

Hifi Pig

EXTRA

& GadgetyNews

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JANUARY
2017

HIFI REVIEWS

GOLD NOTE VALORE PLUS 425
TURNTABLE
PRO-JECT PRIMARY TURNTABLE
COS D1 DAC & PREAMPLIFIER
SOTM SMS 200 STREAMER
CEC TL5 BELT DRIVE TRANSPORT
TANNOY ECLIPSE THREE LOUDSPEAKERS
STELJES NS3 POWERED LOUDSPEAKERS
LEHMANN LINEAR D HEADPHONE
AMP/DAC
WIRE ON WIRE EXPERIENCE 680
INTERCONNECT
CHORD COMPANY SIGNATURE TUNED
ARRAY USB
1More C1002 & E1001 IN-EAR
HEADPHONES

GADGET REVIEWS

AOC Agon AG241QG G-Sync monitor
UKI Mr Bubble & Hystrix
Red 5 X Series 2.4 camera drone
AOC Agon AG241QX Free-Sync gaming monitor
Vape Shoreditch e-liquids
TP-Link Archer C9 router
Onkyo TX-8150 networked amp / DAB radio
Mi Band 2 fitness tracker
Skullcandy Crusher Wireless

OUTSTANDING
PRODUCTS OF
2016



Tellurium Q®

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



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



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

- Jon Myles, *HiFi World* 2015

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

- Awards Edition, *HiFi World* 2015

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

- Mono & Stereo, 2015

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



Stereo Times
The Complete Audiophile Magazine

BEST PRODUCT 2015 High Fidelity.pl

HI-FI WORLD





WELCOME

And so that is 2016 out of the way. It's been a great year for Hifi Pig but along the way we've lost a good deal of great musicians and yesterday we heard of the sad loss of Bret D'Agostino - our thoughts are with his family and friends.

We've had the opportunity to play with some seriously great Hifi throughout the year and whilst much of has been very good indeed only six products were awarded our Outstanding Product Award. They weren't the most expensive and they weren't the most flashy products, but they were the ones that scored brilliantly across our scoring criteria. You can read the original review of each of the six in this month's magazine.

2017 promises to be a challenging year for Hifi Pig with new ideas and features planned throughout the year. We're also expanding our writing team and so expect much more interesting, and often somewhat controversial comment.

Whatever you have planned for the coming year, I and the entire Hifi Pig team wish you health, wealth and happiness.

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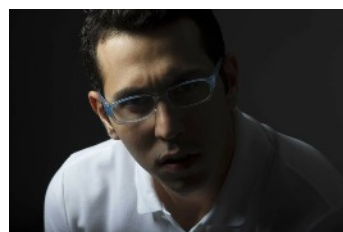
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Skullcandy Crusher Wireless: haptic
bass headphones

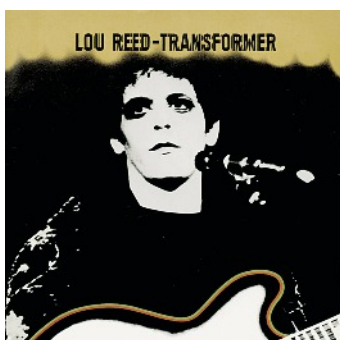
MUSIC

MUSIC NEWS AND REVIEWS



CLASSIC ALBUM

Never one to avoid an obvious cliché, John Scott takes a walk on the wild side and reacquaints himself with Lou Reed's 1972 hit album, Transformer.



COLUMNS

RETRO BITES - Janine Elliot charts the rise and fall and rise again of the Thermionic Tube/valve in this fascinating and informative article

BIRDS EYE VIEWS - 2016 As Seen From The Perspective Of Linette Smith

VIEWS OF STU - 2016, The Year The Music Died? Cheerful as ever Stuart Smith makes a list of musicians that have died in 2016 and asks, was this the year that the music really did die?

RANTS, RAVES & ROCK 'N ROLL - James Fleming asks that crucial question: Is it the singer or the song?

OUTSTANDING PRODUCTS 2016



**PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE PREMIUM HP
INTEGRATED AMP**

**MUSIC FIRST BABY REFERENCE V2 TVC
PREAMPLIFIER**

**PRO-JECT MaiA DS INTEGRATED
AMPLIFIER**

CHORD SARUM SUPER ARAY USB CABLE

**STUDIO CONNECTIONS CARBON POWER
CABLE**

GIK ROOM TREATMENT PRODUCTS

PIEGA Launch Second Generation Coax Loudspeakers



After 16 years, Swiss loudspeaker manufacturer, PIEGA has presented the second generation of their Coax loudspeaker. The second generation of the Coax series comes with the compact bookshelf loudspeaker Coax 311 and the two slightly over one metre high floor-standing speakers Coax 511 and Coax 711.

The PIEGA team under CTO Kurt Scheuch invested a lot of work in the redesign of the loudspeaker drivers.

They say that “the second-generation Coax systems are a further development of the previously used drivers in all important aspects. Faster acceleration and improved dynamics were the objective in developing the new UHQD woofers. Titanium voice coil formers and an optimised suspension make the magnet system highly efficient and create the perfect basis for the specially formed, coated and extremely rigid aluminium diaphragms. We have managed to further improve the cabinet design: So-called “Tension Improve Modules” (TIM) place the entire cabinet under controlled tension and in this manner prevent even the smallest vibrations in the cabinet”.

New Lifestyle Audio Brand Meters

Meters Music is the creation of Ashdown Engineering, makers of musical instrument amplifiers for many of the world’s biggest music stars. The likes of U2, Foo Fighters, Biffy Clyro, System of a Down and many other artists use Ashdown amplifiers on stage and in the studio.

Meters Music is set to begin rolling out its ambitious raft of home audio devices, including a range of wired and wireless noise-cancelling headphones, desktop audio systems and a hybrid amplifier/wireless speaker for musicians and enthusiasts to play along with their chosen music.



Working equally well at home, on the move or in the studio, the Meters Music audio range has been designed and sonically tuned in consultation with the artists who’ve worked closely with the company over many years, including some of the world’s top session musicians – and the world’s biggest rock stars. System of a Down bassist, Shavo Odadjian, says, ‘Ashdown has been a huge part of my sound for over a decade; now I can take them with me everywhere.’ All Meters Music products feature the company’s patented VU meters. The VU Meters react in real-time to the sound level of the music being played, just like a studio mixing desk. Introducing the new audio range, Meters Music Managing Director Mark Gooday, said, ‘After nearly three years of design and patents, we are over the moon with the sound of these products. Our artists are asking daily when they can get their hands on them, and the iconic VU meter has been a huge hit with them all’.

Branko Glisovic Retires From High End Society GmbH After 25 Years



Branko Glisovic's career began in 1967 when he started his apprenticeship as a technical business manager. After various positions in retailing before becoming the co-owner of a hifi studio in Cologne, he switched to the audio industry, becoming sales manager of the "Pirol Audio Systeme" company (Rogers, Arcam, Chartwell, Sonus Faber, Systemdek, Richard Allen).

It was in this position that he became one of the founding members of the High End Interessengemeinschaft für hochwertige Musikwiedergabe e.V. in 1982 – today known as the High End Society.

He was involved in the organisation of the High End at the Hotel Kempinski near Frankfurt / Main and he became managing director of the High End Society in 1991. The High End Society GmbH was founded in 1996 and Mr. Glisovic (pictured above with some of his team) has been the sole managing director from that point until today. In his years as managing director, Branko Glisovic has been able to achieve much, together with his proven and experienced team in Wuppertal. Under

his leadership, the High End has become one of the world's most successful trade fair for the audio and Hifi. It has also organised numerous other events and exhibitions as well as founding a national trade fair in Switzerland.

By the end of 2016 these events will number:

35 HIGH END trade fairs

8 HIGH END SWISS trade fairs

50 WORLD OF HIFI events in Germany and Switzerland

13 HIGH END ON TOUR roadshows

During this time, he also produced numerous albums in a wide range of musical styles on the High Endition label. In addition to this, he has promoted concerts and written essays and publications and initiated a youth project at the Junior University in Wuppertal in which the students created their own loudspeakers.

From 1 January 2017, Mr. Stefan Dreischärf will be taking on the duties of the managing director of the High End Society Service GmbH.

Cyrus ONE Mobile App Released



Cyrus has released a mobile app for its ONE amplifier, bringing app control convenience to users of the new compact amplifier.

For use on the iOS and Android platforms, the Cyrus ONE app enables users to control input selection and volume from their smartphone or tablet. For the target audience of 'Enlightened Consumers', the 18-30 year olds who are design-led, feature and interface driven, the ability to control via an app is the norm and a necessity, with remote controls relegated to reserve or 'emergency use' status.

In order to utilise the app, users of the Cyrus ONE will have to update the firmware in their unit, which is a very simple process they can do themselves by connecting their Cyrus ONE to their PC or Mac via the mini USB connection on the amplifier, and installing the firmware which is available from the Cyrus website. Alternatively, they can take the unit to their authorised Cyrus retailer, who will be able to perform the update for them. The new firmware also provides an additional upgrade to the ONE. Having listened to the feedback from customers, the Cyrus engineers have modified the operation of the automatic Speaker Impedance Detection (SID) circuit to greatly reduce the audible test impulse heard when switching the amplifier on. The performance of the SID, which instantly measures the speaker impedance and adjusts the amplifier to suit, is unaffected by this change.

The Cyrus ONE app is available now from Google Play and the Apple App Store.

ABC Records Partners With RecordingTheMasters

ABC records has partnered with RecordingTheMasters (MULANN Group) to offer tape recording services.

best audio quality with SM911 tapes to seduce

the audio high-end market".

ABC Records developed professional audio tape recording to promote analogue audio for audiophiles in China. Fully equipped with Studer reel to reel master recorders, ABC Records say that they "provide the





Pro-Ject
AUDIO SYSTEMS

The Classic



August 2016



Best Turntable 2016-2017

An Instant Classic

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

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

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

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

Available Now for £799.00 (UK SRP)



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Ifi Micro iDSD Black Label DAC



Ifi got in touch to let us know about their new DAC. They claim that “the micro iDSD ‘Black Label’ is the world’s most powerful DSD/PCM/DXD battery-powered DAC.”. They go on to say, “Perhaps ‘Double Black’ is a more apt description because it is different on the outside as well as the inside”.

“The matt and gloss black anodising is set against the ‘burnt orange’ silk print. While keeping in essence the same design philosophy, we re-engineered the micro iDSD after taking on board customer suggestions and integrating the most advanced and newest components available”.

The improvements they have made include:

DAC digital signal and digital power sections upgraded

AMR Global Master Timing® femto-precision clock system upgraded for ‘super low’ phase-noise/jitter

Analogue signal and power sections revised

3D+performance-tuned / XBass+ performance-tuned

Latest Output stabilisation network

The retail price of the micro iDSD ‘Black Label’ is US \$549 (ex-tax) or Euro 599/£455 (incl VAT).

MUTEC Releases MC-3+ Smart Clock USB Update-App For Apple Mac



MUTEC, German manufacturer of professional and audiophile consumer audio equipment, is proud to release a utility app for firmware updates of the MC-3+ Smart Clock USB on Apple Macs. Since the release of the Windows update utility in July MUTEC say they have received “a tremendous positive response from customers who have eagerly updated their devices”.

MUTEC CEO Christian Peters comments: “The MC-3+USB is very popular among audiophile customers using the device for USB playback from Apple Macs. As a class-compliant device this is particularly simple on a Mac since no drivers need to be installed. We are extremely proud to now offer a Mac-compatible app allowing our customers to keep their MC-3+USBs up to date with equal convenience.”

Key Features:

Free, user-executable update. Optimised re-clocking algorithms. PCM/DSD auto-detection. Enjoy music via USB up to 192 kHz PCM and DSD/DoP streams (up to DSD256 and DoP128 respectively) without the need for manual switching. Support for Windows PCs and Apple Macs (OS X 10.8 and up).

The MC-3+ Smart Clock USB can now be updated on both Windows PCs and Apple Mac computers. Units updated on a Windows machine will still run on a Mac and vice versa. Just like before, the MC-3+USB functions as a class-compliant audio device without the need for additional drivers. A driver is available for Windows PCs.

Once again the firmware release package will contain several update files and a comprehensive guide taking customers through the process step by step. This is a simple and quick process that does not require special skills or computer knowledge. Both the Windows drivers and the respective firmware update packages for Windows

Nord Acoustics Introduce New SE Case

Nord Acoustics got in touch to let us know they have launched a new case for their Hypex amplifiers in stereo and mono block version.

The case, sourced from Japan is, says Colin of Nord Acoustics, “is a real step up in quality and finish, it’s superb”.

The amplifiers in the new case are available now and Colin goes on to say “We will offer a refit service to existing customer’s amps, into the SE case later



next year, details will be posted when available”.



"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

Erzetich Perfidus Headphone amp
RRP: £999



Very generous part exchange available, contact us for more information

web: eliteaudiouk.com

e-mail: info@eliteaudiouk.com

tel: 020 3397 1119

McIntosh Announce Two New Preamplifiers

McIntosh has introduced the new D1100 Digital Preamplifier and MP1100 Phono Preamplifier with the aim of integrating turntables and digital devices into home audio systems. The D1100 Digital Preamplifier includes the company's most advanced DAC to date, featuring nine digital inputs, while the MP1100 Phono Preamplifier features 24-bit digital outputs to enable recording from vinyl sources.

D1100 Digital Preamplifier £8,995

The D1100 Digital Preamplifier is a flexible reference-level stereo preamplifier featuring the most advanced DAC McIntosh has ever used. It features nine inputs to keep even the largest digital system connected. The D1100's advanced eight-channel, 32-bit DAC is used in Quad Balanced mode and digital inputs include three optical, three coaxial, plus MCT, AES/EBU and USB inputs, the latter accepting up to 32-bit/384kHz signals and supporting DSD64, DSD128, DSD256, DXD 352.8kHz and DXD 384kHz playback; all other inputs accept up to 24-bit/192kHz. Three pairs of balanced and unbalanced stereo outputs are also offered.

The D1100 is designed for ease of use: all inputs can be renamed, its four data ports and four power control triggers are fully programmable, plus it has both IR and RS232 external control. For personal listening it features McIntosh's Headphone Crossfeed Director (HXD®). The D1100 is a fully featured, fully functional self-contained unit that can be used independently of any other preamplifier. It can also be connected to and used in tandem with, its analogue equivalent, the C1100 Vacuum Tube Preamplifier. Combining the two together, with the included umbilical cable, creates the definitive analogue and digital stereo preamplifier. When connected, the C1100 takes over all control of the D1100 giving a single, easy-to-use interface. The D1100 is housed in a polished stainless steel and hairline brushed black titanium stainless steel chassis.

MP1100 Phono Preamplifier £9,995



The new MP1100 Phono Preamplifier has been designed for vinyl lovers. It utilises four 12AX7A vacuum tubes, with two tubes per channel in a fully balanced configuration, making it McIntosh's very first fully balanced vacuum tube phono stage.

The MP1100 has three sets of RCA phono inputs, with one set of XLR connectors. All phono inputs allow for adjustment of both resistance (six settings) and capacitance (eight settings). For ease of use, the preamp comes pre-programmed with profiles for Moving Coil and Moving Magnet cartridges as well as McIntosh's MT10 and MT5 turntables. Five additional fully customisable profiles are included and these can be assigned to any phono input. RIAA, LP, NAB, AES and 78 analogue equalisation curves are also available, plus two useful built-in analogue filters: a Rumble Filter and a Scratch Filter. Adjustable gain from 40dB to 64dB allows for further customisation, while a mono setting enables proper playback of mono recordings. In addition, there's a pair of balanced and unbalanced high-level inputs for connecting other sources, and

a pair of balanced and unbalanced fixed outputs complete the connections. In a nod to today's digitally environment, the MP1100 also has an optical, coaxial and USB output. These are fixed at 24-bit and can be set to either 96kHz or 192kHz. When used with a properly configured conversion program, the USB output can be used to accurately rip vinyl to a computer. McIntosh's digital output clipping indicator notifies the user when distortion is being recorded to the file, allowing settings to be adjusted to create distortion-free digitised audio.

To combat noise, the MP1100 is a dual-mono design. It can be paired with any preamplifier, integrated amplifier or home theatre processor that includes a volume control. An ideal match is McIntosh's C1100 Vacuum Tube Preamplifier which also has a dual-mono design; both also share the same polished stainless steel and hairline brushed black Titanium stainless steel chassis.

Orders are now being accepted for both units with (US) shipping anticipated to begin for D1100 in December and MP1100 in January 2017.



Aequo Audio

sonus completum

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

Noble Audio Launch Noble X On Massdrop



Noble Audio has collaborated with the community-driven commerce site, Massdrop, to create an exclusive IEM. The new Noble X, which is available for a time-limited period on Massdrop, features Noble's new proprietary drive units for \$249 (around £200), a price point not seen before in a Noble product.

The Noble X offers distinct styling, differentiating it from Noble's five-strong Classic IEM line, the inspiration for the new model. The Noble X for Massdrop features the same build materials and metalwork as Noble's other models, but with a unique basket-weave texture and midnight blue finish. Inside, each unit features two proprietary balanced armature drivers: one for midrange/treble duties and the other for bass; the latter featuring a reconfigured vented port.

In response to feedback from Massdrop's community, the Noble X has a shrink-wrapped cable guide in place of the memory wire featured in Noble's other models. Further features include a detachable two-pin braided cable, aluminium end caps, plus a Massdrop presentation case with accessories. The promotion, or 'drop', is limited to 2,000 units (three per customer) and is available to both US and international consumers.

Noble X: \$249 (around £200 and subject to current exchange rates)

All orders will be shipped by Massdrop, estimated shipping date is March 15,

The Indulgence Show 2017 Dates Announced



Following the success of the inaugural Indulgence Show, held at Novotel London West in October 2016, the show organisers invited guests to a meeting to revisit, review and respond to the show and re-book for the 2017 event.

Outline plans for the 2017 show were presented and discussed, with the organisers very keen to hear the exhibitors' observations and additional requirements which will aim to be encompassed into the second Indulgence Show. Vernon Hamblin and Amit Patel, the founders of The Indulgence Show, are very keen to present the event as a show for the industry, by the industry, free from hidden agendas and very much in line with the event the UK hifi industry has repeatedly been asking for. The event will continue its 'three shows in one' format, with Audio London, headroom and Pure Pleasure operating under the umbrella brand of The Indulgence Show. Each section will be further developed to build upon the 170 brands and 135 exhibitors who presented the latest in hifi at Audio London, portable audio at headroom, and lifestyle indulgences within Pure Pleasure.

Music will once again be a strong element of the show, with live music from several artists performing during the daytime opening hours and after hours at public concerts and the private exhibitor party.

Commenting on the planning for the 2017 show, Vernon Hamblin, organiser said, "The response to the first Indulgence Show has been superb, with exhibitors and contributors praising it for its atmosphere, format, professional organisation and quality of visitor. We promised the industry a new event and the new audience it has been crying out for and we delivered. 2017 will see us build on this, with additional attractions and even more targeted publicity aimed at bringing high net worth individuals and families to the show to experience the incredible products our exhibitors make." He continues, "With our considerable advertising and marketing efforts, combined with the help of the industry in communicating to its own customer databases, we are confident that the visitor numbers will be higher than we saw at this year's inaugural show. We look forward to opening the doors again in 2017."

We believe that

LESS IS MORE



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24 - 25th June
Cranage Hall, Cheshire

Free parking and Free entry
Live music

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Great deals on overnight stay*

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Audio Analogue New Maestro Anniversary Integrated Amplifier



Last year Audio Analogue celebrated its twentieth birthday with a new, contemporary edition of the company's first ever product, the Puccini integrated amplifier. Now, the Italian brand has given the Maestro the 'Anniversary' treatment.

The original Maestro integrated amplifier was created in 2001, a hefty amp at 52kg. The Maestro range was later expanded to include a linestage, monoblocks and 24/192 CD player, while the original integrated amp enjoyed two subsequent upgrades in the form of the Maestro Settanta and Maestro Settanta Rev 2.0. So what prompted an 'Anniversary' edition?

"The new Maestro Anniversary was a natural and logical progression following on from, and building upon, the experience we gained in developing the Puccini Anniversary," says Audio Analogue. The company's design team spent months on R&D for the latter, conducting intense exploration and experimentation around the concept of zero feedback. The elimination of global feedback is not an easy thing to achieve, and so certain technical aspects of the design had to be uniquely created to achieve performance within a zero feedback topology. Therefore it made sense, following the success of the Puccini Anniversary, to apply that same learning to the Maestro. The basic design of the Maestro Anniversary is very similar to that of the Puccini but with two important differences. First, the amplification chain is fully balanced from input to the output stage, only becoming unbalanced to connect to the speakers. Second, while the Puccini does use feedback in the preamp stage, in the Maestro all stages are without global feedback.

The Maestro Anniversary extends the 'dual-mono' design further to include the power supply: left and right channels not only have their own separate grounds but also their own dedicated 600 watt mains transformers. The separate output stages use four pairs of power transistors per channel, enabling the amp to deliver 150 watts into 8 ohms, rising to a 500 watts into 2 ohms. The amp's circuitry has been refined, with as much attention having been given to the selection of materials as to its design, Audio Analogue have used military-standard resistors, custom-made polypropylene audio grade capacitors, 7N OCC copper internal wiring and pure copper output connectors. At the same time, the routing of the PCB was studied to optimise the signal paths and to maintain the symmetry of the stages, and heavy pure copper tracks (double the standard thickness) have been used.

As with the power amp's circuits, the preamplifier is also fully 'dual-mono'. Immediately behind the input connectors, switching relays route the signal to a discrete components buffer to isolate the amplifier from the source. The volume control, like that of the Puccini, is a resistor ladder. Following the volume control stage, the preamp amplifies up to about 12dB. Each of the Maestro Anniversary's three key elements - power supply, preamplifier and power amp - is physically housed on three separate boards.

Audio Analogue's Maestro Anniversary amplifier is available now, in black or silver, priced at £6,499 (inc. VAT).

Ortofon Announce New Vinyl Accessories



Ortofon have launched some new vinyl accessories including a new Test Record, which they say "is designed to allow you to verify your Hifi system in the most natural audio surroundings at home". The Test Record contains special test signals developed for analysing cartridge performance as well as its interaction with your tonearm and turntable.

The second product is a digital stylus pressure gauge, the DS-3, which is a lightweight compact digital stylus pressure gauge model, a miniature ultra precision non-magnetic instrument that tunes your tonearm. The DS-3 scale is factory precalibrated for high accuracy measurements with the tolerance of +/- 0.01 g.

MasterBuilt Cables Announced



MasterBuilt Audio say in a recent press release that they are pleased to announce the official debut of its high-resolution audio cables with the unveiling of four complete product lines – Performance, Reference, Signature and Ultra.

Each of these product lines offers the full range of cables, including power cords, digital cables, interconnects, and speaker cables.

VPI Prime Signature Turntable Launched



As the demand for vinyl grows at an extraordinary pace, the VPI team continues to develop its turntables to produce, they say, “a revelatory level of audio reproduction”. After the success of their award-winning Prime, VPI has launched the new Prime Signature turntable.

This new super table is the result of VPI’s thirty-five years of audio design know-how and has been lovingly engineered in New Jersey. The all new Prime Signature is part of an evolution of turntables from the US masters of vinyl replay. VPI wanted to get back to their roots with the Prime series by creating tables that offer quality high-end sound while taking advantage of improvements in technology.

Backed by VPI’s improved abilities with 3D printing and design, the Prime Signature features a black speckled gloss finish JMW 3D 10 Reference arm with a Nordost Reference wire. The plinth is composed of layered gloss MDF and machined aluminium together with a stainless-steel motor housing, corner posts, bearing nut bell and arm board. The Prime Signature rests upon custom-designed HR-X (Hot Rod Extra) isolation feet. The Prime Signature improves upon the VPI Prime by featuring improved bracing in the main bearing and arm through the aluminium sandwich construction of the plinth and improved mechanical grounding. There is better resonance damping of the motor as the stainless-steel housing weighs twice that of the original Prime. The new tonearm also delivers better aesthetics and damping.

VPI has of course not forgotten that there is a simple and beautiful tactile joy of playing vinyl - press the start button, move the tone arm into position and then lower it using the lever. The needle will then softly drop into the groove and the VPI Prime Signature performance will begin.

RRP: £6,000

McIntosh’s MP100 Arrives in UK



McIntosh’s new MP100, the first dedicated phono preamplifier from the legendary US brand and one featuring USB outputs for (24-bit) ‘rips’ from vinyl collections has arrived in the UK.

First unveiled in the summer of 2016, McIntosh’s new MP100 phono preamplifier, its first ever dedicated phono stage, has arrived in the UK in time for the holiday season. The new MP100 has been designed to get the best from vinyl collections new and old, by bringing classic McIntosh design qualities to turntable systems and high-res 24-bit USB recording.

The MP100 is packed with features specifically designed for the vinyl lover. It features both moving coil and moving magnet inputs to cover the full range of turntable cartridges, with both inputs benefitting from adjustable loading (six settings each) to optimise performance. Despite its compact dimensions, the MP100 also features both balanced and unbalanced analogue outputs, plus a ‘mono mode’ switch to decrease noise and correctly process the signal when playing legacy mono recordings.

When used with suitable conversion software, the MP100 can ‘rip’ vinyl to computers via USB to produce high-quality digital files. The digital outputs are fixed at 24-bit/96kHz to capture the full dynamic range of vinyl while optimising the digital file size. The MP100 also features digital output clipping protection, to prevent harsh-sounding distortion being recorded to the file during loud sections in the music. A further two digital outputs, optical and coaxial are also included for additional versatility.

The MP100 is available in the UK now priced at £2,750.

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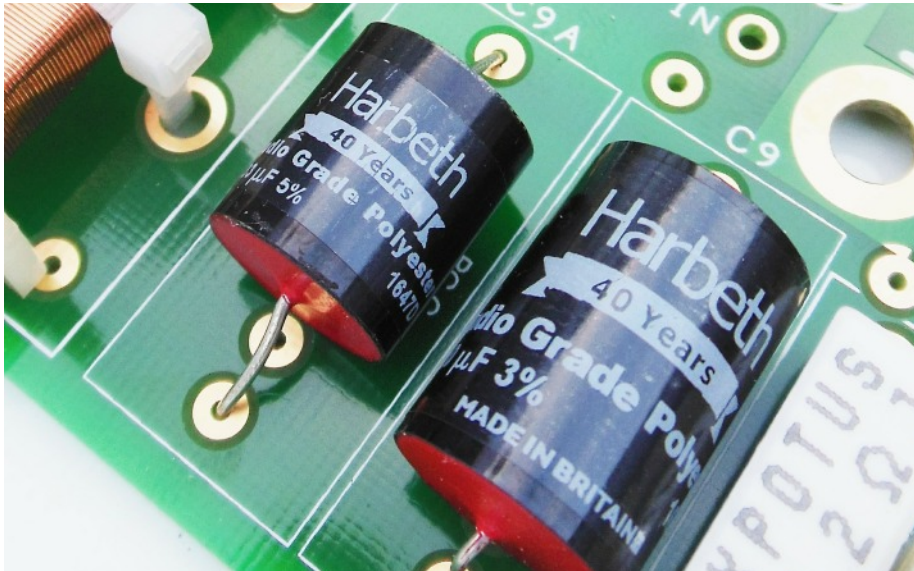


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HARBETH CELEBRATE 40 YEARS

British High-End Speaker Brand Celebrate 40th Anniversary With Limited Edition Products



British loudspeaker company, Harbeth, celebrates its 40th Anniversary this year with the launch of two exquisite limited edition products.

Harbeth's award-winning SuperHL5plus speaker and brand flagship, the M40.2, will both be available in a stunning walnut veneer with some beautiful added features including; the latest WBT-nextgen binding posts, a new-look super-tweeter with protection bar and British-made audio grade poly capacitors. To celebrate the sophistication of these models, each speaker will include the Harbeth 40th Anniversary limited edition front and back badges and a new magnetic anniversary grille badge.* A matching walnut stand is available from Hi-Fi Racks.

This announcement has been well received by Harbeth's distributors worldwide, all of whom are eagerly awaiting the arrival of the anniversary products this month.

Alan Shaw, Designer and Managing Director, says - "We were keen to really make an impact with our 40th Anniversary year in 2017. We've had many requests over the years for special features from both customers and

distributors. What better way to mark this milestone than with these limited edition products."

Andy Sinden, Production Manager, says - "With our 40th Anniversary we wanted to celebrate the Harbeth brand with something special and that we have never done before. Features such as the WBT-nextgen binding posts really enhance the look of our current models and are a perfect addition."

*For further details on the Harbeth 40th Anniversary products, please visit the Harbeth news page.

With our 40th Anniversary we wanted to celebrate the Harbeth brand with something special and that we have never done before



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OPPO UDP-203 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray Disc Player Released



OPPO Digital have announced that the new UDP-203 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray Disc player is ready for release. It is the successor to the BDP-103 series universal Blu-ray Disc player, the UDP-203

The OPPO UDP-203 supports the playback of 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray Discs. Packing a resolution of up to 3840 x 2160 pixels, UHD Blu-ray delivers four times the pixels of Full HD Blu-ray. The UDP-203 also supports High Dynamic Range (HDR) and Wide Colour Gamut.

A customised quad-core video decoder/processor integrates OPPO's video decoding, processing and optimisation expertise. A high-precision, well-balanced laser optical disc loader ensures smooth and reliable playback of all types of disc media. The player features two HDMI outputs – an HDMI 2.0 port for connecting to the latest UHD TVs, projectors and A/V receivers, and an HDMI 1.4 audio port for connecting to older A/V receivers. The design of the UDP-203 focuses on playback and universal compatibility with multiple disc and file formats. In addition to the latest UHD Blu-ray, the UDP-203 supports regular Blu-ray, Blu-ray 3D, DVD, DVD-Audio, SACD, and audio CD. The UDP-203 is equipped with two USB 3.0 ports on the back and another USB port on the front. Users can play video, music and photos from USB hard drives or thumb drives. Built-in 802.11ac Wi-Fi or Gigabit Ethernet connects the UDP-203 to users' home networks, so users can play media files stored on computers and home servers.

The player decodes audio file formats such as AIFF, WAV, ALAC, APE and FLAC. It also directly plays Direct-Stream Digital audio files in stereo DSD64/128 or multi-channel DSD64. With internal decoding of Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio, and bitstream output for object-based immersive audio formats such as Dolby Atmos and DTS:X, the UDP-203 delivers for both movie soundtracks and music. Besides HDMI, audio is concurrently available through the 7.1-channel analogue outputs, featuring "Velvet Sound" 32-bit premium digital-to-analogue converters from AKM of Japan.

The UDP-205 should be available in early 2017 and cost \$549.

Black Rhodium Announces Canon Musiclink Cable

Canon is a new Musiclink cable designed, say Black Rhodium, "to achieve very high sound quality when using portable music systems by using the latest Black Rhodium high end cable technology, Including the Graham Nalty VS-4 Vibration Stabiliser". It is hand built at the Black Rhodium factory in Derby



Supra LoRad 2.5SPC Limited Edition Mains Cable Released



Supra are launching a limited edition version of LoRad 2.5 shielded mains cable: The LoRad 2.5 SPC.

LoRad is an abbreviation of Low Radiation. Supra say: "The main benefit is the highly efficient shielding which helps to ensure that other low level signal cables are not affected by the close proximity of the LoRad mains cable. Likewise induced RF interference has been one of the biggest bug-bears of high quality audio and video reproduction and so by equipping one's hifi or AV system with LoRad, you should both see and hear a difference as the cable cannot act as an antenna and "pick up" airborne electrical interference from the likes of room thermostats and central heating systems and hence "dirty" the mains supply of connected hardware".

The Supra LoRad product range is used in hospitals, flight control towers, etc. where there is no room for system malfunction due to electro-magnetic interference deriving from multiple sources.

LoRad 2.5 SPC is available now both on 50m reels as well as in factory terminated lengths, fitted with a UK 13A mains plug (with gold-plated contacts and optional gold-plated Bussman fuse) and with either 10 Amp or 16Amp IEC320 connectors (again with gold-plated contacts). Factory-terminated lengths available are: 1m, 1.5m, 2m and 4m. Once they are gone they are gone, Supra will not release any more.

LoRad SPC will retail at £20 per linear metre (unterminated) with a 1m factory-terminated cable set (fitted with a UK mains plug, standard fuse and a 10 Amp IEC) retailing for £62.50 inc VAT.

Some Follow

others

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

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

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

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

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

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

Audio Consulting Rubanoide Dvajnoy With Rubabass 2 And Super Tweeter System



Audio Consulting is launching a new three way dipole system with, they say, “unique features”, the Rubanoide Dvajnoy with Rubabass 2 and Super Tweeter System.

Audio Consulting is a Swiss company producing high end audio equipment mostly for the music enthusiast, but also for professional applications. They specialise in audio transformer technology using high quality and often exotic magnetic materials, together with copper and custom made silver wire. They say that they also extensively use optimised thermal treatments (Cryo) during production of parts and equipment. Production takes place in Switzerland.

Price: CHF 185'000.00/ per pair - no VAT

PureAudioProject Release Trio15 PAP-Horn1



PureAudioProject say: “Just like all our Trio15 models, the 'PAP Horn1' resides on our Trio15 Modular Open Baffle Platform, and differs from other models only by the middle baffle with the horn, and the crossover”. They go on to explain “Our open design allows customers to swap the critical audio components and choose their preferable ones; all without the need to have any technical, DIY, or soldering skills. The horn capacitor resides on gold-plated terminals, and is interchangeable with only a screwdriver. At any time, the horn capacitor (as well as it's serial resistor) can be swapped. Different brands and models can be evaluated with your own ears, to choose the ones that match at best your sonic DNA”.

The PAP-Horn1 baffle will come in gloss white finishing, while the other baffles can be chosen from their regular offering of German Oak, Bamboo and Gloss White and Black (subject to availability)

The PAP-Horn1 Trio15 will start shipping during February 2017, and is being offered at a special pre-order offer and to offer existing customers at a special time limited upgrade offer.

Shipped from the US: US\$7,499.-, excl. VAT and shipping

Shipped in the EU: EUR8,900.-, incl. 19% VAT and excl. shipping

Pro-Ject Audio Box Design Pre Box DS2 Preamplifier

Pre Box DS2 digital is a premium pre-amplifier with five digital, one phono and one line level input. It features four different analogue and one digital output. The AK4490 D/A converter, from Asahi Kasei Microdevices, together with the complementing sample rate converter (AK4137). The ability to control the upsampling of all incoming digital signals to PCM 768 kHz / DSD256 with

the Sound Modes button gives you the possibility to shape the sound to your personal preference. Three different sound modes and five different digital filters at your hand offer no less than fifteen individual listening experiences.

It features a Phono input for all available MM and MC cartridges, one Line Level input for any other analogue source as well as lossless wireless sound transmission via aptX Bluetooth. The casework is done with solid aluminium to give an elegant appearance of high value but also to avoid any electrical or mechanical influences. To match their



turntables in design, Pre Box DS2 digital is available with wooden side panels (rosenut, walnut, eucalyptus) and in black or silver casing.

SRP € 799,00 or with wooden panels

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Magico S3 Mk II Loudspeaker Announced



Magico have announced the new S3 Mk II, floor standing, three-way (four driver) loudspeaker. The S3 Mk II nestles in between the S1 Mk II and S5 Mk II and features all of the design elements of the S-Series Mk II models, including a new 9-inch bass driver born from the design and engineering theories applied to the limited-edition, 10th Anniversary M-Project.

The S3 Mk II's high frequencies are provided by a 1-inch Magico diamond-coated beryllium-diaphragm tweeter that, say Magico "offers matching sensitivity, wide dispersion, and

increased power handling over the original S-series tweeter. A new aluminium housing for the magnet structure minimises overall resonance and improves the isolation parameters for the tweeter dome element. The long-throw voice coil enables lower distortion and optimal cutoff frequencies that enhance driver integration with the midrange driver". Magico's midrange reproduction is attained from a proprietary 6-inch driver. The cone material is formulated using Multi-Wall carbon fibre and a layer of XG Nanographene, which when combined is 20% lighter and 300% stiffer than the previous S-series cone designs.

The purpose-built sub-enclosure is made of a proprietary polymer material which provides an isolated and optimised environment for the midrange driver to operate within. Two newly designed 9-inch Magico bass drivers handle the low frequencies and are produced with advanced manufacturing techniques using the same new Multi-Wall carbon, Nanographene cone. The magnet structure controls a 5-inch pure Titanium voice coil that has a 1/2-inch of linear excursion and produces sound pressure levels up to 112dB @ 50Hz/1-meter.

The monocoque enclosure of the S3 Mk II is formed from a single piece of extruded aluminium that is 3/8-inch thick and 12- inches in diameter. The new aluminium top plate is machined into a 3D convex shape to minimise enclosure diffraction and break-up vertical standing waves. A massive base plate incorporates a newly designed 4-point outrigger support system that lowers the speaker's centre of gravity and increases overall stability. All four drivers in the S3 Mk II are acoustically integrated using Magico's exclusive Elliptical Symmetry Crossover topology that utilises components from Mundorf of Germany.

The S3 Mk II is available in two separate finishes: M-Cast (textured satin coat) and M-Coat (smooth high-gloss paint).

Suggested US Retail Price will be \$ 28,000.00 /pair M-Cast finish, \$ 32,000.00 /pair M-Coat finish with a ship date of January 2017



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TAGA Harmony TAV-616F SE Loudspeaker Launched



TAGA Harmony, a European manufacturer of speakers and audio electronics, today announced the launch of a new premium floorstanding speaker models in the Audio Video series: TAV-616F SE (Special Edition).

The speaker is based on the technology of recently introduced TAV-616F and TAV-606 SE with a couple of significant upgrades:

TLIE (Taga Low Interference Enclosure) – a very rigid enclosure. It is built of thick (15mm walls plus 21mm thick front panel) high-density MDF boards. The TAV-616F SE is available in 7-layer high gloss white painting.

The 2nd generation TPTTD-I (Taga Pure Titanium Tweeter Dome) utilises a differently shaped and lighter titanium dome as well as a double-magnet structure – it has a higher SPL, faster and more accurate movement of the dome.

6.5” glass fibre midrange driver

2 x 6.5 polypropylene woofer drivers are very light and have high SPL which results in faster, more accurate cone movement.

Decorative pure aluminium trim rings and tweeter faceplate (TPAF).

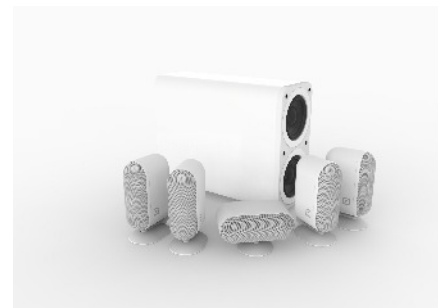
High end binding posts, internal OFC wires the same as in the high end CORAL series.

Bassreflex port and terminal box are rubber coated;

Black aluminium spikes and Special Edition logo badge underline unique character of the speakers.

TAGA Harmony say: “The TAV-616F SE is probably the best hifi speaker in this price category with sound and built quality which can be usually find in much more expensive designs”.

Q Acoustics 7000i 5.1 Home Cinema Package Subwoofer Upgrade



Q Acoustics has announced its '7000i' 5.1 Style Home Cinema Speaker package is to benefit from a subwoofer upgrade. Q Acoustics is a brand of Armour Home Electronics.

Its brand director, Alex Munro, stated: "The Q Acoustics 7000i home cinema 5.1 speaker package needs no introduction. This renowned and multi-award winning satellite and subwoofer system is acclaimed all around the world." Mr Munro continued: "In terms of both style and sonic performance, the 7000i continues to be the class leader. However, to move it even further ahead of the pack, we've decided to replace the older 7070Si subwoofer with the newer and more dynamic 3070S model from the 3000 Range. The new package will be designated '7000i 5.1 Plus' speaker package."

The twin 170mm, high power, high excursion drive units in the 3070S subwoofer, boast 45% more speaker cone area and combine to create a larger voice coil than the older 7070Si model. These factors, together with the ported enclosure design of the 3070S, enable it to deliver, they say “faster transients and a 'bigger', louder, more dynamic, but also more detailed sound”.

Available in classic gloss black or gloss white finishes; with a matt baffle, the 3070S subwoofer complements the 7000i satellite speakers both visually and sonically.

Price and availability:

The new Q Acoustics '7000i 5.1 Plus' package, with 3070S, is available now and has a suggested retail price of £999.00 inc vat @ 20%



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PMC Adds New Finishes To SE Range



The SE Series builds on the performance of PMC's three-way studio monitor speakers and combines them with the finest traditions of British cabinet making. The most discerning of audiophiles can now specify their SE models, in active or passive guise, in Grand Walnut or Amarone, with Natural Oak and Jet Black Veneer available to order.

PMC has researched the emerging developments in home décor and, in consultation with its customers, identified these new finishes as 'on trend'. Combined with the grille-less design of the SE with its unblemished front baffle, the sustainable hand selected and book matched veneers provide the SE Series with an aesthetic that is in keeping with the quality of the audio performance.

The SE Series encompasses the large three-way models, the IB2, MB2 and BB5 and is available as passive or fully active versions. It continues PMC's build quality with cabinets that have been redesigned with additional bracing to generate a lower cabinet resonance for reduced noise and to recreate a purer musical signal.

Keith Tonge, creative director, says, "Loudspeakers make a major statement, not only through sound, but through their looks and physical presence in a room." He continues, "The culmination of our research into emerging trends prompted the development of these four new finishes, which match their desirability with the superlative audio performance."

