. We've had it for a while to review now so we're ready to let you know what we think about it.**

Last year, the company revamped its Astro A40 model with a Tournament Ready edition. I still love this headset and, as well as its improved Mixamp and Astro Command Center software, it has proven to be a comfortable headset. This is what I use on the Tech Addicts UK podcast.

This year it was the turn of the Astro A50 to get a refresh.

## Astro A50 headset design

The new Astro A50 follows much of the A40 TR's design elements, which makes sense. That's great for me as I love the A40 TR.

The design is clean and well thought out. The colour scheme on this version is grey with metallic green.

I'm not as much in love with green on this Xbox/ PC version I have here to review as I am with the white A40. But that's not a huge deal breaker.

The PlayStation version is black and blue, which would suit my rig a little better. That's all just personal taste though.

The headphone construction consists of top-notch plastics and plenty of metal where it matters. It not only looks good but feels like a quality item.

### It's all about the base

The biggest overhaul is with the wireless technology on the latest A50. Instead of having a



headphone stand/charger and separate Mixamp, this is all contained within a neat base station and the cans themselves.

The base station holds the wireless A50 headset and also charges it.

On the bottom edge of the earcups are small charging contacts which, when placed in the base station, top up the can's charge. Simple and effective.

The readout lights on the front alert players to the energy level of headset. There are four bars and the last one flashes when the device is charging.

The boom mic is attached to the left earcup. Unlike the A40 TR, this cannot be swapped over to the other side. Again, not really a deal breaker but I thought that this was a nice touch on the A40. You can swap out the foam ear pads for synthetic leather items with the Mod Kit. In the Mod Kit you also get a black headband section too.

Personally, I find the foam pads much better for longer sessions.

We at GadgetyNews appear to suffer with hot ears when gaming.

The base station also has a handy charging port for your phone or other USB device. This can be found next to the console/PC selector switch.

Connectivity-wise, there's optical in and out, a microUSB port and a 3.5mm input so you can add some background music to your gaming from your phone or tablet.

## Astro A50 headset performance

The A50 utilise a 5Ghz wireless transmitter. I found this to be spot on. Let's face it, you don't need the range or penetration of the 2.4Ghz band as your console will

# Astro A50 wireless gaming headset

rarely be in a different room to where you're playing.

## A50 set up

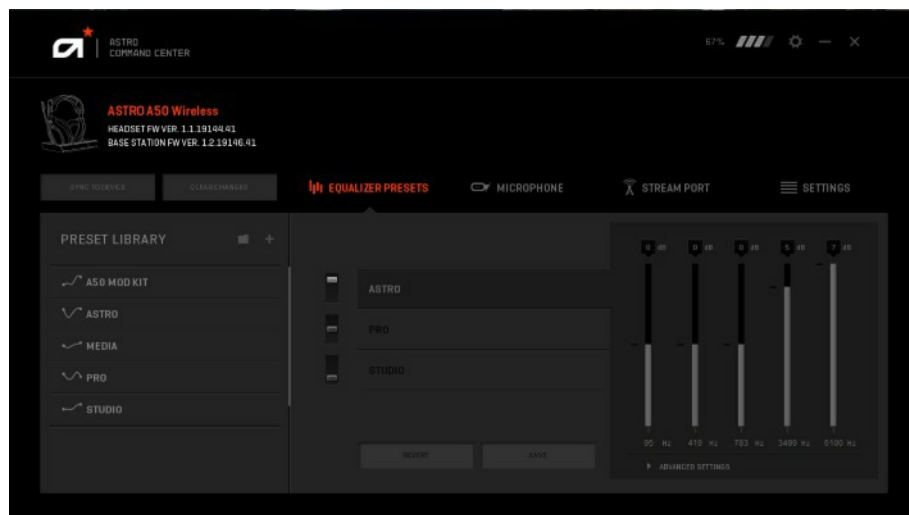
Setup is incredibly easy. It was made even easier for me as all I had to do was unhitch the A40 TR's Mix Amp and use the optical cable and micro USB from that to plug in to the A50 base station. So, within seconds, I was good to go.

