

# Hifi Pig

**Quarterly**

SUMMER 2019

## **INTERVIEWS & FEATURES**

THORSTEN LOESCH - TECHNICAL DIRECTOR AT ifi & AMR

ALAN AINSLIE - GENERAL MANAGER AT MELCO AUDIOPHILE NAS PROJECT

PAUL CLARK OF HIFI LOUNGE

STRATOS VICHOS OF LAB 12

CHRIS BELL OF WIRE ON WIRE

MUSICAL JOURNEYS WITH JOHAN COORG

READERS' LIVES - TONY SEWELL

READERS' LIVES - MARK CHARLES STEWART

HAPPY TRAILS WITH PAUL MESSENGER

STU'S VIEWS

BIRD'S EYE VIEW

IAN RINGSTEAD

READERS' COMMENT - SHANE FAGE

MASCARA QUARTET - ALBUM REVIEW AND INTERVIEW

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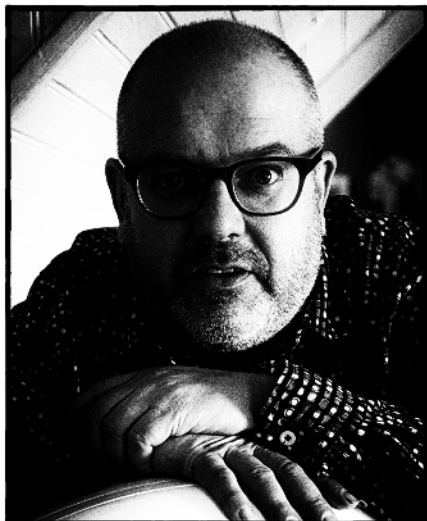
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## **EDITORIAL AND FEATURES**

For all editorial and feature enquiries please contact [Stuart@HifiPig.com](mailto:Stuart@HifiPig.com)

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Without a doubt this is the Hifi show in the UK that is leading the way in how to make visitors and exhibitors feel welcome and part of something that is growing annually.

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Shortly we're heading over the pond to America and the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. It's our first time in the US for a show and so we are both excited and slightly nervous, though we have been invited to sit on a panel to discuss music at Hifi shows and so that should be pretty interesting. Expect a full report from the show on the Hifi Pig pages in due course.

News from Hifi Pig Towers itself is that we have finally got our mid-priced system together and fully functioning. We've invested heavily in this system to enable us to review products that fall in that mid-priced bracket within a system that is wholly relevant to them and to readers...we've also put together a sub-£1000 system, but more of that in the next issue.

As always We hope that you enjoy the Summer edition of Hifi Pig Quarterly and should you have any comments or feedback then please don't hesitate to contact us through the usual channels.

STUART SMITH

**W**elcome to the summer edition of Hifi Pig Quarterly where you will find not only loads of in-depth Hifi reviews but also lots of interesting interviews and comment from industry luminaries and commentators.

It's been a very busy few months for us at Hifi Pig (nothing changes there then) with one of the highlights being the North West Audio Show which was once again an absolute treat with us meeting lots of wonderful people and having the opportunity to listen to some truly world-class systems.

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## FEATURES & INTERVIEWS

**THORSTEN LOESCH - TECHNICAL  
DIRECTOR AT iFi and AMR**

**ALAN AINSLIE - GENERAL MANAGER  
AT MELCO AUDIOPHILE NAS PROJECT**

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**READERS' LIVES - MARK CHARLES STEWART**

**HAPPY TRAILS WITH PAUL MESSENGER**

**STU'S VIEWS**

**BIRD'S EYE VIEW**

**IAN RINGSTEAD**

**READERS' COMMENT – SHANE FAGE**

**MASCARA QUARTET – ALBUM REVIEW AND INTERVIEW**

**SELECTED SNAPS FROM NORTH WEST AUDIO SHOW 2019** [FULL COVERAGE HERE](#)

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## REVIEWS

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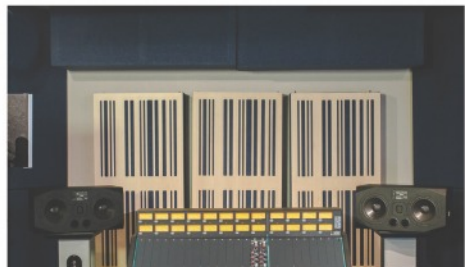
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# INTERVIEW

## THORSTEN LOESCH - TECHNICAL DIRECTOR AT iFi AND AMR



**Thorsten Loesch is Technical Director at iFi and Abbingdon Music Research. Here Hifi Pig talks to him about the history of AMR and iFi and his approach to working.**

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**HP: Abbingdon Music Research (AMR) was formed in 2004; what prompted this?**

**TL:** There were three of us at the time, all audio fanatics, all lusting after the 'golden age' of audio where superior sound and design were at their peak. We wanted to create something special with AMR, inspired by classic brands such as Western Electric, so we gave up our day jobs and took the plunge. Our desire was to attain the top-quality engineering and sound exemplified by the best components in audio history, capturing the immense pleasure and pride of ownership they delivered in a way that's fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

**HP: iFi, AMR's sister-brand, launched in 2012. How did that come about and what are the key differences between AMR and iFi?**

**TL:** AMR makes high-end audio components for home use. In 2008, during the financial crisis, we realised that a significant portion of the audio market was moving away from large, high-end systems to smaller devices and portable gear. We saw an opportunity to bring AMR's sonic pedigree, engineering and design to a wider market at affordable prices and it made sense to create a new brand in order to achieve this.