British Engineering And Hifi Brand SME Ltd Acquired By Cadence



Cadence Group has just announced it has taken ownership of British engineering and Hifi specialist SME Limited. Cadence, which already has major controlling interests in other prestigious audio brands, will bring a new level of investment to SME, allowing the company to extend its research and development activities whilst continuing to produce the class-leading products it is globally acclaimed for.

Over the last few years, Cadence has acquired major controlling interests in several highly respected audio brands including the UK's Spendor Audio Systems and Netherlands-based Siltech Audio and Crystal Cables. With a sustained focus on investing in market-leading audio companies, Cadence has a reputation for helping its companies grow further and to extend their research and development activities.

Although famous for turntables and tonearms, SME's unrivalled design and manufacturing capabilities mean that its expertise is sought after by many precision engineering disciplines including Formula 1 and Aerospace, where the highest precision engineering is commanded.

SME's newly appointed CEO, Stuart McNeilis said, "SME is the most iconic name in tonearm and turntable engineering and epitomises the very best of British engineering. By combining innovation with meticulous manufacturing and attention to detail has made SME a market leader for decades. With increased investment allowing for new product development, the company will build on its legacy of designing and manufacturing the best tonearms and turntables in the world." Simultaneously, SME has appointed high-end audio distributor Padood to look after all sales and marketing activities in the UK and Ireland. McNeilis continues, "We are delighted to announce this new partnership with Padood, who is one of the leading distributors of high-end audio in the UK. Together, we aim to grow awareness of the SME brand and its products to both traditional audiophiles and a new generation of music-loving enthusiasts."



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Bryston Introduce New CD Player



Bryston has announced the introduction of the BCD-3 CD player. The BCD-3 joins the family of digital products in the Bryston lineup, including the BDA-3 DAC (Digital to Analogue Converter).

The BCD-3 is expected to begin shipping to authorised Bryston dealers in December, 2016 with an MSRP of \$3495.

The BCD-3 has been engineered to playback Redbook CD and CDR disc formats using a premium transport/laser pickup assembly mated to two AKM 4490 384/32Bit DAC's. Bryston designed the player to utilize a single master clock that syncs the transport to the DAC, eliminating one of the primary sources of an unwanted artifact called jitter. The DAC in the BCD-3 is based upon the BDA-3 platform and includes a fully discrete Bryston class A analog output stage and independent analog and digital power supplies.

Users will have the choice of balanced XLR or unbalanced RCA Stereo outputs as well as transformer-coupled SPDIF/AES digital outputs. The BCD-3 is network connectable, enabling software upgrades via an Ethernet jack and there is a remote 12-volt trigger input as well. The front panel, available in black or silver aluminum, has been designed to aesthetically match Bryston's Cubed Series amplifiers.

"We are aware that the music industry has written off the CD format, however we have a significant number of customers who have substantial CD collections they'd like to enjoy," explained Bryston VP James Tanner. "We had the ability to leverage our BDA-3 DAC platform—one of the most popular digital products from Bryston—combined with a very good quality transport and deliver an audiophile CD player with astonishing levels of clarity and detail." Initial orders for the BCD-3 have been brisk after the prototype player was seen by media and enthusiasts at recent Montreal and Toronto high-performance audio events.

Amended New York Audio Show Dates Announced



The Chester Group has announced they will be moving the dates of their 2017 New York Audio Show to the weekend of November 10th-12th 2017, and the same weekend - November 9th-11th for 2018.

The Chester Group said: "This has only been possible because of the cooperation of the Hotel, to whom we are extremely grateful, because previously these dates were not available. This past November, we had a very successful show and it was always our intention to continue the show at the same venue, and to keep the dates as consistently close as possible year after year."

They go on to explain: "This new weekend will allow us to accommodate exhibitors who wish to do both CAF and the NY Show, by providing express shipping to New York. This is also Veteran's Day weekend where many people will be off work and we expect this will help increase attendance. (The NYC Marathon weekend is also the weekend before.)"

Details of this and other Hifi Shows and Hifi Events worldwide, can be found in the Hifi Pig Hifi Diary

Enjoy Hifi Pig Magazine In ISSUU Format

You can now enjoy Hifi Pig's monthly magazine in the highly readable and fabulous ISSUU format right here on the Hifi Pig website.

This format allows readers to experience the monthly e-magazine in a format that looks and feels very much like a traditional print magazine, with pages that turn in a realistic way and a generally better feel, though iOS users may experience difficulties in viewing. [Click here to see the new style.](#)

However, others may prefer to download the PDF version of the magazine to enjoy at their leisure and refer back to as and when they like.

BD Audio Appointed UK Dealer For Kii Audio Three Speaker



BD Audio have announced that they have been appointed UK dealer for Kii Audio Three, a new stand mount loudspeaker which really impressed Hifi Pig at the Warsaw Audio Video Show back in November.

Kii say their mission for the Three was to "break the sonic mould of compact speakers. Powerful small speakers with deep bass have been around for a while now but none so far sounded like a big speaker. The Three is built to fix that".

Each Kii Three contains six channels of DSP, D/A conversion and power amplification. Each side panel of the Three holds a 3x250W power amplifier board, designed by Bruno Putzeys using the latest iteration of the Ncore class D technology which he invented for Hypex. Unique to the implementation used in the Kii Three is a combined voltage/current control loop that, say Kii, "goes beyond merely a better amp – it actively improves the distortion performance of the drive units which contributes significantly to the extreme resolution of the speaker".

This means that the performance of the AD/DA conversion has to match that of the amps. This task fell to Bart van der Laan who has a long track record designing DSP and converter boards for high end professional audio equipment. Kii Audio's implementation is a complete pass through the AD/DA circuitry of the Three's signal processing boards which is entirely inaudible. Alongside the Active Wave Focusing filters the DSP is responsible for keeping the drive units within their safe operating range by gently adapting the filters instead of brutally limiting the signal, allowing the Three to play significantly louder and cleaner than much bigger traditional designs. On the input side there is a choice of analogue, digital inputs. All digital inputs are up-sampled and reclocked using Kii's own jitter rejection algorithm that they claim "guarantees actual "bits is bits" audio



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Gold Note Valore Plus 425 Turntable

By Janine Elliot

In Italian Valore means value and at €1495 complete with arm, the Valore Plus 425 turntable from Italian manufacturer Gold Note certainly looks to offer a good bang for your buck. Janine Elliot spins some tunes

GOLD NOTE VALORE PLUS 425 TURNTABLE



The Valore is the entry level turntable in the Gold Note range, a company set up in 1992, though only registering the name 'Gold Note' four years ago. As Tommaso Dolfi, Marketing Manager, informed me;

“Until the introduction of this brand, the company wasn't known to many since we were working mainly as OEM/ODM supplier for audio companies worldwide. It's something we still do”.

Indeed the Canadian company Bryston's new turntable the BLP-1 is manufactured by Gold Note. The company is 15 personnel in number, plus they have the sister milling company counting a further 12. The company don't just make turntables, arms and cartridge of beautiful looks and sound. Their portfolio also includes phono stages, speakers, amplifiers, CD player, DSD streamer, cables and stands. Gold Note resides in Montespertoli near Florence in Italy. The Valore, meaning “Value” was first produced in 2010. Their Valore 400 was their cheapest version at 400mm width. Now in its 425 incarnation it has grown to 425mm wide comprising a choice of 425 and 425 Plus versions with 30-mm thick MDF or acrylic plinth carefully shaped and indented around the bearing of the platter and the motor in circular shapes to drastically reduce all unwanted vibrations. The platter itself is made of 20-mm acrylic. The MDF versions can

be finished in lacquered black and white or to special order covered in real Italian leather (in a variety of white, black, red and sand), with the Valore 425 Plus Special Edition, as in this review, completely made in transparent acrylic and being the top priced version, though at a still very reasonable €1495. What makes this turntable especially good is that it comes complete with 9” tonearm derived from the Gold Note B5.1 arm. It even comes readily supplied with a hinged dust cover, just like in the good old days. No extra expense. My Gold Note arrived with a Vasari Red moving magnet cartridge tracking around 2g.

Motor

The Valore 425 Plus has a 12V synchronous Gold Note PWM motor which they developed with a unique PulseWidth modulator, the same idea as seen in their top end Bellagio (and also on the Bryston BLP-1), and which is designed to transform power voltage in AC-DC-AC mode. This triple conversion enables the best coupling of the two AC half-waves which removes motor resistance and vibration, plus providing a higher motor torque. As Tommaso explained to me;

“This power supply works as an inverter and converts the power AC high voltage to DC high voltage, then reduces the voltage to 12V and finally it reconverts it again to AC, precisely aligning the

What makes
this turntable
especially
good is that it
comes
complete with
9” tonearm
derived from
the Gold Note
B5.1 arm

GOLD NOTE VALORE PLUS 425 TURNTABLE

The motor drives the platter using an hourglass-shaped motor pulley of beautiful physique to pull the round belt around the edge of the platter

three coils of the motor to get very low noise and high torque at the same time”.

The motor drives the platter using an hourglass-shaped motor pulley of beautiful physique to pull the round belt around the edge of the platter. There is no need to move the belt by hand to change from 33 to 45. Control of the motor is via a separate electronic power unit with two buttons to select between 33 and 45 and a fine speed pitch adjustment achieved by pressing the two buttons together for 3-4 seconds. The fine speed adjustment facility even keeps the selection permanently in the turntable memory after it has been unpowered. Both speeds are indicated by a red LED. It is great to see a turntable using a quite an expensive design in such a modestly priced package.

Platter

The platter is a rough surface acrylic, which is a good surface for ‘mating’ with the vinyl disc. The design comes directly from the top level Gold Note turntables. They chose the rough surface as opposed to a shiny surface so that it would create a different surface of contact and avoid being electrostatic. The bearing houses two Teflon/graphite rectified bearings that hold the 60mm long spindle CNC-machined from stainless steel. A large longitudinal groove is located on its axis which allows the lubricating oil to run fluidly. The longer spindle gets rid of any clock pendulum effect and distributes the inertial energy along the whole of the axis, which reduces lateral friction. Indeed, spindle and bearings are held with great importance by Gold Note; their €65,000 Bellagio Conquest Black King features a massive 270mm spindle!

The platter is designed to stay just 3-mm above to the turntable plinth so that, according to Gold Note, such small platter/plinth interference reduces turbulence allowing a noiseless rotational stability. This turntable is very quiet.

Arm

Gold Note also uses the B-5 arm, based on the B-5.1 tonearm as featured on their higher-end Mediterraneo and Giglio turntables, with ball bearings used for both vertical and horizontal movement, pivoted through stainless steel bolts. Indeed, the Valore can be upgraded with the B5.1 if wished, which has different counterweights and custom made ball bearings manufactured by the German company GRW. Gold Note makes a total of three arms; the B-5, B-5.1 and B-7 Ceramic.

Set up

The Valore Plus 425 was a doddle to set up, not because it arrived with cartridge set up for very slightly more than 2g, but because adjustments are simple to do and the instruction manual is impressively detailed for the installation. The angled headshell, with its own adjustment for azimuth with long headshell interconnects makes mating the cables to the four pins just as easy. Some arms (and cartridge connectors) can make setting up a lengthy and at times terrifying ordeal. It even comes with a calibration sheet containing a 50Hz stroboscope and alignment protractor, as well as Allen keys and extra counterweight for heavier cartridges. Those feet might well be adjustable for height, but I am not quite so in favour that they are made of a smooth-edged



GOLD NOTE VALORE PLUS 425 TURNTABLE

cone shaped acrylic. It does mean that they will slide about on a smooth platform, especially glass stands. Of course the use of Acrylic has been chosen by Gold Note for its ability to deaden vibration, it having “higher dampening performance due to the particularly absorbing quality of the material”, but it has very, very little friction with a glass or acrylic base, meaning that just by lifting the lid or if I needed to remove a disc that fitted tight to the spindle meant the whole unit moved worryingly about the platform. I needed to rectify this with a rubber washer between the two surfaces. Perhaps these should be added to the bundle. More importantly using my seismic measuring tool, there is more vibration getting to the turntable from external movements, though this means internal vibrations exit through the feet with equal amounts. Indeed, sitting silently in the Hifi pig settee, this turntable was exceptionally quiet and the Vasari RED, a full-bodied and detailed moving magnet cartridge at €195, was a surprisingly good player. I loved moving magnets in the 1970’s and my favourite Stanton 681 EE, Decca London Gold, Ortofon VMS20E and Shure V15iv cartridges still play well on my various old turntables. In terms of price verses quality this is an exceptionally able cartridge (see separate review in the

coming weeks) and puts those others back into history where they belong. The Vasari RED also has an elder brother, the Gold, coming in at €350.

The Music

I was pleasantly surprised at how transparent this transparent turntable was. Detail was extremely quick and vivid, with start-up time of the turntable probably one of the quickest from a belt-driven platter (and the stop-time was equally rapid) at within a second, appearing more like a direct-drive turntable. It is not that the turntable has a lot of friction; that spindle is extremely free flowing when the belt isn’t tied to it. The fear that such tight control from the motor would mean higher rates of speed fluctuation did worry me before I started listening, but the speed controller and motor and PWM power controller does deliver particularly excellent speed stability and mitigates resonances. I refrained from playing AC-DC.

Listening to Genesis “Genesis” album (I think this is one of their worst musically and from an engineering perspective, though it is Mike Rutherford’s favourite) showed a detailed and laid back sound. This is the rock band’s twelfth studio album, released in October 1983. The vague title was due to the fact that the



GOLD NOTE VALORE PLUS 425 TURNTABLE



nine tracks were single ideas from their members. However, the opening track “Mama” was their highest rating single, reaching number 4 in the UK in 1983. The Yamaha CP-70 piano, Sequential Circuits Prophet 10 and Synclavier ii played by Tony Banks and the harsh drum machine in the introduction might well be very dated keyboards now playing them in the 21st Century but they are managed surprisingly humanly in this Gold Note duo, and Phil Collin’s voice and the forward sound in this badly recorded vinyl gave me a chance to see that this turntable, arm and cartridge could cope honestly and fairly. Actually, better than I could have imagined, with very good mid-band and vocals in the second track “That’s All”. Turning appropriately to Stravinsky Symphony in C permitted an extremely vivid placement of instruments, especially the depth of clarity in the cellos. The cello is really the closest instrument to the human voice, ranging from a bass singer bottom “C” to above top “A” in the soprano’s high end. This turntable played cello with almost human character, and equally with a sensitively warm midrange of the violins and violas. Indeed, it was the bass and midrange that really stuck out to me as being one of the best properties of the turntable, giving a musicality that was quite intoxicating. It just missed out in terms of detail and vastness of sound that turntables costing north of £3000 can offer.

Turning to the excellently recorded Katie Melua ‘In Winter’ album, gave the turntable and arm and cartridge to all three work in a way I didn’t think an under £200 cartridge could do. The snow-white coloured album is so spacious and detailed in all the parts of its recording; from Katie’s very

distinguishable gentle voice, the Gori Women’s Choir, and the guitar backing. Only some subsonic mic “pops” in several tracks took away my enjoyment from this new album, but it showed me just how quick the Valore was at picking up all microscopic detail, and just how valued my Wilson Benesch Torus subsonic generator was. I just wished I had the Bellagio Conquest Black King in front of me. In “Plane Song” I was in heaven; a slow ethereal track with gentle whistle, backing “ooohs”, acoustic guitar and over-reverbed voice from Katie, joined to make me feel I was floating in the clouds.

From one round table to another, trying Rick Wakeman’s “The Myths and Legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table” the amount of orchestration is as long as the album title, and often can sound congested and confused when not played on the very best players. This turntable and the Visari Red cartridge gave a very forward sound slightly less open and detailed “front to back” than my choice turntable, but still highly acceptable for the duo’s price of €1690.

I tried a few upgrade plans from my collection, including using a variety of light-weight record clamps, and I also replaced the OEM 4pin Din plug-RCA connector for my own-designed silver interconnect which created even more detail and magic. The good thing is that this turntable can have upgraded arm and cabling to give even better sonic qualities, meaning that more expensive cartridges wouldn’t be out of place.

Conclusion

Whilst this turntable might be at the starting end of the Gold Note collection,

it is by no means a budget player. The arm is based on the B5.1 (retails on its own for €790) which shows just how good this arm is, and the spindle and motor are inspired by the more expensive turntables. You get my point. And if you don’t like transparent looks, there is a choice of other finishes, which come in at an even cheaper price-point.

Bass and mid were absolutely superb, and with a good fluidity and speed at all frequencies, with slightly forward and exciting sound, easily quantifying the price, even at today’s exchange rates.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Excellent construction and attention to detail, including hinged dust cover

Sound Quality: Open and quick, and with a human element to the sound, particularly in bass/mids

Value For Money: At €1495 this is competing very ably in the lower end of the market, and compares well with turntables at £3000. Add the €195 Vasari Red and it is even better value

Pros

Valore 425 Plus Acrylic turntable is excellent ‘Valore’ at €1495 when you realise it comes complete with external PSU, Speed Control unit, B-5 tonearm and acrylic Dust Cover

Choice of finishes and prices

Excellent bass and midrange, especially on voices and strings

Good speed and definition of all instruments

Cons

Those feet

Price: €1495

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Pro-Ject Primary Turntable

By David and Rob Stevenson

Father and son team David and Rob Stevenson review the entry level Pro-Ject Primary turntable costing £189

PRO-JECT PRIMARY TURNTABLE



Pro-ject has
wrought a
super
enjoyable
listen from
budget bits

The vinyl revival has extended to supermarkets but its delights and reputation are lost in the plethora of cheap nasty plastic 'record players'.

European makers Project offer a range of decks from basic to exotic and now offer a very budget entry level named 'The Primary'. Its an ideal gift aimed at fresh starters or at upgraders from a tacky thingy, and to those wanting USB interfacing or to add to AV setups.

The sample arrived in a box emblazoned all over with 'EISA 2016 Best Product Turntable' and in smaller print 'The Classic.' We got excited...until a smaller label announced its contents as 'The Primary' which was a plain all black, very lightweight turner of MDF plinth and thin aluminium arm on 3 anti-vibration feet that could easily tuck away between shelves unnoticed.

Enthusiasm was waning. Maybe the red or the white variant would have more interest; expectations were on the low side for sound too. This deck had an uphill task convincing us that it was worthy.

It did and then some!

Pro-ject has wrought a super enjoyable listen from budget bits.

"How was the setup Dad?". Rob is in work tea break now. "No fiddly bits, it's factory set, a 'plug and play' as they say".

"Well errr. I washed my hands free of the expensive skincare balm that attracts sophisticated ladies and fast cars and applied the silicone belting around rim

of the 12 inch MDF platter, but then came the plugging in bit".

"So?". Honourable son was puzzled wondering if ageing Father was 'losing it'.

"Its multi part international wall wart style puzzle designed to fit sockets in Azerbaijan, Mongolia, and Zanzibar and France depending on the configuration. I eventually choose a shape that would enter the mains near the Russ Andrews 'Silencer'. Actually setup was easy and the phono lead is solid quality too with decent gold plugs.

"I levelled it on a wall shelf next to the modded Technics. I'm sure I saw the Hana SL looking over disparagingly."

"Yeah right". Mutters Rob.

"It's more than ten times the price and is silent without its SUT. Anyway the USB variants have on board phonostages but this variant doesn't so what are we using, the valve Ear 834P, the Lounge LCR, or the Rega Fono Mk11?".

"Well err, I was thinking (Rob groans), the person buying would be on a budget, so I found this £30 Maplins phono preamplifier". More groans.

Rob says. "You've fetched down the attic based NAD 326 B then?"

"Well it did win EISA best amp".

"Mmmmm, this century?"

Pater uses Van Damme connect and cabling to budget 2.5way style Epos floorstanders.

PRO-JECT PRIMARY TURNTABLE

Tchaikovsky symphony 5 did not extend further left or right than the speakers but it did 'big fast clout' when asked and carried the orchestral sections well



Fifteen minutes later Rob gets a pinging mail "It's good".

45 minutes later. "It's truly good". The sonic balance starts to form.

Four LPs later it's working. "It's a good listen Rob, you are in for a surprise, see you later".

How can it be that less than £200 can give this amount of joy?

It's not a 'looker'. The designer has concentrated around the long time tried and tested cartridge Ortofon OM5e. It's a small and light but a capable clean moving magnet, mounted exactly on a simple short arm with under slung

counterweight and very good bearings. The deck is low mass so resonances are minimised and adds very little, if anything, to the signal.

It has no bias control or down force adjustment other than the movable counterweight or pillar height change. It's set for this elliptical diamond only.

Our usual test record (Hifi and Sound) was passed on the two accepted tracking ability levels but, along with many very fine cartridges, failed the third torture band at 13+ dB.

The lid was interesting. The friction of the hinges allow it to 'park' nicely and the deck plays cleanly with it down!



PRO-JECT PRIMARY TURNTABLE



Regular test routine starts with Joan Armatrading's standard cut disc inner grooves on "Me Myself I". It's an 'open' recording with big dynamic swings, strong drum work, bass, sustained low tones and testing vocals. The music gushed out exciting, clear multilayers, good central voice, dipping, soaring and expressive. Simply enjoyable!

We looked at each other. "Errrr, how much is this?" Asked Rob.

"It'll fail on complex harmonics and dynamics. Get the Gregory Porter".

'Liquid Spirit' sounded out. We had heard it recently from the Hana SL MC so this was not really fair, but this little gem gave us the shapely stand up bass and the rasp of his voicing. We liked it. That certain 'air', that mystical 'ethereal vibe' (no we don't know what it is but we know when it's absent) was not there but there was enough top notes with harmonics to suit most CD listeners. And of course just a touch of that lovely warming that Moving Magnets can give to make a lovely listen.

My turn. "Errr, how much is this?"

Next under was Yello's new 'Toy'. A super recording from all points of

critique (unless you hate electronica) and really showed the ability was inherent.

It bounces joyfully through 70 - 80s tracks with nails and hammer hits on strings, distributed cymbals, sufficient slam and heft, with acoustics around the voices enough to satisfy.

Tchaikovsky symphony 5 did not extend further left or right than the speakers but it did 'big fast clout' when asked and carried the orchestral sections well.

Mono did well. The Zombies classic 'She's Not There' had all the angst required. The Stones recently announced a return to their early music with the Blues, so 'Honky Tonk Woman' sounded out and was much enjoyed.

On and on and on, all day vinyl, no edge of the seat 'will it, won't it?' It just did, and at volume without ear fatigue. Simply pleasing.

Rob says. "I could live with this".

The Primary is a synergy of good value parts maximising the hifi content by operating within their performance envelope.

Overall – a balanced soundscape with clarity and bounce beyond expectation for this budget.



AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: It's ample and functional for the job at hand

Sound Quality: Surprisingly good speed stability and a great sounding way to enjoy your vinyl

Value For Money: Very much worth the stretch over the cheaper turntables on the market

Pros: VERY easy to set up and sounds great

Cons: Not much, perhaps isolation, but it's nit picking at this price

Price: £189



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COS D1 DAC and Preamplifier

By Janine Elliot

The Connoisseur Of Sound D1 is Tiawanese in origin and costs £8000 in the UK. Janine Elliot puts it through its paces in a truly international rig

COS D1 DAC & PREAMPLIFIER

The company wanted to create something that produced a clarity and simplicity of sound that just allowed the music to speak, all three men with years of experience in mathematics, electronics, and research and design



I don't usually get to the nitty gritty of a product in the first sentences of a review, but this was a special moment for me. To get a DAC and a preamplifier all in one box that looks this good and sounds so open as the Cos D1 does isn't something that happens every day for me. To review this £8000 Taiwanese kit I used a collection of hifi encompassing most of the world; American Eminent Technology LFT8b ribbon hybrid speakers, Serbian Trafomatic Belus tube/MOSFET power-amplifier, 24/192 FLAC files on a Chinese Fiio X5, CEC TL5 belt drive CD player from Japan, and cables from England, Scotland and USA. This review showed that the world can seriously work together in (musical) harmony. Lots of harmony!

Standing for 'Connoisseur Of Sound' COS was formed by three close friends who were very serious about audio entertainment and with an aversion, like most of us, to cacophony. The Cos D1 is their first digital converter. The company wanted to create something that produced a clarity and simplicity of sound that just allowed the music to speak, all three men with years of experience in mathematics, electronics, and research and design. This product made its debut in 2014 and I first heard it the following year wanting to give it a full review as soon as I could.

Build and Tech

It is a very stylish design, which I guess is what initially drew me to it; a large knob at the front that goes beyond its top profile. The finish is grey satin

aluminium, which I always like, though not so easy to dust. The feet are a very posh screw-in stainless steel affairs oozing quality, though the aged argument over spike or sponge may affect whether you like them or not. Apart from the protruding knob there is nothing of note, other than the COS logo and an array of 25 LEDs that form a curved smiley-face below the knob to indicate the volume. When the knob is pressed the row of lights is reduced to 7 for you to select one of the 7 inputs (so you'll need to memorise which input is which. SPDIF is 4 and 5). This is simplicity in the extreme and I loved it. A classy 6-button aluminium remote control can also be used. The remote also has a mute button, which when pressed changes that smiley face into a small almost straight face, expressing my mood at not hearing anything anymore.

This is more than a DAC, though. This is a fully functioning balanced pre-amp with XLR and RCA outputs, with a very reasonable analogue balanced/unbalanced input, plus a selection of digital inputs from USB Asynchronous Audio Class 1.0 and 2.0 (class 1.0 only works to 96k samples), plus 2 Toslink and 2 SPDIF. Inputs up to the basic 24/192 are supported. There was no mention of DSD in the manual, though it actually allows DSD 128 via USB and DSD 64 via S/PDIF. As someone loving the technology behind Direct Stream Digital I am ironically somewhat disappointed every time I listen, so I chose to use FLAC and a CD transport for aged 16/44.1 in my

COS D1 DAC & PREAMPLIFIER

This Taiwanese product surprised me at just how accurate yet still very human it was at giving a very precise and exciting playback with warmth from strings, punch from brass and clear rumbles from timpani

listening. To interpret the digital inputs COS designed their own proprietary algorithm, which up-samples data to 24bit 176.4k or 192k, by a process in an array of 4096 with 32bit precision. A linear-phase delay Finite Impulse Response (FIR) filter is used which is preferable to the more usual Infinite Impulse Response (IIR) filter, the former which as its name suggests has a finite duration settling at zero, rather than responding indefinitely. A massively powerful computation of 3648 MMAC (Million Multiply Accumulate Cycles) per second DSP leads to a clarity and detail that I found very addictive. Whatever input is selected the COS D1 aligns them with a 1-second buffer to be sent to be processed and converted into analogue with a jitter precision of less than 1ps. There is however a buffer switch marked "BUF" on the back panel of D1 which needs to be turned on for optimum performance; if the digital music data isn't converted in perfect tandem it can cause jitters, and even a few micro-seconds timing error is enough to perturb the ears and frustrate the mind. This one-second depth buffer, using an independent clock to receive and align data, sends them out in precise time frames for conversion and reminds me of my Sony portable CD player I used before technology went solid-state, with its 20" buffer in case I knocked the CD laser as I walked (or ran) to work each day, which of course it would constantly be doing. How some manufacturers could even think about selling portable CD players without this buffer amazes me even today, but that's another story. However, the switch on

the COS D1 can be switched off if you are playing audio for video, so that it will prevent the even more annoying mis-synchronisation of the audio with the pictures! There is another switch on the back to choose between USB 1.0 and 2.0, allowing you to choose depending on whether you are using Microsoft Windows without a suitable driver which means it will only get to 24bit/96kHz, (position 1), or a proprietary Windows driver to get it to 24/192, plus Mac OS X and Linux which allow it in the first place (position 2).

The analogue stage is on two separate boards for left and right, each with its own power regulation, filters, DAC chip and volume control. Indeed, the DAC chip on each board is a stereo 24bit chip running as mono, to improve performance; two mono channels combined to produce the single balanced output. COS manually tune and match the two pairs of outputs and therefore achieve a lower distortion by more than 6 dB as compared to the chip's quoted specification. The volume control works in 256 steps at 0.25dB/step, operating a total range of 64dB with less than 0.1dB accuracy. There are two power supplies in the D1; one for the digital circuit and the other for the analogue, thereby eliminating cross interference. The unit is balanced within, ensuring improved specification. The volume control is an array of analogue switches and a series of precision resistors that are quoted as "low in resistance, noise, and distortion". My only criticism of this first product is something I have seen so many times in separates over the years. I



COS D1 DAC & PREAMPLIFIER

really don't like mains rocker switches next to the IEC socket. This might be a convenient generic product to use, but it is fiddly to get to, especially when the rocker switch is the wrong side of the socket when you are fiddling behind the unit to switch it on, and especially at a time when most home economists tell us to not leave products on standby when they are not in use. At least turn the IEC/rocker/fuse unit round so that the switch is at the corner. Whilst manufacturers want the lead to be at the edge of the unit it does mean it is harder to get to the rocker switch to turn the unit on and off. I still love mains switches at the front, or better still underneath the unit at the front. End of rant.

Sound

Using the X5 SPDIF output I started by playing my favourite conductor, Simon Rattle, playing Sibelius Symphonies, (24/192, Berlin Philharmonic). His leadership ensures a tight, musical and expressive performance, which matched the foot-fall of the COS. This Taiwanese product surprised me at just how accurate yet still very human it was at giving a very precise and exciting playback with warmth from strings, punch from brass and clear rumbles from timpani. Nothing was too much, and nothing was wanting. This DAC

was full of love, giving tons of detail and bite but no sting. The CEC TL5 is a superb belt driven CD transport, and the musicality from this great product came to the fore in Cantata NWV 6c, Bach (Accademia Amsterdam); plenty of space for the instruments and the reverb in the room and with a tight harpsichord continuo keeping it all taut and organised beneath the vocalists German language invocations. This DAC was epic when it came to reverb and space in recordings, offering an expansive rendition in both accounts. All music was allowed to decay in its own time. We might run down the CD whilst we have our second honeymoon with vinyl, but 16/44.1 can still offer an exciting and musical sound with the right Studio Manager, musicians and CD player. This DAC showed the format to its extreme. Turning to Goldfrapp, their "Seventh Tree" album is perhaps not their best, but it does show the D1 could accurately play more laid back recordings. This album might have Bass speed and treble clarity but nothing is over the top. In track 1 "Clowns" the birds behind the descending string scales in the closing section are well placed within the musical soundstage to not sound all mixed up, like many players will do. This was their fourth album which is more ambient and down-tempo than the Duo's earlier sets. Alison Gregory's laid-back voice and the synthesiser

sounds from Will Gregory in "You Never Know" is a live track recorded at a London concert. Many DACs would make this track quite unassuming that you would hardly know you were playing it. This DAC showed just how ambient and ethereal this track actually is, but still with enough detail to give me a sense of actually being there at Hammersmith in the audience.

Conclusion

It is rare for a first product to be so good. For £8000 (€9000) it might not be cheap, but it is that good. This unassuming machine was like cleaning my glasses from fingerprint stains and climbing to the top of the Lake District in Autumn and just seeing how beautiful it all is, with bright sunlight glistening in the waters and a colourful palette of autumn leaves falling from the trees as far as the eyes can see. You get the point. The amount of speed, detail and colour from the music was second nature to this DAC. This might not be as full-featured and glitzy as some might like, but what is inside is pure magic.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Beautiful looks, and solid craftsmanship.

Sound Quality: Excellent speed and detail without sacrificing musicality. Enjoyed every minute of music I played through it.

Value For Money: If you are looking at spending around £8000 then this machine is definitely worth considering an audition.

Pros:

Detailed soundstage
Speed and sparkle
Excellent noise floor
Fluidity of sound
Simplistic and gorgeous looks

Cons:

Limited DSD might concern some

Price: £8000



Paint It Black

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

Tony Bolton

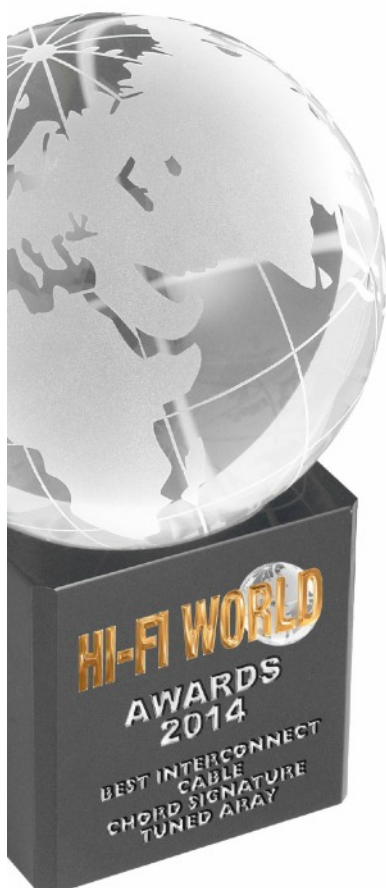


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Sotm sMS 200 Streamer

By John Scott

The SOTM sMS 200 streamer is an unassuming little unit costing \$450 plus taxes. John Scott puts it to the test

SOTM SMS 200 STREAMER



The unit's small form factor and trapezoid shape make it an attractive and unobtrusive addition to your hifi rack

It has been around seven years since I decided to dip my toe into the murky waters of audio streaming. Armed with a Logitech Squeezebox Duet streamer and a Cambridge Audio DacMagic, I ripped all my CDs to FLAC files, stored them on an external hard drive attached to my laptop and discovered the joys of having all by music almost instantly available on demand. I've never looked back since; the Duet was eventually upgraded to a Squeezebox Touch and the laptop gave way to a network attached server (NAS) but streaming remains my primary choice for music reproduction.

Seven years is a long time in terms of technological innovation but in many ways, audio streaming remains in its infancy. Some people prefer to use a computer-based system with a media player such as JRiver, outputting the digital signal directly into a DAC via an USB cable. Others prefer to use a streamer to send the signal into the DAC, either wirelessly or by Ethernet cable, from a remote source on their home network. Increasingly, we are seeing streamers and DACs being combined into single boxes rather than being discrete components. There is, as yet, no single agreed "best" way of doing it and perhaps there never will be.

SOTM (it stands for Soul Of the Music) is a South Korean audio manufacturer, specialising in digital audio products. Their sMS200 is a stand alone streamer so needs to be used in conjunction with a DAC. Unlike some other streamers that have a variety of digital outputs

such as S/PDIF and USB, the sMS is restricted purely to an USB output. Inputs are either RJ45 for network connection or 2 USB ports, allowing connection to 2 individual USB sources.

Unboxing and Appearance

The sMS200 comes in a neat, stylish SOTM-branded black box with the streamer itself snugly swaddled in matching black foam protection and accompanied by its wall-wart power supply. It was hard to tell from photos of the sMS 200 what its build quality was going to be like and to be honest, I didn't have high hopes. It would be an understatement then to say that I was pleasantly surprised. The streamer is solidly constructed from black aluminium with a brushed silver aluminium front plate. The front plate is minimalist in its design, featuring a low-key SOTM logo, 2 small green LEDs and a pierced lattice to provide ventilation. The rear of the unit is similarly understated containing a power socket, 3 USB ports, an Ethernet port a reset button and some more ventilation. The unit's small form factor and trapezoid shape make it an attractive and unobtrusive addition to your hifi rack.

Set Up and Operation

As mentioned above, the streamer is powered by a switched wall-wart power supply which connects to a socket on the rear of the unit. Network connection is by Ethernet – there is no wifi option available. Alternatively, 2 USB ports can be used to connect external USB

SOTM SMS 200 STREAMER

The sMS200 introduced no audible additional noise into my system and simply got on with doing its job – quickly and reliably pushing a signal into the DACs it was working with

storage devices. What SOTM describe as a high end audio USB port provides the digital audio output to your DAC.

Having connected up the sMS200, further set up is achieved through SOTM's own Eunhasu (it means "river of stars") music player. This is a web-based interface, accessed from PC, Mac or android or iOS tablet. The Eunhasu allows you to decide how you wish to control the streamer and a wide variety of options are available. In order of appearance, these are as follows:

Roon. The sMS200 is a Roon ready end point. I have used Roon in the past and in my opinion, it is the music control system that all others should aspire to. Unfortunately, it is also beyond my budget so I was unable to test it with the sMS 200. Given that all Roon's processing hard work is done on its host PC, Mac or NAS though, I can see no

reason why the sMS200 would not interface with it perfectly well.

Squeezelite - The sMS200 will run either from Logitech's LMS server installed remotely on a computer or NAS for networked audio files – I used the LMS server on my Synology NAS – or, for files stored on any USB device connected directly to the unit's USB ports there is an embedded version of LMS on the streamer itself. Whether you want to play networked files or USB storage files, the setup of the LMS server is done through the Eunhasu player. Once the server software is configured, you can easily switch between your network LMS and the streamer's own LMS as desired.

DNLA/UPnP server - If you prefer to use a DNLA/UPnP server on your network, rather than LMS then the sMS streamer can accommodate this too.



SOTM SMS 200 STREAMER



HQPlayer - HQPlayer is a Windows, Linux or Mac based audio player, often used for DSD file libraries. This functionality was not tested during the review.

Shairport - Shairport is an AirPlay emulator, enabling audio streaming from Apple devices.

If you have previous experience with digital audio streaming then you will find the Eunhasu interface easy and intuitive to use. If the sMS200 is your first foray into streaming, setting up the sMS200 through the Eunhasu player should pose no major problems, but you will have a bit of a learning curve. To be fair though, that is likely to be the case whatever streaming equipment you end up using. The downloadable instruction manual is comprehensive but could be improved for English speaking users.

Having got to grips with setting up the sMS200, it was time to put it to work playing some music. Despite its name, the Eunhasu Music Player does not actually play music. To browse your music library, select track or albums, create playlists etc you will need an app for your tablet. I've yet to find a non-proprietary UPnP app that provides a really good user experience. I did find, however that the sMS200 worked well with Linn's Kazoo and Kinsky apps.

For me, the best user experience was provided by using the Squeezelite

functionality. This allowed me to access the files on my NAS, to access internet radio and to stream from Tidal, opening up the widest range of options. Once again, the choice of app is key to the best user experience and my favourite LMS-compatible app, Squeezepad delivered the goods. For non-Apple users, I'd recommend Squeeze Commander as an Android alternative.

During the review period I paired the sMS200 with my Cambridge Audio DacMagic and also fed it into the USB input of SimAudio's Moon Neo ACE, bypassing the ACE's own streamer. The sMS200 consistently delivered a high quality experience, with both high resolution PCM and DSD files being streamed without buffering, allowing the DACs to perform at their best.

Usually at this point in the review it would be time to talk about the sound of the piece of the kit being reviewed. The question is: does a piece of equipment whose job is to move a digital signal from its location on your network, or an USB device, into your DAC actually have a sound? Or should it have a sound? We should maybe be talking not so much about the sound of a streamer as its impact on the sound of the rest of the system. A poor streamer may introduce noise in the form of interference from its power supply, it may handle jitter poorly. These things will have an effect on the sound of the overall system but cannot really be described as the sound of the streamer. Perhaps then, the best thing we can say

about a streamer is that it has no sound at all. The sMS200 introduced no audible additional noise into my system and simply got on with doing its job – quickly and reliably pushing a signal into the DACs it was working with. If that sounds like faint praise, it really isn't. There is nothing more annoying than having a piece of music stop part way through because the streamer isn't doing its job properly. There were no such problems with the sMS200.

Conclusion

SOTM's sMS200 streamer packs a lot of functionality into a small box. SOTM state that they have designed their ARM-based processor board for optimum audio performance and its versatility and reliability bears this out. The streamer's ability to deliver as a stand alone non-networked streamer using its USB inputs makes it an attractive proposition for those who cannot, or do not want to, commit to a fully networked set up.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Minimal design but well put together and well packaged

Sound Quality: Works as it should in getting a clean digital signal to the DAC

Value For Money: Great value for money

Pros:

Offers a flexible range of streaming options

Excellent build quality and attractive design

Cons:

Initial set up may present a challenge for streaming newbies

No wifi functionality

Price: US\$450 exclude tax and vat

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CEC TL5 Belt Drive CD Transport

By Janine Elliot

Japanese brand CEC's belt driven CD transports are legendary in audiophile circles but have had traditionally been out of the reach of most people. The £2600 CEC TL5 CD Transport, sold by Definitive Audio in the UK, puts this exotica much more within the grasp of more people and Janine Elliot couldn't wait to get her hands on it to review for Hifi Pig

CEC TL5 BELT DRIVE TRANSPORT

But CEC's pedigree is as important to the CD as Stax is to electrostatic ear speakers, and people are buying them



CD is alive and, well, still going strong in some circles. Actually, the CD format is better than many would think with all the hype over the vinyl revival. I remember Russ Andrews last year writing a piece saying that we shouldn't be running the format down and that CD quality is still very good. It is, though often let down by bad mastering, performance, and bad CD players. Yes, there are limitations in the format, but I still do use my own Krell KPS20i CD player. With a CDM-Pro9 transport this is often considered one of the best. However, there is one make of CD transports that still has a great following, and when I was offered to review the CEC TL5 I put my hands up as quickly as my aged body would allow.

When I first heard about CEC producing belt drive CD transports in 1991 I had visions of analogue wow and flutter until I thought better of it. Why anyone would consider using an elastic band to revolve that silver disc seemed anathema to my limited brain intelligence and I wondered if it was merely an advertising ploy. But when I glimpsed their amazing looking CEC-TL 0-X in 1995 I realised that perhaps there really was something important in all this that other manufacturers hadn't grasped. Their new top model, the TL 0 3.0 doesn't look too far removed from this one and at €29500 and weighing in at 30kg works out at €1000 a kilogram and much more than you perhaps would like to spend. But CEC's pedigree is as important to the CD as Stax is to electrostatic ear speakers, and people are buying them. It is therefore much relief to see the TL5 coming in at a mere £2600.