The only other thing I had to do was flick the switch over from Xbox to PC.

It might have been nice to have a button on top of the base station in order to select whether you want audio through the cans or your speakers. It's no biggy to go in to the PC audio menu, but just something for Astro to consider for future refreshes.

## A50 Battery life

Astro Gaming promises 15 hours of battery life, and players will discover that the headset delivers on that – although I am not entirely sure. There is a very good reason for this ambiguity though gadgety faithful.



You see, I have to admit, I never really saw the headset drop below a quarter charge; even after a decent session on CS:GO or Project Cars. Part of the reason for this is the ease of the charging station. Any comfort breaks or sprint to the fridge for a cooling beverage saw the headset dropped back in its charging bay.

On the occasions I'd just plonk them down on my desk, the Astro A50s had my back. Thanks to their built in accelerometer the A50 know when they're on your head or lying flat on a table. So, when not on your bonce they'll switch off automatically.

## A50 Sound quality

The A50 headset supports Dolby 7.1. This is handy as it helps with the spatial accuracy of where sounds are coming from.

This means that you get the upper hand (or ear) as you will be able to better tell where discrete noises are positioned. Whispers happening behind

you? Zombie groans coming from another room? Someone reloading around the corner? This isn't cheating, it's just another level of realism.

You can flick the Dolby tech on or off using a dedicated switch on the right headphone.

The A50 delivers crisp, immersive audio.

## Astro Command Centre

You can tweak the settings via the Astro Command Center to your specific requirements.

Mine needed a firmware update but that didn't take long.

Here you can tweak the presets that you activate using the three-position slider on the right-hand earphone.

The headset offers three EQ modes: Astro sounds more balanced in its default state; Pro doubles down on bass and brings up the high mids, whereas Studio seems to emphasise treble. All three modes are satisfying, although Studio's scooped mids get fatiguing.

You can also optimise the 'Stream Port' mix. This is the levels between Game, Chat, Mic and the Aux input. Head over to 'Settings'



# Astro A50 wireless gaming headset

and you can even dim the lights on the base station.

## Sound quality overall

Project Cars gave a satisfying rumble and wheeze when thrashing turbo-charged cars of the 80s and 90s around the track. CS:GO and Left 4 Dead 2 came in to their own with the directionality of the 7.1 helping me to stay alive for a little longer than normal.



Mortal Kombat Komplete is always handy to undo the stresses of the day. I was impressed by just how well the punches and kicks came through.

The A50 also doubles as a dependable pair of multimedia headphones. Led Zeppelin's 'Physical Graffiti' sounded great streamed through TIDAL. My copy of the Blade Runner Director's Cut sounded huge as well as clear through the A50s. Gun shots rang out convincingly and dialogue was projected naturally. The Vangelis soundtrack was as lush as always.

## Microphone

The A50's mic is more than adequate for in-game chat. I have

used it without informing my Tech Addicts co-hosts, so being wireless hasn't altered the sound quality as far as they were concerned.

I am assuming that the mics on the A40 TR and the new A50 are pretty much identical though – aside from the wireless aspect.

The boom of the microphone is totally flexible, so getting it as close to your mouth as you want is not a problem. When the mic isn't required it simply can be flipped up vertically.

Looking at the specs for the previous iteration, if you wanted to use the mic on the Xbox you would have to add a cable. That kinda negated the whole wireless USP of the headset

somewhat. That has all been sorted for the 2016 A50 though folds. Happy days Xbox fans!

The mic's settings can also be tweaked in the Command Centre.

I've used the headset and mic in Skype chats and Google Hang Outs as well as the podcast. All came through nice and clear according to my chat partners.

## Astro A50 wireless headset review conclusion

The Astro A50 is everything I hoped it would be.

Sound quality is excellent and it is remarkably comfortable to wear for extended gaming.

I do love the freedom of the 5Ghz wireless tech and there is no discernible drop in sound quality between these and the A40 TR. On the subject of wireless, even Xbox One gets in on the wire-free action now!

The Command Centre is really easy to navigate and your trio of EQ options are just a slider click away. Thanks to the Mod Kit you will be able to keep your ear pads fresh.