**HP: iFi is perhaps best known for its DACs and headphone amps. Why did you decide to get into this particular product sector?**

**TL:** One of the things AMR quickly became known for was the quality of the DAC circuitry in components such as the CD-77. We knew we could apply our R&D in this

area to portable products and this concept was quick to bring success to the iFi brand. We were among the first companies to develop high-performance portable DAC/headphone amps and in 2014 our second-generation product, the nano iDSD, won a prestigious EISA (Expert Imaging and Sound Association) Award – judged by a panel of respected audio publications from around the world. iFi is one of the youngest-ever companies to win an EISA Award – just two years after we launched. Last year, we were delighted to receive another EISA Award when the xDSD won Best Portable DAC/Headphone Amplifier. The awards keep coming, from publications as diverse as *Hi-Fi News* and *T3* – we hope a much-coveted *Hifi Pig* award may be next!

**HP: What was iFi's first product?**

**TL:** We launched our first four products at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in 2012 – the iDAC, iCAN, iPhono and iUSB Power.

**HP: iFi focuses on portable, desktop and lifestyle products that are also affordable; where do you see the mass-market audience for quality audio being in the coming years?**

**TL:** As one of our distributor friends once said, all these trends are driven by convenience and the future is 'fewer everything' – fewer boxes, fewer wires and so on. The desire for convenience is not new – in the '70s and '80s, for example, radio/cassette players outsold turntables and the arrival of the Walkman took the consumption of recorded music to new levels because now you could listen everywhere you went. Technology provides new



ways of consuming music, always driven by the desire for convenience; nowadays we have Bluetooth headphones and smart speakers. At iFi, our mission is to look at the way people listen to music and deliver an enhanced experience.

**HP: iFi's latest product is the Aurora wireless music system, which will be available this September. What prompted you to make an all-in-one music system and what was the inspiration behind its distinctive design?**

**TL:** In this age of digital music and online streaming, there's a sizeable market for premium-quality all-in-one music systems with Wi-Fi connectivity. However, most products in this space are pretty generic. We thought we could bring something different to the table by utilising our own tech and thinking 'out of the box' with the industrial design – a wireless music system that makes a statement and creates a sense of occasion, because of the way it looks as well as the way it sounds.

Sonically, we challenged ourselves to recreate the musical enjoyment and spacious, room-filling sound of a high-end hi-fi system from just one box. We developed a range of proprietary technologies to achieve that goal, including 'PureEmotion' ultra-high-speed amplification to convey the music's heart and soul, 'ART' (Automatic Room Tailoring) to adapt the sound to suit the room, and our 'TrueBass' system that delivers the kind of deep, accurate bass that other all-in one music systems can only dream about.

In terms of the Aurora's aesthetic design, we wanted to create a music system that stands out amidst all the

ubiquitous, cloth-covered speaker boxes. And yet, its form perfectly mirrors its function. For example, bamboo is not just an attractive and environmentally friendly material for the cabinet, it's also highly effective acoustically.

As a brand, we have a great reputation among fans of high-performance audio equipment but we also want this product to be coveted by people outside that core customer base; people who may not have heard of iFi before but are looking for a great sounding music system they'd be proud to own. For that, we need a design that draws attention, not one that blends in.

At iFi, we don't join bandwagons. Our products dare to be different both inside and out, and the Aurora is an expression of that ethos. Our Director of Industrial Design, Julien Haziza, says a key inspiration for the design was the architecture of Tadao Ando in Tokyo's Otemosando district. Also, the Louvre (Julien grew up in Paris after all) – Japanese minimalism juxtaposed with striking French angles.

**HP: In terms of the Aurora's audio performance, what is your proudest achievement?**

**TL:** Ultimately, the aim was to capture the full character of a musical performance – the scale, the energy, the detail. That's a difficult thing to do with a full hi-fi rig and big stereo speakers, let alone when you're making a 'lifestyle' one-box audio system. Close your eyes when you're listening to the Aurora and you can believe the singer, the band, the orchestra or the DJ is playing live in your room – we're proud of that achievement.





One of the most satisfying compliments we've received thus far came from a professional musician. When we played Leonhard Cohen's *You Want It Darker* he exclaimed, "Oh my god, there's a man trapped in that box!" He was completely taken aback by how realistic the Aurora sounded.