CEC were the first company making turntables in Japan and their turntables and CD players have been supplied to major brands to be badged as their own including Grundig, Marantz, Teac, Sony, Sharp and many more. So from the first time I heard about CEC playing with elastic bands in 1991 I needed to understand their philosophy and hopefully try one out, which I did many years ago, and was duly impressed.

CEC's interest in belt drives actually goes back to 1954, the year the Japanese company was founded, being in fact the first manufacturer to use a belt drive on a turntable. Until then we were used to rubber idlers rotating our Thorens, BSR, Lenco, Collaro and Garrard (indeed, the legendary 301 was launched that same year). Whilst CEC's earliest work on CD players comes from 1983, they didn't actually introduce a belt driven model until 1991; the TL1. Their thinking with the turntable was that the belt decoupled the motor from the important audio source; the record, meaning vibrations and other hindrances didn't make their way to the record platter. In the CD it has the same intention, though where the turntable needed to keep a uniform speed, on the CD it uses Constant Linear Velocity (CLV) meaning the rotation speed is faster at the start of the CD (it starts at the centre) and slows down as it gets to the edge. A conventional direct drive CD system requires a motor with considerable torque to be able to quickly adjust speed as appropriate and because it is directly linked to the CD itself, placed directly under the CD, it will add vibrations and electromagnetic influences. With a belt drive system, as

CEC TL5 BELT DRIVE TRANSPORT

in the TL5, the much lower torque motor is now separated from the CD and consequently those vibrations and electromagnetic disturbances are much less. The motor still ensured that changes in the rotation speed happened as precisely as with a direct drive motor, and start-up of CDs from stationary wasn't noticeably slower even without this high torque. There isn't even a motor to open the top-loading tray on this entry-point CEC machine, though I actually really enjoyed opening up the top, placing inside a CD and holding it down with an oversize heavy washer, or "puck". The plastic lid, that makes a pleasing 'clunk' when fully closed to confirm the motor can start revolving, is opaque tinted black, allowing you to just make out your revolving plastic disc inside. Even the belt drive can be replaced by the user, not being hidden below the base plate, unlike other CEC machines. Having replaced broken and slipping belts on cassette decks and reel to reels which take many hours to do, this one is really well thought out.

Unlike your average CD player most of the CEC's machines, including the TL5, don't even have a DAC built in. This is not a money-saving ploy. This one is simply a CD transport with mains power. Not that CEC don't make their own DACs; indeed there will be a partnering DAC, the DA5, for this transport coming out soon at £3999. There is already a choice of 6 on their website, plus 6 CD players, 5 CD

transports and numerous amplifiers including a valve integrated. They just feel for the ultimate audio control they should be separate from the transport, just like the iconic 1986 Meridian MCD Pro that was a Philips transport with the DAC and power supply below, and the Cambridge Audio CD1 from the same year, for that matter. This was not a problem as I had several D2A converters I could use in this review. Indeed, I really like the idea of separate transport and decoder, as it allows the user to select and upgrade in a manner they like. It also can prevent resonances from the CD player affecting the electronics, and vice versa. However, it can sometimes introduce its own problems, such as jitter irregularities, though none of the three DACs I used for the review had that problem. Many amplifiers/preamplifiers hitting the market now have their own excellent built-in converters, so having a separate CD transport makes more sense now than it did when they first introduced the idea.

The puck, or "high precision CD Stabilizer" as it is called, is very heavy at 330g to ensure that not only does the CD play without any movements up or down, but to also create a higher flywheel effect without the need for lots of speed correction or a really high-torque motor which introduces electromagnetic noise. The puck also improves coupling to the spindle and also, of course, mechanical damping.

As mentioned above I decided to use three machines for the review; firstly the £8000 Taiwanese COS D1, then more reasonable Graham Slee 'Majestic' at £1600 which more matches the TL5 price point. Latterly I used my own DAC that I hadn't switched on for many years. I built this based on the Burr Brown PCM56's (the Krell KPS20i uses 4 PCM63's). Whilst it is a dated design, the warmth and analogue-esque sound I created in this device would be an excellent pairing with the CEC. Similarly, the Majestic has an excellent 16 bit/44.1kHz engine that through the Class A/B Propius mono-blocks gave a powerful and musical performance that was able to show off the CEC to the fore. The COS D1 was epic, a DAC that I have reviewed recently on HiFi Pig. This was the pinnacle of performance, giving a speedy and precise rendition of the music.

I was very surprised when I started to play music. I was surprised at just how musical this was and how relaxed the performance was. It was so un-naturally natural, if that makes sense. This didn't sound like a CD player. Everything was so easy flowing and fun. It wasn't that it was slow in any way, just that it was so very musical. The timing and flow of the music was so 'analogue', and I don't feel that is totally due to the DAC. Our ears can pick up things we don't knowingly observe; just like a single picture frame of a McDonald's burger



CEC TL5 BELT DRIVE TRANSPORT



hidden in a video clip might make you suddenly fancy a quick bite of food. I just sensed something was so right, and if it was related to the use of the belt it was just as well CEC copyrighted this drive philosophy, preventing other manufacturers trying it out. The TL5 just made me relax and enjoy the music; the timing was so good, and I forgot this was a CD.

Playing Mike Valentine's Big Band Spectacular was just so open and so detailed that I had to stop writing this review to listen to it. Everything was so well timed, so open and just so natural, each individual instrument positioned perfectly and it wasn't all down to my aged DAC, though I was impressed. Things were even better with the COS D1; the space between the instruments at 6'32" into track 6 "String of Pearls" had more space in the descending piano chords than I had heard them do before. Trying a different Sony transport that I had to hand just didn't give the same amount of space and musicality even if the detail was still all there; the CEC just wasn't clinical, it was more analogue, more real, and easier to listen to. The trombones in track 7 just sounded more like 24 bit than 16 in terms of their detail.

The TL5 has three digital outputs for AES/EBU XLR, RCA SPDIF, and Toslink. The off-on switch was just as I liked; at the front. I could quite easily cope with the manual loading of CDs, but my only gripe was the remote control. I just wouldn't want my neighbours to see it. It might be fully functional and feel nice to the hand, but it was boring and in a cheap black plastic. It included buttons to change brightness of the display as well as programming track playback and display elapsed or remaining time, but it also included buttons to select USB, COAX, TOS, CD and Filter, suggesting its multiple use with other CEC players and DACs (such as the equivalent CD5). But it still looked cheap and was too

lightweight. Today metal remotes are being made for machines considerably cheaper than this. Cambridge Audio's Azur 640C CD remote was iconic in its day and could be used with all their other products, a metal-fronted remote that started to dispel the theory that you had to spend mega bucks in order to get a good looking remote. Today Devialet show you that it can also be a work of art. Apart from this, there was nothing I could fault the machine with, being available in silver or black.

The Music

Beethoven's Symphony No 7 with the Dresden Symphony Orchestra showed an immaculate positioning and timing of all the instruments with particular detail in space between the notes. The closing of the first movement displayed an extended reverb, even if perhaps it was aided by a Lexicon or other digital reverb unit. The second movement starts with the violas leading the melody. The space and depth of field was compelling, and I felt I was sitting in the audience listening to one of my favourite movements of all time.

The CD transport came complete with its own 19 track montage CD, including Mitchell Bomber B25 and DC3, 6 and 7 aeroplanes which flew across the soundstage with such ease and power that my cat had to run for shelter lest they crash on him.

Back to more mundane things like music. Patricia Barber's 'Café Blue' is an exceptionally well recorded album that the CEC gave a compelling performance. Shimmering cymbals heard in "What a Shame" were initially assumed to be hiss in the recording, but this transport and my choice DACs skewed out this decaying sound in a way I had never heard before; each time the decay was able to execute its rattle without being lost in other sounds in the music. This was so open. I actually found it hard to explain the magic that

this transport delivered. Whatever the music I played in each of the DACs it gave of itself in a way that left me short for words. Yes, you can spend €29500 on the twin-belt-driven TL 0 3.0, and boy, would I like to try that machine for myself, but at £2300 the unassuming TL5 was an all-absorbing player that had me surprised at just how human and magical CDs could be after all.

Conclusion

My expectations on playing the TL5 left me overwhelmed. This was a CD transport on a grand scale but requiring minimum expenditure. If you have your own decent DAC, or don't mind purchasing (or building) your own, then this player is an excellent choice. The performance was exceptionally engrossing, though I couldn't quite put my fingers on why. I guess it must be that elastic band.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Solid construction with good mechanical sliding top mechanism. Only let down by a boring remote.

Sound Quality: Silky smoothness and a sound that is very addictive.

Value For Money: At £2600 this is an extremely good value offering, allowing you the freedom to choose the DAC or use inbuilt DACs in your amplifier, if you have that choice.

Pros:

Musical performance with silky smooth but precise and quick top end
Gives you the choice of your own preferred DAC
Easy replacement of belt, should that need ever arise
Solidly built

Cons:

Remote control is weakest link

Price: £2600 inc VAT

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Designed and hand built in Britain

Tannoy Eclipse Three Loudspeakers

By Dave Robson

At £299 a pair the Tannoy Eclipse Three loudspeakers certainly look like a lot of speaker for the money

TANNOY ECLIPSE THREE LOUDSPEAKERS



These are a
floor standing
two way
designed
speakers and
are bass
ported at the
rear

So here I am, 35 years in our hobby and I have my first pair of Tannoy speakers, the Eclipse Three. The company has been in the speaker game for over 90 years. The brand probably needs no introduction, but it is worthwhile knowing that in 1947 Tannoy successfully invented the Dual Concentric Driver which has been used by other manufacturers since and can be found in their current high end speaker systems. Its speakers have also been used in Abbey Road studios and Pink Floyd's "Dark Side Of The Moon" was recorded using their Lancaster monitors fitted with Monitor Gold drivers. The Eclipse Three speakers I have here for review are part of their HiFi entry range. The box contains each speaker with its removable grill attached, a pair of plastic feet with bolts to fit them, a full set of carpet penetrating spikes and small metal cups to fit under said spikes if you don't have carpet and don't want your

floor damaged. There is also an instruction/assembly manual included. The Elcipse 3 are designed and engineered in the UK and built in China.

Design and Packaging

These are a floor standing two way designed speakers and are bass ported at the rear. Each speaker incorporates two 127mm multi fibre paper cone woofers and a 28mm polyester tweeter. Frequency response is a claimed 38hz – 32khz and sensitivity is rated at 90db (so an easy load to drive for lower powered amplifiers) and have a single pair of 4mm sockets for speaker plugs but which will also take bare wires. Physical dimensions are 95.9cm x 26.96cm x 28.7cm (HxWxD) and are a pleasing size that does not feel too domineering in my room. These are actually a second pair as the first was damaged in transit by the delivery company. At a smidgeon

TANNOY ECLIPSE THREE LOUDSPEAKERS

“Nothing Against You” has a funky verve, the bass guitar is easily clearly defined and well integrated, each chord can be heard and followed without having to strain

over 12kg there isn't a lot in the box to protect the speakers once the cardboard outer has been breached. I also found one of the inserts for the spiked feet on the first example would not take the spike. On the second batch all was good as the speaker box carcasses were very soundly wrapped. The only problem here was that one of the bass port liners had come adrift in transit. Once pushed back in it was fine. If you do order a pair I'd ask your dealer to fully check your speakers before leaving the shop. A few little niggles but nothing that can't be sorted easily. Once fully assembled I left the speakers running for a good few days to loosen up. After approximately 50hrs the sound had settled and to be fair really didn't need the full time as they seemed to burn in very quickly.

Sound

I remove the grills and place the speakers 2m apart, under a metre

forward of the rear wall and 40cm from the side wall and facing straight out. (The instruction manual recommends some toe-in but I preferred without.) I start the listening review by playing some Robert Cray and “Sweet Potato Pie”. This album, having great vocals, brass and a good wallop of Mr Crays Bass guitar is a well recorded little gem. “Nothing Against You” has a funky verve, the bass guitar is easily clearly defined and well integrated, each chord can be heard and followed without having to strain. The music from the Tannoys has me loving the bass lines, (my personal speakers are a little lean) the long lead guitar solo again having good clear crisp tonality without being too hard or harsh. “Save It” has a good smattering of drums within the track, drum skins have a decent smack, although they may lack a little in texture to produce a full realism, but that doesn't detract from enjoying the music. The sound produced seems well



TANNOY ECLIPSE THREE LOUDSPEAKERS

balanced, there isn't anything that is sticking out as glaringly annoying or obvious. "The One In The Middle" is a more soulful and bluesy track. This song picked for demonstrating the high frequencies and brass section. The transients from the tip tapping on the cymbals has a good feel and crispness to each strike, I was expecting a bit of an ill-defined shush shushy sound, but the tweeter seems to have a hold on this. The brass section comes out across the rear of the soundstage, they are quite defined and in their own space, you can hear the individual instruments so it's detailed enough to separate from the rest of the music, but the Eclipse Three just can't manage that last tiny bit of detail to take an accomplished sound up to the next level. The overall presentation here is very inoffensive. The speakers produce a good sound stage, not 3d as such, but it has width, height and vocals and instruments have separation, which in my opinion moves them away from just making a noise and into proper Hifi territory.

Swapping CDs to the new highly acclaimed (by the media) Rick Astley "50" album. Rick has a great and unique voice in the glut of high pitched squawkers of popular music. "Angels On My Side" has a nice blend of gospel with the thump of disco thrown into the mix. Mr Astley's voice hovers centrally, the driving electronic beat is unfortunately compressed and lacks extension, this I'm afraid is more down to the recording and engineering processes, which is a shame as I feel he, like so many other artists are being

robbed of producing classic tunes and albums... (I digress, moan over!). What I am happy with is the fact the Tannoy Eclipse has enough transparency to see this flaw, they just don't pump out noise, they are trying their very best to produce exactly what's being fed into the plugs at the rear. "Pray With Me" like the other tracks on the album has a church like vibe, with a twist of disco funk. Here on the bass heavy and complex multi layered track, Ricks vocals take on a slightly coloured or wooden tone, I'm listening at a high-ish volume and there seems to be a bit of bleed-over and this muddies the music a tad. Back down at a more civilised volume level things perk back up and clearer and cleaner vocals present themselves yet again.

Going from the "Pure" to the "Downright and Dirty" rock thrashing of Foreigner and my second ever CD I bought, the classic "4". The atmospheric "Juke Box Hero" with its rock heartbeat beginning rhythmically banging out has me turning up the volume to hear the Threes low bass tones ripple up my listening room, the Tannoys go quite deep and again, beyond my expectations, keep it all under control, never getting sloppy or ragged, but an even and quite addictive rendering. Only on tracks like "Break It Up" do the vocals of lead singer Lou Gramm get a slight hardness about them and only then when volume levels are pushed upwards. Playing "Girl On The Moon" has the speakers giving a concert like performance; their ability for the two pairs of easily driven drivers to fill the room with music has the twang of

the lead guitar play from rearward of the speaker, and to project up and overhead while the drum beats are positioned behind with Gramms talents sitting bang in the middle. Yes, there is a little lack of "feeling" due to having a little less detail, but there is enough not to sound cold or heartless and keep you engaged with the music.

Conclusion

Timing and rhythm plays a good part of the likable characteristics of the Tannoy Eclipse Three, along with a sweet, deep and controlled bass. For £299 these speakers do a great job of playing music "musically", they are fun and even in what they portray, and never offend. The high and low frequencies marry well and don't leave you feeling like there is something missing or un-natural. Fed with a good source material these won't disappoint.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Some issues with packaging but overall reasonably well put together speakers, but there is room for improvement.

Sound Quality: Fun and even handed sound that does not offend.

Value For Money: For £299 there is little not to like about these speakers. They offer those on a tight budget a real feel of what Hifi is about.

Pros:

Great bass response, powerful and even sound, easy to drive

Cons:

Sound hardens up at higher volumes. Could have a little more detail. Fit and finish could be better (over 2 samples) but at this price and sound this is easily overlooked

Price: £299





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Steljes NS3 Powered Loudspeakers

By Stuart Smith

At just £200 the funky yellow Steljes NS3 powered speakers offer a whole lot of connectivity including Bluetooth, but can they cut the mustard?

STELJES NS3 POWERED LOUDSPEAKERS



We're keen at Hifi Pig to be inclusive and we realise that not everyone either has the money or the desire to own systems that cost thousands and take up a good deal of space. We also realise that there are younger people out there that access their music in a whole new way with many using their smart phones and computers as their main source of music. Step up the NS3 from Steljes Audio.

These powered speakers arrive well packaged and in a very cool looking bright yellow, though another six colours are available, including the more traditional black and white. They certainly make a bold statement on the shelf and look modern, compact and funky. In essence one speaker acts as the "master" with the other being connected to it by standard speaker cable – the included cable is pretty flimsy stuff and I would perhaps suggest it's worth spending a few quid to get better. However, build is solid and the speakers are really well finished...and not just for the money.

The master speaker has a remote receiver window, volume/selector button

and an LED light that is red when the speaker is on standby and then blue when in Bluetooth or work mode. Around the back of this speaker you have a plate with a pair of RCAs so you can connect a CD player or other line source, even a turntable if you have an external phono stage. There's a 3.5mm minijack for connecting sources using this kind of connector, a sub out, a power on/off rocker switch, a digital optical in and a USB socket that can be used to charge your smart phone or other device. There's also a figure of eight power input and a pair of speaker binding posts. This pair of binding posts is used to connect to the second speaker which looks much more conventional around the back with just a pair of speaker binding posts. You also get a remote control which is nice looking and it controls all the functions of the system. Point it at the master speaker and you can turn the system on, increase or decrease bass output, mute, select the source, adjust the volume and treble and pair your Bluetooth source, you can also pause tracks or skip/shuffle tracks.

Setting up the speakers is a two minute job and the instructions are clear and

Initial reaction
was a bit of a
“Wow, these
don't sound
half bad”

STELJES NS3 POWERED LOUDSPEAKERS

Truth be known, I wasn't expecting much at all from these speakers, but I've been really pleasantly surprised by how much fun they are

simple to follow. Bluetooth connection likewise is a doddle, even for this relative newbie to the whole smartphone thing – select Bluetooth on the remote, enable Bluetooth on your phone, enter the pairing code and you're done...the LED on the front is now blue. I was up and playing tunes in a matter of tens of seconds which was a bit of a shock really!

Connecting other more standard sources is a doddle too with – plug them in, select them from the remote and off you go.

The 45W x 2 power is provided by a class D amplifier and you've got one inch soft dome tweeters and four inch woven fibreglass woofers with a port on the back of each speaker. The speakers are 85dB sensitive, 4 Ohm and have a claimed response of 60Hz to 20KHz. They're a relatively dinky 210 x 140 x 190mm (HWD) and weigh 6.1Kg.

Sound

For the purposes of this review I initially simply plonked the speakers on one of the hifi racks we have, spaced them about a metre apart and that was it. I reckon most of the folk that are going to buy these speakers are going to be using them on desks, in bedrooms or either side of the TV or computer, but more of that later.

Initial reaction was a bit of a "Wow, these don't sound half bad" playing files off the Android phone and I confess to thinking immediately that I'd have been well happy with these in my early teens for my bedroom, but then this wasn't any critical listening session.

As I said previously lots of people are going to be using these on their desks and so, having recently moved into a new office space, the little Steljes were installed on my desktop. I'm a reasonably happy bunny sat here listening to Daft Punk's Discovery album via Bluetooth. What's pretty nice is that the stereo image is like having a mini soundstage in front of you. Hats have a bit of grain to them, as do vocals, but there is movement of instruments within that image – by this I mean that it's not just a left and right one dimensional image and there is an element of three dimensionality.

Listening critically to Eels Novacaine For The Soul at decent volume there is

some confusion and lack of separation of instruments and a feeling that I'm driving the speakers a little too hard, but dial back the volume a notch and things improve, but there is lack of definition and that graininess. I believe this is not down to the speakers but the fact that I'm feeding them with crappy files and that is a positive point for the speakers in some ways.

We have a little AR DAC/headphone amp here for review that is sat on my desk so let's see what happens when we play higher resolution files at the NS3s.

The little Steljes have enough about them to be able to tell you are listening to a superior format and that is a very good thing. On the same Daft Punk album I'm able to turn the volume up to uncomfortable levels on One More Time and get the diminutive drivers really moving and it feels like there is more balance to the overall sound. This is interesting to me. Many teens use their phones pretty much exclusively as their source of music, but it is clear that it is not really suitable for critical listening in my opinion; FLAC, through the AR DAC is clearly a much better listening experience with the NS3s. There is a feeling that the Steljes have been allowed to open up and sound a good deal better than previously. The soundstage is still in miniature and between the speakers but that's just what happens with desktop speakers, though it does extend forward towards the listener in a pleasing manner. The hats have lost that graininess to them and there is good definition throughout the frequency range. Bass is tuneful and whilst it is still limited in its extension, is perfectly acceptable for such a small speaker.

Gil Scott-Heron's Pieces Of A Man goes on next and I'm really surprised at how good these things sound. I did find I have to wind back the volume a little otherwise it's all a bit much for the NS3s. Pianos sound acceptably like pianos as do the rest of the instruments in the mix. There's not the refinement or depth of insight into the mix we get on our main rig, but you know what, these certainly play music and get your toes tapping which to me is the main thing and they are detailed enough to be more than acceptable to the vast majority of people.

Conclusion

STELJES NS3 POWERED LOUDSPEAKERS

Truth be known, I wasn't expecting much at all from these speakers, but I've been really pleasantly surprised by how much fun they are. As an office pair of speakers, or if you are on a tight budget they really do play your music very nicely.

Yes they have limitations; bass is obviously restricted and they focus on the mids and tops, but at this price, and considering all the onboard amps, Bluetooth etc, they offer great value for money. In a lot of ways I'm reminded of my first proper pair of speakers, the original Wharfedale Diamonds. Speaking of Bluetooth; it's fine if you are having a party and you are not really concentrating on the music, but I do think in its standard iteration as used on these speakers it is limited to what it can convey in regards of detail and definition. It's a useful feature to have and people not used to high quality audio may well get on well enough with it, but it is worth spending a little more on a decent little DAC and feeding them with good files to get these speakers really singing. They certainly come on song with better files!

The included remote is a useful little device and whilst not the last word in fit and finish works well enough and is better made than many of the remotes I've seen on similarly priced products. The USB out on the back is useful for charging your phone and if you do want more bass you can add a sub.

Overall it's hard to find fault with the NS3s; they are very well made, sound fab', look funky and offer brilliant value for money. If you are looking to add a pair of speakers to your desktop they're

great. If you are looking for your first pair of speakers and can live with some limitations that all small speakers inherently have these are great, just feed them with the quality signal they deserve.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Really nicely made and solid feeling

Sound Quality: Offer enough detail and insight into quality recording to make them more than acceptable. Bass is limited as it was always going to be

Value For Money: It really is difficult to fault these speakers given the very modest price-point

Pros:

Great value

Very nicely put together

Fabulous fun but with enough detail in the music to satisfy more critical listeners

Cons:

Bass is limited

Price: £200


Overall it's hard to find fault with the NS3s; they are very well made, sound fab', look funky and offer brilliant value for money



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Lehmann Linear D Headphone Amplifier/DAC

By Janine Elliot

Lehmann are a German manufacturer headed up by Norbert Lehmann and make a range of widely respected electronics. Here Janine Elliot pops on her cans and takes a listen to the Linear D Headphone amplifier and DAC costing £1050

LEHMANN LINEAR D HEADPHONE AMP/DAC



This model is basically a single analogue input Linear with additional Toslink and S/PDIF RCA digital inputs

There are certain duo's that should always go together, like fish and chips and Marmite and cheese, and a few that probably shouldn't like Audio Innovation's CD player with built-in FM tuner. A few years ago the idea of a headphone amplifier with a DAC were equally frowned upon, but as we become more involved in hi-res players and turn 'antisocial' using headphones as opposed to antisocially playing our loudspeakers too loud, this duo seems all the more relevant. And, with the Lehmann Linear D being reviewed here, should you have friends to share with then there is an additional headphone socket so the two of you can listen together. Sweet.

This model is basically a single analogue input Linear with additional Toslink and S/PDIF RCA digital inputs. A blue light next to the sockets will indicate when a digital source is connected, with priority for the Toslink. I just wish the on/off light at the front of the Linear D changed from blue to red to indicate a digital source, as you won't see the blue light on the rear unless you turn off the room lights! The unit doesn't need any manual switches to toggle between the analogue or digital sources, rather it recognises if a digital source is playing and switches across automatically, picking the optimal setting. The Sabre K2M DAC from ESS Technology on the quad-layer circuit board, which has been optimised against HF interference, can handle 24 bit digital inputs at sampling rates of 32 kHz; 44,1 kHz; 48 kHz; 88,2 kHz; 96 kHz; and 192 kHz. There is no provision for higher 384kHz or DSD conversion.

The front of the unit is quite sparse with just the blue light to tell you when the unit is switched on, the all-important volume control, and two ¼ inch stereo Neutrik gold plated headphone sockets.

All sockets at the back are tightly packed at one end due to there being the on/off switch, IEC socket and fuse block at the other, and whilst there is labelling underneath the unit there is none at the rear itself which can be rather confusing if you are in a hurry to set up, particularly because the analogue left and right and digital RCA socket are not separated, which could be puzzling if you don't read the manual or peek underneath the unit, and because where left and right analogue RCA inputs are set horizontally, the output left and right RCAs are vertically set on the right. I prefer in/out and left/right to be placed in rows, in the same way as they were in cassette and tape recorders, but old habits die hard. Two parallel outputs on the discrete class-A solid-state output stages powerfully feed two headphones connected in sockets at the front of the unit, preferably of equal impedance. For this test I used Sennheiser HD650's (always difficult to drive well), Audio Technical W1000, Meze 99's, and borrowed a pair of HD800's.

Norbert Lehmann set up Lehmann Audio in Cologne, Germany, in 1988 when a young student of audio engineering. Since the Summer of 2007 he has been operating from Bergisch Gladbach. With a passion for detail of sound this German manufacturer has been producing a big selection of headphone amplifiers, phonostages and

LEHMANN LINEAR D HEADPHONE AMP/DAC

Kate Bush's A Sky of Honey "Prologue" from her iconic 'Aerial' album gave an open and full-frequency performance delving into each individual instrument methodically and with great ease

power amplifiers as skilfully as Britain's very own Graham Slee. This product like many in his range is offered in a choice of matt aluminium, black or my favourite the shiny anodised aluminium. The Linear D also has vibration-absorbing SSC feet to "decouple the Linear D from its base and provide calmness". Calmness was certainly manna from the power reserve in the zero global feedback Class A output stage that works well with any headphone, no matter what impedance. At £965.00 this is a medium price for a headphone amplifier, but bearing in mind the cost of decent headphones today it is proportionally only a small amount to pay for what for me was quite exceptional sound-per-pound. You get a headphone amplifier based on their very successful £649.95 Linear with added digital input, and one that is easy to operate once you get past connecting it up.

Sound

Kate Bush's A Sky of Honey "Prologue" from her iconic 'Aerial' album gave an open and full-frequency performance delving into each individual instrument methodically and with great ease. Even the combined assortment of closing drums, piano and vocals were clearly defined in their own space, and the open C-chord from violins and piano 'G' in the centre stage isolated itself from an Ab "hum" that was well defined on the right ear, and continuing until the final fade. I hadn't really noticed this before and I wonder if Kate also knew that it was there when she recorded the album in her home studio. The Lehmann gave excessive amount of detail without making it all

sound confused or clinical. The sound was passionate, involving and musical. This was electrostatic detail with oomph.

Playing the Queen Symphony through the DAC, the piano-key pressing gave quick attacks that sounded good on the HD650. All instruments were clearly defined in their allotted space, and all sounds, whilst powerful and sumptuous, were still very sensitive to the detail. From the lowest sounds to the high glockenspiel I never got tired of listening. Berlioz Symphonie Fantastique (Robin Ticciati, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Linn 24/192) was crystal clear, from the "brushing sounds" merged under the string introduction (which seems to be synonymous with a number of Linn recordings) to the brash brass bursts in the fourth movement. The dynamism of the music is allowed space in this headphone amp, and I felt more front-to-back awareness in the 2-dimensional HD650's than I thought was possible. These are unflustered and clinical headphones at the worst of times, and this headphone amp played each individual note with a high degree of musicality and pizzazz. The manual supplied shows how you can select the best output for your cans, with 2 micro-switches per channel situated under the unit allowing you to adjust amplification in a range of 0, +10, +18 and +20 dB, with the manual even listing suggestions for German headphones from companies including AKG, Beyer, Grado, Sennheiser and Ultrasone. Output gain was considered more important than matching impedances, and the unit worked well with both low and high impedances. Giving the HD650's and



LEHMANN LINEAR D HEADPHONE AMP/DAC



HD800's an extra 10dB of "welly" meant I was never short of power and the Linear lived up to its name with a very undeviating frequency response from lowest to highest. And, like the Black Cube Linear that I heard some years ago, the sound was full-bodied, rich and meaty, giving me masses of enjoyment.

Turning to mono with Ella and Louis "Can't We Be Friends" (Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong) was defined and accurate, and with both of them singing the fact that this was a mono recording made it none the less enjoyable. Switching to the HD800's and Audio Technica W1000 fifth generation headphones opened up the sound even more, becoming more human and enjoyable, especially the 'muted' trumpet solos. I didn't really notice it was mono with the distant trumpet solos and piano contrasting with the closer vocal interjection. Prog rock album 'Life within a Day' track "Tall Ships" from Squackett (Chris Squire and Steve Hackett; YES and Genesis respectively) played with authority and detail, with clear decays from the bass drum that I could still hear clearly amongst all the other instruments still playing. Nothing was hidden. Indeed, in a later performance Pavlo Beznosiuk playing the Toccata and Fugue in A minor (JS Bach) on the solo violin rather than the organ illustrated further the space and decay of sounds. Back on Squackett,

whilst I still prefer the original YES and Genesis, there are some great tracks on this second album from this duo. The Lehmann didn't disguise some unadventurous mixing in this album, but kept it as I remember; particularly the very centralised mix-down in 'Divided Self'. 'Aliens' was a very tame track and the Linear D made it all the more clear and not frightening with all the different short riffs fitting together that left me with a sea of smiles. Queen "One Vision" from A Kind of Magic (Queen Studio Collection, 2015) played with power and awe, with the bass particularly good on the Meze 99 Classic headphones, recently reviewed, and this MP3 download sounding surprisingly musical. The title track wasn't flustered with its highly compressed drum beats. If anything the Lehmann opened up the sound so I didn't get a headache. David Gilmour's "5am" from 'Rattle that Lock' took me back to a restful state of mind. Pat Metheny Group 'The Way Up' opening track sounded clear and powerful with the ride cymbals in the percussion, guitars, synthesisers and Steve Reich' inspired repeated phrases sounding crystal clear and refined. The HD650 relished this music, giving of itself as good as I have ever heard. Nothing rushed, all there and very detailed. Where I normally prefer my Audio Technicas, they now sounded too bright and the HD650 sounded more natural,

and the HD800 just improved it one more degree.

Conclusion

The Linear D was surprisingly good choice for me to play with. Where I usually prefer tube headphone amps in order to get the musicality and personality in the sound, I felt very happy getting to know this product, both with analogue and digital sources. The sound was powerful, human, never flamboyant, but still sensitive to detail. It worked well with all I played, from classical, jazz, pop and folk. Having that extra 20dB of power up my sleeve was also good for those less efficient planar headphones that are flooding the market. I would therefore most certainly give this product a listen to if you are in the market for a headphone/DAC duo.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Minimalist, well-built design, both component design and construction

Sound Quality: Accurate, full frequency sound with lots of warmth and vivacity

Value For Money: With a price of £965 this is not a basement price offering, but bearing in mind the price of the headphones you should be using with the Linear D, this is excellent value

Pros:

Immense musicality
Full sound
Works on all music
Detail that doesn't tire you out
Detailed soundstage

Cons:

Limited to 1 analogue input
Limited to 24 bit PCM digital inputs
Confusingly laid out sockets
Having the digital source light at the rear

Price: £1050



**“THAT WAS THE 1ST TIME
MUM HEARD ME SING
SINCE THE TUMOUR,
SHE TRIED TO HIDE IT
BUT I COULD SEE SHE
WAS CRYING.”**

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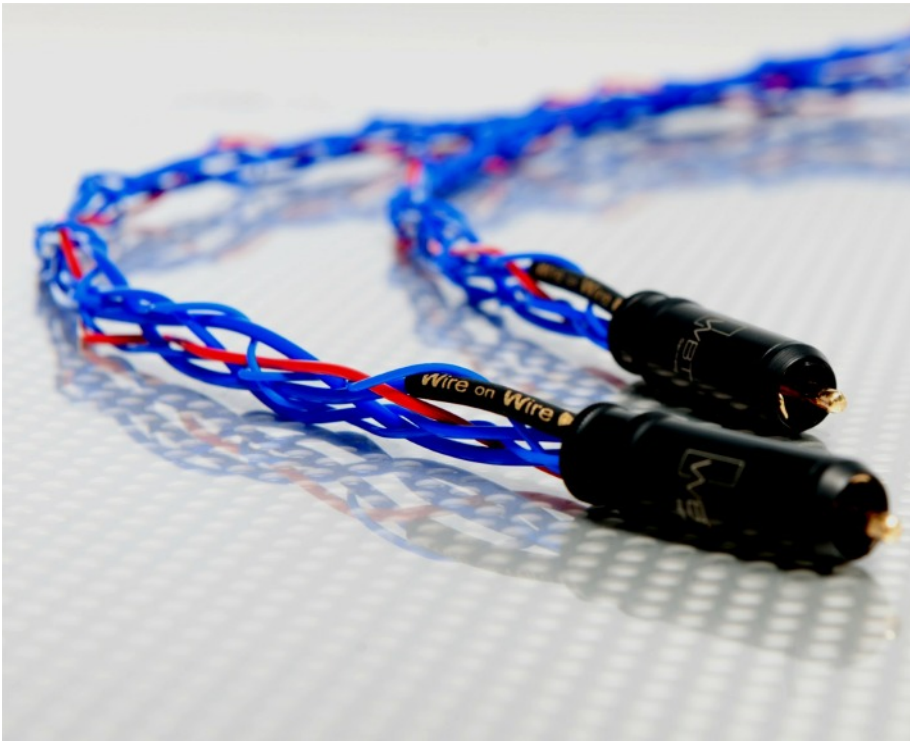
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Wire On Wire Experience 680 Interconnect

By Dominic Marsh

The £280/m Experience 680 interconnect from British manufacturer Wire On Wire is an interesting concept in that it is able to be 'tuned' by the owner. Dominic Marsh tunes in for Hifi Pig

WIRE ON WIRE EXPERIENCE 680 INTERCONNECT



When you have had as many cables through your hands as I have, it takes something either exceptional or really off the wall to get my immediate attention and this Wire On Wire interconnect certainly did that when I first opened the packaging.

Wire On Wire kindly sent me two cables to evaluate, one that was “naked” without any spacers and another with the full complement of adjustment variables having all the spacers installed. At first look it looks like something a drunk spider has fabricated after a generous slug of some home brew with what appears at first sight to be a haphazard weave pattern, but look past that and you find a cable that obviously has a great deal of attention paid to its construction. Any idiot can do a simple three strand plait weave blindfolded, but this cable is a lot more complex than that and according to the designer Chris Bell it took an inordinate amount of research and experiment to arrive at this final design. The resultant geometry is called “REDpurl” and I understand that a patent has been applied for and is pending (GB1602578.5).

Most of us will (hopefully) know that resistance, capacitance and inductance are all traits inherent in any speaker or interconnect cable and whilst resistance remains fairly constant dependant on wire metallurgy, tamper with capacitance parameters and inductance falls victim to that and vice versa. Some designers rely on those two parameters

to shape the final sound, but it is fixed once the cable is manufactured into the final product. Wire On Wire decided that there was an opportunity to manipulate these parameters in their favour and also allow the end user to do likewise by a simple yet ingenious method of adding or subtracting spacers to vary the geometry of the weave pattern. These spacers are not introduced randomly; they are allocated at predetermined intervals or “nodes” along the length of the cable.

Construction

Wire On Wire have chosen silver plated copper conductors despite this configuration having a reputation for having a sharp edgy treble performance, but that is mostly earned by cheap silver plated copper wires and many leading cable manufacturers also use this combination of silver plating and copper core to good effect, so that reputation is rather too generalist, applied with a very broad brush and perhaps not applicable to all silver plated copper wires. Although not actually measured, the conductors themselves appear to be of different diameters, some with a red outer insulating jacket to preserve polarity for termination. Insulation is by PTFE. Capacitance is quoted at 69pF per metre which of course is variable depending upon spacer configuration.

The cable is fitted with good quality and genuine WBT- 0114 RCA locking connectors.

To put it mildly,
I was stunned
at how good
the “naked”
Wire On Wire
cable sounded
when put
head-to-head
against my
resident
interconnect
cable which
has a price tag
of £2,000

WIRE ON WIRE EXPERIENCE 680 INTERCONNECT

Put into context then, the Wire On Wire cable at £280.00 fared very well against a £2,000 cable and there wasn't much outclassing going on unless one is being hyper critical



There is the option to have the cable covered in an expandable outer mesh sleeving.

Price is £280.00 for 1 metre pair at time of testing, with other lengths available to order.

Sound

I spent a considerable amount of time familiarising myself with the sonic qualities of the cable without the tuning spacers, before delving into adding/subtracting the spacers to tune the sound. I am fortunate that my latest CD player acquisition has two line level outputs so comparing cables with instant A/B switching by source selection on my pre-amp makes comparisons so much easier, although I still prefer using my ears as the arbiter.

To put it mildly, I was stunned at how good the “naked” Wire On Wire cable sounded when put head-to-head against my resident interconnect cable which has a price tag of £2,000. Yes there were differences in presentation but they were fractional and as a result, very subtle and had to be critically listened for.

Into the CD drawer went Fink's “Wheels Beneath My Feet” live album and that has many cues that puts any Hifi components through their paces for me. The first is the ambiances recorded at each venue of Fink's European tour, where each has its own unique reverberation and of course, each audience too has its own signature in the way they cheer and applaud the performance. I would expect to hear

each as unique and the Wire On Wire cable performed this with ease, so you could easily tell the volume of each theatre by that ambience. Imaging, width and depth very good, with steady instrument placement in the soundstage. Bass however was just a fraction behind my resident cable and didn't quite have the power and energy, nor did the Wire On Wire cable muster the sheer definition and shape of bass notes the resident cable can portray down in the lowest registers. Midband was equally as clear and lucid, male and female voices too for that matter was certainly on a par between the two cables. Put into context then, the Wire On Wire cable at £280.00 fared very well against a £2,000 cable and there wasn't much outclassing going on unless one is being hyper critical. I went through most of my CD collection over a period of two weeks and then I felt the time was right to introduce the full ‘spaced’ up variant of the Experience 680 interconnect.

The sound to me was a chasm away from what I heard from the “naked” cable; a tad thick sounding and bloated in the bass, the treble to me had lost its polish and refinement and the midband acquired a chesty quality, so it shows just how critical conductor geometry spacing is with this cable, indeed with all cables. Thankfully, Wire On Wire provide a handbook that shows how to tune the cable by subtracting and adding their plastic spacers to the cable, the nodes being numbered and counted off from the source end, no matter which way round the cable is initially installed.

WIRE ON WIRE EXPERIENCE 680 INTERCONNECT

Below is a chart copied from Wire On Wire's website explaining the effects of adding or removing the spacers has on the perceived sound. Being the thick idiot that I am, whenever I took a spacer out I placed a square of masking tape onto the loop the spacer was removed from so I would know the exact place it came from. The combinations and permutations of spacers installed or not runs into the thousands as Chris Bell pointed out to me, so it would be rather unwise and indeed pointless typing out the results that I got during the evaluation, as in all probability none would match those obtained by buyers of this cable in their own systems and of course meeting their own listening preferences. What I can tell you is all the changes were subtle rather than manifested in clearly obvious amounts.

Reference configurations	Experience680			
Loop number from source end of cable	Reference 1 (No spacers)	Reference 2 (8, 13)	Reference 3 (8, 11, 13)	Reference 4 (4, 8, 13)
2				
3				
4				x
5				
6				
7				
8		x	x	x
9				
10				
11			x	
12				
13		x	x	x
14				
15				
16				

Conclusion

Wire On Wire's website has an anecdote about Chris Bell's cable which says their product HAS to sound good or the man will be locked in the shed until it does.

In the final analysis, I much preferred the "naked" variant above the cable that had the spacers installed, no matter what combination and permutation of spacers I took out and put in with my current system as it stands. Readers should not be concerned by this statement as I am more than certain your results would probably be at complete variance with mine anyway. To me the spacers were an optional extra and of course the price remains the same with or without the spacers so that is a good value proposition for the asking price. Obviously the planets were aligned just

right for the unmolested cable to sound just right for my system and I don't know whether that is a good or bad thing for the purpose of this review and I make no apologies if you wanted a full autopsy of my many spacer swapping trials, but I still went back again and again to the sans spacer cable.

However, being the inveterate box swapper that I am, there might come the day that the spacers become an essential tool in tuning the sound to my personal tastes when one of my myriad of blind purchases has an acute attack on 'non-synergy' when introduced into my system – as has happened in the past. At that precise moment it would be comforting to know that I have to hand an easy method of accomplishing that fine sonic tailoring, instead of hunting around for a completely new cable to match, so the Wire On Wire Experience 680's versatility and adaptability earns my recommendation.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: At first glance it looks a right tangle and a bit fragile, but looks are deceptive in this case. The inclusion of good quality and genuine WBT connectors is a welcome sign.