Add in the convenience of the charging base that also keeps your cans safely stored, I really can't find a downside. If I was to be extremely picky, an output selector by way of a touch sensitive button atop of the base would be neat. I am not mentioning the colours as green obviously matches the Xbox theme and blue goes with PlayStation.

## Astro A50 wireless gaming headset price and availability

The A50 wireless headset is out now and can be yours for £250 direct from the Astro Gaming website.

**Overall 8.4**

**Build quality 8.5/10**

**Design 8.5/10**

**Ease of use 8.5/10**

**Sound quality 8.5/10**

**Value for money 8/10**

# D-Link DCS-936L HD security camera

**GadgetsNews has had D-Link's DCS-936L HD security camera patrolling the living room. We've previously had the mydlink Home Monitor HD performing duties there (it has since moved to the office), so how does the new kid shape up?**

Home security IP cameras are becoming increasingly more popular, and it makes sense. Your home may or may not have a burglar alarm – if you're renting, you might not even get any say in this.

So, short of getting creative in a Home Alone stylee, adding some networked security devices is the next step. I must add at this point that most of you will have spotted the first weak spot of these devices already. If your network goes down, these devices are rendered useless.

Well, not so with the DCS-936L HD. I shall tell you more about that later on.

## D-Link DCS-936L design

The most obvious difference between this camera and the others I have had here is that it this one is black.

Now, if anyone was to ask which colour is more stealthy, black or white, it would normally be black. The thing is, I understand why a lot of the consumer cameras are white. This goes doubly as someone who rents their place.

Most walls and/or ceilings will be painted white.

The thing is, if you wanted to hide a camera in a good shady spot, then a gloss white plastic eye isn't really going to get in to the Ninja Hall of Fame. The DCS-936L, however, will.

This camera also has more placement options as there's a



whole lot of swivelling going on.

### Swivel

Let's start with the base. This can not only flip out and be angled, but the ring around the base allows it to swivel and point in exactly the right direction.

This means that, if you have limited mounting options, you can still cover the area you need to.

There's more though. The camera itself can also be rotated.

A very handy trick indeed, especially if you are planning to mount the camera from the ceiling or on a wall. True, you can set up the software to flip the video, but this is a more hands-on and intuitive way to get an image the right way up.

## microSD and microUSB

The camera is powered by the ubiquitous microUSB port in the rear of the camera.

The cable terminates in to a power plug with the usual slide-off 2 and 3-pin plug options.

The base of the camera has a channel for tidy cable routing.

There is also a microSD slot in the camera. This allows you to record video footage and store it locally on the camera, as well as having it pushed to your NVR (networked video recorder).

I really like how the DCS-936L looks. The base really does open up the options for positioning the camera. I just had it sat on the top of a

bookshelf and the wide viewing angle can cover my living space really well.

## D-Link DCS-936L performance

Just like the mydlink Home Monitor HD, the DCS-936L captures 720p (1280 x 720) video in 16:9 ratio format.



# D-Link DCS-936L HD security camera

What has changed is that the view is not only wider, but the quality of the optics are also improved on the DCS-936L. The stats for the camera are that it packs 4x digital zoom and the sensor has a focal length of 2.45mm and a F2.4 aperture.

Angle of view is (H) 100°, (V) 54° and (D) 120°.

## The app

The app is really straightforward and easy to use.

As you can see, there are other D-Link smart devices at Gadgets HQ that are also controlled by the same software.

This makes it even easier to keep tabs on your D-Link kit.

The D-Link software even allows you to view all the video stored on the SDcard, as well as live monitoring.

This also means that if you record on to an NVR (Networked Video Recorder) and someone breaks in



to your business/home, you don't really have to worry if they do your NVR over. Because, if the criminals think they're being clever by busting up/stealing your NVR, you have the SDcard in the camera which has been used to back up all the action. Boom! Back-ups all sorted.

You can set the app up to notify you each time the camera either detects movement or sound. These push notifications will then pop up on your mobile device as a text or email. You can also get your device to give you audible alerts.

The camera has a microphone in order to detect any noises. The mic is pretty good but there is no speaker in the unit. So, no two-way chat with your pets or crims when you're out and about.