A fundamental part of achieving this natural, realistic sound is our avoidance of DSP (Digital Signal Processing) to artificially 'boost' performance and deliver out-of-the-box spatial effects. Instead, we use precisely engineered analogue processing, backed by rigorous acoustic design, to achieve not only exceptional depth of bass and high playback levels, but also to create musical realism – to convey texture and emotion, rather than just a big, superficial sound.

In modern audio design, DSP is often used as a quick, inexpensive fix for design challenges, such as getting ostensibly deep bass from a small box or making a small speaker sound 'big'. This adversely affects how 'real' and authentic the music sounds. It's like comparing a steak in a boutique steakhouse, perfectly seasoned, lightly seared and served rare, to a beef burger sold by a fast food chain, overly processed, excessively seasoned with MSG and cooked to death. Both start as a piece of beef, but the results are dramatically different.

**HP: More and more people, particularly the younger generation, rely on their smartphones for delivering musical content; do you see a move back to more traditional methods of music delivery, or is the smartphone here to stay with regards music?**

**TL:** As I mentioned before, convenience drives the mass market. We can now carry a single device – a smartphone – to do everything. We can use it for work, for entertainment, for all kinds of communication. The concept of 'smart' multifunctional devices is certainly here to stay, and this is the way the majority of people will continue to play their music.

Of course, there will always be those who desire something more; those who are willing to forgo a degree of convenience to obtain better performance and an enhanced overall experience. There is a different sort of appeal to less overtly convenient ways of consuming music, such as vinyl, which has seen something of a resurgence – a tangible sense of authenticity.

Not matter how people choose to listen to music, our job is to deliver solutions to ensure the best possible sound quality, whether at home or on the move.

**HP: Among other things, you design phono stages for turntables, amps for headphones, USB cables and digital noise busters for computer-based audio. What's your personal favourite way of listening to music and why?**

**TL:** If time is no issue and I'm settling in for a session, then I'd choose vinyl with single-ended triode amplification and high-efficiency speakers. There is a musical purity to the sound that remains incredibly hard to capture through other means. But I also listen to music on the go; I want the best sound quality I can get relative to my circumstances at any particular time, whether I'm relaxing at home, working or travelling.

**HP: You have previously worked as a recording engineer; how do you feel this experience has helped you in the decisions you make when designing circuits and products?**

**TL:** It's useful to have direct experience of how the sound of music is captured, how the recording chain works, the effect of the acoustic environment on a recording and so on, and also to have a sense of what a recording engineer or producer wanted to achieve and how they went about it. This helps me to design equipment that 'unpacks' recordings effectively at the reproduction end, capturing the 'truth' of the music and the way it was recorded.

**HP: Innovation has always been a major part of what AMR and iFi are about, how do you make sure you are ahead of the curve?**

**TL:** As with any company, it's always about hiring good staff. At AMR/iFi, we like to hire people who come from other industries because audio equipment manufacturing is not a large industry in relative terms. Hiring seasoned people means that everyone brings their viewpoint to the table and this helps us to make considered decisions, including staying ahead of the curve with consumer trends and market opportunities, and identifying the product types we're best placed to develop.

It's about achieving the right mix; you want people with huge passion for high-performance audio who've worked all their lives in this industry, but you also need a balanced perspective from successful people with experience in other sectors. For example, we've recently employed someone who was a senior project manager at Nortel, and another person who is a senior buyer at Debenhams, as well as someone who was a director at speaker manufacturer PMC for the last 15 years. We're proud to work with a diverse mix of talented people.

**HP: What do you think is the most important characteristic of a product and how do you go about achieving it?**

**TL:** Any product must be 'fit for purpose' – that includes delivering all the functionality that customers demand and deserve. Above all, it must deliver the true essence of music – the energy, the detail, the scale and emotive qualities. There are many sonic elements that combine to create the musical 'whole' but focusing on one aspect or another does not necessarily make for a satisfying musical experience. Audio equipment is the conduit through which the 'message' of a piece of music is conveyed; ultimately, it should make the music that moves you move you even more.

Whether it's AMR or iFi, all our products are rigorously tested by scientific methods, and also by the most important tool of all – our ears! Ultimately, it's our customers' ears that will judge the quality of a product and how enjoyable it is to listen to. That's the purpose of an audio product, and that's why we conduct hundreds of

hours of listening tests before we consider a product ready to launch.

**HP: Your products allow for a good degree of the user being able to "tune" the sound to their liking; can you tell HiFi Pig readers a little about why you think this is important and some of the tuning available on your products?**

**TL:** First and foremost, sound quality is subjective. Second, the characteristics of one room or pair of headphones differs from another, and we must understand this so that the customer can 'adjust' to suit. It's a bit like drinking coffee; there are so many different ways to enjoy it and everybody has their favourite.

Many audio manufacturers take a 'one size fits all' approach. This may delight some customers but risks alienating others. In this day and age, there are many different sonic variables in the way recorded music is consumed – for example, the codecs used by different streaming services. With so much variation in the sound quality of the music being played, a degree of sonic tailoring is extremely useful.