Sound Quality: Gave a pair of £2k high end interconnects a surprisingly good challenge. Says it all.

Value For Money: I rated it well without the spacers installed, but the day might come when they earn their keep with their tuneable options as the spacers adds no additional purchase cost.

Pros: Great quality sound with the ability to be customised to your own listening tastes. At £280 a metre it represents good value too.

Cons: Not the prettiest cable around. If it bothers you then an outer mesh sleeve is available.

Price: £280/m

At that precise moment it would be comforting to know that I have to hand an easy method of accomplishing that fine sonic tailoring instead, of hunting around for a completely new cable to match, so the Wire On Wire Experience 680's versatility and adaptability earns my recommendation

AUDIO

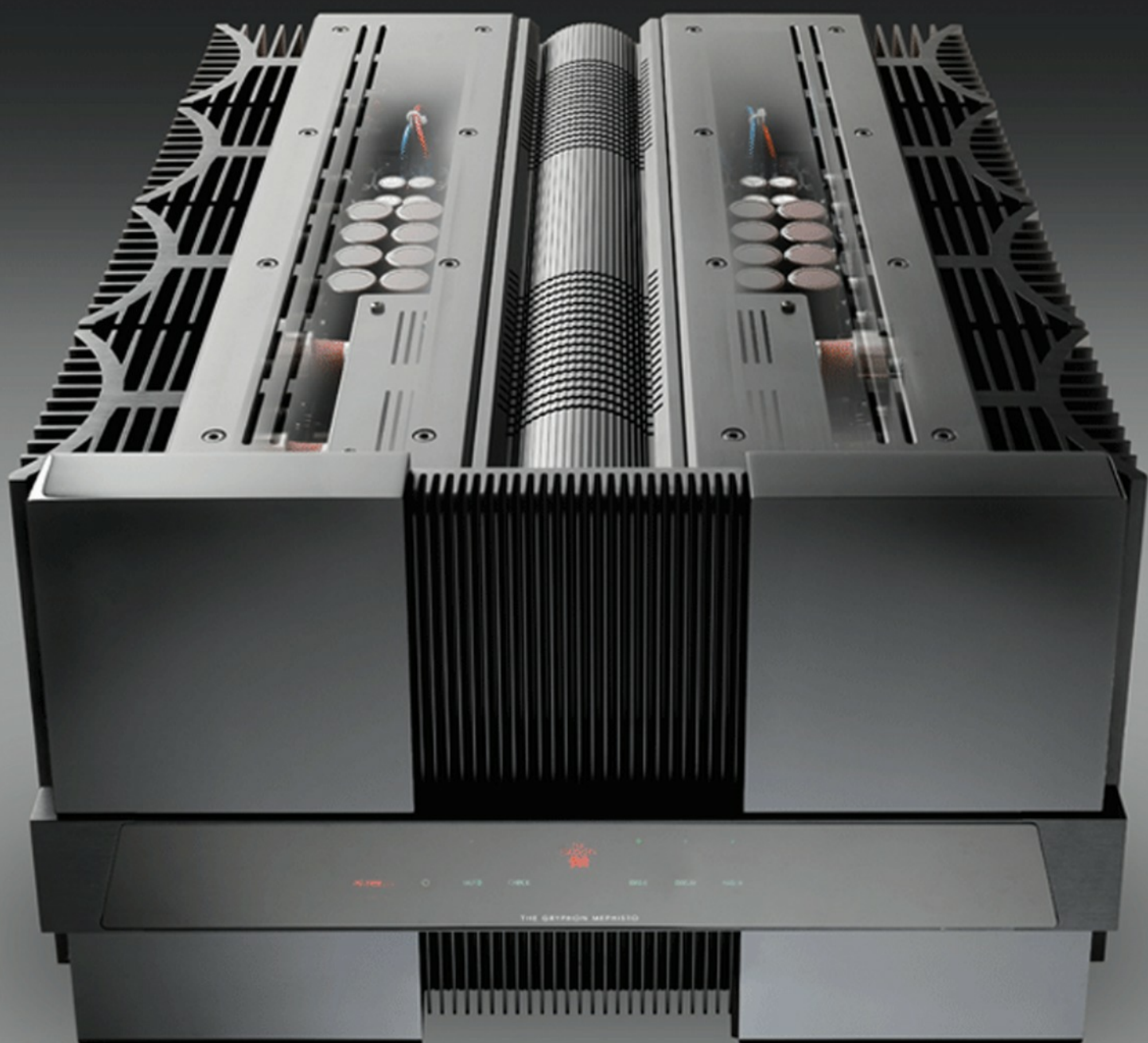
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Chord Company Signature Tuned Array USB

By Dan Worth

The efficacy of cables, and in particular USB and digital cables, is a much debated subject in the audio world. However, Dan Worth, Hifi Pig's resident computer audiophile is convinced of different cables' bringing benefits to the overall system. Here he tries out The Chord Company's Signature Tuned Array USB cable costing £400 for a 1m length

CHORD COMPANY SIGNATURE TUNED ARAY USB



I've already reviewed the Sarum Super Aray USB, stating quite openly that it is the very best USB out there today, to my knowledge and I've tried most

The market today is awash with USB cables from various companies. It wasn't so long ago where people would turn their noses up to the idea that a USB cable could influence the sound quality of the protocol when running a PC or dedicated streamer into an outboard DAC or clock. The hobby still contains its usual sceptics of cables, but many of those with the foresight and open mindedness to try different cabling and make their own relative decisions have concluded that cables, and more to the point USB cables, can have a profound effect on overall sound quality and performance of their systems.

With such a wide range of USB cables readily available, where does one start?

The simple answer is within your budget. At each level or 'pay grade' there is a range of electronics, speakers and cables to suit budget. So don't be shy, go to your local dealer or hit the secondhand market and start trying a few to gauge where the sweet spot in the price range strikes a chord.

The Chord Company with their extensive knowledge and years of experience with cabling have a good range to suit the end user's budget. With a company such as Chord you can rest

assured that build quality and the all important value for money is at the forefront of their expertise. Yes they do offer cables with a price tag that would make your dog weep but then these cables are produced to cover the top end of the spectrum, supporting systems running into the hundreds of thousands of pounds. Back here in the real world they still have an extensive range of cabling in clearly designated ranges to guarantee excellent performance for even the most basic and modest systems.

I myself have been on a long journey with cabling in hifi, starting off many years ago hooking up equipment with whatever I could lay my hands on - bell wire, power flex, joining odd pieces of cable together to increase length and getting a few shocks along the way. When more specific (to audio) cabling began to be more plentiful I began to experiment and soon found that cabling had a quite profound effect on my systems and it soon became an integral part of the whole.

When computers first started to become a more useful tool in music playback within the hifi system, mainly due to Apple Music and streaming services, I was already a very long term user of computer based music, using Mac and

Signature TA offers an intelligible and informative amount of spatial awareness reflective of its extremely low noise floor through Aray Technology, which makes live music very convincing in naturalness and clarity

PC for many years, hooked up via various sound cards using spdif to DACs, but it's only been in recent years (since 2009) that USB has become the main protocol for this method of playback.

One of the earliest USB DACs I remember using was based around Phillips' TDA1543 chip, using the Dir 9001 USB chipset which was shared with optical and the two would require switching dependant on input. At the time there was absolutely no USB cables around apart from the typical 'printer' cable, so that's what I used. Being a firm believer in the importance of cable in a system I trawled the internet time and time again searching for anything that would (on paper) have superior conductors and geometry, there wasn't anything.

Back to today and the vast availability of USB cables on the market. What makes a USB cable good? In my experience of creating my own designs, it's not an easy standard to get right. High or low capacitance plays a big role in chip compatibility, extensive or no shielding, separated for data and power with dedicated power supply and conductor type and size, like any cable, play a huge role and more crucially so where digital is concerned in my opinion.

In Chord, I think we can trust that what they have to offer is going to be of excellent construction and vigorously tested for quality control and performance, so we could say - it's not a bad place to start. From the C range, through to Shawline, on to Signature and finally the range topping Sarum, Chord will accommodate the budget conscious as well as the larger spenders with their range of USB cables.

I've already reviewed the Sarum Super Aray USB, stating quite openly that it is the very best USB out there today, to my knowledge and I've tried most. Today is the turn of the Signature Tuned Aray, second to the top of the range and coming in at £400 for a one metre length, a respectable middle of the road price, not as expensive as the £1000 Sarum Super Aray and I suspect there margin in expense will soon be filled by another option under the Indigo Plus banner? Admittedly £400 isn't exactly budget, but it's a middle of the road cable with superior performance making it a worthwhile cable for closer examination.

I will endeavour to obtain USB cables from the other ranges from Chord in due course, but for now after my glowing review of Sarum and the Signature being based on Aray Technology, sharing key construction aspects with the Sarum it's something I personally wanted to try next. I have had very positive initial listening tests with Signature Tuned Aray and need to assure myself that Sarum Super Aray is worth the extra outlay.

Fit and Finish

Chord have paid particular attention to the strain relief of the conductors on the ever so delicate USB plugs, which is the cable types nemesis and I am shocked that nobody has had the foresight yet to redesign the plugs specifically for more sustained use in the audio world, where more complex and heavier gauge cables are apparent. The overall finish of the cable is neat and visually appealing, keeping in line with the designated red colour scheme of the new Signature range. Packaging is very strong and protective with nice visuals, not that it's makes much of a difference as it's a cable after all, but still nice to see that Chord offer good attention to all aspects.

Sound

With the Signature Tuned Aray (STA) in my system between Mac and Hydra Z, replacing the Sarum Super Aray (SSA). Relaxing into a live Derrin Nuendorf album, the sonic signature of the STA clearly speaks volumes of similar design techniques with that of the SSA. What really stands out well about the SSA is that its retrieval of ambient information maintains a realistic flow to the music, Signature TA offers an intelligible and informative amount of spatial awareness reflective of its extremely low noise floor through Aray Technology, which makes live music very convincing in naturalness and clarity.

The acoustic guitar work of Nuendorf is often commented to be let down by his vocal, but for me, I enjoy the duet. Derrin produces very complex string work, lots of very small string rubs, small tweaks and raps on the body of the instrument which, without an extremely low noise floor smear, masking depths of decay with layered leading edges. Signature TA has a fantastically black background which in turn increases breadth of soundstage.

CHORD COMPANY SIGNATURE TUNED ARAY USB

Playing some big band music allows for that typical cliché of individual placement of band members and space around instruments to be denoted, but what surprised me more at this lower price point in comparison to my SSA was how fluid and fulfilling the music cohesively sounded, whilst still being able to determine individual placement well throughout a soundstage that was large and palpable.

Layering of instruments during more conventional four to five member bands such as Fleetwood Mac covered great depth and forefront layering, whilst keeping individual tonality and instrument timbre very true and really quite natural, falling short of Sarum's abilities by not too great a margin at all in main information conveyance, allowing for vocals to stand strong and projected without over-masked clarity, forwardness or liberal interpretations of unrealistic tone. SSA does give a larger a more intimate soundstage with the finest micro details and dynamics concluding the ultimate in realism of a performance.

To break down each tonal area of the cables sonic signature is something which I generally find very easy to do, however with Sarum and Signature I would hesitate to call neutral, it would be easier to convey what they offer to an individual performance or piece of music, but then we all listen differently and have different systems and rooms. I think the most informative way to describe STA is to say that it has hardly any bottleneck on the frequencies of all music types I've listened to with it in my system. If Sarum Super Array was to have extremely minimal resistance on signal, then Signature Tuned Array has a performance that will in fact leave Chord scratching their heads a little when or indeed if they were to produce a USB cable that sits within the Indigo range between the two.

Bass guitar sounds full, playful and bouncy with great extension. Midrange is solid, transparent and has enough clarity to really engross me into sultry vocals and 'see' through the soundstage. Top end performance reflects great ambient information and interacts organically with tonal qualities befitting the material played. I still don't like to say neutral, as for me, a lot of the time neutral can be boring or lifeless, the Signature TA is the total opposite, it

allows the digital signal to resonate with the listener in a non digital way and allows the music to effortlessly flow and ride the waves, hanging ten at opportunities of aural excitement and doing equally well with intimate detailed listening at lower volume levels, maybe we could say it's less resistive and allows more information throughput, the systems tonal balance remains but it's abilities to communicate more increases.

If I hadn't of heard the Sarum SA, I would say that the Signature TA is up there with some of the very best USB cables I've heard

Conclusion

We have to remember that most things in life are relative, although there are always exceptions to be had, the general rule of thumb is you get out what you put in and the whole is only as good as its weakest link. You wouldn't put a lorry driver in an F1 car or wooden

wheels on a carbon fibre bike; skill levels, quality of parts and implementation is key and most usually relative.

So, would I take the Sarum still over the Signature? Yes I would, but only if I had the funds to allow that choice to be a choice in the first place and my system was really quite high-end. If my Sarum was to leave the building would Signature keep me so engrossed in the music? In my main system I would notice what I'm missing, this is mainly in small special cues and the smallest of micro and macro detail, but it's what I'm used to after all. Placing the STA into two other lower priced systems I have here really brings them to life and Sarum was unable to obtain more due to the nature of the limit of the electronics, which are still very good. There needs to be some seriously resolute equipment in the system for Signature TA to cause any resistance to musical information and what it achieves will give the majority listeners absolute pleasure.

If I hadn't of heard the Sarum SA I would say that the Signature TA is up there with some of the very best USB cables I've heard.

In fact I'm going to buy the review sample for my active system as I've now realised that the setup has more to offer after this review.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality - Solid, with great strain relief and attractive styling

Sound Quality - Extremely well tailor, transparent, effortless sound

Value For Money - Price/Performance is great for a cable

Pros - Exceptional sound quality, with very low background noise and a transparent and effortless sound

Cons - Er...

Price: £400 / 1m

1More C1002 and E1001 In Ear Headphones

By Stuart Smith

1More is a Chinese brand that make a range of headphones and in-ears. Here Stuart Smith tries out the £89.99 dual driver C1002 and the three driver E1001 costing ten pounds more from their UK website

1More C1002 & E1001 IN-EAR HEADPHONES



1More C1002 and E1001 In Ear Headphones

1 More is a Chinese brand that makes a small range of IEMs and more traditional looking headphones. Their offerings start at just £29.99 but here we have the £89.99 capsule dual driver IEM (C1002) and the triple driver IEM (E1001) costing £99.99. The price points put these IEMs in the sights of those wanting to get something more out of their portable music player without breaking the bank.

C1002 Capsule Dual Driver

The packaging is pretty cool on these and a lot of thought has gone into the whole experience of buying them. In the pack you get the headphones, a range of 4 tips, a little carrying pouch, a silicone cover for the capsules that is designed to increase their size for those more well endowed on the lughole region and an instruction manual in a range of languages. There's a matching shirt clip included too.

Features

The C1002 has a balanced armature driver along with a separate dynamic driver. There is an in-line remote that is compatible with Android and Apple devices that you can change volume, skip through tracks and change the volume. A MEMS microphone is included too.

When you're not using them the C1002s have handy magnetic tips so you can put them around your neck. The cable is

enamelled copper around a Kevlar core with the lower part being braised with nylon whilst after the split it is covered in TPE. The capsules are marked for left and right ears.

Comfort

I'm a weird one with IEMs and I tend not to get along with them at all but the capsule shape of these is really comfortable for me using the smallest of the silicone tips. I'm able to shake my head around pretty violently without them becoming dislodged or moving about and I'd certainly be happy to take part in vigorous physical activity whilst wearing these...were I of that persuasion...I'm not. These certainly block out the outside world when you are using them and I had no complaints from Linette about leakage of sound whilst using them.

Sound

You're never going to get the full listening experience that a proper stereo can offer when using any headphones in my opinion, but there are folk out there that actually prefer listening to music like this. Of course the main benefit of these kind of devices is their portability and the fact you can have music wherever you go.

However, my first listen is from the desktop computer using FLAC files through an AR DAC. From the first few bars of Gil Scott-Heron's compilation album *Ghetto Style* it is clear that the 1Mores are a quality product. My initial comments would be

These are a
very, very
good in-ear at
a price that is
something of a
bargain.
Sonically they
are a class act
that is, in my
opinion,
amongst the
best I've heard

1More C1002 & E1001 IN-EAR HEADPHONES

of a sound that is clean, well defined and with a bass that sounds tuneful and bouncy. The all important midrange is sweet and mellifluous whilst the top end isn't at all harsh as can be the case with some IEMs I've had the opportunity to use.

Body Count's first album is a raucous metal-fest and the C1002s cope well even at loud volumes; these will go very loud (dangerously loud) without distorting. I was never of the opinion that these were getting stressed out and finding the going a bit much, they were composed and polite throughout.

Audiophiles will like their presentation a good deal I think. There's a real snap to the snare on the track Body Count that is really pleasing, whilst the grinding guitars come through really well.

Separation of instruments is good with vocals being dead centre and you can hear where things are panned in the mix.

As I mentioned, these are priced to appeal to those looking for an upgrade from the standard ear buds that come with a phone or portable player and so I plug them into my WileyFox Android phone. The remote works as it should but I find, having sausages for fingers, the buttons a bit fiddly to use and I kept

turning the music off to begin with...I got more used to them after time.

Playing Gregory Porter's Liquid Spirit I found I had to turn the volume up pretty high to get to decent volume levels. Perhaps this is a good thing given my previous comments about these being able to be pushed to loud volumes before breaking up. There is a silkiness to the presentation and good insight into his vocal presentation whilst retaining a snappiness to the tops and decent bass. Again I'd say these will appeal to audiophiles on the move but who don't want to go to the expense and hassle of a separate mobile set up.

Conclusion

Over long periods of use these earphones were comfortable in both the way they fit and their non-fatiguing sound. For the asking price I consider them a bit of a bargain. Some mobile users will want more volume. The cables don't tangle easily and the magnetic tips are a useful feature.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Great packaging and a solid feel to the product itself. Cables on these kinds of product are inherently fairly flimsy

Comfort: Very comfortable indeed and stay in the ear

Sound Quality: Silky and detailed presentation

Value For Money: Great value for money

Pros:

Comfortable

Non-fatiguing sound

Cons:

Need driving pretty hard to get the best out of them



E1001 Triple Driver

The packaging for these is brilliant and adds to the whole experience of opening them up – a real Christmas morning experience. The box, in the form of a book, opens up to reveal drawings of the headphones and the philosophy behind the brand. As well as the earphones themselves you get six pairs of silicone tips, three sets of foam tips (my preference was for the smallest silicone tips) a natty little carrying box to protect them when out and about, a dual prong adapter for using on planes and the instruction manual. There's also a matching shirt clip.

Features

With the E1001 you have two balanced armatures and a dynamic driver. The cable and the remote are the same as on the C1002. The aluminium housing are angled to better fit the ear.

Comfort

As I mentioned earlier I am funny with IEMs and find many of them pretty

1More C1002 & E1001 IN-EAR HEADPHONES



uncomfortable. I used these on the trip too and from the recent Warsaw show and found them to be one of the most comfortable earphones I've ever used. They go pretty deep in the ear canal and whilst they don't feel as secure as the previous model, I was still able to shake my head about without dislodging them – I'd certainly be happy running about with these in place.

Sound

These are sonically a step up from the previous headphones in every respect and are one of the best sounding set of in-ears I've ever used. Using the desktop computer and the AR DAC/Headphone amp and playing Bowie's Ziggy Stardust album it's clear from the opening drum beat and guitar strum that you are listening to a superior product...and not just when compared to the dual drivers above. The drums are tight, bright and you can hear the effects used, guitar is crystal clear, bass is well defined and tuneful and Bowie's vocal is great.

There's bags of detail in the mix too which is good to hear.

Ice Cube's Good Day is a laidback funky rap tune and here what I'm getting is a deep melodious bass and again loads of detail in the mix. What I do get here is that this tune is a bit compressed in the mix...not the fault of the earphones, but it did annoy me.

The Grunge of Veruca Salt's American Thighs album was great using these, conveying power and subtlety in equal measure. What stood out here was the clout in the bass and sheer believability of the overdriven guitars – Seether sounds stunning!

Again it's time to get these IEMs onto the phone to see what they're like in a more realistic environment. Gregory Porter's Liquid Spirit is a delight. I'm finding that I'm really enjoying the detail and sleek presentation at lower volumes, but even when turned up full the sound never strays into the territory

of sounding overblown or at the point of break up. Overall there's a smoothness and liquidity to these earphones that many audiophiles will love.

Massive Attack's Blue Lines makes me just sit back and just enjoy the tunes and that's a great sign in any product. Details in the mix and sounds are really apparent, with the bass being controlled and fully in check. Spatially I'm getting a more out of the head experience with these than previously.

Conclusion

These are a very, very good in-ear at a price that is something of a bargain. Sonically they are a class act that is, in my opinion, amongst the best I've heard. They are comfortable in the ear and the presentation is seriously non-fatiguing. Truth be known I'm finding it hard to find fault with these, particularly given their budget territory price. I know it's a cliché in reviews, but these really do offer audiophile performance at a relatively budget price.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Great packaging and good build quality

Comfort: One of the most comfortable IEMs I've ever used

Sound Quality: Great bass, superb midband and a snappy top end make for a great 'audiophile' type listen

Value For Money: An audiophile product at a relatively budget price

Pros:

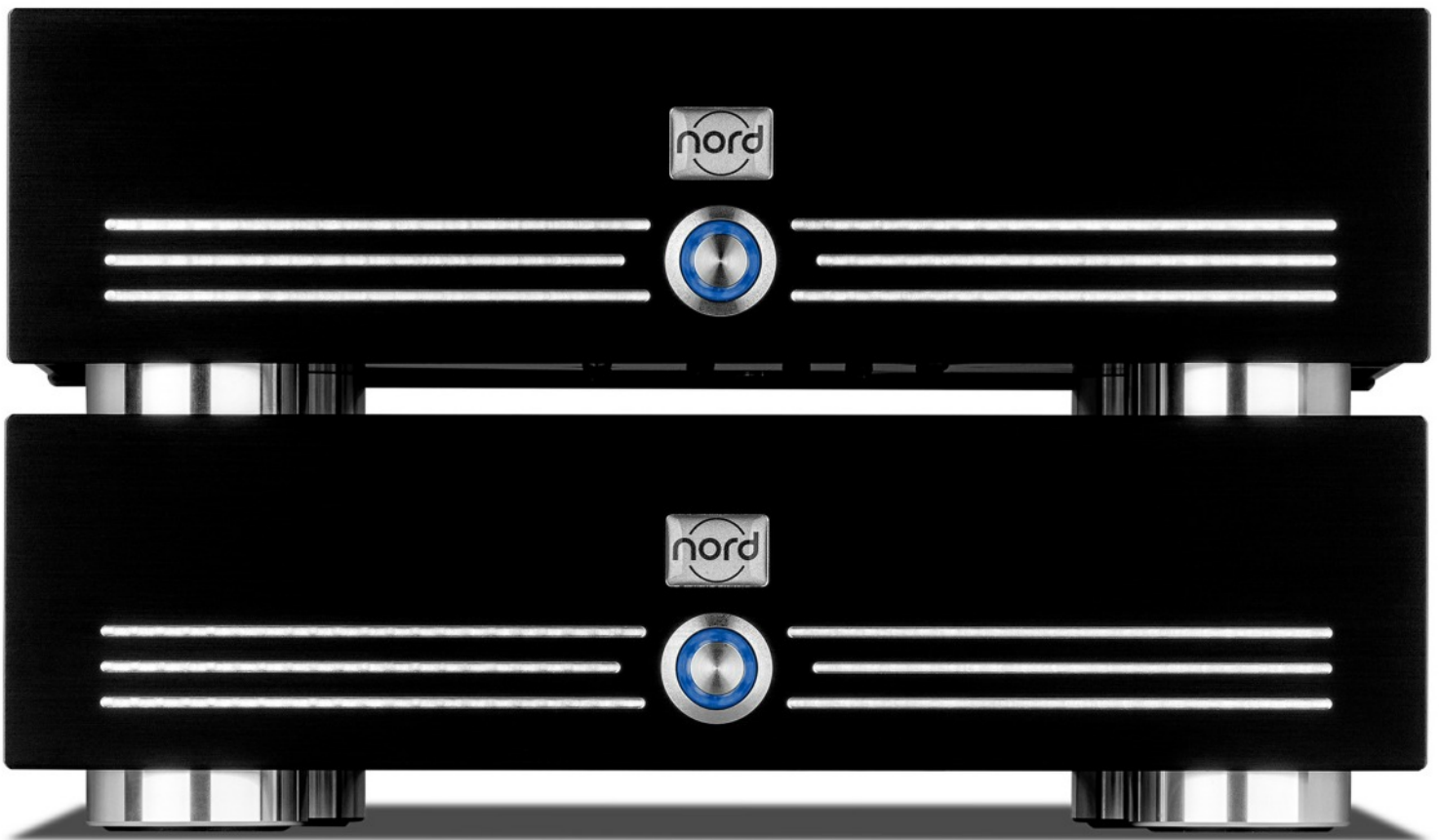
Fabulous sound quality

Great build

Cons:

Struggling to find a negative at this price

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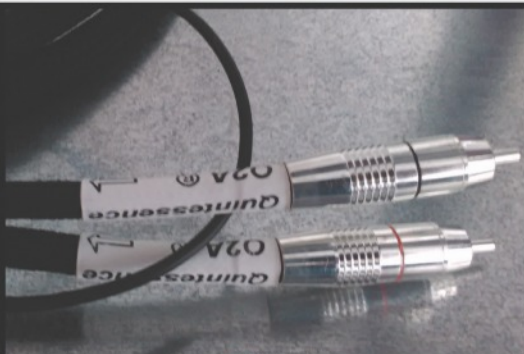




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Primaluna Dialogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier

By Ian Ringstead and Dominic Marsh

The PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier at £2,998 is billed as a fit an forget valve amplifier that avoids many of the headaches traditionally associated with valve amp ownership

PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE PREMIUM HP INTEGRATED AMP



This was always going to be an exciting product to review. Firstly because it was a product I had always wanted to review and although not new to valves I had never taken the plunge in the past to buy one and so when given the chance to try the Prima Luna I couldn't resist.

I have followed this manufacturer from their beginnings and heard the amps at many shows over the years and have always been very impressed with what I heard. Valve amps have a certain mystique amongst audiophiles, love them or hate them, but I have always been open minded and every time I have heard one at the numerous shows I have attended over the last 40 years they always fascinated and usually impressed me. Prima Luna is a relatively young company compared to its established rivals from the USA and Europe being founded in 2003. The name Prima Luna is Italian for first moon and founder Herman van den Dungen adopted the name from his Grandparents and a place in Italy.

More than 30 years of high-end experience in the fields of design, manufacturing, export, import, retail, and after-sales-service is the basis for a range of affordable and reliable, yet

highly musical products. Together with Marcel Croese (of Goldmund fame) and Dominique Chenet (of Jadis fame) he heads his team to simply bring the best products, with the best service and for the best price. The philosophy of the PrimaLuna team is that it is not just the PrimaLuna products, but also the people involved in PrimaLuna that have to be top-of-the-bill. So the goal for PrimaLuna is to give you excellent designers, highest quality manufacturing and a first-class sales and after-sales network. This is all without becoming unaffordable and involves Western design and marketing, combined with Far East manufacturing under European control and Dutch after-sales-service. PrimaLuna say they are proud that skilled and experienced distributors and dealers from all over the world have now started to recognize the potential of the PrimaLuna brand for themselves and their clientele.

With a philosophy like that I was eager to try the DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier in my system. Absolute Sounds, the distributors here in the UK, very kindly supplied not just the standard EL34 valves that are normally supplied, but also a set of KT120 valves. This was great because I could then

compare the difference between the valve types (tube rolling as it is called).

The DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier is very solidly built and extremely well put together, being neat in appearance and footprint. Unlike some valve amps I have seen at this is not a great behemoth and fitted neatly on my equipment rack, being no wider than standard separates. The only proviso is that you must give it room to breathe with adequate ventilation as tubes obviously get hot, so it rested on the top shelf. I had the black version, but it is also supplied in silver. The quality of finish is to automotive paint standards and there are five coats of paint applied, not as many as a Rolls Royce, but still very impressive. The front panel is simply laid out with a volume control on the left, the input selector on the right and headphone socket. The controls are well weighted and solid in feel and use. In-between are power indication LEDs and a neat touch is the green and red valve operation LEDs as you can switch on the fly via the remote control between triode and ultralinear mode, allowing one to alter the sound at the flick of a remote switch. What a great feature. Although not a new innovation, being switchable via the remote is so convenient.

PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE PREMIUM HP INTEGRATED AMP

PrimaLuna amps are famous for long tube life and running relatively cool. What they've done is increase the power and output transformer size, designed and built a larger Adaptive AutoBias board, and all the supporting circuitry required to run eight power tubes instead of four. This doubles the power and increases bass slam. Customers can use almost any tube on the market and the new DiaLogue Premium HP can be shipped with EL-34s, Gold Lion KT88s, or Tung-sol KT120s

The headphone amp runs from all the power tubes and the elegant, well designed circuit allows you to switch from speakers to headphone as you wish. If you love private listening, this amp is ideal. I tried this feature near the end of my time with the amp and I have to say it was excellent with very low noise and no detectable hum.

The design and development that has gone into the PrimaLuna range is astonishing.

As with all PrimaLuna amps, you never have to worry about biasing your amp ever again, and the need for matched tubes is eliminated. Just plug in EL34, KT88, or KT120 (as well as many others) and the on-board Exclusive Adaptive AutoBias does the rest. Tubes are constantly monitored and kept in their best operating range, reducing distortion by up to a claimed 50%!

Silver-plated, oxygen-free continuous crystal (OCC) copper with a Teflon dielectric wiring is used in the critical signal paths (point-to-point wiring is used throughout) and an ALPS Blue

Velvet motorized volume control is used as standard. TAKMAN premium resistors made in Japan are used inside the amp, as are SCR Tinfoil Caps in the critical signal paths and while they are expensive, the PrimaLuna team felt they could not be left out.

PrimaLuna custom-winds their own AC toroidal transformer and instead of a cheap selector switch, PrimaLuna has a relay and circuit mounted at every input. If you select a CD player input, for example, a relay closes and a perfect load is presented to the item you are listening to. All other relays are open so as to prevent crosstalk between inputs. If the power transformer should overheat, the "Power Transformer Protection" circuit cuts primary power, allows the amp to cool down, then resets itself.

The DiaLogue Premium uses three 12AU7 tubes per channel and as mentioned previously you can switch between Triode/Ultralinear from the remote. In ultralinear you get the flattest response, whilst in triode mode you get a sound that PrimaLuna say people have compared to 300B single-ended amps. On the chassis' deck in front of each power tube, is a small LED that lights up if the tube goes bad. The circuit then puts the amp into protection mode, you just replace the tube it tells you to and turn the amp back on. Another useful safety feature is the "Output Transformer Protection" circuit that protects the output transformers in the event of users crossing speaker wires. A "+B relay" replaces the plate fuse and works in conjunction with the OTP-circuit to protect the amp against tube failure.

PrimaLuna
custom-winds
their own AC
toroidal
transformer
and instead of
a cheap
selector
switch,
PrimaLuna has
a relay and
circuit
mounted at
every input



PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE PREMIUM HP INTEGRATED AMP

At £2,998 this amp isn't cheap, but when you appreciate the effort that has gone into this design I think it is fantastic value compared to many of the more expensive brands out there

The amp has dedicated subwoofer output for those that prefer smaller speakers and a sub.

That is one comprehensive list of features but what about the sound of the amp? I found this amp immediately engaging, solid and real sounding with a lovely depth to the sound being produced. There is no hint of a syrupy sound or lack of clarity here which is a negative attribute that is often levelled at valve amps, particularly older designs. All types of music were beautifully portrayed. I tried Fink's album *Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet*, a favourite of my colleague Dominic Marsh, because it is a superb live recording from several venues during their European tour. Each venue has a different acoustic and it was easy to hear the differences with the PrimaLuna in place. Also very apparent was the excellent quality of the sound recording and I was able to pick up every nuance of the atmosphere and characteristics of the guitar, bass and drums. The kick drum on *Sort of Revolution* was amazing and had a real palpable feel and wallop to it...almost as if the drummer was in the room with you. Tracey Chapman's *Fast Car*, amongst the many great tracks from her first album from the eighties, sounded fresh and still had a joyous feel to it even all these years later. Great music never dies out.

CONCLUSION

What I learned listening to the PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP Integrated Amplifier was valve amps can be domestically acceptable as well

as "fit and forget", something that has not always been the case and one of the reasons valve amps have not gained universal acceptance. PrimaLuna have certainly done their best to arrest this issue and I feel they have succeeded admirably. Now as to which mode was best is truly down to personal taste and will depend on many variables. I switched many times and although it was obvious on occasions, I wouldn't like to say which was best. The same was true of the output tubes, EL34's or KT120's, with the KT120s having a more powerful sound than the former. Again you choose. Both were excellent and it may well depend on your room size and speaker efficiency as to which ones you choose.

At £2,998 this amp isn't cheap, but when you appreciate the effort that has gone into this design I think it is fantastic value compared to many of the more expensive brands out there. The remote control is excellent, hewn out of metal with rubber protective bands either end. Recently PrimaLuna announced you can add a Phono module, allowing owners to use a turntable with a moving magnet or high output moving coil cartridge on one of the amps inputs for a very reasonable cost. Nice touch and keeps the box count down.

The power output was more than adequate and I had loads on tap, after all valve watts are certainly more powerful than transistor watts in my opinion.

Power output is quoted as follows: EL34 - Ultralinear 73 watts, Triode 42 watts and KT120 - Ultralinear 89 watts, Triode 51 watts



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All in all a truly versatile amp. What more could you ask for? Well PrimaLuna also make pre amps, power amps and a nice looking CD player. If you fancy taking the plunge into valve territory the PrimaLuna range is a great way to enter without fear of problems. There are of course other excellent companies producing valve amps, but PrimaLuna seem to have covered all bases and although not budget they don't bankrupt you if you are serious about owning a very reliable long term investment.

Given that Ian has done a wonderful job of writing the history of the company and a detailed description of what does what in this amplifier, then my job as second reviewer has become a whole lot easier. Thanks Ian!

Over the years I have owned several valve amplifiers, DACs, and CD players and none have stayed with me for any length of time for a number of reasons. Was it just me, or do other valve equipment owners get a touch anal about tube rolling? I kept searching and hunting for those elusive "better" sounding valves, swooning at finding a new old stock valve that has been malingering in a dusty store for decades

with the rare gold pins and fancy getter, then being fed up when I could only find one of the blighters, when I needed a pair. Valve life was always at the back of my mind too and a new set was always on standby waiting after just 100 hours to jump in at a moment's notice. Prodding around with a digital voltmeter through tiny holes in the base board to adjust bias settings did nothing for me either and top of my wish list was an amplifier I could simply plug another valve in and that was my entire involvement in the process. Another thing that I didn't particularly like was the basic almost agricultural appearance of most valve amplifiers, which followed the same basic format of transformers in a row at the back, with the valves lined up in front like soldiers on parade standing to attention, then clothed in black. Arguably, some manufacturers hid that behind layers of bling with shiny panels or elaborate valve covers to obfuscate that, but the basic formula remained unchanged. Headphone socket and remote control facility? Dream on.

So, you might gather then from that I am no fan of valve amplification or valve anything, right? Nope. The arrival of the PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP amplifier has made me go all gooey

eyed again, as (nearly) all of my valve amp gripes have been neatly addressed by PrimaLuna in one fell swoop. Dominic is impressed.

What joy, to actually swap valves around at will with no grubbing around poking a meter here, there and everywhere setting up the bias. Remote control too, this man was in heaven, whereby you had direct access to source selection (rather than sequential incrementing), instant on the fly switching between Ultra linear and Triode modes, volume up/down and muting. Headphone socket as well, had to rub my eyes to make sure I wasn't seeing things. Goodness me, I even found some indicator lights to tell me what the amplifier is currently up to. No singeing of fingers either from the mechanical Ultra linear/Triode switch some manufacturers have unwisely placed between seriously hot valves. Stunned and impressed now.

It is still the same basic layout though, with transformers at the back with a parade of valves in front, but PrimaLuna have made it very compact given there is a complement of 8 power valves and 6 signal valves to cater for. The paint finish is actually a metallic colour which I would describe as a dark Sapphire (I



I was hoping
for better
treble
definition and
the KT120s
certainly gave
that to me in
spades

am colour blind so don't take that as Gospel) which changes tone depending on what angle you view it, which again is a refreshing change from plain black. I'm none too sure about the valve cover though, which is a series of 10 round horizontal bars set into curved pie slice shaped triangular side panels, each fitted with a glass pane. In a home that has responsible adults only, the cover works as it should do as a means of protecting the valves from physical knocks, but if any young children are in occupancy, a close watch is to be kept on them as small hands can easily reach between the bars and bar 6 from bottom gets very hot indeed, being directly above the front row of KT sized valves, with a gap of only 2 or 3 millimetres so the valve itself can also easily be touched by curious fingers. Bars 8 and 9 are also situated directly above the rear bank of valves although there is more clearance between valves and bars so they get slightly less hot. Oddly enough, I perceived more heat radiating from the amplifier with the cover in place and I can only surmise the solid glass end panels are reducing the air flow around the valves.

One small thing Ian didn't mention in his review is that this amplifier is heavy and I mean HEAVY. I have a custom built seven level rack with 10mm toughened glass shelves and the Prima Luna had to go on the topmost shelf because of its height. It wasn't easy lifting it up from the floor to the top shelf and it wouldn't have surprised me at all if it pancaked it's way down to the bottom level taking each shelf with it on the way down. I was gingerly listening out for a while in case I heard the sound of stressed glass I can tell you. Surprising that glass can hold that much weight, but we are almost conditioned to believe that glass is a somewhat fragile substance to be treated with great care.

SOUND QUALITY

Well then, banging straight into the sound quality without the preliminaries which Ian has kindly done already, I first listened to this amplifier with the stock EL34 valves fitted. Having heard quite a few EL34 equipped amplifiers over the years with just a pair of them in the output stage, I always seemed to get the impression that they were puffing and wheezing a bit, rather like when you have to change down a gear and rev the car's engine some more when going up an incline, as staying in top gear slows

the car down and the engine is labouring. With the PrimaLuna's complement of four, I didn't get that perception at all, it seemed perfectly happy delivering plenty of good full bodied bass with no hint of wheezing. Where I felt it lacking though was in treble detail and impact, so I had to work to hear the treble details rather than the amplifier presenting it in full for me to listen to without effort and soon had the urge to swap to the KT120s supplied with the review amplifier to hear what transpires.

Out with the stock EL34s and in with the KT120s which was a quick and painless operation, but it also needed the rocker switch on the right hand side of the chassis switching from EL34 mode to KT88/KT120 mode before switching on again. My last encounter with a PrimaLuna amplifier (A Prologue 5 as I recall) it took a healthy 20 to 25 minutes or so before the amplifier came "on song" with its best performance and during the warm up period it didn't sound all that mellifluous to me. The DiaLogue Premium HP here however was ready to rock and roll within a minute or so of switch on, no doubt the auto biasing circuitry doing its job admirably.

I was hoping for better treble definition and the KT120s certainly gave that to me in spades. Not in a bright spot lit way I hasten to add, it was considerably silkier than that with a smoothness and refinement dispensed with a naturalness I found beguiling. Whereas I had to listen out for treble output with the EL34 set installed, the KT120s ladled it out in precise amounts that took no effort at all to hear. Fine for treble output then, the bass also moved up a notch in the switching process and almost came to the point of dominating the sound in my system. No need to panic Dominic, simply pick up the remote control, press the topmost button and switch to Triode mode. Cooo, that was easy and my lazy fat rear end was still sat on my seat. Love it.

Bass now acquired a significant measure of tautness without sacrificing power and heft, no longer the leading element in the sound I was hearing, so time to make this amplifier reveal its true performance envelope from my reference music selections. First into the CD drawer then goes my favourite workout music in the shape of Fink's "Wheels Beneath My Feet" live album,

PRIMALUNA DIALOGUE PREMIUM HP INTEGRATED AMP

which I am glad to read Ian now uses as well for his evaluations, so my bit here should dovetail neatly into his observations.

Track one called “Biscuits For Breakfast” starts with the drummer making a short intro on the ride cymbal and I expect no less for it to sound exactly that, with no tizz or fizz and the Dialogue didn’t disappoint at all, with superb clarity and rendition, so a good start there. During the entire track the drummer sets up a rhythmic pounding beat on the kick drum that again has to have plenty of weight, yet remain under complete control, with the listener clearly able to tell if a hard or soft beater is being used. Of course the acid test for me throughout the entire album is how the venue ambience and audience is delivered and the benchmarks are that between each track I have to be able to hear the venue changes because each track has been recorded during one of Fink’s tours across Europe. The audience too has different mannerisms and reactions, spread right across the entire soundstage from left to right and from front to back too, so I should be able to pick out individual audience members with ease no matter where they are in the imaging canvas. I was able to do this without any difficulty at all, aided no doubt by the eerie background silence the DiaLogue has.

Unfortunately (or fortunately) I don’t have speakers that present a difficult load to an amplifier. I tried the amplifier with my resident speakers, a pair of TAGA Harmony B-40 stand mounts and a pair Roksan K2 TR-5 speakers, which all sounded excellent with the Prima Luna DiaLogue HP amplifier,

particularly so the Roksan speakers with their rather revealing ribbon tweeters.