## Settings

Enable camera LED – this is a real neat feature. This allows you to turn

the LEDs on the front of the camera on or off.

So what? Well, if you have hidden the black camera in a dark corner, you don't really want a bright green LED ruining all that stealth.

The camera in this shot has the green power LED switched off. The red lights you can see are for the infra red night vision.

As you can probably tell, the night vision is on and yet there are lights on in the room. This is down to the sensitivity setting which can be altered.

## Night vision sensitivity

So, if you can still see the room in your video capture in colour yet your camera seems to want to flick over to the black and white night mode – you might want to sort that out.

The camera has 5 metre night vision with the infrared LEDs.

The night vision is really clear though. This is a screen shot straight from the app. You can take stills direct from the app though.

The room was actually in total darkness at this point and everything can be clearly made out. Yes, it's untidy but I'm busy!



# D-Link DCS-936L HD security camera



Another handy thing is that you can actually mark a particular area to trigger notifications.

Simply draw on the screen with your finger the area you want the camera to pay attention to. The red area in the shot above is what I want to trigger if it spots any motion. This means my nocturnal flying monkeys can still glide about without bothering the camera. Other scenarios are just as valid – such as ignoring the area around the windows if you have cats or foxes regularly pressing their furry faces against them, for instance.

## More info

You can toggle to get extra detailed information from the video capture, depending how much of it you need.

I guess if you're a security or video nut or just really need all the information about everything, then this might be right up your street.

With all the info showing you get the device name, model number, the D-Link ref, resolution, encoding, frame and bit rates, and whether or not audio is on.

## Web interface

The web interface will most likely not be needed by more users. I think the whole mobile app plus camera scenario would be plenty for me.

But, in the web interface there are more advanced settings to be had.

For instance, if you would rather set the camera up on the network, or a particular network, you can certainly get your hands dirty in here. Personally, loading up the app and using a QR Code is my ideal way of 'setting' tech up.

If you plan to record the captured footage to an NVR then this is where the static IP settings will be useful.

This is also where you can flip the video, as well as adjusting the Brightness, Contrast, etc. The light frequency is handy if you're getting flickering on your recordings due your lighting.

## Recording settings

For both MVR and SDcard you can set it to record when triggered or, through the web interface, you can actually set the SDcard

recording to be Always. This is not an option in the smart app.

## D-Link DCS-936L HD camera review conclusion

The DCS-936L is certainly a great security camera for its size and price.

It looks good, and has a wider-angle lens than other products from D-Link or similar companies. For me this comes second only to the Arlo Q.

The optics are excellent, the video quality is good, and the mic captures decent audio too.

Throw in the usefulness of recording to SDcard then I reckon D-Link have a winner here.

## D-Link DCS-936L HD pricing and availability

The camera has a RRP of £70.83 (Exc. VAT). You can grab one on Amazon for £102 plus delivery. I have seen them elsewhere on the web for around £80

## Overall 8.2

**Build quality** 8/10

**Design** 8.5/10

**Ease of use** 8.5/10

**Performance** 8/10

**Value for money** 8/10



# Anki Overdrive Supertrucks

**I'm a huge fan of Anki Overdrive. I was enthusiastic about it when I reviewed it last year. Earlier this year Anki introduced their Supertrucks and I was invited along for a sneaky peek. Now I have a Supertruck to test at home!**

Being old enough to remember greats such as TCR (Total Control Racing) and Scalextric, Anki Overdrive blew me away. In fact, Overdrive has proved a huge hit with all my mates to the point where if they come around for a drink they quiz me if I haven't already got the track set up.

I've extra bits of track such as the Collision and Launch kits but it was time for something new to race.

## Anki Overdrive Supertrucks

Thankfully, Anki introduced the Supertrucks. There are three to choose from – X52, Freewheel and a limited edition X52 ICE exclusive to the UK and Republic of Ireland at Smyths Toys Superstores.

These Supertrucks are a big deal in every way. Not only do they open up a new dimension to the racing battle game, the app has been refreshed to include the new trucks' abilities. Oh, and the trucks are almost three times the length of the original Supercars.