However, it's critical to iFi that we engineer this in the right way, so we don't degrade the purity of the audio signal. As already mentioned in relation to the Aurora, we don't resort to DSP to achieve audio effects; all our sonic tailoring options are engineered in the analogue domain and the way we implement these settings is unique.

**HP: You develop both software and hardware in-house; how important is it to develop your own software and hardware rather than buying off-the-shelf products?**

**TL:** iFi doesn't do 'standard' datasheet implementation. We believe in pushing the technical envelope as far as it can go, to wring every last drop of performance from a product – but you can only do that if you have the in-house skills. Many electronic components simply don't do what we want them to do straight off the shelf; it's like getting a BMW and taking it to Alpina to tune it up to the highest possible level!

In the digital age, software/firmware is as important as hardware. We maximise performance by not only selecting the best electronic components and creating excellent circuit designs, but also by implementing innovative coding. We code in-house, because nobody knows our products and what we want to achieve better than us! That way, we maintain full control. Of course, we also work with technical partners where relevant, such as the team at MQA.

**HP: Julien Haziza is responsible for the striking design of your products; can you tell us a little about Julien, who he has worked with and what he brings to the table for iFi?**

**TL:** While I 'get' the internal circuitry of a product, Julien



'gets' the exterior. He has a knack of creating a bold design that reflects the cutting-edge technology inside.

Julien will tell you that he has a passion for mid-century modern and neo-futuristic design. He grew up in Paris in the 1990s, watching Leiji Matsumoto anime, listening to French house and electro, with a picture of a Lamborghini Countach on his wall. He once told me that all airport buildings should be as grandly futuristic as Eero Saarinen's TWA terminal and every car should be at least as cool as the Lancia Stratos Zero. That would really make him happy!

Julien has worked with Philip Starck and Yoshiaki Hishinuma, the Japanese fashion designer, as well as brands such as Marriott, Nokia and Axent Switzerland. In addition to being iFi's Director of Industrial Design, he also runs his own design studio – Studio Cocktail.

## **HP: Which iFi product has been your favourite to work on and why?**

**TL:** I have a number of favourites, for different reasons, but if I have to pick one right now I'll say the Pro iDSD – technically, it's the most sophisticated and unrestrained product iFi has ever made. It has native hi-res DSD/PCM reproduced in bit-perfect form via a quad-stack of multi-bit DACs, as well as DSD1024 remastering via our custom-coded FPGA. It has user-selectable valve and solid-state output modes, streaming via Wi-Fi and Ethernet, and a raft of digital inputs from USB to microSD Card. It's a DAC, a streamer, a preamp and a headphone amp all rolled into one. We only left out the kitchen sink!

## **HP: What's the one piece of audio advice you'd give to our readers?**

**TL:** Audio is for enjoyment, pure and simple. We live in a world where the pace of life is often frantic; music provides respite, solace, motivation and joy. While a smartphone with earbuds doesn't sound as good as a high-end system costing £100,000, they both play music and in the end, just enjoy the tunes and have one less worry!

## **HP: What's next for you and iFi?**

**TL:** Lots! We have talented R&D teams on both sides of the globe and we're always looking to develop both 'red ocean' and 'blue ocean' products. As an industry, we need to attract new customers to high-performance audio – especially the younger generation – and we intend to play our part with innovative concepts.

Since Julien came on board, we've been focusing on delivering progressive industrial design whilst continuing to push the performance envelope at various price points. We're excited by the arrival of the Aurora, which is now just a few weeks away from production; this will be followed in the autumn by a range of super-affordable compact components for home use, including a new DAC, a headphone amp and a phono stage, as well as new low-cost, high-value mobile audio products. In-

between, we're launching a power conditioning bar called the Power Station. Distinctive audio products to suit particular requirements, each delivering a unique mix of qualities to separate it from the herd – that's the iFi way!

## **UPDATE**

Since conducting this interview John Curl, one of the world's most respected high-end audio engineers, has been engaged as a technical consultant for iFi and AMR.

Curl is working across all new product designs from iFi and AMR, collaborating closely with iFi's Technical Director Thorsten Loesch to ensure that all circuit designs are fully optimised. The first products to feature his input include iFi's forthcoming ZEN range of desktop audio products, the first of which launches at the end of August, together with all-new high-end components from AMR, due in 2020.

John's status at the forefront of high-end audio's hall of fame has long been secure. In 1968, whilst building a mixing console for the Grateful Dead, he developed a solid-state circuit that became a benchmark in high-performance audio – the "complimentary differential-input" circuit, which still appears in application handbooks published by transistor manufacturers today.

This led to Curl working with a young Mark Levinson in the early 1970s, creating the legendary Mark Levinson Audio Systems JC-2 preamplifier – the first standalone product to incorporate Curl's complementary differential-input circuit – followed by the ML-2 Class A power amplifier. He went on to work with many other luminaries of the high-end audio scene, including Dave Wilson and Jeff Roland.