CONCLUSION

To sum up then, here is an amplifier from the PrimaLuna stable that gave a solid meritorious sonic performance in every respect. At this price point most other valve amplifiers sound just a tad anaemic and noisier too by comparison, then we can heap on top of that the fact that you can change valves in under three minutes and no need at all for getting the voltmeter out for setting up the biasing either. That will be good news to many no doubt, as too is the provision of a headphone socket and a full function remote control, which to me drags the whole valve amplifier concept well into the 21st century and far out of the 20th. Ian thought it was expensive but I disagree, given that it has a headphone socket, auto biasing AND a remote control to make easy living with this particular valve amplifier a busting good value purchase too and a long term “keeper” amplifier, as I dread to think how much it would cost to best it.

I am still a little vexed over the protection cage which covers the valve array though. Safety would only become an issue in a household that has young children who would see sparkling glass objects as something intriguing to play with, pretty much like they seem to be drawn inexorably to driver dust covers and tweeter domes on speakers that they feel should be concave instead of convex. Maybe that’s the underlying reason why some people get a real kick out of popping bubble wrap as adults. Whatever turns you on, I say.

At this price
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Music First Audio Baby Reference V2 TVC Preamplifier

By Stuart and Linette Smith

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

MUSIC FIRST BABY REFERENCE V2 TVC PREAMPLIFIER



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

Fit and Finish

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

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

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

The V2 designation uses RX63 transformers from Stevens and Billington who have been making audio transformers since 1963, indeed



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MUSIC FIRST BABY REFERENCE V2 TVC PREAMPLIFIER

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

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

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

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

Sound

For the last few months since the Baby reference arrived I've been using it with

a pair of Merrill Thor Class D power amplifiers, our Avantgarde Duo XD loudspeakers with the front end being the Lampizator Big 7 DAC being fed by files from the computer. Cables have been a mix of Tellurium Q, Vermouth Audio and Chord Company, with power conditioning via a Lab 12 gordian unit.

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

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

missing out on a whole layer of detail and accuracy that is there in the music.

With acoustic instruments and simply recorded music the baby Reference V2 allows the music to flow with a naturalness that is uncanny. There is a real feeling for the recording space and a depth to the soundstage that is organic, precise and uncoloured. If you are looking for a preamplifier that adds fireworks, bells and whistles to make it appear like it is doing something special to your system, then you need to look elsewhere I'm afraid. The Music First preamplifier is one of those products that slots into your system and just lets the music flow through it without adding or taking anything away.

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

I plugged in the hORN Mummy speakers we have here and played loads of different genres from Jazz to Techno and again the effect of the Baby Reference is to add nothing. Bass is reproduced as it is on the recording and



MUSIC FIRST BABY REFERENCE V2 TVC PREAMPLIFIER



that is really what I'm looking for in a product.

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

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

saying that the Baby Reference V2 is cold and analytical that's to miss the point a bit. The preamp is just letting through what your source is putting into it and feeding that through to your amplifiers.

Conclusion

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

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

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

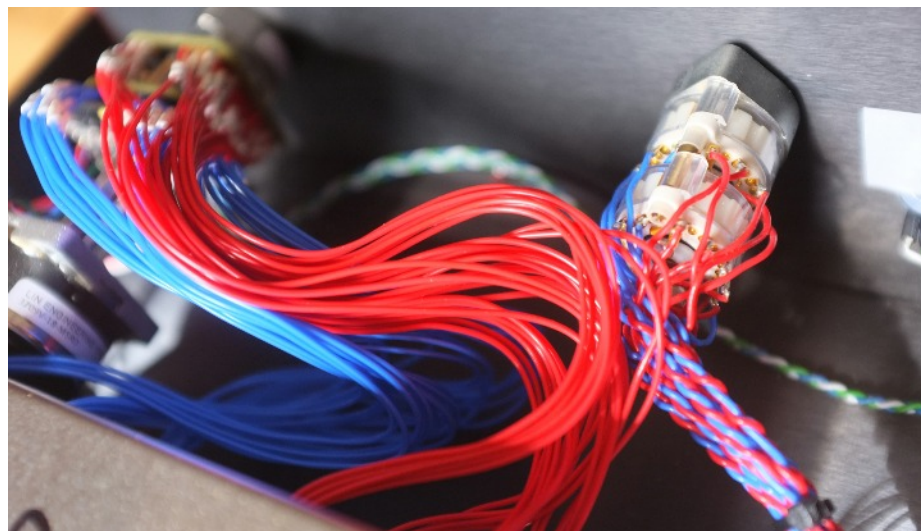
Sometimes the simplest things are the most beautiful to use and look at and, for me, that is what the Music First Audio Baby Reference V2 is all about. Essentially, all it has to do is be a switch and a volume control for your amplifier(s) and that's what it does. Perfectly. It has the classic 'form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

Simple to use, it has a very satisfying feel to it. Quality components, put together well, by someone that wants everything to be as it should, delivers a high quality product. The only frills I guess are that you can have it in a range of colours or a shiny chrome finish so that your Baby looks good on the hifi rack.

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

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

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





Pro-Ject MaiA DS Integrated Amplifier

By Dominic Marsh and Ian Ringstead

Dominic Marsh and Ian Ringstead take the very well specced £699 Pro-Ject MaiA DS integrated amplifier for a ride and rather enjoy it

PRO-JECT MaiA DS INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

When it comes to source inputs, there is an absolute plethora available, with an impressive **NINE** separate digital and analogue inputs to choose from



How do you make a great amplifier even better? That was the task facing Pro-Ject when updating their excellent little MaiA amplifier that Hifi Pig gave an Outstanding Product Award to back in March 2015's issue.

The next logical step we can presume then would be to increase the power output, in this case from 25 watts per channel from the original MaiA, up to 50 watts per channel for the DS variant and it doesn't stop there either, with an extra cost option of the Power Box MaiA DS taking it up to no less than 80 watts per channel. Pro-Ject say the amplifier will cope with speaker loads down to 2 Ohms. Impressive!

We don't hand out Outstanding Product Awards lightly and the original MaiA amplifier won that by having no less than 9 inputs packed into a diminutive package and the DS version has that same number still, but some important changes have been made with those it seems in the DS variant. The phono section has been enhanced for better cartridge matching with the addition of a moving coil input, the DAC section can now also handle DSD data input, plus a new facility included whereby remote controls can be handled via a downloadable app to a phone, tablet or PC.

Construction

I make no apologies for repeating what I wrote to describe the original MaiA's layout as they are essentially the same, which saves me a lot of typing but worth reading anyway as there are notable

differences between the MaiA and the MaiA DS version.

The DS variant is still a diminutive amplifier by anyone's standards and I can easily see it fitting unobtrusively into countless domestic situations. Measuring some 206mm(W) x 72mm(H) x 220mm (230mm including speaker sockets) deep and has a slightly larger footprint in depth than the MaiA. Incidentally, these measurements were taken by me which seems to be at variance with the dimensions given on the Pro-Ject website. The separate power supply provides 24 volts of DC at 5 amps and is fitted with a dual pole plug that connects it with the power inlet socket on the rear of the amplifier, with the power input to the power supply unit is via a standard figure of eight IEC socket (Suitable mains lead supplied). Other plugs and voltage matching power supplies are available for non-UK consumers. The casework is of steel construction with the choice of either a black or silver finish faceplate. Fit and finish of the casework is exemplary and the sample supplied for review was in a silver finish.

When it comes to source inputs, there is an absolute plethora available, with an impressive NINE separate digital and analogue inputs to choose from. Rarely seen these days although we are seeing a huge revival of vinyl playback, is an RCA phono input that caters for both moving magnet or moving coil cartridges, followed by 3 line level analogue inputs labeled 1, 2 and 3 accordingly, then on to the digital inputs which comprises 2x TOSLINK sockets,

PRO-JECT MaiA DS INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

With a more accurate signal being fed into the amplifier from my resident CD player, I was stunned at just how good this little amplifier sounded

an RCA co-axial digital input, a USB input and a Bluetooth connection to APT-X standard, with a supplied external aerial which screws on to a dedicated socket on the rear panel.

There is only provision for a single pair of speakers to be connected. The group of four 4mm connectors are grouped tightly together at the far right of the rear panel (although not as tightly grouped as the original MaiA) and not insulated from each other either, plus the holes to insert bare wired cables are aligned vertically so extreme care is needed so the wire isn't pushed right through the connector body to touch the adjacent terminal above or beneath. A good tip would be to measure exactly how much bare wire is exposed on the cable to be inserted that is less than the connector's diameter, so none of the bare wire is exposed external to the connector to negate the risk of shorting. I would not advocate or even contemplate using spade connectors for the speaker connections because of the close proximity of the naked terminals.

On the front panel reading from left to right, we have a power button with a tiny blue LED above. A real surprise was to see the amplifier perform a soft start operation with the LED blinking while it is being carried out, so no switch on or power down thumps through the speakers from this amplifier, which is rather refreshing to see. Next we have the remote control window which is a small unobtrusive plastic dome, followed by a 6.3mm headphone socket, which mutes the speaker output when a headphone jack plug is inserted.

We then have a rotary volume control knob to adjust the volume by hand, although the control itself is also motorized for adjustment via the remote control handset. The control itself is quite stiff to turn by hand, although in all probability this stiffness will ease over time with usage. The remote control handset provides the basic functions of source selection, volume adjustment, muting and power on/off. Next on the front panel of the amp we find a source selector button which changes the source in upwards increments, with a bank of blue LEDs to indicate which source has been selected and screen printed in black lettering beneath those LEDs is the source names themselves, then finally another source selector button to change the source in downwards increments. Incidentally, the front panel LEDs are very small yet still bright, but don't actually provide much glare as blue LEDs are prone to do. You can tell the power is applied and which source has been selected without constantly drawing your attention to them – a nice touch.

The original MaiA was priced at circa £399.00 and naturally the DS has a price premium of around £300.00 more at £699.00, so let's see what that extra cash outlay gives you.

Sound Quality

Unlike a standard run-of-the-mill integrated amplifier review, I had my work cut out with this one as it wasn't just a case of bunging a CD player into it and any old pair of speakers and cables for the output either. If the inputs were



PROJECT MaiA DS INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

there, they all had to be tested which proved to be quite a lengthy and protracted process. Not only that, I had to fit the amplifier into various systems ranging from high end to budget, including ancillaries so hopefully you the reader can get a handle on it's performance envelope.

Firstly, I paired the MaiA DS with my HTC mobile phone using the Bluetooth facility and this was straightforward and easy to do when following the instructions given in the user manual. Select the "BT" source on the front panel, and then set the phone to detect any nearby devices and when the BT LED on the MaiA flashes, momentarily press the power button on the MaiA and job done with no need for passwords. I only have a small selection of MP3 tracks on my phone, but the sound quality was perfectly acceptable nonetheless given the limitations of the MP3 format. I have Spotify on my tablet PC and the sound was again perfectly acceptable from that source.

With a more accurate signal being fed into the amplifier from my resident CD player, I was stunned at just how good this little amplifier sounded. Delicious treble performance which was clean and vibrant, the sound of struck cymbals were as realistic as anyone could wish for, with a defined metallic "ting" and the following decay all clearly rendered. Mid tones were slightly on the lean side giving a slightly cool balance to the sound. When it came to the bottom octaves, the extra power of DS version certainly added weight and body in the bass regions, which is where the MaiA's weakness lay, although the MaiA and the DS variant obviously share the same DNA, the DS version sounds like it has a lot more headroom with power in reserve to cope with heavy bass and fast transients.

I found it a very entertaining listen and happy to say that I was never affronted by what I was hearing, or never once thinking to myself "Wish there was more bass, better mids, clearer treble, etc" because it simply wasn't the case. Fink's "Sort of Revolution" CD sounded palpable and full of detail, the propulsive bass line being recreated very well indeed and the treble especially so, that "ting" from the Ride cymbals in all the tracks never being overwhelmed by the rest of the music so it stood as an individual clear entity. This album is threaded throughout with close mic'd

acoustic guitar recorded so the body of the instrument needs to be captured and the squealing of the finger work on the frets is integral to the performance, adding not detracting from the charm of the album.

As I did with the original MaiA amplifier, I installed the DS into the wife's TEAC component system and it outclassed the TEAC amplifier in every respect. No surprise there to be honest.

Time now to really put the MaiA DS through it's paces with my resident system CD player, speakers and cabling. Now I found that the amplifier wasn't seriously outclassed at all with every component costing many times more than it did. The sound moved on into yet another dimension that was snapping at the heels of my resident amplifier which cost some 10 times more than the MaiA DS and the MaiA. Yes it didn't have the raw grunt and outright power at higher volumes, but even so it says more about these amplifier's capabilities and what can be achieved with good design that enabled that.

Back into the CD drawer went Fink's "Sort of Revolution" and here we are talking about differences between the two amplifiers in the finite range, they were that small. Bass was 90% of what my resident amplifier gave me, treble was even closer and it was much easier now to pick up the ambience cues in the recording, but it was the mid band was where I heard the greatest difference and the MaiA provided a slightly "leaner" sound, but even that I could probably have lived with on a daily basis without real criticism in the long term, because that is a better compromise than a flabby or chesty sounding midrange which wreaks havoc with the music's undertones.

Imaging and soundstage were certainly well up to standard with good height and depth, the sound extending well out beyond the speaker boundaries.

The MaiA DS like it's smaller sibling didn't quite have the same "punch in the guts" bass power and dynamics that my resident amplifier has and frankly didn't expect it to be, but I don't see that as a weakness on behalf of the MaiA DS as my own amplifier has 150 watts per channel on tap. Incidentally, the casework didn't even get the slightest bit warm during these high power runs. A highly commendable performance.

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PRO-JECT MaiA DS INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

Last, but by no means least, I turned to the digital input capabilities of the MaiA DS. Both co-axial and optical inputs routed from my CD player in to the DAC section were more than satisfactory with no noise or mush detected. It was nigh on impossible to

tell if the resulting sound via the DAC was any better or different to the DAC within my resident CD player because they sounded so similar. Signal lock was instantaneous although there is no indicator to show that it was. USB connection from my laptop PC was of a similar performance so no quibbles there either. As my television and satellite receiver are in another room unfortunately, I was unable to test how the MaiA DS interfaced with that equipment although I foresee no issues there either.

Conclusion

Whereas the original MaiA amplifier was fine for smaller rooms like a study or a bedroom, the extra power available from the DS version means it will provide more than sufficient output to fill a medium sized room from a good solid 50 watts per channel of clean sound, three line level analogue inputs, a switchable moving magnet or moving coil phono input, remote control, a headphone output too, no less than three digital inputs, the unique remote control facility and a Bluetooth connection as well, adds up to a versatile and highly flexible heart to any hifi music reproduction, computer, or two channel A/V system. With a genuine level of swiss army knife versatility that these Pro-ject MaiA amplifiers possess, the savings from not buying separate DACs and high sensitivity phono stages alone makes them a total steal at their asking prices.

The MaiA DS will happily integrate into budget systems, middle ranking systems and not entirely out of place or embarrassed when rubbing shoulders with the esoteric either, so I will say nothing more other than a wholehearted endorsement from me.

Given that Dominic rated the MaiA DS so highly I was asked if I could do a follow up to his review on the and took no persuading being a great fan of Pro-ject. The MaiA DS is basically a MaiA on steroids built to higher standards in a very nicely made case and with a solid aluminium front panel. I have owned a Pro-ject RS phono stage which was excellent, so I knew what to expect build wise; could the sound be as good?

The DS is bigger than the standard MaiA with a larger separate power supply to allow for the greater power

output it produces. Like the MaiA, the DS is incredibly versatile and is a veritable Swiss army knife as Dominic said himself in his review. For such a compact unit it packs one hell of a punch with it numerous analogue and digital inputs. I particularly like the fact the very good phono stage has both moving magnet and moving coil switching. I used both to good effect and as a reviewing tool it would be a handy amp to have. The headphone stage is useful as well, and unless you are a purist does a fine job.

The credit card sized remote is neat but could easily be lost down a cushion so make sure you don't misplace it! I tried my mobile phone with the DS streaming my music and found it a very straight forward process to achieve. The sound was good even though it was only mp3 and a convenient way of playing background music through your system for a party or meal with friends. Although the power output is only 55 watts, it was plenty with my resident Triangle speakers.

MaiA DS can be upgraded with a separate linear power supply that will almost double the dynamic performance power and improves the sound significantly in terms of punch and clarity. Power Box MaiA DS additionally offers convenient power wiring for customers who decide to have multiple Pro-ject components in a system. Up to five products from the Pro-ject family, including a turntable (DC-only products) can be connected simultaneously.

Dominic has covered all the facilities and features in his review so I'll just say I loved it as well. If space is a major issue and let's face it modern homes are smaller than they used to be or you live in a small flat or bed-sit, then the MaiA DS is a real boon without compromising on the quality front. In my room and system the DS was excellent, so I urge anyone who is interested in trying one out to ask a dealer if they will loan you one on a trial basis. As a second system amp it would be superb if you can justify the extra cost. I used it with my Pro-ject Extension 9 and Ortofon Quintet Black moving coil and had no issues with the built in phono stage and the separate phono stage I am currently trying out costs more than the DS, and although better ,wasn't vastly superior, so well done to the design team.

The MaiA DS will happily integrate into budget systems, middle ranking systems and not entirely out of place or embarrassed when rubbing shoulders with the esoteric either

Chord Sarum Super Array USB Cable

By Dan Worth and Dominic Marsh

Dan Worth and Dominic Marsh take a listen to the £1000 Chord Sarum Super Array USB cable that is causing quite a stir in some circles

CHORD SARUM SUPER ARAY USB CABLE



...but in this case the pen is firmly placed on the pad and my experience tells me that this cable is something special, a real treat

I have used virtually every major high-end USB cable on the market and although I have been incredibly impressed with many, I still had one major issue and that was the centre focus. I have been talking with others at Hifi Pig, dealers, distributors and friends regarding many of the cables I have heard and how they have a tendency to trade the solidity of centre focus for openness. On critical analysis over many months of listening tests with various USB cables I decided to design my own.

This was a very lengthy and tedious process as the guy who built it for me will attest to, but finally I found a combination of materials and dielectrics that offered a cable which gave that solid, full bodied sound and vocal that also had a beautifully open and wide soundstage, this conclusion was arrived at through multiple listening tests by myself and others in my room, with my system and with others in their own systems, I was finally happy...

A passing acquaintance mentioned to me during a conversation about USB cables that he had, after many vigorous listening hours, purchased a Chord Sarum Super Array USB and said he would allow me to borrow it for a couple of weeks 'you have to listen to

one' he said. I thanked him and said 'if it's that good I'll contact Chord's PR people'.

So I put in a call to Dan George of Dan George Communications and former editor of Hifi Choice Magazine, briefly after the Chord Sarum Super Array USB landed on my doorstep.

After a burning in period on the Blue Horizon Proburn I placed the cable in my system and from the first note I was completely captivated - that was some 6 hours ago now and I am still transfixed to the music, telling myself I must get some sleep soon.

It's ok to get excited about a product I tell myself, but at the same time this statement has to be met with realism and the ability to shake off the 'different factor', now usually common sense does tell me that much more time is required to make a more educated decision before putting pen to paper, but in this case the pen is firmly placed on the pad and my experience tells me that this cable is something special, a real treat.

What stands out with the Chord Sarum Super Array USB is how prominent clarity positions itself throughout the soundstage, from the centre focus to the

CHORD SARUM SUPER ARAY USB CABLE

Previously,
vocalists with
other USB
cables I have
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and smeared

very edges of the enormous soundstage produced by the cable. Notes on the boundaries of the stage are as thick and clearly defined as the centre focus and the centre focus has as much definition as the boundaries.

My want for completeness in the sound of a USB cable had been somewhat realised by my own design, but when comparing to the Chord Sarum Super Aray USB I recognise my own design and how good it is, but that it just isn't a match for the Chord in overall definition, resolution and texture.

Although I pat myself on the back for what I believe has been achieved from the geometry of my own design, I defer to the Chord for superior conductor choice and overall build specifics and understanding of the criteria for a superior USB cable.

Every single note has its own position in the soundstage now which is so stable it feels almost liberating. It's like that sigh of relief at the end of a busy day when you kick off your boots, grab a drink and relax. A completely unforced sound that fills the room so clearly with no grain and the vocals are just so sweet and pure.

Previously, vocalists with other USB cables I have had I now judge as flat and smeared. With the Chord Sarum Super Aray USB in place it's as if the singer has taken one small step forward into freer space in the venue, giving them more focus and clarity, which translates to better expression of the vocal and more depth to the surrounding band members, allowing the listener to focus on the music more easily.

If you build it they will come - should I be so bold to say something like this for a piece of wire? Maybe not, but as I feel my system has reached a point where it is, or was, exactly where I want it to be and then a cable comes along and tickles me in a way a carefully selected front end or preamplifier upgrade could only achieve I have to be honest and convey the experience in what I hear.

What is all this really all about if we're honest? It's about our love of music and how it can affect our mental state, from happy and energetic to relaxed and entranced. If a cable can enhance this experience it should be given as much credence as any other part of the system.

I have had similar experiences in the past but as I'm sure you all know they really are few and far between. Some fall into our laps and others we strive to search for, hoping that the synergy will be complete from component to component whether in a high end system or a more modest setup, with the goal of connecting us to the music sincerely. One of my own was really seriously looking at my electrics from a new consumer unit onwards to a balanced mains supply and really honing down the grounding in my system. Another was redesigning the crossovers of my speakers. These things on the grand scale of things were inexpensive and easily implemented but boy they have really made a difference.

Although the Chord USB is far from cheap it's been the cherry on the cake for me personally in my current setup, maybe without all the combination of my recent redesigns it wouldn't have had as much purchase on the overall ability of the system, or maybe recent changes have allowed me to appreciate the cables real influence, I'll allow you to decide but for me it's an absolute winner and will take a hell of a lot to better.

Having scored so highly the Chord Sarum Super Aray USB is eligible for second review and possible Outstanding Product Award. So over to Dominic Marsh the cable went and here are his findings.

I have reviewed a USB cable before for Hifi Pig (From JIB in Germany as I recall), so I am no stranger to their sonic characteristics, even though it runs through my mind that 1's and 0's are still just that and the absence of either puts a real spanner in the works, never mind an enhanced or otherwise sound quality from a digital stream. Do you detect a small sceptical note there? You would be right. My personal feelings locked tightly away in a box, reviewer mode switched on, dust off the DAC, connect up the Chord Sarum Super Aray USB cable to my PC and system, fire up the tunes and see what transpires.

No construction details were supplied with the cable, so it becomes very difficult if not impossible for this reviewer to reconcile the sounds heard with whatever physical build attributes the cable possesses, so I'm afraid the review will consist entirely of my

CHORD SARUM SUPER ARAY USB CABLE

perceptions of how this cable sounded to me.

I remember clearly how I was utterly gobsmacked when I first heard the JIB Silver Arsenic USB cable and even that experience paled by comparison when I first heard the Chord Sarum Super Aray USB and there isn't a huge price gap between this cable and the JIB Silver Arsenic. I wasn't at all prepared for the sound coming from my speakers, the first thing I noticed was how the sound had appeared to leave the speaker cabinets and was entirely hanging in mid air, perfectly centered, spread widely well beyond the speaker boundaries and with a stunning three dimensionality depth-wise. It wasn't being thrown forward into the room though, it was like being at a stage play in a theatre where there was no microphones or amplification being used and you could pinpoint exactly where each actor was placed, with clear limits determined by the boundaries of the stage itself. Maybe not the best analogy, but it's my best effort.

As Dan also says, he and I both noticed a lack of grain in the sound and I can add to that a lack of hiss too. Dynamics had a razor sharp leading edge with no smearing that I could detect and delivered with full force and power too. Snare drum strikes had a tautness and vibrancy that sent a shiver down the spine so drum solos had real drive, weight and impact to them. I was particularly impressed too at how guitar riffs weren't just a chord, but each individual string of the guitar could be heard which forms the chord and that is something I haven't heard before from any cable, let alone a mere USB cable that purportedly only carries 1's and 0's. That should give you some indicator of the performance available from the Chord Sarum Super Aray USB and to say I was impressed is an understatement.

All of the music I listened to through this cable had immediacy and vibrancy running throughout, with fast lithe dynamics and perfect timing when it was there in the recording, which for once didn't actually fatigue after many hours of listening which was most surprising of all, as music with high dynamic content can wear you out pretty quickly and those listening sessions are generally much shorter than with more mellow softer music.

I had in mind when I started this review that I was in no hurry to go it all digital to streaming because I still value my hard copy library of music. This cable might just make me change my mind about that, but if I did my backups, will have backups of backups and a spare backup just to make sure, so I don't have the misery my poor friend endured when his computer turned its toes up and died.

CONCLUSION

I still keep wincing at the price of the Chord Sarum Super Aray USB, but like all good things in life there is a price to pay. I have no idea what goes into it's construction either, but by the same token I don't ever go busting into a restaurant's kitchen to remonstrate with the Chef about the recipe when he has cooked me a superb meal that I thoroughly enjoyed and happily paid the bill. Look at the Sarum USB cable in that light and suddenly it all makes complete sense.

Take a listen for yourself and see if you agree.

Designer's Notes

When I first started to listen and become obsessed by music, there were two ways to listen - one was radio and the other was vinyl. Any radio I had access to had a single rather small speaker and if I played records, it was on a mono system that my father had built - he was an electrical engineer, first at Mullards and then Phillips. He came home one Friday night with a turntable and a box of bits and over the weekend built an amplifier, plinth and speaker cabinet that also served as a bookshelf. The reason for mentioning this is that I - like a lot of other people my sort of age - grew up listening not to hi-fi, but to music. Everyone knows the limitations of transistor radios but the argument you can make for them is that whatever they aren't, they do tend to be coherent. That is - they allow you listen to music with a real sense of rhythm and timing and the same was true of most vinyl systems as well. Later on came a stereo system and I can still remember my utter astonishment at hearing the guitar solo on "Yours Is No Disgrace" from the Yes album - each individual note bouncing from speaker to speaker. Music was a magical thing and that's the way it should remain.

Much later on I learnt to play music and discovered the utter joy and thrill of making music with other people. A guitarist friend lent me his bass and we played together for about seven hours - we would have gone on but my fingers were bleeding. I still play in a band and it's still wonderful - and on occasion, when we all get it right - almost transcendental. Once you've experienced this (and whisper it quietly, but on occasion it's better than sex) you begin to understand what makes some of the music you listen to so special. The Doors, Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, Elmore James, Parliament/Funkadelic, John Coltrane, Pentangle, Fairport Convention - and I've not even scratched the surface - there is so much good music out there to be explored and experienced.

Then at the end of 1989 I met and starting working for Sally, the founder and owner of The Chord Company. At that point in time CD didn't even register with me; I had a turntable and there were five record shops in Salisbury, all of them full of vinyl. These days there's only one and if I want anything other than Jazz, Blues or Classical I need travel, usually to Marlborough where there's one of the best record shops for miles.

When I first met Sally she threw a cable to me to take home and try; up until then the choice of cable had never crossed my mind. I put it into the system at home and everything I loved about music got better; I got fascinated and 26 years later I still am.

Working for Sally meant meeting lots of people in the hi-fi industry. It meant getting a better system - a new turntable, a pre and power amplifier and bigger, better speakers - and that meant I got to hear even more; my favourite albums were a revelation and listening to music became an utterly joyous experience.

Then came digital. Slowly at first and then very quickly CD was the only way to buy music. If you loved music you couldn't just stop buying it because it wasn't available on vinyl any more. That meant getting a CD player and I was pretty lucky. My first CD player was a Micro Mega Solo - at the time, one of the more musical CD players available. That's when the serious experimentation began. It still amazes me that something machined onto a 12 inch piece of plastic

CHORD SARUM SUPER ARAY USB CABLE

can sound so good - especially when it's played on a machine where a rubber band connects an electric motor to a platter so that it revolves. That a needle dragged through the groove in the plastic should do rhythm, pitch and timing so well - and that is where the magic is.

So we experimented, we researched, we visited dealers, we talked with manufacturers, musicians and reviewers and we listened and listened. We begged, stole and borrowed, we experimented and we learnt.

One of the really important things we learnt about was the importance of shielding – particularly high frequency effective shielding. We started building interconnect cables with high frequency effective shielding in the late 90s and at the time, they were a revelation. They were a revelation because they made music sound more like music: more coherent and more enjoyable, more revealing and ultimately there was so much more sense of coherence and rhythm. Fundamentally it put some of the magic back into music.

We learnt about the tonal influence of insulation materials in relation to conductor materials, we learnt how different types of solder behaved and influenced the performance, we learnt about plugs and termination methods. We learnt about all of this because it had a direct influence on the ability of cables to carry a coherent musical signal. We did a lot of blind testing – we used a whole mix of people: musicians, music lovers and hi-fi enthusiasts – and we found that the results were remarkably consistent.

The experimentation with high frequency shielding continued and in 2004 we produced our first high frequency shielded speaker cable. We did this for exactly the same reasons that we were using high frequency shielded interconnects – the shielded speaker cable made music sound more coherent and more involving and it revealed levels of detail, particularly in terms of timbre and dynamics. It also helped to put the groove back into music.

One of the problems with hi-fi is that it's very easy to forget why you first bought a hi-fi system, and in the pursuit of seeing ever further into the music that you love, you end up destroying the

I am deliberately
avoiding calling
these cables either
Ethernet or USB –
they're not

thing that made you love it – you break it.

Over the past five years a lot of things have changed. First of all, digital sources have got a lot, lot better. There are now more ways to listen to music than ever. You can stream, you can rip your music collection to a hard drive, you can download, there's a huge resurgence and interest in vinyl and you can download high resolution files and stream CD resolution music. This is one of the most exciting times I've experienced in my 26 years in the industry. Over this time, we developed our first Tuned ARAY cables. We used our then flagship Sarum cables to do this and what we produced was a cable that wasn't just transparent in terms of detail and timbre but critically was capable of carrying a musical signal far more coherently than anything we'd produced before. As music lovers it was, for us, transformational. The first Tuned ARAY cable we developed was a digital cable. We had, for a long time, been using DACs – both at home and in the demonstration room. The effect of the Tuned ARAY technology was, we felt, so musically profound that we went on to experiment and develop the same principle for, first of all, our analogue Sarum cables and then the Sarum power cables.

Around this time, we also got hold of streamers and USB DACs – partly out of curiosity and partly to start playing around and listening to high resolution music. The thing is that for so many years, we'd been waiting for high resolution music. Like many people we believed that digital music wasn't really going to come good until the sample rates were high enough. By now

though, the work we'd done with the Tuned ARAY cables had made us realise that actually, standard CD sample rates were capable of producing really good, coherent, exciting and involving music. So what was high resolution going to offer musically? We had streamers, we had USB DACs. The streamers were using RJ45 plugs and Cat cable; the USB DACs were using USB cables. We're a cable company – it was only natural that we would be curious about these cables. In particular, given the fact that whilst we could hear some of the very obvious benefits of streaming, we were struggling once again with all those things that make music so special for us – and not just special for us, special for pretty much every music lover as well. What we were getting was hugely detailed, but ultimately and frustratingly lacked emotion and soul. So we experimented. We had the Tuned ARAY principles, we knew about high frequency shielding, we knew about high frequency signals and it was only natural to apply this thinking to both USB terminated cables and RJ45 terminated cables. I am deliberately avoiding calling these cables either Ethernet or USB – they're not. They are cables that we built to carry a digital audio signal in a way that produced a more coherent and realistic musical performance. They carry an electrical signal, just like our analogue cables and our digital coaxial cables. They have very high levels of shielding and they have either our Tuned ARAY or Super ARAY tuning technologies applied to them. We think they help a system to produce music that sounds more detailed, more coherent and ultimately far, far more involving and enjoyable – which in principle is what a hi-fi system should do, be it vinyl, CD or streaming. We think that the way these cables help music to sound is something that anybody with a love of music will find easy to hear.

The computer industry and the hi-fi industry are not necessarily easy bedfellows. We had no idea of the controversy and the degree of anger producing these cables would cause. We simply set out to see if we could make a better musical experience and we did it in the way that we've always done – by experimentation, blind testing and ultimately, listening. It is, after all, all about the music.

Nigel Finn (The Chord Company)



Studio Connections Carbon Power Cable

By Dan Worth and Dominic Marsh

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

STUDIO CONNECTIONS CARBON POWER CABLE



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

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

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

System Efficiency and General Implementation

High performance power distribution is not just about providing energy to components in my opinion, but also bonding components together to form a single, cohesive system. This demands providing a stable common reference ground between components and

preventing stray voltages and noise occurring between different parts of the system.

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

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

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

Installation

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

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

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

When listening for acoustic air and space in live venues I felt that the sound I was hearing was definitely truer and more representative, almost as if the other silver cable was a bit artificial in its sonic approach

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

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

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

Bring in the Carbon Mains Cables

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

I then proceeded to replace my existing cables back into the amplifiers and changed the one in the DAC for a SC Carbon. Most notably I understood the vocals better. What I mean is I could feel more emotion and realism in the artist's rendition of the given music. When watching a live band, eye contact from the singer is essential in conveying the emotion that is felt in the lyrics, but we cannot have that with Hifi, as we

strive to ascertain the emotion from the description of the vocal and with the SC Carbon in place in my DAC I really felt a good connection with the singer. Not to degrade my other cables at all I could say that at a staggeringly cheap cost I felt that I was retaining a palpability that I had worked so hard to achieve which cost a great deal more previously.

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

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

Placing another Carbon cable into the preamp had similar results to adding one to the DAC initially, I felt that from the upper mids to the upper bass I had more

STUDIO CONNECTIONS CARBON POWER CABLE

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

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

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

The entire loom made complete musical sense to me and flow and sculpture of the soundstage was fantastic, leaving nothing in the mist of background hashes, with ambient harmonics retaining great stature throughout the soundstage and micro details, maybe a little more rounded but contacting the music and the listener with full ranged articulation. I do like a bit more of a slapstick sound overall, but arguments could easily be raised for both alternatives, especially when concerning

myself with the wide range of musical taste I have.

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

Conclusion

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

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

I was also called upon to evaluate these Studio Connections Carbon power cords for Hifi Pig and was supplied with enough cables to completely wire my system from wall socket to all IEC inlets throughout, including the input socket to my MS Audio 6 way mains distribution block. Usually we only get submitted to

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STUDIO CONNECTIONS CARBON POWER CABLE

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as a single power cord to review, so it was both refreshing and indeed very welcome that Studio Connections made available a whole set which gave a sort of “completeness” to the review, rather than a mere snapshot in total isolation of one cable alone.

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

Sound

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

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

Fink's enunciation a good deal more lifelike, with a distinct gruffness to his voice.

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

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

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

Conclusion

The Studio Connections Carbon power cord set has acquitted itself very well, with honour too I might add. They are still to this day installed in my system and I am in no rush whatsoever to uninstall them, because for the first time in many years I have a set of power cords that I don't feel the impetus to ask questions about and simply let them get on with the task I have set them, happy in the knowledge it would cost a lot of additional cash for any kind of tangible improvement over what these cables do, so they really are a fit and forget product so my spare cables box will have an emptying session soon.

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

GIK Room Treatment Products

By Stuart and Linette Smith

Room treatment is often seen as a dark art a somewhat expensive process. Stuart and Linette Smith try three products from GIK Acoustics including bass traps, acoustic panels and diffusors

GIK ROOM TREATMENT PRODUCTS



Perhaps the most cost effective upgrade you can make and if you have spent a good deal on your hifi you really should be aiming to get the very best out of it

If you don't know GIK then let me fill you in a little. They're based in the UK with offices around the world and they manufacture room treatment products and that's all they do. GIKs products are used extensively in recording studios and even in the world renowned Abbey Road studios in London. They offer a free service where you can measure your room's acoustics using a free little program and you can send the results in to GIK and they'll talk you through the treatments they recommend for you.

We added treatments in stages and listened for changes in the sound as we went along. Now, our room is a normal living space (be it quite a large space) and is acoustically not ideal and so I'd been itching to have the room treated for a few years. Don't get me wrong, it's not terrible, but as fellow enthusiasts will appreciate, there is always room for improvements.

Now, I'm sure there are going to be many reading this that will say, "But I'll never get away with having huge bass traps and offensive looking wall panels in the front room!", but fear not because

GIK offer a wide range of colours, sizes and you can even have images printed on the acoustic panels. With regards the latter I went and had a series of abstract photographs printed on them and the results are pretty spectacular. However, I sort of wish I'd gone for all the panels in the bright red that the other panels I have are in as they immediately add a statement to the room and, to mine an Linette's minds, they look really rather cool – sort of instant decorating. All the products are relatively lightweight and very easy to position, move about and the panels are a doddle to hang on your walls with all fixings being included in the packaging.

I'll go through the order in which we added each of the treatments and give you my thoughts on the benefits or otherwise of each.

Tri-Trap Bass Traps

The bass traps we have installed are £252 for a pair including VAT and measure 120cm in height and are 58.5cm wide. They are called Tri-Traps and, as their name would suggest, they are a triangular prism in shape as you

GIK ROOM TREATMENT PRODUCTS

look down on them – obviously designed to fit in corners. We have two stacked on top of each other in each corner behind the loudspeakers (we’ve had a few pairs in during the period we’ve been experimenting with GIK room treatments). They weigh 6KG each and as such are easy to position. The Tri-Traps are designed to absorb frequencies in the bass end from 50Hz up to 5000Hz.

What I was expecting was any bass boom in the room to be dealt with and the overall effect to be one of reducing the perceived amount of bass in the room. However, what actually happens when you pop these in the room is that you get more perceived bass...this threw me for a while to be honest. The bass is more pronounced in the mix, but it is also tighter, faster and without any flabbiness. Anyone who reads my reviews regularly will know that overhanging bass is something I loath and the Tri-Traps just tighten everything up really nicely.

We listen to a lot of bass heavy music (Techno and Dub in the main) and despite our speakers having onboard DSP there was still a propensity to have a bit of a boom in the room – the Tri-Traps cured this most effectively! I could waffle on about listening to this record and that CD but there’s no need to and I reckon I’ve outlined what these things do pretty effectively.

242 Acoustic Panels

The acoustic panels we have are the larger ones measuring 60cms x 120cms and costing (in their plain coloured form) £185.40 including VAT for three panels. You have the option of adding a scatter plate, a boom stand bracket, a wooden or metal stand or brackets for mounting on the ceiling. Other sizes are available being 60cm x 60cm and 30cm x 120cm and so you really should be able to accommodate these pretty easy in your room. Initially we had two panels mounted on the wall behind the speakers and more on the side walls at first and second reflection points on the two side walls. To find the reflection points you sit in your listening chair and have someone walk down the side wall with a mirror until you can see the speaker in the mirror...easy and the “reflection” point name sort of gives it away really. GIK have a video that’ll walk you through this too. They fix with a metal wire that you screw onto the back of the

panel and this hangs on a hook/screw you screw into the wall...again dead simple to position and hang and once positioned they sit flush to the wall.

They are designed to absorb the entire frequency range and the effect is one of tidying everything in the mix up. Tough to describe in any way other than to say that it’s a bit like focusing a camera from out of focus to a pin-point image. The aural effect is to add a dimensionality to the stereo image that now has greater depth and width, with instruments sitting in the soundstage in a more accurate and three dimensional manner. Stereo becomes more stereoscopic if that makes sense. Of course, this is why these panels are used

extensively in recording studios, but they have the same effect in the home and as such pretty much invaluable if you are serious about your listening.

Poly Diffusor

The Poly Diffusors are a polycylindrical diffusor and absorber in one unit. Basically speaking they look like a panel with a curved front which GIK says allows for “virtually perfect spatial diffusion”. They’re 120cm high and 60cm wide and at their deepest point 15.5cm deep. They hang onto the wall using the included little gizmo that fits to the back of the unit and also screws into the walls. It’s not difficult to do and even this committed non-DIYist



GIK ROOM TREATMENT PRODUCTS

managed to get them up in a little more than ten minutes. The fixing gizmo allows the diffusors to be taken off the wall should you need to pain or whatever. They're £240 for a pair. We have two of these diffusors and they are positioned on the back wall where we previously had a couple of the 242 acoustic panels positioned. Their effect is similar to the panels we had in place in that they clean up the soundstage and add focus and dimensionality to the stereo image...only a little more so. They also seem to further tighten the bass but this effect is not so pronounced as when you first add the bass traps.

Conclusion

I've read a lot of crap on various forums about the efficacy of room treatment and its place in the domestic audio set up, but all I can say is you need to hear what these relatively inexpensive panels can do. Anyone who is not convinced is either fooling themselves for whatever reason or needs to take themselves to the ear-doctor without passing go and without collecting their £200. The weakest part of your hifi is very likely to be the speaker and room interaction and, short of having your listening room built from scratch, the only way to get this sorted is to use room treatment products.

GIK's panels do what they say on the tin, their service is terrific and for the money I'd suggest that they represent astounding value for money given the increases in resolution, accuracy and clarity you will get from your hifi.

We have invested in the panels I've written about above but will be investing further in the future, initially on more of the 242 acoustic panels for a cloud on the roof and then more for the side walls and then finally a couple more of the diffusors so we can stack them behind the speakers.

I have absolutely no hesitation in putting these through to Linette for her thoughts on these and to see if they get our Outstanding Product award.

Perhaps the most cost effective upgrade you can make and if you have spent a good deal on your hifi you really should be aiming to get the very best out of it. You can start with a few panels or a couple of bass traps and go from there... as we have and will continue to do.

I must admit to being a bit sceptical about the idea of room treatment and acoustic panels, however I am definitely a convert since we got the GIK Acoustics gear into the listening room. I would second everything that Stuart has said. These are well priced, great looking panels that just work. I was particularly impressed by the effect on bass, making it really tight. I love the fact that you can have your own artwork printed on them too, the interior design possibilities are endless. Importantly for us, we can move things around depending on what gear we are using, the flexibility is important. They were very easy to put up, even for my somewhat DIY challenged husband and they make your listening room look very professional. The products are extremely

well made, from environmentally safe materials, our floor-to-ceiling bass traps have actually had kittens run up and down them with no ill effects! GIK are a very approachable company which is run by down to earth, knowledgeable and friendly people and they are very happy to give advice and help on getting the best sound in your room. Not just for home use, the products are used in commercial settings and professional studios too, which to me reinforces their reputation.