This makes overtaking a tad more difficult – a bit like when Volvo started racing their 850 estates in the Touring Car Championships back in the mid-90s.

Here's a quick interview with Tommy from Anki:

## Supertruck X52 review

### Anki Overdrive set up

I have X-52 to review in addition to the four Supercars that I already have.

It might be commonsense for most but I think I should mention here that you cannot use the Launch Kit with Supertrucks. As awesome as it would be to see an articulated lorry jump a gap, that particular skill is not yet present. If you do try then the vehicles will pick it up when they initially scan the track. When I had my testing time with the trucks earlier in the year I did suggest a special Launch Kit for the trucks where the truck could go around the jump whilst the cars could still go over. Let's see if that happens.

Setting up is simple. You will need at least the Starter Kit to get going. This comes with two cars, Groundshock and Skull, a four car charger, tire cleaner, riser pieces to build *low bridges*, and ten track

pieces capable of constructing eight different layouts.

I emphasised the low bridges as the risers were just a bit too low for the trucks when I set my track up. I ended up using a couple of the risers from the Launch Kit to ensure X52 could get under the bridge.

To take part in a race each player needs a vehicle and the free Anki Overdrive app installed on a compatible iOS or Android phone or tablet. The app and your device becomes your controller.

The Supertrucks use the same charger as the cars, so that's sorted. A decent 20 minute charge for all the vehicles should be good. I generally charge the cars as I'm building up the track.

### X52 in game

You only really need one Supertruck to get started with the expansion and once added it unlocks the new features.

Supertrucks can be used in the existing game modes but you also get some new ones. I love the Takeover battle where you start off in a car but then can take control of the truck.

The trucks have their own unique weapons: Freewheel gets a Gravity



# Anki Overdrive Supertrucks

Trap, whereas X52 is loaded with a Pulse Ram.

As you would expect, the trucks take a little longer to hit top speed. I tried to level the playing-field by adding loads of corners to the track. The cool thing is that as the Supertrucks gain momentum they also build Rage. Once their Rage-o-meters are maxed they can enter Rage Mode allowing them to speed up and take everything out.

X52 might not be as fast or nimble as the cars but you can certainly use its size to your advantage. You can become a rolling roadblock or use the trailer as a whipping tail. When Rage Mode kicks in then nobody is safe.

The Pulse Ram is fun as it clears the cars out of the way when you're getting your speed up.

## Anki Overdrive Takeover

The Takeover mode comes new to Anki Overdrive with the Supertrucks.

In this battle you all race in Supercars and try to damage the



Supertruck until you are able to take it over.

Once in charge of Supertruck you are able to attack your opponents using your super-sized weapon. The thing is, while you're doing that they will be trying to nab the truck for themselves.

## Anki Supertruck review conclusion

I love the addition of the Supertrucks to Anki Overdrive.

You do have to build your tracks and change your tactics with them in mind though. More straights would be a bonus to allow the Rage to build up quicker, for instance.

I did find that you get more pile-ups with the truck but that just adds to the fun most of the time.

I do rate Anki Overdrive

highly and was a definite favourite of mine last year. Adding the Supertrucks really gives the game a new lease of life and an added dimension. If you have Anki Overdrive already, you need at least one Supertruck in your life!

## Anki Overdrive Supertrucks price and availability

The Anki Overdrive Supertrucks are available now for £59.99 each, so add them to your Christmas wishlist. More information can be had over at the Anki website.

- Anki Overdrive Starter Kit: £149.99
- Supercars: £49.99 each
- Supertrucks £59.99 each

### Overall 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





# Revell Control Spot 2.0 camera drone

A couple of months ago Abe reviewed the Nano Quad Cam drone from Revell Control. We have since had the Spot 2.0 camera drone sent over to have a look at. This time Darren has taken the controls.

The main expectation for the Revell Control Spot 2.0 camera drone was improved optics over the Nano Quad. We were also hoping to see good speed and handling but all still at a keen price.

Is that what we got? Read on and see what Darren thought.