Curl is unquestionably one of a small band of engineers whose influence is so great it has altered the direction of audio design. Many of us have listened to the equipment he has designed, or that was inspired by his work, often without even realising it. His solid-state circuit designs are lauded as classic exemplars of the type; when asked what makes him different to other audio electronics designers, he once replied, "I have circuit sense".

Today, Curl works with a select group of highly reputed audio companies. iFi Audio and AMR are delighted to reap the benefits of the exceptional experience he has gained whilst devising some of the finest audio circuits of the last 50 years.

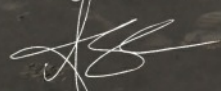
Vincent Luke, Sales Director at iFi Audio and AMR, said: "We are excited to have the opportunity to add John's exceptional expertise to our talented team of technical designers, led by Thorsten Loesch (pictured with John). His insight will help us to further raise the sonic bar with products from both iFi and AMR – from portable and desktop audio to the very finest high-end hi-fi components, we will continue to push the boundaries of design, functionality and performance."

# Cardas Audio

## Bandon, Oregon

Since 1987, Cardas Audio has manufactured premium audio cables and component parts. My father, George Cardas, founded the company to perfect audio cables using ultra-pure materials, innovative Golden Ratio resonance control techniques and uniquely insightful solutions to transmission line problems. The legendary craftsmanship at Cardas reflect his pursuit of perfection.

All of us at Cardas are here to help. Whether you're a manufacturer in need of quality connectors & chassis wire, or a HiFi enthusiast looking for a cable to round out their system, please visit us online, call or email. We look forward to serving you.



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## Superior craftsmanship equals devastating performance

Unlike many other audio equipment manufacturers, Melco does not simply repackage a PC computer board into Hi-fi casework and power supply, to create a Hi-Res digital music source component. Each unit is designed from the ground up, solely to provided the ultimate High Resolution audio performance. Melco is the world's first audiophile grade source component to access, store and deliver Hi-Res Digital Music without the compromise of computer hardware and peripherals. Melco is the de-facto standard, regularly used by leading audio manufacturers to showcase their devices.

Melco is award-winning Japanese craftsmanship.

**N1ZS20/2A** (2TB SSD with Melco SSD Data Management Hardware) – N1ZH60 (6TB SFF HDD) are both a development of the original N1Z series to further advance sound quality, especially for USB-DAC users. A dedicated Neutrik USB2.0 port connects to older USB DACs for optimum sound quality, leaving the faster USB3.0 ports for fast, Easy Music Import and Easy CD Import. Internally, there is further fine-tuning to further reduce internal noise and data jitter, including new screening materials, new advanced components, and a new capacitor bank to isolate the two internal Medical Grade power supplies, which now connect to the mains with a higher current, 3 pole IEC connector with true grounding and inline EMC filtering.

Whether SSD or SFF HDD, there is a new massive, non-magnetic vibration and isolation system with the HDDs contained within an isolated compartment in the N1Z. The unique Melco Dedicated Player Ethernet Port, in addition to LAN port is, of course, maintained so that users of Ethernet Streamers can enjoy all the Melco sound quality benefits.

Recently added functionality includes Direct Hi-Res downloading from HighResAudio.com which avoids possible file errors. Also TIDAL and Qobuz Sublime+ Hi-Res streaming and simplified Internet Radio. Plus USB 3.0 ports on the rear make for Easy Backup, Easy Expansion, Easy Music Import and Easy CD Import.



[www.melco-audio-masters.com](http://www.melco-audio-masters.com)

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CRAFTED  
IN JAPAN  
BY AUDIO  
MASTERS**

## INTERVIEW

### ALAN AINSLIE - GENERAL MANAGER AT MELCO AUDIOPHILE NAS PROJECT



**Alan Ainslie of Melco, General Manager of Melco, the popular digital music library hardware, has a rich and varied history in the audio industry, here he talks to Hifi Pig about his past exploits, his thoughts on digital media and what occupies him outside of audio.**

**Hifi Pig**  
**[www.hifipig.com](http://www.hifipig.com)**

# ALAN AINSLIE - GENERAL MANAGER AT MELCO AUDIOPHILE NAS PROJECT



**HP: You have a long and interesting history in the audio industry but your involvement goes way back to your time at university when you designed for manufacturers; Can you expand on this and let readers know what you were involved with.**

AA: That was a long time ago! Essentially, I am a real analogue engineer, a rare beast nowadays. Back then, it was possible to bring major improvements to 'data-sheet' designs which I did for a couple of brands who really would not appreciate me spilling the beans, today.

Truth to tell, I am a bit of a test and measurement enthusiast and have always been intrigued by the apparent lack of correlation between known 'good' equipment that does not measure well and well-behaved products that, on the test bench, sound poor. I really do believe that if it can be heard then, of course, it can be measured. If it can be measured then optimisation and improvement is always possible.

**HP: You've written several books; care to give them a plug?**

AA I have but all are now out of print. I did many articles in Practical WI treeless and Wireless World, plus books under the Newnes and IPC imprint on amateur-level test and measurement. One of my designs in Wireless World, for a precision log-sweep generator, was widely adopted by hi-fi companies in their QA departments.