For all of the above reasons I think that GIK Acoustics thoroughly deserve a Hifi Pig Outstanding Product award.



RETRO BITES

CLASSIC AND ICONIC AUDIO ...BY
JANINE ELLIOT



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LONG LIVE EARS

Janine Elliot charts the rise and fall and rise again of the Thermionic Tube/valve in this fascinating and informative article

1960 was an epic year. Not only was it an epic year for me, but it was the year BBC Television Centre was opened (on 29 June 1960), the first edition of British soap 'Coronation Street' and also when Jimmy Hendrix did his first paid gig. It was also the year that old-hat valve-based HiFi reached its peak before transistors would see them parked unscrupulously in the bin until, like aged vinyl, it would begin its second renaissance.

Whilst many manufacturers during this important time would be producing products both valve and transistor based – and even a mixture of the two – some companies, like British manufacturer Lowther were quite late in disbanding the bulky, inefficient, fragile and hot component that was first constructed in 1904.

By 1970 most HiFi companies had turned to manufacturing transistor based equipment, particularly led by Japanese and American companies, and then by British and other countries. However, a number of companies such as Quad and Leak worked with both at the same time. For example the acclaimed Leak Stereo 20 (and less acclaimed Stereo 60) valve power amp was produced until 1967, but their Stereo 30 transistor amplifier ran from 1963-67. Similarly, the Quad II valve amp first appeared in 1953 but ran until 1969. In America Fisher Radio Corporation ran a TX-300 transistorised amplifier at the same time as the X-100 valve amplifier. The transistorised version was 3 times the price of the valve amplifier. Lowther's LL18 mono, LL18S stereo and LL26 MkII valve amplifiers ran on until 1975. Interestingly, they brought out their first transistor amp, the Transistor Amplifier Unit (a preamp available in three

versions of high impedance, medium gain, and high gain) way back in 1956. It is true to say that early transistorised amplifiers were worse than their valve replacements or alternatives, hence why early valve amplifiers fetch such good prices in antique audio-fairs. Leak's Stereo 30 transistor amplifier carried an advert saying that since it was 43% of the size, 48% of the weight and 89% of the price of an equivalent valve amp, plus apparently greater reliability, how could the valve possibly survive? They worked out it was "500% better" because it didn't get hot, unlike the valve. It wasn't their best creation.

Whilst the transistor was first patented as an idea by American physicist and electronic engineer Julius Lilienfeld way back in 1925, with the first produced transistor in 1949, its sheer price prevented it superseding the valve until those prices came down and valve prices

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increased; supply and demand in its infancy, then. Figures from the RCA Company in the US show that they sold just over a million tubes in 1922, but by 1924 this had risen to over 11 million. With the advent of broadcasting in 1922 (BBC, on 18th October) the needs for valves increased significantly for both broadcasters and listeners alike. Valves and tubes did have their problems, though, preventing their fame possibly having been higher. They were not only quite expensive (even in 1950's, buying a Leak mono power amp would cost you a month's wages), but running them wasn't that simple. For a start they were power thirsty. Early valves used directly heated cathodes and that meant you needed big batteries to run them. There were no PP9's then, nor would their 9 volts be sufficient. My 1950's Eveready "portable" Sky King radio uses a massive B136 battery with 4 terminals (LT+ 1.5v, HT 90V plus two negative terminals), which were not cheap and nor were they lightweight. This radio was actually one of the very first truly

portable radios you could buy with 4 B7G valves. Once indirectly heated valves were developed, this opened up their use considerably and they were more widely used in radios. The 1950's and 60's saw a great rise in valve amplifiers, tape recorders and radios. Most "Hifi" was part of the home décor, so size didn't matter. Indeed, much of the components came in "chassis form" for you to put inside your teak or mahogany wooden frame, complete with Garrard or Collaro turntable plus loudspeaker, just as originally the motor car came in a chassis for you to contract a 'coach builder' to create the bodywork.

The story of the valve (or thermionic tube) goes back to the American Thomas Edison, when he noticed a plate placed in the electric lamp that he invented offered rectification of AC to DC current. He noted the effect but didn't do anything more. That was left to a Brit' on 16th November 1904.

Lancaster born John Ambrose Fleming (he created the famous 'left-hand-rule') built the first valve to be used in an electronic circuit; a "Fleming Diode" was a two element (anode and cathode) three wired vacuum tube as an "instrument for converting alternating currents into continuous currents". To explain how it worked it had two connectors for the cathode which was heated up with a 12V battery, which sent negative charges to the anode. Applying AC current to the cathode and anode terminals and with a resistor in parallel between them created DC between the resistor. This was then used as a detector and rectifier in the then important world of radio telegraphy. The following year the Fleming Diode began being manufactured by The Edison and Swan United Electric Light Company and within a few years was being used in the Marconi-Fleming 2 valve wireless receiver. I say two valves; actually there was one valve with another one in reserve since this new tube technology was so unreliable. The first Triode was



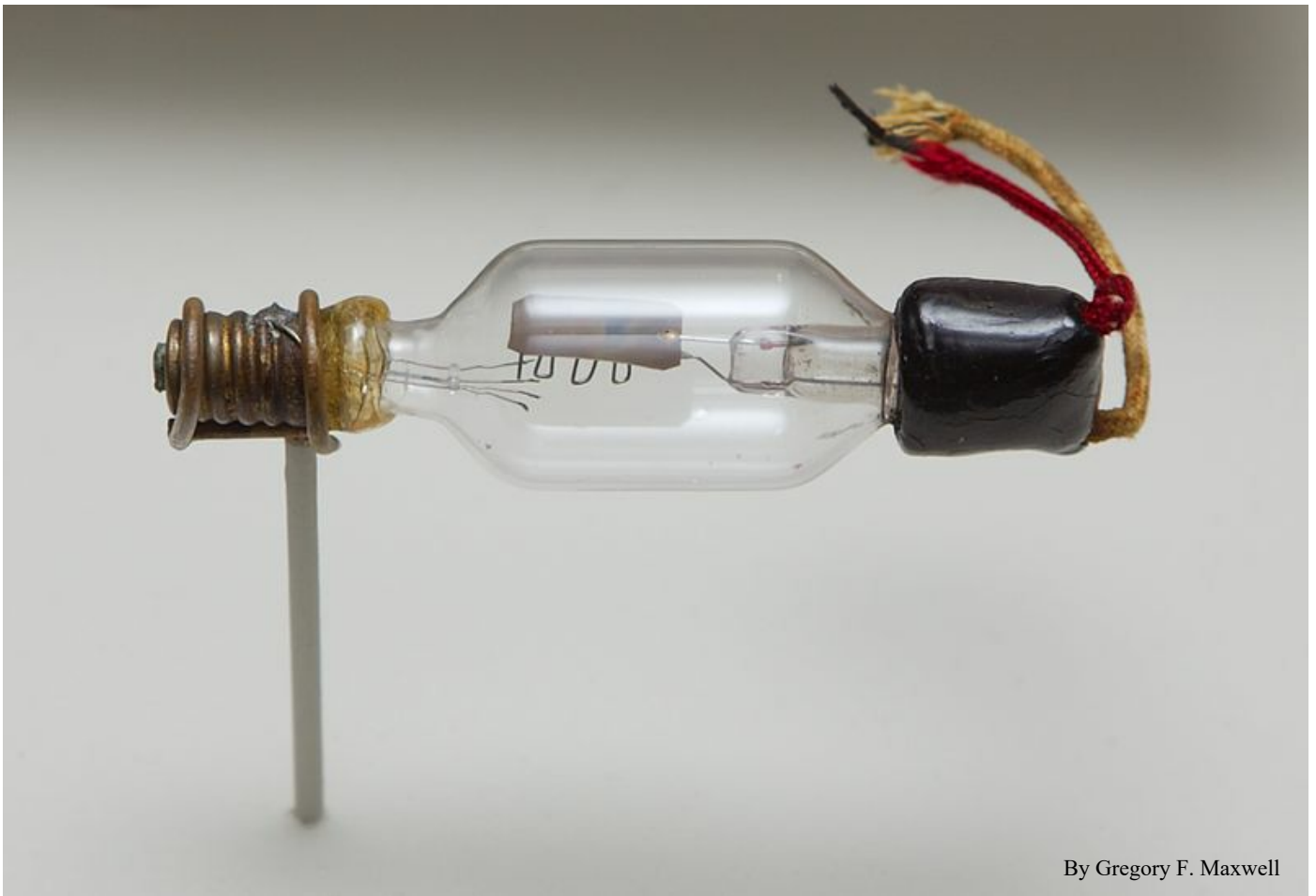
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By Gregory F. Maxwell

Usually electrons would be fired from a hot cathode into a vacuum known as 'thermal electron emission' or the 'Edison Effect'

made in 1906 by American Lee de Forest, called the 'Audion', (pictured) a fish-bowl shaped tube in a low vacuum, which itself led to the "Type A", which as well as being designed as a detector of wireless signals could also be used in amplifiers. It was to appear therefore in amplifiers along the newly created long-distant telephone lines. This was followed by the British "R" valve which was a higher vacuum triode, which itself led to a number of other triodes.

The name "thermionic" in relation to valves relates to the use of thermal processing; the use of heaters. In normal life metals have lots of electrons which move about in response to the application of electromagnetic field. Normally the positive charge on the atoms cancel out those negative (electron) charges. However, if heated up those electrons have more energy, and in a vacuum they move about quite freely. Usually electrons would be fired from a hot cathode into a vacuum known

as 'thermal electron emission' or the 'Edison Effect'.

Triodes, have three electrodes inside an evacuated glass envelope: a heated cathode (usually achieved by a separate filament) from which electrons leave it, then a grid, and at the other side another plate which was the anode. The ECC83 is a commonly used "double-triode"; if you look inside there are two separate units in the vacuum tube. The Pentode, invented by Mullard/Philips, by its name has five electrodes in total; namely the addition of two extra grids in the centre. This is to better control the cathode to anode current flow. As electrons flow about they could tend to work their way back to the cathode and so the third "suppressor" grid is there to prevent this from happening. An example is the EL34 tube. A single EL34 creates an amplifier of around 11 Watts. A Tetrode has just two grids (hence 4 electrodes). The KT66 (pictured) and KT88 is a beam tetrode invented by GEC (the 'KT' stands for Kinkless Tetrode)... two of

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these in “push-pull” can create around 100W.

Commercially manufactured valve amplifiers began to appear in 1913, just before the start of the First World War. World wars seem to create great inventions; the First WW saw U.S. Army Major Edwin Armstrong in 1918 invent the superheterodyne principle, whilst in France, a method of getting better radio reception by moving the signal to a fixed intermediate frequency (IF) was invented. All radios would duly go this way, but it meant more valves were needed, so that meant prices becoming cheaper as more were made to supply demand. Between WW1 and WW2 amplifiers tended to be very heavy, big and ugly, mostly using triodes such as the PX4 and PX25. Two PX4's in “push-pull” Class A setup would easily give 10W. They also had low distortion, making them popular until the 1950's ... amplifiers such as Decca's PA/VI used them. Similarly WW2 was a key point in the development of the thermionic valve, being needed for electronic equipment from radio receivers and transmitters, to electronic warfare equipment and radar systems, and much more. Where early valves were large, after WW2 they began to get smaller. Now, in the 21st century valve amplifier manufacturers are, in the main, keen to make valves highly visible, whether large or small.

There are many types of valves and their numbering system is highly complicated, and would take too long to explain here. There were a number of different generic codes to describe their design and use, for example the RMA system, RETMA, EIA, etc. Certain letters would describe the manufacturer of origin (eg PL = Philips, SV – Svetlana) and numbers and letters to describe more details of the most common valves used in hi-fi equipment of this period such as ECC83, KT88, KT66, B7G, EL84, EL34, PX25, ECL86, etc. The standard valve system negotiated between Philips and Telefunken in 1933-34 is the easiest to explain. Using this system the iconic ECC83 means E= +6.3v, C = small signal dual triode (ie effectively two triodes ... CC), 83 relates to the chronological order; this being a 9-pin

tube (numbers 80-89 were all 9 pin tubes.). ECC83 was the 1950 European version of the 12AX7 (pictured), originally conceived in America in 1947 by RCA (originally having the developmental number A-4522, just to confuse even further and being two 6AV6 triodes in one vacuum tube). The ECC83 is thought to be better than the 12AX7 by some. With the 12AX7 the ‘12’ stands for 12V. Bear in mind this is a double triode so 6.3V+6.3V sort of makes 12. The tube has a centre-tapped heater separated from the cathode (so it can be either one or two heaters). Whichever version, this famous valve is commonly used in first stage/preamps connected one after the other until arriving at the required amplification (each works at an amplification factor of 100). The Leak Stereo 20 has three in total, plus two EL84 pentode output valves per channel. The EL84 had two ‘similar’ relations, the PL84 and UL84, but they were used for smaller television amplifiers (E stands for 6.3V heater, P for 300mA heater and U stands for a 100mA heater).

Today valves are playing an increasing importance in home audio, with rediscovered tubes from the forgotten past reappearing in newer kit as the ‘popular’ valves become too popular for some. Whilst some might say certain valves are better than others, and I agree certain tube manufacturers produced the best of each type of valve, it is more important how the tubes and other components are combined in the single package of amplifier or control unit, that defines how good it really is. Some, like the Leaks, Quads, Radfords, Pye Mozart, Rogers and many others will go down in history as epic, but many others are best forgotten. Now companies, particularly new ones from Eastern countries, are reliving the magic of the thermionic tube, and other favourites such as McIntosh and Audio Research, and more recently Manley Labs have never stopped recreating valve paradise showing that maybe we haven't yet quite reached the pinnacle of hi-fidelity valve audio. Now valve based audio is on the up in the tables, meaning that perhaps we might again reach that pinnacle of 1960 where both valve and transistor products are of an equal par. I hope so!

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BIRD'S EYE VIEW

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

In Association With

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2016 As Seen From The Perspective Of Linette Smith

2016 has been one of those years, there have been ups and there have been downs and for us at Hifi Pig Towers, it really has been a 'blink and you've missed it' kind of a year. We covered a host of Hifi Shows, reviewed a huge amount and range of gear and brought you the most informative Hifi News going... here's my round up of our year.

January

We knew that the trend for Reel 2 Reel tape would grow this year and this was confirmed when Austrian company **Horch House** announced **Project R2R**, a move to produce the world's only new Reel 2 Reel Tape Deck. We saw prototype images at High End Munich 2016 later in the year, but hold out high hopes that they will bring the actual promised prototype to the 2017 show. Hifi Pig went headfi as we covered the **Headroom** event at the end of the month in London, proving that the headfi phenomenon continues to grow and

gather followers both from the traditional hifi world and beyond.

February

The main event in February was, of course, **The Bristol Sound And Vision Show**. Seen by many as the UK show, both for the public and the industry itself, this year was a big one and we were there in force to cover it all.

March

For us at Hifi Pig Towers, March was dominated by the arrival of the **Avantgarde Acoustic Duo XD**s. We had waited nearly a year for this beauties that we ordered at High End Munich 2015, so the excitement was palpable...and backs were sore after the actually-not-as-hard-as-we-thought-it-would-be task of putting them together! The Vinyl Revolution continued it's take over as **Sainsbury's Supermarket in the UK** announced they would be selling vinyl records in their stores.

April

Perhaps more appropriately for our readers, April saw the Annual Record Store Day event for Independent Record shops. The industry as a whole was thinking about what would happen if **Brexit became reality** and we broke the news that UK hifi royalty **Tannoy** were **closing their Coatbridge manufacturing works**. (It was later announced that the Prestige range manufacturing would remain in Scotland.) Stuart and I popped over to London for a very special **launch of the ChordMusic cable**...one that was certainly going to divide opinion. Our man in Chicago, Ron, checked out **AXPONA 2016** for us and Grant reported back from the **Stylus Show** at Heathrow. The news of new products was flying in thick and fast..of course we were getting ready for the annual pilgrimage to High End Munich the following month, and so it seemed was everyone else!

May



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

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Best of 2015

High Fidelity
Best of 2015

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BIRDS EYE VIEW

What can be said about May, other than it's the time of the year when literally anyone who has anything to do with hifi packs up their bags, and in some cases, several tons of hifi gear, and heads of for beautiful Bavaria and the madness that is **High End Munich**. **High End Munich 2016** was the biggest and best yet, even after attending a few of these shows I still marvel at the sheer size and incredibleness of it all. There were new products galore, some of the most high end gear you could ever care to see or hear...and plenty of beer and sausage for those who wanted it. Always a great chance to catch up with friends from far and wide, Munich is a very special show. We also had a very successful and fun Women In Hifi meet up, and of course gave out our Hifi Pig loves You award.

June

The Women In Hifi met up again at **T.H.E. Show in Newport beach** and, besieged by kittens at Hifi Pig Towers, I decided there was no better time to look into the relationship between **Audiophiles and their cats**. We were back in the UK again this time for the wonderful **North West Audio Show**, with whom we are media partners. The show grew well in it's second year and we are really looking forward to it's two day event in 2017 which should be the UK event of the year.

July

There was of course **plenty of news Hifi** wise but for us, Hifi Pig Towers became a little quieter as both our youngest son, and two of the kittens, spread their metaphorical wings and went off to explore the world...what for us to do with an empty nest? Play lots of music and enjoy the summer of course!

August

August saw the launch of our **'Wheelchair for Ricky'** campaign to raise money for a young audiophile in the USA who the Hifi Pig team had got to know through social media. We were truly staggered by the overwhelming generosity of both the industry who

donated more and more prizes and our readers who donated. Expect and update next month as the Wheelchair was in it's final stages at the factory just before Christmas. Stuart and I had a bit of a holiday and went further south to cover the incredible (and free!) **Crescendo Prog Rock Festival**, it was a very special event with some amazing bands from all over the world.

September

Personally, it was my first time at the **National Audio Show at Whittlebury**, near Silverstone. It was a very enjoyable show in a great setting but, as we announced later on in the year, it was to be the last with the show moving north to Birmingham for 2017.

October

October saw us hopping back over to London for **The Indulgence Show**. A lot of effort had gone into the event and the exhibitors had really pushed the proverbial boat out, we are hoping that 2017 sees word of the show spread further so it gets the success it deserves. Although we couldn't get to **The Windsor Show** ourselves, we were able to bring plenty of photo's of the event for you. This month also saw our News Sponsor, **Roksan, launch their Pink turntable**, a limited special edition version of their Radius 7 turntable, with a charitable donation from each one to Breast cancer Care.

November

Speaking of **Roksan, November brought the news that they had been bought by Monitor Audio**. This should make for an exciting future for both brands. Hifi Pig took on some younger writers and expanded our music section, taking a stand to bring new music to audiophiles and hifi to non audiophiles and the younger generation. Stuart and I visited Poland for the first time for the **Audio Video Show Warsaw 2016**. We both thought it was perhaps the best show we had ever been to...which is saying something after this year's High End Munich! We were also paid a visit by Aequo Audio after the show so look out

The Women In Hifi met up again at T.H.E. Show in Newport beach and, besieged by kittens at Hifi Pig Towers, I decided there was no better time to look into the relationship between Audiophiles and their cats

for the review of their stunning loudspeakers early in 2017. To top off the month we announced a year long fund raising partnership with **Nordoff Robbins**, the largest independent music therapy charity in the UK.

December

A van full of Ukrainians bearing very high end speakers is a pretty crazy way to start the day even for us, but that's what happened when Voyla arrived with their beautiful Bouquet loudspeakers in early December. We will be bringing you the highly anticipated review very soon.

December is always the month to look back on the year and forward to the next. Personally it has been one tinged with sadness for us, as we lost Stuart's father earlier in the year, but it has been wonderful to gather the family together here at Hifi Pig Towers to remember the good times. We are looking forward to 2017 enormously, including working with our fantastic and dedicated team of reviewers and writers both new and old, plus getting out there and meeting more of you, the readers, that make all the team's hard work worth while.

A happy and healthy new year to you all!



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



In Association With



2016, The Year The Music Died? Cheerful as ever Stuart Smith makes a list of musicians that have died in 2016 and asks, was this the year that the music really did die?

Anytime you have looked at the news this year it seems as though another musician or recording artist has died. Of course there were the big names; Leonard Cohen, Prince, George Michael... but there were many more than these too. Look through the list here (and it's by no means exhaustive) and you'll see that there are names you know, names you don't, names you may be familiar with if you knew the bands they were in and names that even if they came and rattled their ghostly chains at

the bottom of your bed next Christmas Eve you'd still be none the wiser.

It looks a long list doesn't it? Some were old, some were young, and some were middle aged. Some died of disease, some were shot, Viola Beach and their manager were killed in a car crash and then some died of old age.

Take a look and see the names you recognise. In researching this article I've looked and said to myself... "No, surely

not!"...Dj Spank Spank, Gilli Smyth being cases in point.

Here you go...

George Michael, Sharon Jones, Leon Russell, Leonard Cohen, John Berry, Phife Dawg, Frank Sinatra, Jr., Joey Feek, Denise Matthews, Paul Kantner, Glenn Frey, Dale "Buffin" Griffin, Pete Huttlinger, David Bowie, Bunny Walters, Keith Emerson, Daddy Cool, Micky Fitz, Bernard Zaslav, Knut Kiesewetter, Ben Xi, Alphonse Mouzon,

"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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Rick Parfitt, Mick Zane, Ruud Merx, Abdul Gafur Hali, Mohamed Tahar Fergani, Allan Zavod, Ray Columbus, Jeff White, Johnny P, Craig Gill, Bob Walsh, David Mancuso, Jean-Jacques Perrey, Bob Cranshaw, Bobby Vee, Pete Burns, Caroline Crawley, Bored Nothing, Thomas Round, Shawty Lo, Jerry Corbetta, Trisco Pearson, Qiao "Kimi" Renliang, Clifford Curry, Bobby Ramirez, Bob Bissonnette, DJ Spank Spank, Prince Buster, Fred Hellerman, Matt Roberts, Tom Searle, Lou Pearlman, James Woolley, Glenn Yarbrough, Ab Tamboer, Gilli Smyth, Alan Vega, Allan Barnes, Sandy Pearlman, Steven Young, Bernie Worrell, Ralph Stanley, Wayne Jackson, Prince Be (Attrell Cordes), Dave Swarbrick, Vladislav Yankovsky, Thomas Fekete, Nick Menza, Marlene Marder, Candye Kane, John Stabb, Prince, Richard Lyons (aka Pastor Dick), Merle Haggard, Harrison Calloway, Pete Zorn, Karl Broadie, Gib Guilbeau, Jimmie Van Zant, Getatchew Mekurya, Jeff McLaren, Sir George Martin, Aaron Huffman, Joey Feek, Bankroll Fresh, Larry Payton, Andy Newman (Thunderclap Newman), Ali Ahmed Hussain Khan, Nik Green, Nikolaus Harnoncourt, John Thomas, Viola Beach (The whole band), Shan Johnson, Mikey Clement, Maurice White, Jon Bunch, Jim Reeves, Lennie Baker, Chris Finley, Sonny James, Vi Subversa, Paul Gordon, Berre Bergen, Signe Toly Anderson, Jimmy Bain, Dale Griffin, Blowfly, Giorgio Gomelsky, Jason Mackenroth.

So, on paper 2016 looks like the old Grim Reaper has been pretty busy on the music scene. What's he got against all these musos? Most were I'm sure lovely people, many will have had demons and excesses they've had to cope with and will have contributed to their deaths and surely every single one will be missed by their family, friends and fans.

However, musicians (and people in general) die every day of the year and when they do we find ourselves looking back at their achievements and in this case their music.

When David Bowie died the mainstream media was awash with people declaring undying love for their idol and I understand this I really do, I was devastated when Lemmy passed last year. However, for every big name artist like Bowie, Prince, Keith Emerson and George Michael that '(Top Of The) Pops their clogs' there are many, many thousands more artists and musicians looking to be heard and have their shot at five minutes of fame...or just wanting to express themselves through their art.

I was having a chat with someone a while ago and he made the comment (and I've mentioned this previously) that many audiophiles tend to look to the past and listen pretty much exclusively to the music that they remember from growing up, forsaking pretty much all new artists and new music... and I get this, I really do; we love what we know and are comfortable with. However, look through the list above again and, as I said, you'll not know all the names, or even most of the names And the point here is that unless we support new artists and buy their music they will not have the opportunity to be heard and prosper in this already difficult business.

So what, you may ask. What I'm getting at is musicians don't get by on fresh air, they need support, they need financial input...which is unlikely to come from governments in these times of apparent "austerity" where the arts are the first to come under the scrutiny of the bean counters and have their financial lifeblood severed.

What can you do?

If you make one New Year's resolution this year (above the ones you know you're not going to keep up for more



than a month or so like stopping drinking, going to the gym, stopping smoking and helping old ladies across the road) I urge you to make a resolution to seek out one, just one, new musician or band that you are not familiar with every month and buy their album or go support them at a live gig.

2016 isn't the year the music died by any stretch of the imagination, it's just that there were a few big names that caught the attention of the mainstream media that made it look a bit like that!

The dead we can do nothing about, but the future of the music is in our hands!

Happy New Year!

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

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The Dream - 'Get Dreamy' Deluxe Reissue



From the somewhat sparse, yet unique catalogue of adventurous, high-quality rock music coming out of Scandinavia in the late 60's, the sole album 'Get Dreamy' by The Dream has been one of the most hunted treasures.

Originally released in 1967, the album proves that the youth of Norway were just as happy swinging as their blighty cousins. It also marks the beginning of guitar legend Terje Rypdals journey from beat music and pop into new musical territories, which would ultimately lead him to become a key player in the European jazz world.

Any album that opens with a track describing the heartbreak of aliens abducting your love, is clearly out of this world. But 'Get Dreamy' somehow fits there, and it doesn't feel alarming when it takes you with it. Getting lost in the cosmos and making a great time out of it was the aim in '67 and The Dream follow the tradition well. Having clear references to The Beach Boys (Driftn'), Floyd (Aint No Use) as well as some truly lust-filled riffs that sound like unreleased Hendrix tracks from a lost session, The Dream's highly personal and almost fearless take on free rock and psychedelia was, actually, the first of its kind in Norway. With elements of jazz, glam horror (Hey Jimi), hazy sounding pop and the occasional whimsical Vaudeville-vibes so typical of 1967, it is a special slice of vinyl from the era.

Round 2 proudly presents this rarity and true Norwegian classic, remastered from the original tapes and with liner notes written by Rypdal aficionado and guitar ace, Reine Fiske (Dungen, The Amazing).

Rumours Of Fleetwood Mac 2017 Tour



Rumours Of Fleetwood Mac, the world's ultimate homage to Fleetwood Mac, returns to the stage October 2016 for their landmark 'Hits to Blues World Tour'. Encompassing nearly five decades of legendary music and channelling the spirit of Fleetwood Mac at their very best, 'Hits to Blues' offers a unique opportunity for fans, both old and new, to rediscover the songs and performances that have ensured Fleetwood Mac's place as one of the most loved bands of all time.

From the exultant heights of such classic hits as 'Rhiannon', 'Don't Stop', 'You Make Loving Fun', and 'Seven Wonders', to the cathartic relationship autopsies contained on the bestselling Rumours album, 'Hits to Blues' – like previous Rumours Of Fleetwood Mac concert performances – guarantees to offer its audiences a rich and emotive musical experience, blowing away the cobwebs and rekindling those precious personal memories in a way that only the best music can.

True to the band's roots, 'Hits to Blues' will also feature a comprehensive profile of the work of legendary British bluesman, and Fleetwood Mac founder, Peter Green. With faithful renditions of early Mac masterpieces such as 'Albatross', 'Oh Well', and the plaintive 'Man of the World', the show promises to bring the full depth and power of Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac back to life.

From the outset, the Rumours Of Fleetwood Mac musicians and performers have always striven to combine their deep personal love and reverence for the music of Fleetwood Mac with the excitement and spontaneity of live performance. Immersed in this music as they are, they know that these are songs which simply refuse to be played without passion and intensity.

It is now half a century since Fleetwood Mac first emerged onto the world stage. Over the intervening five decades it is fair to say that both the band and the world have been through some considerable changes. Throughout it all, however, the music of Fleetwood Mac has retained its place in the hearts and souls of hundreds of millions of fans the world over. Join Rumours of Fleetwood Mac this Autumn and experience the very best of Fleetwood Mac, from 'Hits to Blues'.

[See here for full list of dates.](#)

Hickory Signals Announce New EP



Inspired by the sea-inspired James Joyce poem of the same name, 'Noise Of The Waters' is the second EP from Brighton folk duo, Hickory Signals. Made up of multi-instrumentalists Laura Ward and Adam Ronchetti, the pair combine strong vocal melodies with vibrant guitar, shruti, flute, glockenspiel and pulsing percussion; layering sounds carefully and minimally to create atmospheric folk.

Making melodies reminiscent of music past, their inspiration comes not only from bygone songs and lyrics but also the illustrative world of literature and poetry. When singing ominously about 17th century soldiers burning down fields and stealing grain in 'Irish Ways' the duo conjure up darkened images of Ireland's past made all the more arresting by the conviction and purity in Ward's voice.

Elsewhere, traditional song, 'The Unquiet Grave' echoes Laura Marling's sing-song, confessional style - with string accents adding a mysterious air to the tale of decaying hearts and lost love.

Title track, 'Noise Of The Waters' merges haunting flute lines with cleansing water imagery, offering a redemptive feeling that evokes a by-gone era of ominous storytelling, while

MUSIC NEWS

'Take The Window' descends into a raging revenge ditty, made all the more piercing by Ward's clear and meandering vocal style.

Another, 'Bows and Arrows', sees the duo explore the mechanics of man-made arrows, traps and fishing lines for catching unattainable birds, deer and fish. The song states that building anything (bridges, schools, tools) requires education "but still there are things we cannot know...". A cautionary tale that subtly explores the dangers of our human penchant for fixing and often, destroying.

Ward and Ronchetti are joined on this EP by Stick In The Wheel's Ian Carter, who provides the production, and skilled violinist, Tom Pryor, whose sensitivity and musicality help make the collection an utter joy to listen to.

'Noise Of The Waters' EP is out now.

LAOISE Announces Single From New EP



With the release of her hotly-anticipated debut EP just around the corner, Irish artist LAOISE is pleased to share the first single from it.

Taking her cues from the silky production of acts like NAO, Melanie Martinez and Skott- LAOISE is an Irish electro-pop artist hailing from Galway, Ireland. Incorporating elements of synth, indie and alternative, she was brought up on a diet of theatrical, iconic pop – and deeply inspired by household names like Kate Bush and David Bowie – setting her in good stead to create the startling, sparkling pop she presents to us today.

Growing up playing the violin and piano before teaching herself the guitar at 11, LAOISE began writing at the age of 15, experimenting mainly with the above, before exploring the shiny buoyancy electronics can offer. Her lyrics draw inspiration from feelings of anxiety and angst, many of which reveal inclinations of hopelessness and despair which she defiantly contrasts with confidence and complacency.

LAOISE was inspired to write the EP when she was at a halfway point in her recovery from mental and physical difficulties, hence the title 'Halfway'. This resulted in LAOISE experimenting with various genres and sounds as she began to rebuild and reinvent herself along with her music. On the brooding, 'You' noted for it's silky R&B-esque hooks, she says:

"The idea was to write a song restricted to only three chords to see how far I could take it and I ended up loving its vocal melody and its lyrical content. Its progression and structure changed a lot during its production with Seán (Behan), and it became the most suitable as an introduction to my new music and what



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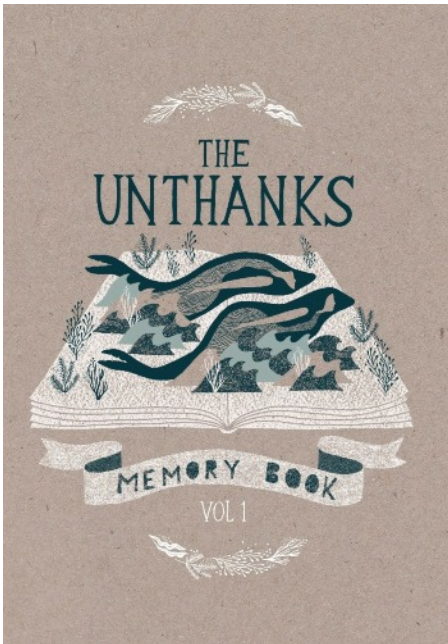
it contains. It's also really fun to dance to (especially while wearing pink)."

'Halfway' was recorded and produced by Seán Behan, (A Place Called Kai Studios), in a spare room in his parent's house. The entirety of it was produced using one ramshackle microphone and an equally ancient laptop, making LAOISE's pristine and glittering output all the more impressive. Take a listen now and experience this bright new light for yourself! You won't regret it.

'You' is out now on A Place Called Kai

'Halfway' EP due out end of January

The Unthanks Tour Dates and The Memory Book



A wistful mother in the 1950s makes some simple home recordings in her family sitting room. Little could she have known that decades later, her son would become one of the most poetic and influential songwriters ever, or that more than sixty years later, the dust would be blown off her own songs. On the surface, the 2013 release of Molly Drake's work could easily have been perceived as just a curious footnote and jigsaw piece in explaining the enormous talent of Nick Drake. In the eyes of The Unthanks however, and increasingly amongst others, Molly's work is extraordinary enough to rank alongside and independently of her brilliant son.

With encouragement from the Drake musical estate and the full blessing and

enthusiasm of celebrated actress Gabrielle Drake (Molly's daughter and Nick's sister) The Unthanks are relishing the opportunity and will treat the challenge with the same love and diligence for their subject as they did when reinterpreting the work of Robert Wyatt and Antony & The Johnson's on Diversions Vol 1.



Never intended for public release, Molly Drake's recordings, made by her husband, were made at home and are of the time. In a climate where films, stories and music are being rehashed for spurious repeat exploitation, if ever a body of work actually merited reappraisal and fresh presentation, surely the work of Molly Drake is it. Her songs share plenty of common ground with her son's - charming and bittersweet, yet dark and pensive.

A tour of Molly Drake's work, reimagined by The Unthanks, will be accompanied by the release of Diversions Vol 4. - The Unthanks Perform The Songs and Poems of Molly Drake. Tour dates are announced and on sale today. Full listings below. More details on the album release, set for April 2017, to be announced at a later date.

[Click here for full tour dates](#)

The Molochs Announce New Album and London



The Molochs have released the video for their second single You And Me. Talking of the single, lead singer Lucas Fitzsimmons said, "You And Me" is

about losing the struggle to control one's emotions." The sentiment is accompanied by a nice Hammond organ. You And Me is the second single from the band. It follows their first single No More Cryin'. Both tracks will be released on America's Velvet Glory out Jan 13th via Innovative Leisure.

As part of the band's further preparations for 2017, they've just been confirmed for next year's Primavera Festival, as well as scheduling in two UK live shows for their first trip here. See the band live at the following dates:

22 May - Shacklewell Arms, London

23 May - Montague Arms, London

America's Velvet Glory was recorded with engineer Jonny Bell at Effortless (says Fitzsimmons) sessions at Long Beach's JazzCats studio - also incubator for Molochs' new labelmates Wall of Death and Hanni El Khatib. It starts with an anxious electric minor-key melody and ends on a last lonesome unresolved organ riff, and in between comes beauty, doubt, loss, hate and even a moment or two of peace. There are flashes of 60s garage rock—like the Sunset Strip '66 stormer No More Cryin' or the Little Black Egg-style heartwarmer-slash-breaker The One I Love—but like one Fitzsimmons' favourites The Jacobites, The Molochs are taking the past apart, not trying to recreate it.

Tallisker Announces Debut EP Heliotrop



Tallisker is the DIY solo project of French artist Eléonore Melisande, 28. A former cellist and guitarist with a classical and folk background, she is now a full-time DJ, producer and performer with electronic, post-folk & rave aesthetics. Winning the Inrocks Lab Award (2014), the Booster Award (2015) and performing every weekend helped her take off pretty quickly and now she's pleased to celebrate the release of her debut EP 'Heliotrop'.

Baroque aesthetics are a major driver to her work: movement, expansion, tumult, ostentation, super-emotion, drama and tension. Her introspective universe often draws comparisons to artists like Björk or Fever Ray while her epic, soaring string sections are reminiscent of post-rock and neo-folk bands like Sigur Ros or Woodkid. The arrangements also feature rough drumkits and nasty sub-bass unveiling a full allegiance to trap & rave culture.

On 'Heliotrop': "Most of the tracks were written in Glasgow, Summer 2015, while listening to a lot of classical Music, mainly Baroque & Romantic-era masterpieces, plus techno and trap music! It was my purpose to explore these extreme genres, from the most traditional to the most recent forms of music to accelerate the genesis of something hybrid and awkward. Heliotrop is also a manifest."

"My view as an artist is to reassert the fact that there's no such thing as punk music opposed to noble/classical music. Punk aesthetics are noble and noble music has become punk. That's what I want to express when I mix cellos with heavy techno-friendly kicks or when an epic brass ensemble embraces a rough trap beat. You can enjoy both a Victorian garden-party and an underground hardcore music party. I'm interested in all the forms; I boil them, I distill them and I make my own stuff. And I'm happy if it's hard to classify."

"The artwork reveals this hybridity too. I'm wearing a costume that stands for tradition -religious, aristocratic, sacred. But this costume has been distorted and alienated thanks to contemporary, forward-thinking devices and tricks - Photoshop or other software. So in the end it looks like a ghostly, electronic silhouette full of mystery. You couldn't say whether the portrait comes from the Tsardom of Russia or from a spaceship. It pictures how you can turn heritage into innovation, and vice versa."

Passport By Omar Rahbany

An album that took three years to make, with over 180 collaborators from 12 different nationalities, of which include Grammy award winners and critically acclaimed artists, 'Passport', by Omar Rahbany, unfolds over 59

minutes. The forthcoming album, 'Passport', breaks down barriers between cultures and countries, having travelled across world to complete it. Heavy jazz and classical influences are fused with Arabic and Lebanese overtones throughout the album, meeting in a place where there are no divisions, culturally, linguistically or artistically.

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1989, Omar comes from a rich musical lineage. His grandfather, Mansour, and great-uncle, Assi, known colloquially as the Rahbani Brothers, forged Lebanon's musical identity with their distinct and innovative pieces. Similarly, Omar's childhood was infused with a rich variety of artistic mediums; his father is a playwright composer and lyricist whilst his mother is famed for her professional dancing.

Omar's debut album sees him carrying his heredity forwards, whilst innovating and developing his sound. With a deep interest for the German concept of 'Gesamtkunstwerk' (a total work of art) - an idea that only stimulated his burgeoning creativity - his interests widened to include film and choreography. Omar's vision of uniting these various aesthetic elements to form one total work of art soon became more pronounced, leading him to compose his first musical at the age of nineteen.

In many ways 'Passport' takes forward the idea of 'Gesamtkunstwerk', the record is a genre all of its own. Omar makes use of the wide variety of the musical tools at his disposal, setting the album apart as an entirely unique body of work. The songs are complex, deeply textured and cinematic, they are as infectious and as diverse as they are accomplished.

Speaking about the album, Omar says, "After a three year journey to perfect every note on Passport, and to achieve the overarching vision of the album, we are now ready to share it with the world. The successfully enriched sounds of Passport are attributed to the 180



talented individuals that took part in making it, all unified by one vision."

The socio-political situation in the Middle East has also been a big influence on the new album. Most of the world's ruling civilisations, at one time or another, have left their mark on the city of Beirut. This fact, combined with the effects of globalization and the internet, has created a city, and indeed a country, which is torn between three languages, eighteen religions and one history that no one can seem to agree upon. This is a nation that undertakes a constant struggle to find its 'absolute' identity.

Understanding his own position within this debate has become a personal mission for Omar. Speaking about the impact this has had on the new album he says, "The melting pot of cultures I grew up in, the double-edged sword that shaped me as a person, the confusion, the creativity, the struggle itself is my identity. I am a citizen of planet Earth and my nationality is that of a human being. This is my PASSPORT. And I'm certain that this view is shared by everyone that contributed to the making of the album."

Mixed at Real World Studios (Manic Street Preachers, Kanye West, Jay-Z, Beyoncé Knowles, Ludovico Einaudi and more), and with every single part of the album written and composed by Omar himself, the album features over 180 guest musicians. Guests on the album include fourteen-time Grammy Award winning producer Steve Rodby (bassist for the Pat Metheny Group), Keith Carlock (drummer for Sting and Steely Dan), Wayne Krantz, Karim Ziad,

MUSIC NEWS

and Cuong Vu (trumpeter for the Pat Metheny Group), along with accompaniment from the Kiev City Symphonic Orchestra.

The completion of such an ambitious project is owed to Omar's distinct, original sound and technical proficiency. In many ways this album is an artistic passport, a tool in which the listener can travel freely across a multifarious range of styles, genres and experiences and can submerge themselves in the unknown.

New album 'Passport' due out 10th March 2017

Cambridge Folk Festival 2017 First Names

Cambridge Folk festival has announce the first names for the 2017 festival.

Cambridge Folk Festival is delighted to reveal the first artists for next year's bill including one of Britain's most exciting talents Jake Bugg, who the Festival have invited to return to headline Sunday night with an acoustic set. Jake's progress from performing in 2012 at the



Festival's smallest stage, The Den, to headlining Stage 1 is a feat matched only by one other artist, Passenger.