## Spot 2.0 design

The Spot 2.0 has a minimalist design which no doubt keeps it light and nimble. The black plastic frame is livened up by sporty flashes of white and yellow.

There is a camera fitted in to the centre of drone's nose. This can be angled to suit your shooting.

The battery is exposed but is snugly fitted (more on that later).

Around the rear is where you will find the MicroSD card slot and battery connection.

The drone's feet are fixed and part of the propeller braces.

It's a good looking drone to be fair and looks built for purpose.

## Spot 2.0 performance

### Set up

Being a man, I don't see the point in instructions and normally just



like to plug and play. This is nigh on impossible with the Spot 2.0. From initial battery set up to syncing the drone to the controller, everything with the Spot 2.0 just seems fiddly. I actually thought I'd broken the thing before I'd even started and that was due to the exposed nature of the wiring which connects the battery to the quadcopter.

One tug on the wiring to remove the battery and I was sure I'd pulled a little too hard. Since then, turning the

Spot 2.0 on since has been tricky. I now have to hold the wire at a particular angle to get it to work. And this is all before you try and fly the thing!

### Not for indoors

Right, let's do this!

What better to ease myself in to my first drone experience than with what I thought was an entry level drone, boy was I wrong.

The Spot 2.0 is touted as being a fast stunt drone with HD video and still image capabilities which I wish I'd known before I started to fly the thing in my living room!

After crashing in to almost everything in the room, I can

confidently state that the Spot 2.0 is durable, although the back left propeller hasn't been the same since it's coming together with my coffee table.

After visiting the Revell site, I now understand that the Spot 2.0



# Revell Control Spot 2.0 camera drone

is not entry level but for those with between Advanced and Professional level flying experience, I obviously do not fall in to this category.

## Off to the park

Finally, the wide open spaces, the wind in my hair, this was it, I was going to fly this thing! Again, boy was I wrong!

Due to the speed of the Spot 2.0 and its stunt flying nature, the controls are very sensitive. Twice I ended up in bushes and once the Spot 2.0 lodged itself in to a tree (this happened not long after the video below finished, in fact you can see the tree!).

But I persevered and after a while I started to enjoy myself and with more time, patience and battery power (does not last long at all) I could really have some fun with this.

The price point makes this attractive but I can't help but think, if I was an advanced/professional droner (not a word, I know), surely you would be investing in more expensive kit with better technology?

I know I could have been aided by a gyroscope and some stabilisers, especially after seeing the Propel launch of their Star Wars drones this week.

## Spot 2.0 camera

The SD card slot is nicely tucked away and the camera is movable to allow for forward facing recording or birds-eye view. This is all good stuff. The only this that lets it down is the camera quality.

The selling point here is HD recording and imagery, I can't see any of these in the video or



photo's I have taken. The video above was taken straight off of the SD card together with the image below.

The image is blurry and pixelated. This is probably down to the movement of the drone while the image was taken but surely Revell must've known that pictures being taken while flying a stunt drone would be subject to this and should done something to counteract this.

## Specs

- 4CH GHz remote control system
- With speed levels and flip function
- 3.7 V LiPo / 350 mAh battery rechargeable / included
- LED lighting
- High-quality HD camera
- Micro SD card and adapter
- Four powerful electric motors
- With stable chassis especially crash-insensitive
- Convenient charging with USB charger
- Charging time: approx. 60 min / flight time: approx. 5-7 min
- Length: 140 mm / width: 140 mm / height: 40 mm
- Rotor diameter: 58 mm
- Weight: 41g

## Spot 2.0 drone review conclusion

A drone at entry level cost that requires near-expert level skills.

If you can keep it up, you'll have fun (that's what she said), and there probably isn't many better at this price. But, if you are at the flying level targeted, you may feel you'll better off investing in something a little sturdier, with more tech and a better camera.

## Revell Control Spot 2.0 camera drone price and availability

The Spot 2.0 camera drone is available right now for 59,99 € direct from Revell Control.

Alternatively, you can nab one for £43 from Amazon.

## Overall 7.2

**Build quality** 7/10

**Design** 8/10

**Ease of use** 6/10

**Performance** 7/10

**Value for money** 8/10