**HP: As well as running Technics UK for 20 years you also engineered some of the early Technics CD players that won lots of praise. What were the main aims of your designs?**

AA: I make no claims to have designed Technics products – we probably had the largest audio design team on the planet doing extraordinarily good things – but I did make a significant contribution in some areas: the early days of CD and DACs were a minefield of

conflicting considerations, but, as always, finding ways to measure what we heard was a good start.

Sometimes, the simplest things could make dramatic improvements – the early days of CAD PCB layout introduced lots of (not very nice) outcomes – simply moving a grounding point or ensuring that PSU currents really were out of the audio path, using the old-fashioned ideas, was a good tonic.

**HP: You sat on the CD Standards Committee which must have been very interesting; can you tell readers some of the "discussions" that took place and how the "standard" was come to?**

AA: There were many committees and it was a very well-orchestrated technology advance. CD had a few ground rules: not least 'no compression' because no-one could, at that stage, make it work and a capacity limited by the available infra-red laser-reading technology employed by (analogue) Laservision and the requirement for the optical disc to fit into Mr. Timmer's (the President of Philips at the time) shirt pocket, which was 12cm!

How many bits? There was lots of discussion, but the answer was not clear-cut, as Philips were employing 14-bit DACs with oversampling which sounded rather fine, whereas everyone else was at the time-linear 16, 18 or at a push, 20-bit DACs. The playing time (and the 12cm limit) gave us 650MB or so and so 16 bits was settled on the basis that oversampled, it could be persuaded to sound rather good and would play for over 60 minutes. Interestingly at the time, indications that human hearing was effectively sampling at much higher frequencies (and that this was needed to give spatial precision at low frequencies) had to be glossed over. It has recently come to light again in the work of several well respected DAC engineers with extreme digital filter taps to effectively surpass this implicit human hearing limitation.



44.1kHz instead of the obvious 48kHz was a direct result of last-minute awareness of an A/V future requiring sample rates of audio and TV systems to be related. So today, you see Hi-Res downloads available showing their origins as either CD digital masters as opposed to 48kHz derivations. So a question to be asked is, 'why is a transfer from a master tape still showing a 88.2kHz sample rate?' Suspicious! ( $44.1 \times 2 = 88.2k$ )

**HP: CD, wrongly in my opinion, gets a bad reputation from many quarters what are your thoughts on the benefits and limitations of Red Book CD?**

AA: When CD was introduced, we had a fight on our hands! The CD lobby failed to make satisfactory arrangements for the smaller manufacturers to build CD players unless they 'pimped-up' machines from Philips and so the press were against the whole concept.

I fought back with several CDs released on commercial labels using highly skilled BBC engineers and lots of rehearsals. Digital promised a reduction in rehearsal time as editing would be so easy; it was nonsense and resulted in the Musicians' Union upping the rate for digital recordings. So we rehearsed for real live concerts and then made some excellent recordings, the first being *A Venetian Coronation* with Paul McCreesh – still a sound quality standard after 30-plus years and it won several awards.

We made some nice recordings, had some cracking concerts, launched a lot of musicians on their careers and pioneered the works of some fantastic composers. Andrzej Panufnik became a very good friend and we made a good few premier recordings; all exciting music and technically, a testament to what could be achieved with 16 bits and a following wind.

Early CD often sounded pretty rotten, the reason being poor-quality archives accumulated by labels in order to hit the ground running at

launch or the poor digitisation of existing analogue recordings – many of which were released (done properly) years later to great acclaim and are now being released once again as 'Hi-Res'. But, honestly, 16 bits done properly can make grown men cry.

**HP: If the online fora and Facebook groups' chatter is to be believed then CD is a dying format; what do you think of this, particularly in light of lots of manufacturers releasing new machines?**

AA: The understanding of CD technology and playback is now so good that the format still has credibility; the issue is playback. CD players normally have to employ error-correction and so never can fully deliver. So, there is always room to improve which is happening; there will always be better CD players.

The alternative, though, is really exciting: ripping the CD carefully results in zero errors and the resulting ripped digital file can be considered as an 'archive-quality' file which can never be improved. It is then all down to player architecture and the DAC. DACs do improve as clever digital folk evolve even more sophisticated digital filters. So the advances in DAC technology are then available for the perfectly archived 16-bit file playback.

This is where Melco's technology and systems become so valuable to music lovers. It's not where I would naturally start to explain a Melco, but given a carefully ripped file, which any Melco with our high-quality D100 external drive achieves, a clean architecture, which is unlike any computer but is similar to high-end CD players, and a DAC of your choosing, you have the best of both worlds. Quite simply, the file cannot be bettered. The architecture and rendering is as good as it gets and you get to choose the DAC that you love. This all equates to perfect CD playback and that is quite a proposition.



**HP: Online streaming services and high-resolution download sites are becoming increasingly popular; Do you ever see a time when there is a mass movement back towards physical media?**

AA: Streaming services have to happen and grow, of course. We used to call this 'broadcasting' (!) and when you *choose* your material, broadcasting becomes 'music on demand'. But it is for the masses, not the cognoscenti.