Also confirmed are: folk and roots pioneers Oysterband (Sunday), celebrating their 40th anniversary; multi-award winning, visionary folk trio Lau (Saturday), featuring Kris Drever, Martin Green and Aidan O'Rourke and US 'rockgrass' favourites Hayseed Dixie (Sunday).

They join previously announced Guest Curator Jon Boden, who will perform over the Festival weekend with The Remnant Kings to preview his autumn

2017 album as well as guest curating elements of the line-up.

Tickets are now on sale:

Full Festival ticket: £167

Day tickets: £27.50 (Thu), £59.50 (Fri), £70 (Sat), £70 (Sun)

Camping at Cherry Hinton Hall and Coldham's Common is available. Concession tickets (disabled access and carer, Under 21, Cambridge City Resident) are available.

Cambridge Folk Festival is held over four days in the picturesque grounds of Cherry Hinton Hall. Celebrated for its relaxed atmosphere, excellent facilities and diverse programme, the Festival brings together the best of folk in its broadest sense, from international stars to breakthrough new artists and special one-off performances, talks and workshops across several stages. Previous headliners have included: Joan Baez, Nick Cave, Ray Davies, Buddy Guy, Christy Moore, Van Morrison, James Taylor and The Waterboys amongst many others.



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Tom Paxton Returns To UK



Tom Paxton returns to the UK in 2017, with very special guests Cathy & Marcy.

Tom has had a music career spanning more than 50 years. The five decades have seen the recording of many enduring songs, and thousands of live performances around the world, as well as a Lifetime Achievement Grammy Award in 2009.

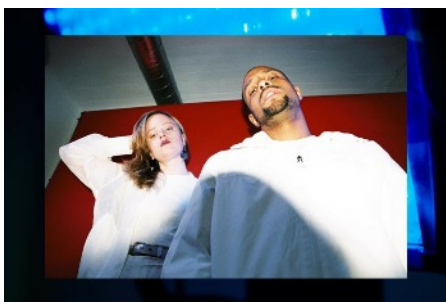
Celebrated amongst his peers and audiences alike, he is one of the most highly regarded, loved, and best known folk singer/songwriters of his generation.

With timeless classics such as; The Last Thing On My Mind, Bottle Of Wine, and Ramblin' Boy, he portrays through his songs and his famously generous nature a true desire for justice, and to bring people together.

Tom Paxton is a joyful treat, a revered figure in folk music, and a voice of his generation.

[Click here for full tour dates](#)

Blånk To Release New Album



Split between Atlanta and the remote northern parts of Sweden - commonly known as Sápmi, the hip-hop meets electro-pop trio Blånk are currently getting ready to release their third album 'Weary Soul'.

Touching on topics such as self-destruction, angst, hope, and finally acceptance, the new record is as much uplifting as it is lachrymose, focusing on emotional emancipation and taking control of your own life.

With their last two albums 'You've never been to Sápmi' (2009) and 'Only Built For Northern Lights' (2015) earning the trio acclaim from across the US and UK, Blånk have gone from strength-to-strength with each release. It is obvious that their evolution across their work, influenced by friends from across the music scene (they collaborated with Noonie Bao on their last record), has transmuted their sound towards their most mature and consummate release yet. This record now sees the trio go it alone bearing brutal yet charming honesty and an empowering confidence.

'Weary Soul' is powerful step forward for Blånk, whilst still combining the trio's signature combination of polar melancholy and the slick yet gritty flow of the nominally southern state of Atlanta. The album is still heavily rooted in hip-hop, however the new record also sees Blånk move into a darker more downbeat atmospheric electro sound, which occasionally takes influence from intermittent soul-infused textures and at times owes itself to a subtle 80's electro-pop inflection. It's an incredibly diverse record, which is carried by the contrasting vocals from Simon Trabelsi and Lina Öhman and their lyrical themes - the album surrounds their motivation to turn thoughts of depression and suicide towards thoughts of growth, self-love and self-discovery.

It's dark, but still hopeful, whilst also exhibiting hubris. 'Weary Soul' is the culmination of years of personal challenges and self-work. Valleys, peaks, wins, losses, they're all a part of the journey but their collective weight adds up. Speaking about the album Blånk said, "The album is about baring the pain and perspectives of the weary soul that's lived through it all. At this point it's not about being depressed or celebrating wins, it's about recognizing all those things are a part of a larger journey that shapes the person one becomes."

Chris Pope & The Chords UK New Single



Chris Pope & The Chords UK have released a new single from their recent album 'Take On Life'. Entitled 'Dreams Of Yesterday', it is an edited version of the final song on the record, a Mott-esque remembrance of London and its chequered musical history from the 1970's to the present.

The Chords UK were formed in 2012 by Chris Pope, the chief songwriter/guitarist of the highly regarded late 70's new wave pop act The Chords.

Commonly associated with the mod revival, the band released several singles in 1979-80 that flirted with the Top 40 plus one solitary album that hit the Top 30.

Over three decades on, original lead singer Billy Hassett had relocated to Tokyo and was performing the band's repertoire as The J-Chords, so Pope decided to create a UK version in order to continue playing the likes of 'Maybe Tomorrow', 'So Far Away', 'The British Way of Life' and other songs that he had written just after leaving school and was juggling his writing responsibilities with the struggles involved in being a teenager signed to a major record label (Polydor).

Teaming up with the crack rhythm section of Mic Stoner (bass) and Kenny Cooper (drums) and later adding guitarist Sandy Michie, this line-up have been gigging regularly since 2014 and started recording new material a year later.

Their opening salvo was an EP entitled 'Get Famous', released in the autumn of 2015 and described by Vive Le Rock as "more melodic pop chestnuts from a much underrated UK songwriter." Working with renowned producer Pat Collier, the group have now delivered a blistering debut album, 'Take On Life',

MUSIC NEWS & REVIEWS

that details Pope's ongoing experience of London's daily grind ('Man On The Northern Line') offset by the hedonistic thrill of the weekend ('Get Me To Saturday Night'), his dissatisfaction with the elite who lord it over the rest of us ('Pillars Of Society'), and the inevitable march of time and acceptance of 'progress' ('Dreams Of Yesterday').

Chris Pope has also recorded with the bands Agent Orange, Gatecrash Heaven and Pope, and released three acclaimed albums under his own name, the most recent of which is 2012's 'Peace Of Mind'.

The Beat Release New Single

The Beat's brand new single, **SIDE TO SIDE**, taken from 'Bounce' is currently A-listed on BBC Radio 6 and the band have released it as double A-side 7" vinyl with a track from label mates and life-long friends The Selecter. The two bands played live from Maida Vale on 13 December for Steve Lamacq's Christmas Ska Party on BBC Radio 6 with other guests David Rodigan and Mungos HiFi and have announced a co-headline tour in 2017.

Side to Side is taken from 'Bounce', the new fourth album by first-generation 2



Tone skankers turned purveyors of joyous political pop The Beat fronted by Ranking Roger. Joining Roger in the revitalised Beat is his son Ranking Junior AKA Matthew Murphy, a powerhouse MC who brings to the band an update on the toasting that made Ranking Roger such a pivotal part of the original Beat. Side to Side features Ranking Junior taking the lead as well as co-writing the track with his dad Ranking Roger. The track was mixed by Dennis Bovell (The Slits, Madness).

Life-long friends, The Selecter and The Beat are two of the main bands to come

out of 2 Tone – a crucial musical and cultural movement which is still as relevant today as it was over 30 years ago. Renowned for their energetic live shows, longevity has not diminished either band's ability to put in a performance and get everyone in a room, or field, dancing. The bands are teaming up to give fans a rare treat, hitting the road together for a number of dates around the UK and Ireland in Spring 2017. Originally a six-date tour, due to demand they have now added 8 more dates.

consumer – Shattered Fruit

Making noise is a bit like making a mistake: any fool can make a mistake, but it takes skill to cause a fiasco.

Skill and talent, just like noise-rock. There's plenty of fools trying, and plenty of them fail. Thankfully, those that don't keep the torch aloft and well lit. Black Flag managed it, as did The Stooges before them. And the spirit of these accomplished noise makers infuses the racket of Hereford's consumer.

That's high praise, and not to be thrown around lightly. But, as Henry Rollins himself said, noise is one of the few genres to remain untouched by corporate molestation. As a result, it remains a vital and potent force, a thrilling and necessary alternative in the 21st century. And consumer are walking, screaming proof of that.



The 4 tracks across their debut EP **Shattered Fruit**, alternately ooze by in a sludge of shuddering riffs or blast by with a punk-inflected speed that never veers into the incoherent. They somehow manage to combine the attitude of straight forward hardcore punk with its slower cousins in sludge metal and the My War era of the aforementioned Black Flag. A feat no one else has accomplished. Or at least, they never sounded as good as consumer.

There's two of 'em in it, but they make such an unholy racket you'd swear there was twelve. Even at their quieter moments they sound immense, with the clean guitar tone sounding like a demented cross between Nirvana's soft

moments circa Nevermind and Duane Eddy's vintage hollow body twang.

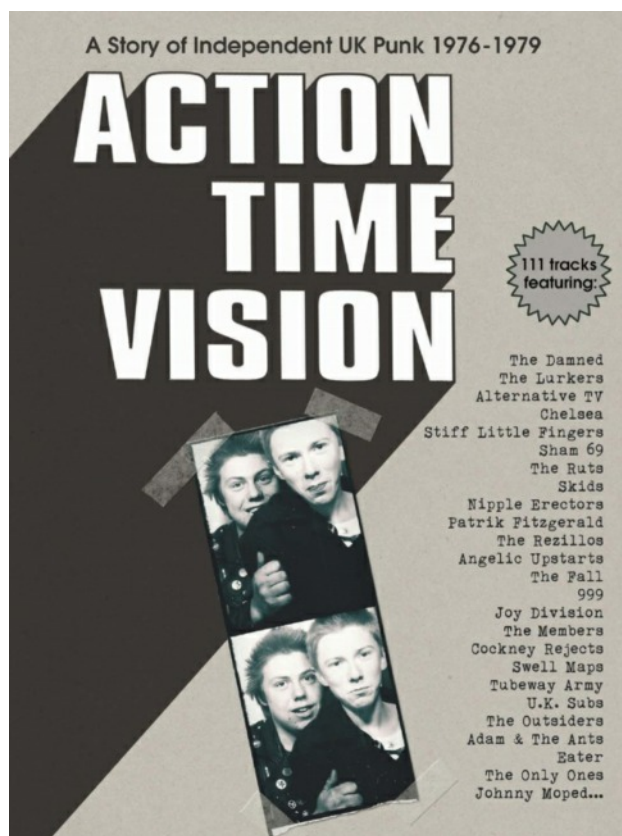
Then, they kick into gear, and the whole ungodly mess descends into a vortex of sweet noise. The screeched lyrics of the frontman "I am the petrol/ and I am the match/ I am the chopping block/ and I am the axe" express the confusion and rage of a generation strangely bereft of a focal point for those emotions. consumer could very well be that focal point.

With a sound as blunt as a dulled cleaver, yet with the precision of a laser beam, consumer stand tall as a testament to the fact that there are in fact still angry young men out there. They might not look like The Clash or The Pistols, and they sure as Hell don't sound like them. Or indeed, anything that's come before. But they are still here. Like an army of berserkers, ready and waiting for their moment.

James Fleming

MUSIC REVIEWS

Various - Action Time Vision Review - A Story of UK Independent Punk 1976-1979 (Cherry red)



CALLING PUNKS OF ALL AGES! Gather your favourite pair of pogo-worn Doc Martins, best ripped, studded and patch covered denim jacket and slick up that Mohawk, because punks not dead and the 111 track long Active Time Vision Boxset is here to remind us of that. So get on board or get left behind! Still not sure? Well I have been lucky enough to get my anarchy loving paws on the boxset to review it, so let's dive in!

With four discs of pogo perfect tracks and varied artists from all over the genre, this boxset could not have been more up my street if it tried and I would highly recommend it to anyone who loves a bit punk in their lives. The added bonus of the 64 page long reference booklet is also fantastic, as it meant that any time I came across an artist or song that I didn't know or recognise I had all the info I could want to start diving into their style of punk straight away in the palm of my hands. That is... once I stopped pogo-ing of course!

I often find that with many compilations today they tend to rely on the biggest names in a genre to fill an album, which often means that if a younger enthusiast, like myself, comes along they can get a

very tunnel visioned view of the genre. But no risk of that here! This boxset did what I wish a lot of them would do now, and that is let you properly get a flavour for the genre from a variety of artists AND give you enough info to then go and discover more on your own.

Whether you are just getting into the genre or you are a veteran of all things anarchic, I would highly recommend this boxset as it perfect companion for any punk rocker!

Lauren Coombes

I know Lauren has done her review of this album but I wanted to add my twopenneth as this is an important record,

celebrating as it does forty years of when punk first exploded onto the scene, changing the world of music forever.

This is a pretty exhaustive and in-depth overview of the punk scene that has a good few classics on there, as well as a few more obscure numbers. Opening with The Damned's New Rose sets the scene for what is to come on Action Time Vision (the tune by Alternative TV is also included of course) with other well known tunes like SLF's Suspect Device, Angelic Upstarts The Murder Of Liddle Towers (Tom Robinson also covered this killing at the hands of the police with his tune Blue Murder, though it's not on here of course) and loads more.

Incendiary, dangerous and of course of its time, but rest assured the spirit of this first wave of punk is still well alive up and down the country and around the world, and whilst plastic punk bands are getting airplay and appealing to edgier teenyboppers, there are still real bands playing real music all over the place.

Punk's Not Dead and this is where it all began.

Stu

Incendiary, dangerous and of course of its time, but rest assured the spirit of this first wave of punk is still well alive up and down the country and around the world, and whilst plastic punk bands are getting airplay and appealing to edgier teenyboppers, there are still real bands playing real music all over the place

James Fleming asks that crucial question: Is it the singer or the song?

The year was 1965. The Summer of Love was still two years away. Its untimely demise with Altamont was two years even further down the line. It could be described as an innocent time, mop-topped and entranced as it was. But more likely, it was a time of quiet dysfunction...

The Stones' first drug bust came in 1967, a teasing hint of the darkness to come, during all the free love of that year's legendary summer. The Beatles' first smoked, and most certainly inhaled, on a joint with Mr. Dylan in 1964. But only later admitted to drug use of a much heavier sort in '67. The Summer of Love, like all love, was tinged with blackness. But, for now, it's still '65 and all is just swell. Dandy, even.

The Rolling Stones, yet to be branded "the world's greatest rock n' roll band," had just released Satisfaction a mere few months previous. The pressure of celebrity and the frustration of success that they experienced birthed a great, great song; Get Off of My Cloud. You can argue that the Louie Louie "I, IV, V" riff that carried the verse is a rip off. But, an argument can also be made that it's timeless. For, with a song that great, who cares about the chord progression? But, it's the UK B side and US album track that we're here to talk about.

It's called The Singer Not The Song.

With its out of tune guitars and sickly harmonies, it's a woeful pastiche of the Beatles. The sixties bore rotten fruit as much as any other decade. Fruit that stank of dated production techniques and stale creativity. But, its hook, which is the title, as is the case with many songs, when taken at face value, poses an interesting puzzle for those who care to solve it:

Is it the singer, or the song?

Simon Cowell claims that the only thing he knows about music is whether or not a singer sounds good. Any fool can tell you that. Even if you never heard them and just went by the law of averages, a person would figure out that a handful of his misguided hopefuls on that accursed X Factor can sing. It doesn't take a Beethoven to figure that one out. But, is it the singer that carries the song like Christopher carried the Lord, or does the song ferry the singer down the river Styx?

John Lydon's
infamous
sneer/howl kicked
a generation up
the arse and
spearheaded not
just a genre, but a
whole subculture in
the form of punk

Which brings us back to Mr. Dylan. By no stretch of the imagination has Bob a brilliant voice. Original? Yes. Idiosyncratic? Definitely. But, a Pavarotti he is not. Yet, Like a Rolling Stone is Rolling Stone magazine's number one greatest song ever written. Knockin' On Heaven's Door has been covered numerous times. And Blowin' In The Wind is even sung in primary schools. There are more versions of Dylan's songs than there are possible games of chess. And yet, while his voice is no doubt iconic, it is far from perfect.

And why should it have to be? Part of the charm of rock n' roll is that it's lightyears from perfection. A thrill for those who seek chaos and a nightmare for those afflicted with OCD.

The Sex Pistols are yet another example. John Lydon's infamous sneer/howl kicked a generation up the arse and spearheaded not just a genre, but a whole subculture in the form of punk. His vocal predecessor, Alice Cooper, similarly scared society shitless with his shock rock stage show and kitsch lyricism. Between them, they can just about carry a tune. Yet, God Save the Queen remains an iconic anthem of youthful discontent. And School's Out, just like Blowin' In The Wind, is sung at least once a year by rejoicing children across our humble blue-green planet.

And then there's Adele.

Adele's 21 album was ubiquitous for what seemed like an age upon its release in 2011. Songs like Rollin' In The Deep, Set Fire To The Rain and Someone Like You raked in the awards and swept up the public's cash like wildfire. Just reading those song titles has you humming I'm sure. And yet, a few critics claimed that it was her voice that lifted the songs from a quagmire of pain. Slant Magazine's Matthew Cole wrote that Adele's extraordinary voice masked the "blandness" of many of the tracks. And Allison Stewart, writing for The Washington Post boldly stated that many of the tracks are remarkable "only because Adele is singing them."

Rap is another example, albeit, an example that swings both ways. Rappers are notorious for their vocal style. It's far from tuneful, but the emotional impact of the vocal styling carries the song. And each rappers voice is as unique as a finger or tongue print, lending a stamp of individuality to their work that is often missing in this day and age from even rock n' roll, and certainly from the majority of pop music. However, without the great songs, and the likes of Eminem with his outstanding lyricism and comedic timing are full of excellent tunes, the voice would merely seem ridiculous. A parody of a style.

A song without a singer is a ghost. It's a soul without a vessel. Left to linger in a notebook and to fade away with the echoes of the piano that spawned it.

Likewise, a singer without a song is an empty book, waiting to be filled with the words that will carry it down through the generations.

For decades, singers and songwriters were two very separate entities. The songwriter wrote, and the singer sung. It was a terribly symbiotic relationship and it continues to this day. Bacharach and David wouldn't be that holy duo they are today without the likes of Dionne Warwick to bring their creations to life. And the Shangri-Las wouldn't have had such thrilling stories to tell if Shadow Morton hadn't written them down.

But, who would have breathed life into Morton's stories? Who would have communicated the heartache to us but Ms. Warwick?. The singer raises the song from its rubbish bin grave. But the song, the song keeps the singer from their own.

Transformer – Lou Reed

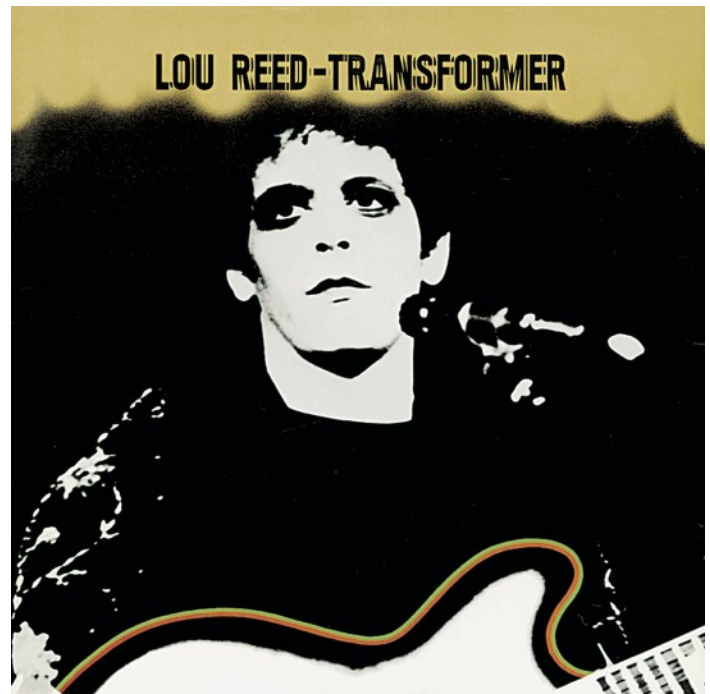
Never one to avoid an obvious cliché, John Scott takes a walk on the wild side and reacquaints himself with Lou Reed's 1972 hit album

I first encountered Lou Reed in the spring of 1976 thanks to an interview in *Melody Maker* with journalist Allan Jones. I was a naïve thirteen-year-old at the time; I knew nothing about Lou Reed, I'd never heard of The Velvet Underground and I had no idea what a Lou Reed record might sound like. By the time I had finished reading the interview I was still no better informed on what a Reed's music might be like, but I had learned a few things: I'd learned that Allan Jones was totally in awe of Reed; that Reed had nothing but contempt for Jones – regularly referring to him during the interview as a “little faggot” – or in fact for anyone who wasn't Lou Reed; that Reed liked to take lots of drugs and had a six foot four transsexual girlfriend called Rachel. While the interview was a thoroughly fascinating Reed-related read, I was left with the impression that Reed was a deeply unpleasant individual and I had no interest in finding out any more about his music.

This changed just over a year later when I fell head over heels for The Modern Lovers' *Roadrunner* single and read that Reed and his old band The Velvet Underground were a huge influence on The Modern Lovers' lead singer and guitarist Jonathan Richman. I sought out a Velvet Underground compilation and gave it a listen. I was a bit torn; I liked some of the songs like *Sunday Morning* and *Waiting For My Man* but I wasn't really sure that it was my thing and I mentally filed it away as something that I might come back to at some time in the future.

My next encounter with Reed was during the death throes of a drunken party maybe five years later. Slumped semi-consciously in front of an electric fire I managed to barbecue my leg while listening to *Transformer*. It might not have been up there with Reed's own rock and roll excesses, but you have to start somewhere. The scars on my leg took about 18 months to heal, my fondness for *Transformer*'s trashy glam aesthetic never faded.

Before we look any further at *Transformer*, it might be useful to recap just a little on Reed's earlier history. Reed was born in Brooklyn in 1942 to middle class parents and developed a keen interest in rock and roll, rhythm and blues and do-wop music from an early age, playing in several bands while at high school. His education was interrupted by what was put down to a mental breakdown, treated by electroshock



treatment. Reed later said: “That's what was recommended then to discourage homosexual feelings. The effect is that you lose your memory and become a vegetable. You can't read a book because you get to page 17 and have to go right back to page one again.” Reed resumed his studies at Syracuse University where he studied under the poet Delmore Schwartz who would remain a lifelong influence. After he left Syracuse, Reed started work as a staff songwriter for Pickwick Records. A band, The Primitives, was put together to record *The Ostrich*, a song that Reed had written to parody the dance craze records that were popular at the time. Welsh musician John Cale was a member of The Primitives and he and Reed began a partnership that led to them forming The Velvet Underground with Sterling Morrison, whom Reed had met at Syracuse on guitar and Maureen Tucker on drums. The band hooked up with artist Andy Warhol and became an intrinsic part of the New York art and music scene. Although never particularly commercially successful in their lifetime, The Velvet Underground went on to be one of the most influential bands in rock history.

CLASSIC ALBUM

The Velvet Underground were never particularly stable, Cale leaving in 1968 after 2 albums and Reed himself bailing in 1970. Reed initially took a job as a typist with his father's accountancy firm before signing a contract with RCA records and recording his first self-titled solo album in London between December 1971 and January 1972. This proved to be, for the most part, a somewhat sterile revisiting of some Velvet Underground tracks that had featured in live performances or on demos but had never made it to a studio record. The album was recorded with a bunch of seasoned session musicians, including improbable appearances from Steve Howe and Rick Wakeman from Prog supergroup Yes.

There was nothing in this debut solo album to suggest that Lou Reed had anything to offer anyone who was not already a committed fan of his work with The Velvet Underground. Nothing to indicate that Reed might have any chart success or, indeed, an ongoing career. Fortunately for Reed, London in 1972 was the hotbed of Glam Rock. While Reed had been recording his solo debut, David Bowie had been working on his glam masterpiece *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and The Spiders From Mars* with Mick Ronson. T Rex had released *Electric Warrior* in 1971

and the UK pop charts were full of glam hits from Gary Glitter, The Sweet and Slade.

Perhaps more than any other genre, Glam relied on self-mythology and artifice, from Gary Glitter's tinfoil pantomime persona to Bowie's considerably more fleshed-out starman alter ego. Glam provided Reed with a route to reinvention, one that allowed him to draw on the louche demimonde that The Velvet Underground had mined, reinvented for a new audience. Reed had met Bowie in New York in September 1971. Bowie was a huge fan of The Velvet Underground and was keen to meet Reed. Lou was less keen but the pair got on well and became friends. When it came to recording Reed's next album, it made perfect sense for Bowie and his sidekick Ronson to produce along with, perhaps even more importantly, Bowie's long-time co-producer Ken Scott. While Bowie and Ronson contributed musically to the album, it seems likely that it was Scott who provided its overall sound. Scott certainly needs to be credited for the sound of those famous Doo-De-Doo-De-Doo backing vocals in Walk On The Wild Side. "By the time it came to mixing "Wild Side", I was so sick of hearing the "doo doos" so many bloody times that I had to do something just to

Slumped
semi-
consciously in
front of an
electric fire I
managed to
barbecue my
leg while
listening to
Transformer



CLASSIC ALBUM

relieve the boredom of it” Scott said. “I had this idea of them coming from way back in the distance and walking forward finally singing it right in your face. I started off with just the reverb signal which I kept at the same level during the mix, but I had the source background vocal level come up and up until you hardly hear the reverb at all and they're almost dry and in your face.”

Like Reed's previous album, *Transformer* pulled on Velvet Underground-era songs. Four of the album's ten songs were written while Lou was still with the band; Andy's *Chest* and *Satellite Of Love* had been recorded by the band and *Goodnight Ladies* and *New York Telephone Conversation* had been played live. Reed had so far portrayed his sexuality ambiguously, but on *Transformer* he embraces Glam's extravagance and seizes every opportunity to ramp up the camp to the max.

Opening track *Vicious* takes the kind of riff that Reed used on Velvet Underground songs such as *Sweet Jane* and *Rock And Roll* and pares it down to a razor's edge. Reed's tone is that of a slighted Bowery drag queen. *Perfect Day* is one of the album's most iconic songs. Superficially a bland love song, *Perfect Day* is actually a serenade to smack. Some years later, Bowie would turn this idea on its head when transforming Iggy Pop's own homage to heroin, *China Girl*, into a pop song about a Chinese girl. *Walk On The Wild Side* is the album's signature song. Although I'd said that when I'd read that interview back in 1976, I'd had no idea of who Lou Reed was, I realised in retrospect that I had in fact heard *Walk On The Wild Side* on the radio. It seems incredible that in the comparatively prudish times of the early Seventies, a song that explicitly mentions oral sex would fly so far over the head (no pun intended) of the BBC Radio One censor. The song tells the tales of some of Andy Warhol's Factory acolytes but it's popularity arguably lies not in the stories it tells but in Herbie Flowers' famous twin bass lines – one swooping up the neck of a double bass and the other dancing around the dusty end of his 1959 Fender Jazz bass. Highlights of side 2 include the pure pop of *Satellite Of Love* and *Wagon Wheel*, the high camp of *New York Telephone Conversation* and *Goodnight Ladies* which sounds like it could have been lifted straight from the score of Kander and Ebb's score for *Cabaret*. Possibly coincidentally, Mick Rock's accidentally overexposed shot for the cover of the album echoes Joel Grey's haunted *Master Of Ceremonies* from that film.

Transformer gave Reed his biggest commercial hit and almost certainly saved his career. In true Lou Reed style, his next record was the bleak song cycle *Berlin* of which producer Bob Ezrin commented “Wrap this turkey up before I puke.” Reed went on to record a double album of guitar feedback, *Metal Machine Music*, further alienating himself from the audience who had been hooked by *Transformer*'s Glam allure. Reed remained true to his own artistic muse throughout his career and, despite his treatment by Reed, Allan Jones remained a fanboy. His enthusiastic review of 1986's *Mistrial* sent me rushing out to buy the album on the day of release. It remains one of the worst in Reed's discography. Still, I'll always have *Transformer* and the hazy memories of that party.

John Scott

AT A GLANCE

Released December 8, 1972

Recorded August 1972 at Trident Studios, London

Genre Glam rock

Length 36:40

Label RCA

Producer

David Bowie & Mick Ronson

Side One

1. **"Vicious"** 2:55
2. **"Andy's Chest"** 3:17
3. **"Perfect Day"** 3:43
4. **"Hangin' 'Round"** 3:39
5. **"Walk on the Wild Side"** 4:12

Side Two

6. **"Make Up"** 2:58
7. **"Satellite of Love"** 3:40
8. **"Wagon Wheel"** 3:19
9. **"New York Telephone Conversation"** 1:31
10. **"I'm So Free"** 3:07
11. **"Goodnight Ladies"** 4:19

Singles From The Album

"Walk on the Wild Side"

Released: November 8, 1972

"Satellite of Love"

Released: February 1973

"Vicious"

Released: 1973

Skullcandy Crusher Wireless

Skullcandy looks to be going through its range and removing cables. We have already been impressed by the Grind Wireless. Now, the company has untethered its Crusher cans. These had the odd unique selling point of 'haptic bass'. Now, I know you need to know more.

Skullcandy Crusher Wireless promises to give you bone rattling bass. That kind of bass that you expect to get from a live gig, great cinema or a car with a rather loud sound system.

All that in some headphones? This should be interesting.

Skullcandy Crusher design

As they did with the Hesh Wireless, Skullcandy have gone for a more understated design than usual. The Crusher cans I have been sent are matte black.

There is a discrete Skullcandy logo on the headband just above the ear casings. The logos have come out a little more pronounced in the snaps. In real life the grey seems to fade more in to the design.

The ear cups, pads, and headband are otherwise free of embellishment. Personally, I think this gives the Crusher Wireless an effortless style. Besides, these will not clash with whatever you're wearing. Should you care about such things.

Controls

The controls are located on the ear cups. The main ones are on the right side. Here you have control over volume, playback and there's a centralised multi-function button. There's also a built-in mic



so you can make and receive phone calls easily without skipping a beat.

Over on the left hand side is a slider that controls that haptic bass craziness as well as the USB and audio jack ports.

The headphones fold up nice and compact. This enables them to slip easily in to the bundled travel bag for even more protection on the go.

Materials

The plastics used for the Crusher all appear to be good quality. The hinges are sturdy and metal, as is the adjustable headband.

The earcup backs have a nice soft finish on them. The top of the headband is leatherette, and the underside is nicely padded rubber. There is even a neat little cut-out to help prevent a hotspot forming on the top of your head.

The buttons are good and sturdy and feel like they'll last.

The overall look is classy and subtle.

Skullcandy Crusher performance

Comfort and isolation

The earpads of the Crusher Wireless are very comfortable indeed.

The pads are oval in shape and covered in a soft leatherette. The interior of the pads are of a decent-quality cloth. This helps to prevent sweaty and over-heated lobes.

The padding is memory foam. Even with the clamping force of the headphones being on the firm side, the pads stay comfortable for long listening sessions.

Another benefit of the memory foam is that these cans are able mold to your face no matter what the shape.

The snug fit even contributes to the overall sound quality.

Skullcandy Crusher Wireless

The headphones tip the scales at only 1.5 lbs, so quite lightweight.

Isolation is darned fine too. Using these during the commute on noisy underground and overground (Wombling free) trains, I can easily block out the world.

In the office at lunchtime, I can ignore the phones and general hubbub of my colleagues.

Sound quality

The unusual thing about the Crusher Wireless is that sound quality needs to be broken down in to two acts.

Act 1 – without haptic bass

Without the bass slider engaged, the Crusher presents a lovely, slightly warm sound.

I was impressed by the level of detail throughout the frequency range.

The sound-stage is reasonably wide for closed-backed Bluetooth cans.

Bass is definitely present but not overpowering with the slider all the way down. Treble

and mids are detailed without any graininess or fatigue-inducing shine.

I dare say that you could use them like this and be suitably happy with their sound quality.

But, should you want a subwoofer strapped to your head...

Act 2 – monster bass

Each ear cup contains one of Skullcandy's in-house designed 40mm drivers, as well as a second 34mm driver that kicks in when you use the bass slider.

For all intents and purposes, I believe that the slider controls a crossover system, just as you'd feed a subwoofer in a home theatre or car audio system.

As you push the slider up, the bass frequencies slowly transfer from the main drivers to these bass-specific drivers.

Boom!

If you've ever stood next to the speaker stack at a big gig or club, or sat in a car that's more speaker than vehicle, that's the bass you

The Crusher's box states "Bass You Can Feel," and it's true.

Especially when cranked all the way. You really do get that sub feeling.

It's not just club classics that this bass works on either. 'A History of Bad Men' by the Melvins and 'Tree of Suffocating Souls' by Triptykon both gave my lugs a hilarious work out.

Hit or gimmick

For me, I found the sweet spot to be around just below half-way for the slider.

This presents you with the more nuanced bass texture from the main driver, bolstered by the sub thump of the secondary system.

The haptic bass actually seemed to come in to its own when watching

movies or gaming. I have a soundbar and sub in my living-room and the Crushers are a bit like a portable version of that.

To my mind, this is where you need truly immersive bass that you can physically feel.

Stamina

The battery life

is rated at 40 hours. That is very impressive, especially given their weight and price. I've used them all week and they are still going strong.

Bluetooth range is decent enough. It works perfectly at usual listening and viewing distances. I



get here.

The bass that the haptic drivers produce is intense – as well as a tad ridiculous.

I have to admit, for the most part, the extra bass is controlled and punchy. It can get a bit messy on some tracks but I think bass hunters will love it.

Skullcandy Crusher Wireless

don't really need more than 30 feet range.

Pairing is as fuss-free as expected.

What is really neat is that the haptic bass drivers are not active. This means if you decide to use the bundled cable to attach these cans to your sound source, you still get that banging bass.

The inline mic and button on the cable worked with my tablet and phone.

Skullcandy Crusher Wireless review conclusion

These really do sound good and are priced pretty keenly.

Given the option of these or some Beats cans, I'd probably plump for

the Crushers. They perform well and that haptic bass feature is definitely a new one on me.

Granted, I would not have the slider pushed up to insanity levels, but that extra low-end for films and gaming is a bonus.

Add in to that their build-quality and stealthy looks, who wouldn't want to wear a 2.1 system on their ears?

Skullcandy Crusher Wireless price and availability

The Skullcandy Crusher Wireless are available now. They cost £120 direct from the Skullcandy website.

Overall score 8.3

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Sound quality 8/10

Value 8.5/10



Xiaomi Mi Band 2

The Mi Band 2, as you may have already guessed, is the latest wearable fitness tracker from Chinese hardware giant Xiaomi. This fitness-phobe has been putting it through its paces.

The Mi Band 2 follows the inexpensive but feature-filled Mi Band and Mi Band 1S. This latest

elements is extremely simple and fuss-free.

It's IP67 water resistant so it can handle being splashed with water or the odd shower.

The pod-shaped device has a scratch-proof face and single capacitive selector button.

The display is a monochrome

Xiaomi Mi Band 2 performance

The 0.42-inch OLED screen is pretty clear. It does a decent job of displaying the time, steps, calories burned and heart rate, and distance I've covered.

I have it set to turn the screen on when I rotate my wrist and this works more often than not.

I actually like the fact that there's a touch sensitive button rather than a touchscreen. A touchscreen of this size could be too fiddly to use. A button is a much more sensible interface solution in my opinion.

The whole thing has an anti-fingerprint coating which is a nice touch (pun intended).

Inside the main unit there's a vibrating motor which allows it to notify you of events. Passing a particular goal triggers a notification, as does sitting idle for too long.

If the Mi Band 2 thinks you're being too sedentary, it'll remind you to get up off your ass.

You can also set an alarm which will vibrate to wake you from your



model adds an OLED screen and improved pedometer tech.

The tracker will not only monitor your steps, it keeps tabs on your heart rate and sleep patterns. You can also add in notifications for calls, text messages and selected applications.

All of this at a surprising price. But, is it any good?

Xiaomi Mi Band 2 design

The Mi Band 2 comes in two parts. There's the tech-filled module itself and then the wrist strap this slots into.

As tempting as it is to pop the capsule in to the strap straight away, these parts need to be separated for charging. So, best to charge up the main device first.

Once the module has been fully charged, assembling the two

0.42-inch OLED screen. By tapping the button you can scroll through time, total steps, calories burned, distance travelled and remaining battery life.

On the underside of the unit – the bit that touches your skin – there's an optical heart-rate sensor.

The bottom edge is home to two charging pins that link to the charging cable.

The silicone strap is apparently made from a breathable, anti-sweat material.

It feels like rubber but is tougher and should hopefully stand up to more punishment. My friend's Microsoft band is on its second strap.

Even if it does become damaged over time, you can buy a replacement in black, orange, green, camo or blue.

A simple stud-like mechanism is used to fix the watch around your wrist.



Xiaomi Mi Band 2

sleep. This is neat as one quick burst is enough to wake me. I can quite easily ignore my audio alarm.

Also, as it's a slender thing, the Mi Band 2 is comfortable to keep on in bed. This is handy as it will even monitor your sleeping patterns to ensure you're getting the recommended amount of deep sleep.

Mi Fit app

The first read out on the watch, after the time of day, is your total steps taken. This lets you know what this device is all about from the offing.

The information shown as you tap through the menu is configurable via the app. You can get access to calories burned, distance travelled and your heart rate. You also can see how much battery charge is left.

In order to get the most out of the Mi Band 2 you'll need to install Xiaomi's free Mi Fit companion app on your phone via the iOS app store or Google Play Store.

Notifications

I like the app. It's clear and easy to navigate.

Through it you can control which notifications are sent to the Mi Band 2, and what is displayed as you tap through the main menu using the button.

You can also select which other apps are allowed to send alerts to the device. This means you can be told if you're getting a call, text, etc. by the band vibrating.

The screen will also show the respective icon so you know what you're being alerted of.

There are plenty of other options to fiddle around with, too.

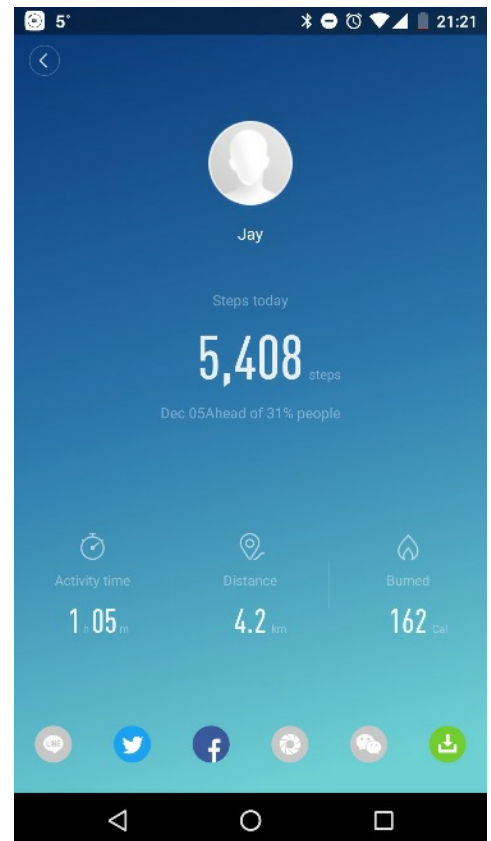
There's a dashboard showing the day's activity and your last night's sleep.

You can also manually track your weight in the app. As you update your weight you get a graph plotting your progress.

This area shows your BMI as well as where you fit in the grand scheme of things.

Pulling the screen down reveals your last recorded heart rate and your goals graph.

From each of these you can access daily, weekly and monthly graphs.



Record your runs

Tapping the little running figure in the top left of the dash sets the band monitoring your jog or run.

The app will break activities up into 'walk' or 'activity' in a timeline under the graphs. You can view the times, steps, minutes, distance and calories.

Share your stats

There are also options to share your progress via social media. Twitter and Facebook are, of course, catered for. There's also a hint that the Mi Band is designed for the Oriental market as WeChat (the pair of speech-bubble faces) is huge in China and Line is one of the top Japanese social sites.

Mr Motivator

I was kind of expecting this app to kick me in to gear. Perhaps,



Xiaomi Mi Band 2

rankings against friends, challenges, goals and the like.

Xiaomi does try a bit though. But, only as much as telling me that I'm 31% ahead of other people. I'm guessing that's including sleep, steps, etc.

While Mi Fit stores your fitness information under a Xiaomi user account, you can share this information with your Google Fit profile. As more healthy Android users will most likely have installed Google Fit, being able to port this data over is a definite plus.

DIY

It's pretty much down to you to set your personal goals such as number of steps taken in a single day and target weight. Some might need more information but, again, this is where Google Fit will add to the Mi Band 2's arsenal.

Battery life

I fully charged the Mi Band 2 when I received it a little over a week ago. I've been wearing it for a few days now and it is showing 46% charge. Xiaomi claims that has a 20 days charge, to my reckoning it will most likely come in just under that. But then, I am sure that other users may find they get longer.

For instance, I have the display to come on depending on my hand movement. You could save juice by having to activate the screen manually. Also, I have notifications coming in from other apps, restricting yourself should see a longer life between charges.

If you are a heavy user and are serious about keeping track of your activity, you might want to charge every 10 days-or-so.

Charging

There's no fancy-schmancy contact-charging here. You have to push the pod out of its rubbery home.

The dock is a snug fit but then it's not really a big deal. When it's like this, it reminds me of an old-



fashioned microphone. That's probably just me though.

It's not ideal, but then I can't see this being a deal breaker for anyone.

Xiaomi Mi Band 2 review conclusion

For the money, the Mi Band 2 certainly represents incredible value when you take in to consideration the amount of functionality compared to its more expensive competition.

I have been impressed by the companion app overall. I liked

how easy it is to use and also the level of integration with other apps.

Being able to share Mi Band 2 data with Google Fit is a sure-fire bonus for those mapping their achievements.

You also get the option of buying different coloured bands to suit that day's Lycra outfit too!

The Mi Band 2 also looks good. I am sure it will suit the casual

activity mapper right up to those more goal oriented gym bunnies. I reckon that this tracker will do the job until you are ready to go to the more professional level and price point.

Mi Band 2 price and availability

This is the big one. With all that functionality, decent looks and slick app you would expect to be paying around £45. Nope.

£30 then, a bargain? Still lower.

The Mi Band 2 is available right now for less than £20 on the GearBest website.

Overall score 8.2

Build quality 8/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Performance 8/10

Value 8.5/10

Onkyo TX-8150 networked amp

We've not reviewed much from Onkyo here on GadgetsNews but we've had the TX-8150 networked amp to check out.

The Onkyo TX-8150 looks like a classic amp but it has so many features that it covers many duties.

Looking for a stereo receiver? It will do it. Looking to drive two pairs of speakers and a sub? Yup, the TX-8150 can. How about Bluetooth, Wi-Fi and Ethernet? Sorted.

Is it all too good to be true though?

Onkyo TX-8150 design

If you were around in the 80s and 90s then the style of the TX-8150 might seem familiar. I quite like its

throwback appeal but to those looking for sleek and minimalist, it might feel a little dated.

You have a choice of finish, silver or black, and to me both look good.

It's a no-nonsense design in so much as it's a rectangular box fronted by control dials and buttons.

The faceplate has a neat brushed finish. The centrepiece is undoubtedly the wide dot-matrix

display. This is extremely clear, even to shortsighted me. One main benefit of having such a large screen is that there's no need for abbreviations.

The quartet of knobs along the bottom controls input selection, bass, treble and balance.

The main dial is the oversized volume control situated top right. To the left of this, hidden in the screen section, is a 4-way selector for radio stations. A further four 'BGM' preset buttons provide instant access to your saved stations.

Connections

Still at the front of the TX-8150 you are offered a USB port and 6.3mm headphone jack.

Flip the amp around and then you'll find a whole array of

Furthermore, the device boasts an IR in/out for custom-install use, a remote-control jack for compatible Onkyo RI products and DAB/FM aerial screw terminal.

Speakers are treated to not one, but two pairs of banana plug-compatible speaker terminals. These are handily labelled A and B – good for feeding another room or filling a large space. So, the TX-8150 has the ability to drive two pairs of speakers of 2×55 watts at 8 Ohms. Nice.

It's not all analogue either.

Digital

There are four digital inputs (two optical, two coaxial). That should be enough to connect an HDTV, a CD/DVD/Blu-Ray player, a gaming console... Stereo audio streams up to 24 bits and 192 kHz are handled.

USB

The USB port is compatible with DSD and PCM files up to 24 bits and 96 kHz as well as DSD. It will play nice with flash drives and FAT format hard drives. It is also possible to browse the content

of the USB peripheral device via the Onkyo Remote app.

Bluetooth

The receiver can be paired up with any device loaded with a Bluetooth transmitter (smartphone,



connectivity options.

There are six sets of analogue stereo inputs as well as a grounded phono input. You also get an analogue line output and a subwoofer pre-out.

Onkyo TX-8150 networked amp

tablet, computer, portable player, etc.).

Network

You also get an Ethernet port and Wi-Fi connection. This plumbs you in to internet radio as well as other online niceness.

AirPlay, DLNA, Internet radio, Spotify, Deezer, FLAC and DSD playback via USB, FM and DAB+ (RNT) tuners are all welcome here.

Onkyo TX-8150 performance

The tech specs for the TX-8150 states that it packs 135 Watts. While that might indeed be true, this is on one channel at 1 kHz and with a distortion 12 times over the hi-fi standard.

In stereo, ranging from 20 Hz to 20 kHz, with a 0.08% distortion rate, the power is 2×55 Watts. This is plenty for most home Hi-Fis output through compact and mid-range floor-standing speakers.

Set-up and in use

The amount of inputs and buttons might be daunting but TX-8150 is a breeze to set-up and use.

My only niggle is that, because Onkyo crammed in all those RCA inputs, things get a little snug back there if you haven't the slimmest of digits.

The app was simple to connect once downloaded from the Google Play Store.

It was just a matter of opening the app and then it sniffed out and found the TX-8150 without issue.

I did find myself using the physical controls more than the app. But then, I am in my mid-40s.



The app does underline just how versatile this thing is though. Just look at that list of possibilities above!

I have tested the unit through both the lovely DALI Menuets as well as the reliable Tannoy Mercury V1i. The speakers were joined to the amp by Chord Elite cables. I have left the bass, treble and balance zeroed just for the review.

The Pure Audio button is a neat touch. This deactivates the tonal correction and the balance, as well as the front panel display. This is to protect the audio signal against any possible interference.

Sound quality

I started off with Fleetwood Mac's 'The Chain' being fed from my NAS via DNLA and the wired Ethernet. The TX-8150 proved to be agile and dynamic through both sections of this classic.

Impressed with this first play I moved on to 'Talking Drum' by Japan. Karn's bassline was impressively taut and controlled. I found the playback detailed and revealing. Sylvian's vocals especially grabbed me as his relaxed, breathy voice came across with an abundance of character.

Moving on to some orchestral tracks and these sounded huge. The instruments had space to

breath with the string section being full of texture and nuance.

The same goes for anthemic rockers, Rush. Synth parts weaved between Geddy's bass lines and Alex's riffs without getting muddled or confused. I did find the drums lacking impact though. This was perhaps more noticeable when slinging on some Tool and the rhythmical 'Grudge'.

Unplugging the Ethernet cable and running purely on Wi-Fi, the TX-8150 did not suffer any drop-out during the week-or-so I had it in use.

CD

Going over to silver discs played on my Oppo using digital optical now. To kick off I played 'Grudge' again for comparison. The reproduction actually sounded thinner to me. Saying that, PJ Harvey's 'Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea' album sounded engaging as ever.

Bluetooth and Spotify

Chuckling tracks over from my phone using Bluetooth matched my Musical Fidelity V90 Blu. I was also struck by just how good Spotify Premium sounded.

Getting my groove on with Earth, Wind and Fire's 'Getaway' the

Onkyo TX-8150 networked amp

TX-8150 again proves agile and musical.

Vinyl

Intrigued by the Onkyo's phono stage, I could not wait any longer.

After seeing Lazarus at Kings Cross Theatre it was obvious that Bowie's last album should come out to play first.

I might have been expecting too much after the decent showing from the other sources but the moving-magnet phono stage was a tad underwhelming.

The title track is quite a work-out for any system but Bowie's vocals lacked the depth I am used to through my usual rig.

The track, 'Lazarus' lost some of the subtleties in both the instruments and vocals.

To be fair, whilst reading back over this review, I may have been too harsh on the phono stage. Looking at all the other options packed in to this receiver, a phono stage is quite an added bonus. It is capable but I can see vinyl-lovers incorporating a separate stage such as the little Rega Fono or similar.



coloured my judgement but it has made me smile at the end. Given that the amp in my system has an asking

Radio

Internet radio, as well as DAB and FM all came through nice and clear with good tonal balance.

Sound quality overall impressions

The TX-8150 is more than competent. Timing and tone are engaging and clear. There are more vivid and dynamic amps out there but at higher prices and/or with fewer capabilities. I have really enjoyed my time with the Onkyo and it has proved to be a great all-round performer.

Onkyo TX-8150 review conclusion

The Onkyo TX-8150 has really set its stall out as being a Jack-of-all-trades. You know what, I really think it is too!

Yes, the phono stage was found lacking a little, but it does so many

things right. It is a well put together bit of kit and its companion app is clear and user friendly – not just an after-thought, as many are.

I didn't look at the price before, or during the review and I am glad I kept it as a surprise. Not only could this have

price of five-times more than this box of tricks, I cannot really fault the TX-8150 at all.

The Onkyo TX-8150 is not only a musical, agile, and enthusiastic amp, it's an intuitive networked and Bluetooth streaming system, DAB radio and phono stage all in one. The fact that you can run a second stereo pair of speakers as well as a subwoofer from the same amp, all at the same time, just continues to poke fun at all the other systems in this price bracket.

I can see the TX-8150 becoming the cornerstone of many home Hi-Fi systems.

Onkyo TX-8150 availability and price

Now, here comes the crucial bit. All of this flexibility and capability can be yours for under £500! In fact, Amazon has the silver one at £480 right now! Other retailers seem to be pitching it at £499.

That's a bargain for something that will certainly work for the majority of households.

Overall score 8.3

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Sound quality 8/10

Value 8.5/10



TP-Link Archer C9 router

TP-Link announced new additions to their Archer router line a few months back. The Archer C9 might not be the newest in the range but it looks attractive for other reasons.

The Archer C9 is an AC1900 Wi-Fi router. It can dish out wireless speeds of up to 1300 Megabits per second but the C9 has a couple other things going for it.

One, it's priced rather more modestly than its competition. The other thing is that, rather than the aggressive, angular styling followed by other brands, this TP-Link router keeps it classy.

TP-Link Archer C9 design

Not only is the Archer C9 white, which makes a refreshing change, it is also smooth and upright.

The overall design is pebbly-smooth, curvy, and glossy. You get a cool white front with an elegant silver-painted, non-removable stand. The stand actually starts as edging along the top and then, seamlessly, become the stand.

Up top stands three matte white articulated aerials.

Around back are all the necessary ports. From left to right there's a USB 2.0 port, WPS and reset button and WAN socket that goes to your modem. These are joined by four gigabit Ethernet ports as well as the power switch and socket.



On the side is a second USB port, and this time it's USB 3.0. Perfect for sharing files on your network from an external hard drive. Here you'll also find the Wi-Fi transmit on/off button.

The router measures 8.7-inches wide, 3.4-inches deep including the stand, and 6.6-inches in height without the antennas.

The blue lights on the front indicate power, Wi-Fi connection, Internet connection and the like. They are all nice and easy to read at a glance. TP-Link does score extra points for the blue on white colour-scheme

TP-Link Archer C9 performance

Yes, it does look pretty neat but the main selling point of this router is its AC1900 Wi-Fi capability. That amounts to up to 600Mbit/s transfers over 2.4GHz and 1,300Mbit/s over 5GHz.

You do have to look at this as future-proofing as most won't have the devices that takes advantage of this. You see, you'll really achieve that high bit rate if you have compatible triple-antennae hardware. Most laptops and phones don't have it – most stop at dual-aerial setups.

That said, the triple aerial setup makes for better beam forming and multi-device throughput rates.

Set-up

It seems as though the days of the complicated router set-up are over.

Even modestly priced units such as the Archer C9 can be sorted via a mobile device.

The Quick Installation Guide is clear and explains the steps via wired and wireless methods. I had the passwords and SSIDs updated within a few minutes using my phone.

Simply turn the unit on, look for the SSID (given on the rear of the

TP-Link Archer C9 router

device) and then connect using the password (also on a label on the router's rear).

Then it is just a matter of opening a browser and heading to tplinkwifi.net. Once there, you'll be greeted with a login screen, in which the default username and password are both 'admin' – obviously needs changing to something more secure.

Reach

The 2.4GHz range on the Archer C9 shows a strong signal throughout the house. I think it's worth pointing out that my home office desk is literally as far away from the router as I can get it. My desk is at the front upstairs window in the corner; the router is in the opposite corner of the back ground floor room.

As to be expected, the 5GHz range is not as far reaching as the more penetrative 2.4 band, but my phone still shows a full, strong connection. I have to walk outside to lose signal from either bands. This is actually better than my Linksys EA7500, and I love that router.

I am not sure if the range is so good because the Archer is stood up and so the aerials are higher or the that the transmitters are better.

I just know the C9 seems to have a longer reach than my trusty EA7500. Annoyingly.

Streaming

The Archer C9 handled streaming FLAC to the Onkyo TC-8150, whilst

simultaneously sending Netflix to a laptop and tablet. All without missing a beat.

I think that is probably a fair reflection of a real-world situation. The wired connection has also been stable with my NAS taking up a pair of the Ethernet ports and the switch to my A/V taking another. The final port goes to a Powerline router that feeds the upstairs rooms.

TP-Link Archer C9 review conclusion

I've said this before and it still remains true – routers are rarely things to get excited about. The strange thing is, everyone will had a rubbish one and *that's* when you tend to notice them.

The Archer C9 as AC1900 skills. It has great range and it also looks nice enough to leave out in the clear and open. That latter point, by the way, is the easiest method of getting a better signal.

The upright stature might not be a winner for some, but I like it. I

like that it's white with blue lights too. But, what I love most of all, is that this is a great router that costs a lot less than its competitors.

Add to that its quick and easy set-up, I really can't find anything bad to say about it.

TP-Link Archer C9 price and availability

You can buy the Archer C9 right now and solve any potential Wi-Fi woes over Christmas. It costs £99.99 from TP-Link's Amazon store.

Overall score 8.4

Build quality 8/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Performance 8.5/10

Value 8.5/10



Vape Shoreditch starter kit

I was recently contacted by Vape Shoreditch, so I have something different to review for you. I am not promoting smoking but I know there are quite a number of 'social smokers' out there. With the festive celebrations now in full swing I thought that this might be of interest.

Let me kick off this review by stating that I do not count myself as an ex-smoker. I can go months without a cigarette but, every once in a while, I might have one. I am also aware of the impact of smoking, not only to myself, but to those forced to inhale second-hand smoke.

The thing is, people are most likely to have a 'cheeky cig' during party season and I am usually one of them. Not this year though.

Less risk

I cannot say that vaping is a healthier alternative either, as e-cigarettes / vaping has not been around long enough to prove its case really.

What has been shown is that there are fewer risks attached to vaping than normal cigarettes. Vaping has been found to be up to 95% less harmful than smoking and has also been found to help smokers quit.

Right. I am taking it that we're all adults here and that we all know that smoking is bad for you. You still have to be 18 or over to buy e-cigarettes, just as you are to purchase tobacco products.

Vape Shoreditch review

This is my first experience of vaping, although I do have a number of friends that switched from tobacco to liquids over the past few years. I even know a couple who buy the nicotine-free liquids for that shisha experience without the naughty bit.

I received the Aspire K3 starter kit and three bottles of e-liquid.

Aspire K3

The Aspire K3 I was sent is finished in a black carbon-fibre look jacket.



The see-through 2ml tank is easily unscrewed to gain you access to the coil.

The battery is a 1200mAh unit which is recharged via micro USB – something that we're all very familiar with by now.

Aspire K3 set-up

As a total novice to vaping I literally had no idea how to start. Sure I could dismantle the K3, and worked out where the juice should

go; but I also was aware of the need to prime the thing.

So a little research was need for that bit.

Specification

- 1200mAh K3 battery
- 2.0mL Juice Capacity K3 Tank
- Kanthal coil with organic cotton wick
- 1.8 ohm resistance for 4.2-5.0V use

Priming and filling

It is necessary to drip a couple of drops of e-liquid directly into the hole in the top of the coil to help with saturation.

Now carefully fill the tank with your chosen flavour of liquid.

Ensure that everything is refitted and tightened and leave for a while. I set this up in the office so mine stood for a couple of hours.

Basically, the liquid needs to fully saturate the coil before it's heated. There should not be any dry areas of cotton or wicking

inside the coil before you press the fire button.

Thinner liquids are likely to take less time. Thicker, more viscous liquids and those with a higher level of VG (vegetable glycerin), as well as larger coils, are likely to take longer to prime.

Firing and use

The K3 requires 5 pushes of the power button to switch it on or off. This prevents accidental activation.

Vape Shoreditch starter kit

When in use the button lights up blue (blue lights FTW!) and taking a draw from the mouthpiece is easy. My first impression was that you do not get the heat or the 'thick' smoke of a cigarette. The vapour is much cooler and lighter.

What it does give you is good flavour and a satisfying plume of vapour.

As a newbie to vaping I found the K3 incredibly easy and intuitive to use. Some might find the lack of custom controls limiting, but my cigarettes never had them.

It also looks pretty good to me.

Shoreditch e-liquids

There are a number of categories to choose from. I was quite amazed at the range, to be honest.

They start off with the Edition, which contains five specially created flavours.

Then you have the more familiar Tobacco, Sweets and Fruit ranges. In total, I counted 35 options of e-liquid that are currently available.

Flavour

For this review I chose Oh So Orange from the Editions range, Golden Tobacco and then Cherry Chill.

I was expecting a totally synthetic aroma and taste from all of these, especially the Oh So Orange. What I discovered was that all three flavours were quite enjoyable in their own right.

Oh So Orange

This quickly became my favourite flavour. Not only did I find this

easy to vape but I had not noticed anyone else using orange liquids.

It has a very clean, orange citrus-y aroma and taste.

It will have to be a real special flavour to knock this one of its top spot for me. Hopefully I won't over use it and ruin the experience.

Golden Tobacco

I chose this one as I thought it might be odd 'smoking' fruit. I think people that have smoked roll-ups might like this one.

It's reminiscent of a certain brand, perhaps based in Virginia, but also has similar notes to some 'light' cigarettes.

It lacks the novelty of some of the other flavours but when you want to 'smoke', Golden Tobacco is a nice, smooth and light choice.

Cherry Chill

Cherry Chill was the one I thought I'd like the most. Back in the day I'd roll cigarettes using either dark cherry or vanilla tobacco from the old-school Tobacconist back in Barnsley.

I did like the sweet cherry hit but you also get a blast of menthol. That makes this experience somewhat akin to vaping some cherry flavoured Tunes. Not unpleasant, but Oh So Orange did leapfrog this flavour as my top choice.

This is one I'd go to for a change every now and then, I reckon.

Vape Shoreditch review conclusion

I was impressed, not only by their selection of vape hardware and e-liquids, but also by the quick turnaround between order and delivery.

The flavours I have tried have been pleasing, overall. I was afraid that the fruity flavours would have the cheap, sweet, synthetic taste. That was not the case here.

I also got a nice nicotine hit from the vapes too. The flavours tested were 6mg at 50/50 (see below).

Everyone at Shoreditch that I've been in contact with have been helpful and friendly.

If you are looking to dip your toe in to the world of vaping then I reckon you could do a lot worse than contacting Shoreditch.

Vape Shoreditch prices and availability

Everything reviewed is available now and the vaping hardware ranges from £6.99 for replacement batteries to £49.99 for the Wismec Reuleaux RX200S box mod.

Kits are available from £14.49 and go up to £44.99.

The Aspire K3 kit as reviewed is £29.99.

E-liquids start at £3.33 for 10ml and can be bought in the following VG/PG (Vegetable Glycerin / Propylene Glycol) ratios and nicotine strength:

50/50: 0mg, • 6mg, • 12mg, • 18mg
80/20: 0mg, • 3mg, • 6mg

Overall score 8.1

Build quality 8/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8/10

Flavours 8.5/10

Value 8/10

AOC Agon AG241QX gaming monitor

AOC Agon, as you should know by now, is the company's gaming range. I have been kindly sent the 241QX, a 24-inch display with Adaptive-Sync (FreeSync), 1440p resolution and 144 hertz image rate.

The AOC Agon AG241QX has a 23.8-inch screen that should fit nicely on everyone's desk. More importantly, it retains the gamer-required specifications of a 144Hz refresh rate and 2560 x 1440 resolution.

As well as that, the Agon promises decent ergonomics, an array of connectivity options as well as a good-looking stand and VESA compatible screen mounting. All of this, at a competitive price point.

Let's take a look-see shall we?

Agon AG241QX design

I do like how the Agon monitors look. They have the aggressive styling, as expected by anything built for gamers, but AOC has kept it subtle.

The screen surface here is of a medium (regular) matte anti-glare finish.

The matte black bezels are quite slim, with the top and sides coming in at around 12mm (0.47-inches) and the bottom, 19mm

(0.75-inches). The bottom bezel has a brushed effect rather than a plain matte. Nice.

The bottom bezel also features a dark red Agon logo but that's it really as far as splashes of colour go, apart from the OSD controls.

The OSD (On Screen Display)



controls are located towards the right of the bottom bezel. These are nicely spaced and have good feedback. Unobtrusive white icons printed on the lower bezel indicate the button's purpose. The power light is also white when on.

There is even a remote control that connects via mini-USB. This hands you shortcuts to your saved screen profiles and is an alternative way to control the monitor. The controller is well made and easy to use.

The functionality of the OSD using both control methods is simple and well laid out.

The monitor is slender, measuring about 19mm (0.75 inches) at its thinnest point.

The rear of the screen is a striking combination of matte black plastic and dark red brushed-effect plastic wings.

The stand attaches centrally using a captive screw in the base and then 4 screws in order to attach the stand to the panel. Included in the bundle is a Vesa mounting plate, should that be more your thing.

3W down-firing speakers are also included at the rear. These aren't going to blow your mind but are good enough for notifications.

Connectivity

On the right side you'll find a 3.5mm headphone jack, 3.5mm audio input and 2 USB 3.0 ports. The top, yellow, USB port

supports fast-charging for compatible devices.

Above these ports is a flick-out headphone hook. When not in use it is stored at the rear of the screen pointing upwards.

At the rear there is another pair of USB 3.0 ports (making 4 in total, plus upstream) and the DC power input.

Here you will also find Dual-Link DVI, HDMI 1.4 port (with MHL), HDMI 2.0, DP 1.2a (supports Adaptive-Sync), VGA, 3.5mm audio out, 3.5mm microphone jack and a mini-USB port for the OSD remote.

AOC Agon AG241QX gaming monitor

Stand

The metal stand is remarkably heavy and solidly built. This is powder-coated with a forked design that offers good stability without an excessive footprint.

The stand is adjustable and allows the monitor to be rotated, tilted, swivelled and raised up to 130 mm in height. There is even a scale so you can remember the favorite settings.

Agon AG241QX performance

Specifications

The 2560 x 1440 resolution (Quad HD) monitor uses a 23.8-inch TN (Twisted Nematic) panel with support for a 144Hz refresh rate. This panel offers true 8-bit colour without dithering and boasts a 1ms grey to grey response time.

If your PC is rocking an AMD FreeSync compatible Graphics Processing Unit (GPU) and you hook the monitor up via its DisplayPort then you can get the most out of the AG241QX.

As my rig runs an overclocked NVIDIA GPU I plugged in via the HDMI 2.0. This still supports 2560 x 1440 @ 144Hz, but not AMD FreeSync.

DVI and HDMI 1.4 is limited to lower refresh rates at native

resolution and is there for compatibility, including games consoles.

Those kind folks at AOC do throw in a VGA cable, HDMI cable, DVI cable, DP cable and 3.5mm audio cable for good measure though.

Ergonomics

As alluded to previously, the screen can be tilted back 22 degrees or forwards by 4 degrees. You can also swivel the screen 20 degrees to the left and right.

The display can be spun around to portrait mode thanks to full 90 degree rotation.

The Agon features scales and pointers so that you can log where your optimal settings are. Very handy should you have to share your station or have different preferences for work and play.

The top of the stand neck terminates in a handy (pun intended) carry handle.

Eye care

The 241QX is kind to your peepers too. There is AOC Flicker Free Technology and AOC Low Blue Light mode to ensure that your eyes aren't overly strained during gaming marathons. I must add here, taking regular breaks does help and is better for you.

With AOC Shadow Control you can activate contrast enhancement for dark areas.

This helps see those pesky would-be assassins lurking in dark corners – you do lose a bit of picture quality though. The same is true for the low-input lag

mode, which virtually deactivates the postprocessing of the display in order to further improve the response time.

Image quality

The display reacts quickly, without streaking or other unpleasantness. The matte anti-glare finish to the panel did add some graininess to some lighter backgrounds. I really noticed this when typing out documents.

Colours are pretty accurate and are vibrant. As with most TN panels, though, there can be a feeling that some colours appear slightly washed-out.

Most monitors with a 2560 x 1440 (WQHD) resolution are 27-inch models. That adds up to a pixel density of 108.79 PPI (Pixels Per Inch). With this 23.8-inch screen the pixel density is increased to 123.41 PPI (13.4% higher than 27-inch WQHD models).

That might look amazing on paper but I would doubt most people would notice the difference. Also, if you are worried about text and UI (user interface) elements being too small to read, there is little difference between how they appear on the 23.8-inch and the 27-inch.

I have been offered the 27-inch model as my contact thought I'd be disappointed by the 24-inch model size-wise. To be honest, many gamers I know are quite comfortable with this size of screen. I would never say that the AG241QX ever felt too small. Although, if I had the desk space, three of these would be awesome.

One benefit from this size of display in a 'normal' seating position is that more of the action happens within your central field



AOC Agon AG241QX gaming monitor

of vision, rather than peripheral. This could improve reaction times and lessen eye fatigue. Just a thought.

Gaming

This is, after all, the whole reason for the Agon range.

I found the AG241QX perfect for first person shooters as well as high speed driving sims such as Project Cars.

Colour and contrast is pretty darned good but there is the usual brightening towards the edges that you have to expect with these panels. This does not interfere with playing but I have to mention it.

Left 4 Dead 2 played smoothly with good response times even when hordes of zombies fill up the screen.

CS:GO was nice and fast. Switching to Overdrive in the Gaming section of the OSD gives improved response times with a little bit of ghosting. To be honest, I was hardly aware of the ghosting in-game, but it's there if you're looking for it.

Project Cars was smooth with fast rendering of the backgrounds.

Rocket League's colours popped and gameplay was fast, fluid and fun.

In all cases I could not detect any input lag.

Viewing angles

The viewing angles are a tad narrower than some other monitors at 170 degrees horizontal and 160 degrees vertical – most come in at 178 degrees. Again, unless you use your monitor for watching videos in bed as well as



gaming, this shouldn't be much of a problem.

At really extreme angles you will notice some yellowing (from the sides) or green tinging (from the bottom up) but, from straight on or even at slight angles you will be fine. This is just something I noticed and so had to write down. I have not experienced this getting in the way of my day-to-day use of this monitor over the past few weeks.

Image quality overall

AOC's AG241QX provides good picture quality with strong colours and contrast. When gaming I could not detect any problems. The display reacts quickly and without noticeable artefacts or tearing.

Agon AG241QX review conclusion

The AG241QX is a great gaming monitor. It looks good, has plenty of scope for adjustments to tailor it to the user, and the processing is fast.

The AOC AGON AG241QX makes good use its 2560 x 1440 panel with a screen area measuring 23.8-inch on the diagonal. This combination works well with

increased pixel density and overall screen real-estate. I found the monitor nice to use whether I was tapping out these reviews or killing zombies.

If I was to be critical, and I guess that's my job here, I'd say the anti-glare coating was a bit too heavy-handed. Also, having to screw the panel to the stand seems to be a retrograde step given the toolless solutions currently available.

I was not able to test out its Free-Sync / Adaptive-Sync skills but I can only imagine that this would've improved on its already decent responsiveness.

Agon AG241QX price and availability

You can buy the AG241QX right now for £327 from Amazon.

Overall score 8.4

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Image quality 8.5/10

Value 8/10

AOC Agon AG241QG gaming monitor

After reviewing the AG241QX we were sent the G-Sync touting AG241QG variant.

This will be a quick one. Yeah, my chat-up lines don't get any better, do they?

Oh. What? Yeah, the review.

This will be short and sweet (stop it now!) as the looks of the AOC Agon 241QG are pretty much the same as the QX.

The dimensions, resolution, ergonomics – all identical. The biggest noticeable difference between the G-Sync QG monitor and the Adaptive-Sync QX is their name stamped in the top-right corner of the display bezel.

AG241QG spec round-up

Righty, what we have here is a 2560 x 1440 (WQHD) resolution gaming monitor.

At 24-inches, this means that you get a good 123,4 PPI, which is

roughly 13% more than a 27-inch WQHD screen.

The main point of reviewing this screen is that it's packing Nvidia G-Sync.

This gives it the skills to push out up to 165Hz and a 1ms response time. This is obviously only for those rocking a compatible Nvidia graphics card in their PC.

Without an Nvidia GPU (graphics processing unit) and G-Sync enabled you will *only* reach a maximum refresh rate of 144Hz.

That's still pretty much the gaming benchmark anyhow!

The G-Sync range for the AOC AG241QG is 30Hz – 165Hz.

Viewing angles are specified to be 170/160° and a 1000:1 contrast ratio is specified as well.

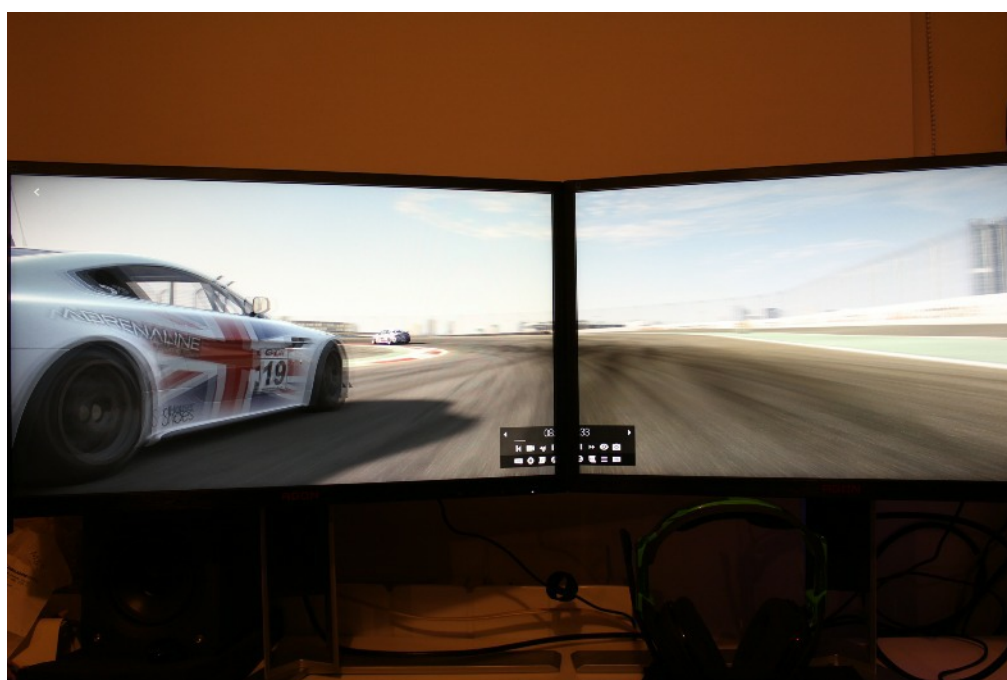
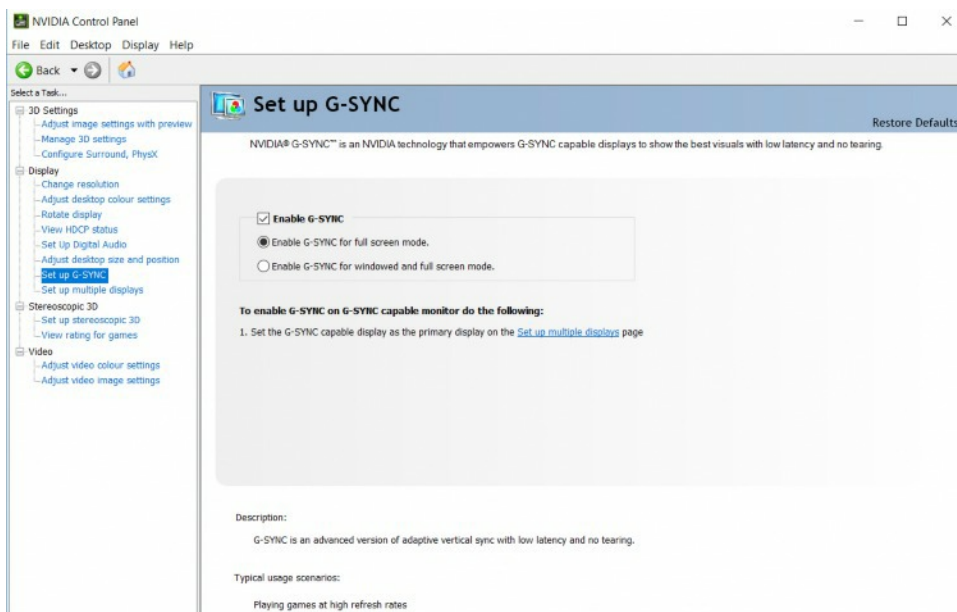
The display is also flicker-free and has support for the sRGB color space. ULMB (Ultra Low Motion Blur) is supported by this monitor as well.

The AG241QG features 2W speakers rather than the 3W ones in the QX. You also lose the OSD (on screen display) remote control.

AOC AG241QG performance

Before getting in to the nitty-gritty of reviewing the Agon AG241QG, I could not resist plugging both Agons in together for some wide-screen Agon action!

Yes, that did leave me with a bezel-barrier right up the middle, but at least I was



AOC Agon AG241QG gaming monitor



I could tell the difference though, and that really impressed me. It's a good-looking monitor and all the specs line-up to what any competitive gamer would demand.

Throw in the 165Hz ultra-fast refresh rate achievable with G-Sync, and you have quite the monitor.

AOC Agon AG241QG price and availability

You can buy the AG241QG right now.

The AG241QG can be yours for £468 from Amazon right now.

able to compare like-for-like. Naturally, the response rate with a pair of monitors in stretch mode drops to 60Hz

This mainly left me needing wanting a three-screen set-up. Just have to wait for that lottery win now...

Image quality

I will have to admit, in normal day-to-day use, there wasn't anything to separate the QG from the QX.

The only difference I could tell was that the OSD was slightly different.

But, when gaming on my rig with an overclocked GTX 780, things were plenty much smoother with the AG241QG.

I honestly didn't think that there would be a noticeable difference. It was mostly discernible in the fast-action games such as Project Cars and Rocket League.

I also noticed G-Sync doing its thing when quickly panning around in FPS (first person shooters) – even CS:GO. The rendering was just smoother, sharper and swifter.

AOC Agon AG241QG review conclusion

If you are serious about your gaming and have an Nvidia GPU then you will be used to paying a premium.

You see, as with all G-Sync monitors, there is a bump in the price. The difference between the QG and QC is £140. Is G-Sync worth the extra? Well, that's down to how much you game really. I get a few hours per month in so...

Overall score 8.4

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Image Quality 8.8/10

Value 8/10



Red 5 X Series 2.4 drone

House of Fraser are stocking tech toys from Red 5 now. They have kindly sent over their X Series 2.4 quadcopter camera drone for us to have a look at.

The X Series 2.4 drone is fitted with a HD camera and 4GB Micro SD.

It also boasts a six axis gyroscope and 3D eversion and so *should* be easy to fly.

We have heard that before though haven't we?

This is the second drone I've reviewed and after having my confidence rocked by the hard to handle Spot 2.0, I must admit I was worried.

X Series 2.4 drone design

Firstly, I unboxed the quadcopter. My first impressions were that the X Series was a big drone!

It looks sleek with its all black finish but it was at least double the size of what I had previously flown.

Setting up was easy but I don't know if this was actually easier than previous drones, or just that I'd done it before and therefore knew what to expect.

I was happier to see a sealed battery unit and a simple to access power button and SD card slot. However, there is some exposed wiring connecting the battery to the camera unit.

A 20 minute charge and I was ready to go, although the instructions do state an hour charge for 8 minutes of continuous flight. I do think that I got a little more.



X Series 2.4 drone performance

First flight – indoors

In the interest of fairness and the integrity of science, I decided to conduct the very same tests I undertook with the previous drone.

Which, if you check out my previous review, is to attempt to fly the craft indoors!

I'm older and wiser now so turn the speed option down to its minimum. I push up on the stick gently and am surprised by the amount of control I have of such a big drone in such a small space.

This has to be down to the gyroscope. Already this is a far more fun experience. I manage to

navigate around my living room and dining room, even moving in to the kitchen whilst in flight! I'm a pro!

Well, maybe not yet. I need to get this in to the park!

So off to the park... again...

Ground control

Before I talk about the drone, let me rewind to the controller. There is an element of familiarity here. Previously I had to get used to a new button set and controls, with the X Series I didn't have any of that.

They have ingeniously used the same shape and button config of the very well-known PlayStation controller. This means that gamers like me can pick this up easily.

Fair enough the build quality is not as good but what do you expect for the price?

Red 5 X Series 2.4 drone

Take it outside

Right, back to flying! (this time I even brought a piece of cardboard as a helipad!)

Initially I took things easy, tried to control take-off and landing, turn the craft around, move forwards and backwards. But, before long I was itching to push the X Series and myself. This was fun!

Not before long I was ramping up the speed and attempting the pre-programmed aerobatics! It was becoming clear that this was a fun drone for beginners but also a product that can develop with you. The better you get, the better the drone will react.

I could pick up serious speeds at the highest setting. The only thing I could not get my head around was the "Return Home" feature. Although the setting managed to set the drone down safely (something I struggled to master), it didn't seem to return to the point of take-off. Maybe I'm asking for too much.

At the end of the test I was so confident I managed to walk back to the car with the drone flying steadily beside me.

Oh, and the lights not only make it attractive and easy to find at night but also help you identify which way is forward! A useful trick when the drone is a way off in the distance and you need to figure out how to get it back.

X Series 2.4 drone camera

The gyroscope is a revelation for using the drone as a serious source of imagery.

The stability this provides made for some lovely vistas of Morden and some pretty good video even in windy conditions.

A couple of downsides, I wouldn't really classify the camera quality as HD but I'm probably just splitting hairs here.

The camera is fixed in the forward facing position which means birds eye imagery is very difficult and, much like all drones in this price bracket, the inability to get real time feedback on your pictures and video means that this drone can't really be considered if imagery is your primary driver for droning.

X Series 2.4 drone review conclusion

Great fun! I'm a convert!

I likened this experience to the first time I drove an RC car when I was a kid.

Based on this experience, I'd actually consider spending my hard earned cash on this drone.

X Series 2.4 drone price and availability

If you're quick you could still add one to your Christmas list!

The Red 5 X Series 2.4 drone is available now in black or red. For us at GadgetyNews, we think that the **£69.99** asking price is a bit of a bargain for something so easy and fun to fly.

Overall score 8.3

Build quality 8/10

Design 8/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Performance 8/10

Value 9/10



UKI Mr Bubble and Hystrix

We like to mix things up here at GadgetsNews. So, as the party season is here, we have been sent a couple of hair styling gadgets from those lovely people at House of Centini – the UKI Mr Bubble and Hystrix.

Those who know me will be aware that I have long-ish hair.

Yes, my 'fashion' hasn't moved on from when I discovered heavy metal in the 80s. I am comfortable with that.

I was prepared to try these out on myself but, fortunately, I had a willing volunteer. Who then didn't want to be photographed.

Anyhow, here are the reviews.

Mr Bubble

Stop sniggering at the back! Yes, this could raise eyebrows should you leave it on your bedside table. Its name doesn't really help either, does it?

But there is a good reason for Mr Bubble's shape.



The idea is that the asymmetric design will give you a more natural looking curl.

A microchip controls the temperature of the professional-grade Tourmaline ceramic plate... Hang on. The what now?

Why Tourmaline?

I am not going to pretend to already know what this is. But, what I have found out is that

Tourmaline is a rare mineral that naturally emits negative ions and infrared rays.

UKI has injected Tourmaline into the ceramic heating plates so that you can style your hair using less heat. Also, apparently, those negative ions actually trap moisture into the hair.

So, together, you are left with hair that is both styled and shiny.

Mr Bubble performance

The speed at which Mr Bubble heats up is remarkable.

Naturally, the heat settings can be controlled on the wand. It was good to see the obvious professional touches on this device.

You get a 3

meter cable that is fitted to the wand in a cuff that can rotate through 360 degrees.

By sectioning your hair and then wrapping it around the bubbles you are left with fairly loose curls. A quick brush-through gives you natural-looking waves.

The results are impressive and, thanks to the consistent heat, pretty quick to achieve.



Hystrix

Now this one is a great two-for-one deal.

The UKI Hystrix is not only a hot brush for super-fast curling and volume, but it is also a straightening iron for smoother looks.

Where Mr Bubble was packing Tourmaline, Hystrix is rocking Argan Oil-infused ceramic plates.

Argan Oil

As the ceramic plates on the Hystrix heat up, they realise the Argan nutrient into the hair giving your style shine and protection.

I do hope I am not the only one learning stuff here!

Hystrix performance

To use as a brush you simply lock the two-halves off. This creates a hot barrel brush.

Anyone that has used a hot brush before will be familiar with the volumising effects.

Unlock the straighteners and you'll see the heat controls, as well as the professional ceramic plates.

Hystrix is coated with a smooth heat resistant material making it very safe to use.

UKI Mr Bubble and Hystrix

The coated bristles are heat resistant too. This allows you to hold your hair around it with your hand for superb control.

Just like Mr Bubble, the Hystrix has a 360 degree professional swivel cord.

The Argan oil combined with adjustable temperature control 130°- 210° maintains hair health leaving it smooth and shiny.

Mr Bubble and Hystrix review conclusion

I have to say, even I could tell the difference when using these bits of tech compared to other high street brands.

The fit and finish is what I would class as professional. In fact, Max Centini uses the products in the salon. I have been promised a Brazilian Blow-out but still yet to take him up on that.

Both devices reached their working temperatures quickly and left hair just as desired.

If you're serious about your style, you owe it to yourself (and your hair) to check these out.

Mr Bubble and Hystrix prices and availability

You can get these, as well as other UKI products from House of Centini right now!

Mr Bubble is £50

Hystrix is £93



Overall score 8.4

Build quality 8.5/10

Design 8.5/10

Ease of use 8.5/10

Performance 8.5/10

Value 8/10