Audio is rather special: our ears are very sensitive to every nuance of shortcoming and we can tell the difference between a file that is in your living room and a file that has been on a world tour before you get to play it. Melco does some unique and very clever stuff to rebuild data that has suffered on its trans-continental journey, before presenting to the DAC and the results are excellent, I would urge anyone to audition a Melco at a local dealer.

But, us hi-fi guys love, cherish and own music, and, therefore, we wish to have a collection that is 'ours', selected as a result of our own knowledge and insight, and a testament to our good taste and expert knowledge. Add to that the emotional attachment of the discovery process and it is easy to see why we all have shelves full of CDs and vinyl and are now making the move to terabytes of files that we own and cherish.

**HP: What are your thoughts about DSD?**

AA: BitStream?! DSD is thought to be the new kid on the audiophile block, but it is a very basic and original digital technology, blessed with a simplicity that is hard to ignore. It has many benefits in the conversion processes and is 'good engineering', so I do like it.

What bugs me is that DSD is tainted by the runes that because it is not PCM, it is not somehow 'real' and the PCM DAC manufacturers have to convert the DSD into PCM before it can be rendered. The

truth is that if one has a PCM DAC then DSD *must* be converted and if the conversion is not done well (it is pretty tricky maths) then most of the inherent DSD advantage is lost. Some brands have DACs that treat PCM as PCM and DSD as DSD, which is an elegant solution.

Anticipating this situation, Melco will accurately convert DSD to 32-bit PCM with great accuracy, better than many outboard DAC conversions. But the real test is to listen with your own hardware and then make a judgement. Many Hi-Res vendors allow both PCM and DSD downloads, so it is easy to compare.

**HP: Do you think we have come as far as we need with regards to resolution of files for music reproduction?**

AA: That's a difficult question. The hi-fi business is all about getting the best possible music. The music industry, less so, maybe. That is where the limitations will become apparent I think. We already had to survive mp3 (pre-ruined music) as well as bad 16-bit audio, so there is always hope.

**HP: You were involved in the architecture for what became NaimNet; can you tell readers a little more about the project and its importance. You also managed the Naim Streaming Project; can you expand on this a little?**

AA: Multi-room audio is an interesting area – who could not wish for wonderful music in every room? In the analogue days, it was achieved with lots of wire which compromised sound quality or room amplifiers, which were a much better solution but came at a price and required a complex infrastructure. Digital networks promised to greatly simplify the infrastructure, but to get perfect synchronisation, clever tricks were needed and this is where Naim were pioneers for sure. The results were superb, if relatively costly.



# ALAN AINSLIE - GENERAL MANAGER AT MELCO AUDIOPHILE NAS PROJECT

There was in parallel a growing use of UPnP or DLNA for transport on the network in the home, which was not possible to synchronise (easily) at the time. And so for the 'not installed' market, it was obvious that UPnP had a level of versatility and cross-manufacturer compatibility that meant it was the obvious choice. So the Uniti was born.

**HP: You have “sold ATC into studios in EU and USA” on your CV; we have a constant discussion here at HiFi Pig about the crossover of studio tech into home use; do you think we will see an increase in this and what do you think the benefits or otherwise could be for audiophiles?**

AA: Studios are very demanding in many ways other than basic sound quality; even sound quality is 'different' due to the fact that control rooms have managed acoustics: monitoring is done before limiters etc.; truth and resolution is mandatory. Hi-fi is more interpretive. Many hi-fi listeners have never heard live instruments – even rock concert-goers only hear the output of a desk into a few kW of PA amplification. Hence the flexibility afforded by hi-fi systems and in part, this is one of the great delights of hi-fi: there is no one 'best' system; we can all enjoy different things and different interpretations.

**HP: Currently you are involved with Melco which has won many awards including from HiFi Pig; what has been your involvement?**

AA: I am a humble artisan! Seriously, though, I met the Japanese team when it was apparent that the requirements of the Japanese (an aversion to using computers for music or any other entertainment, uncompromising sound quality requirements, unwillingness to accept anything but the best) were also attributes that would be of interest to many other parts of the world.

Japan was a closed market when the rest of us were messing with Sinclair Spectrums and Commodore 64s. Hence the Japanese will game using Nintendo or Sega, not a CD Rom. It's the same for audio: the Japanese have great difficulty getting the hang of networked audio, which require lots of dodgy IT devices and a considerable level of skill to make it work.

I understood this position clearly from my initial work at Naim: HDX was designed to 'just work and work well' and so there was an immediate empathy. And I really do believe that the same ethos will apply outside of Japan; even folk who are expert at PC use just cannot be doing with using a PC for audio given the dependence on IT devices and the ultimate limitation in sound quality that a PC architecture imposes.

So, we have all worked together for five years or so to develop Melco for life outside of Japan, where the world is rather different. Music libraries are bigger and there is often an element of multi-room, but we all have the highest expectations of a digital music system – it is just that for many years, we had to put up without having Melco and accept the sound quality limitations of computers, computers that *look* like hi-fi and IT devices.

**HP: What do you think that Melco brings to the table over and above the use of a NAS drive and other systems and why?**

AA: It's important to remember that Melco are part of Buffalo Technology, the largest data engineering and IT products company in Japan. But, what is not often realised, is that Buffalo started life as

Melco: (Mr) Maki Engineering Laboratory Company, making boutique and fantastic hi-fi in the early '70s, the same time as Naim and Linn were founded.

So, under the strict guidance of Mr Maki, who handed responsibility for this project to Mr Araki as CEO of Melco, we have a unique situation: a data engineering company that respects and understands all aspects of the music and hi-fi business and knows better than anyone, how to craft digital audio solutions from the ground-up, instead of having to use IT industry components like most other companies making audio servers.

There are two main areas where Melco has to be the preferred solution: network streaming and using USB DACs. Network streaming is where it all started, but there is a big problem, the network itself. Data networks are not time-sensitive, they do not need to be. Providing all the data gets there in the end, all is OK. Audio is, of course, acutely time-sensitive and so from the Melco to the network player or streamer, we have a direct connection without using any IT dataswitch. We also remove all interfering traffic from other devices in the home, so the network player only gets the correct audio data, which is correctly timed, clean and sounds better as a result.

The data *inside* the Melco, the local rips or file storage, is handled in a totally different way to a computer. It is a relatively slow and precise clocking of data to mimic what happens in a CD player – quite different to burst data in a PC going as fast as possible because there is no knowing what comes next! In Melco, we know *exactly* what comes next, so the data is nicely clocked in a low- noise and isolated environment.

This data is, therefore, perfect to send to a DAC directly and this is the second main application and benefit of a Melco: playing into your USB DAC. You can connect a DAC to a computer, of course, and it works. But the reason the Melco sounds so much better, is the way that data is handled within the unit, the way that the USB interface is engineered and the extreme low noise and high data-integrity of the complete architecture. Plus, Melco will play into a network streamer and a USB DAC, and even systems such as Sonos, at the same time!

There is one other important aspect to Melco, though, extreme ease of use. Data on a NAS needs to be backed up, which is not so easy, with Melco, backup is just two button pushes!

Even the expansion of capacity to move with your collection requires no button pushes – just plug in a drive. Additionally, downloading from the best Hi-Res sources is direct to the Melco without any intervening computer. Loading music from a USB drive or data stick? – one button press. Melco is as perfect for first-timers as it is discerning audiophiles migrating from other systems.

**HP (DG): Why should music lovers have a digital music library in their systems?**

AA: Music lovers and hi-fi fans like ourselves, value and nurture their music collections. While streaming is useful for music discovery, local storage on a Melco, provides unrivalled sound quality through the customer's preferred DAC.

**HP (DG): We understand the D100 optical drive is something of a standout product in its own right, can you tell us about its features and benefits as a ripper and player?**

AA: Why do we not simply put a CD loader inside the Melco? We could, of course, but an IT CD Rom drive is a pretty low-cost,



# ALAN AINSLIE - GENERAL MANAGER AT MELCO AUDIOPHILE NAS PROJECT

unreliable item. They suffer from poor performance as well, plus when it fails, and it will, the whole unit is in trouble. So, you can use a separate IT-quality CD loader, which is very low cost. just plug it in and recycle when it breaks. But, you can also choose the Melco D100 which is actually a specialised audio drive, not an IT drive. It will run more slowly than an IT drive and as a result, the sound quality of the rips is so clearly better. Plus, it's easy to prove: just rip your favourite CD with a D100, rename it to avoid it being overwritten and rip again with a cheap IT drive and compare. Digits are digits, but there is a clear difference, plus it can be measured in the low-noise sidebands of a test disc ripped on the two drives. Our Melco Master Dealers can arrange auditions of the D100 and, of course, any other Melco product.

**HP (DG): The differences between HDDs and SSDs are a cause of much online debate. What can you (and Melco) tell us about the two approaches?**

AA: HDDs are reliable and solid, but unless they are chosen with care, they can be noisy and have a bad impact on power supplies. So SSD, on the face of it, is so attractive: no moving parts. But, there is a lot of additional software running inside the SSD that impacts the data in a very bad way for audio. This is only really obvious in a high-resolution environment such as Melco; it is almost imperceptible when using a PC-in-a-box for audio.

So, for our SSD machines, we had to initially manufacture our own HDDs (a benefit of being part of the giant Buffalo Technology company) and recently, we have been able to arrange special larger SSDs from industry partners that can be used in ways more suited to audio than ultra-fast data storage.

**HP: Away from audio and HiFi what are your passions?**

AA: To have some spare time to enjoy myself I suppose! But, I have a nice garden which gives the family and dogs great pleasure and has purpose as well in that we have a 1/8th-scale steam railway that runs for both pleasure and local charity fund-raising. There's an interesting comparison of the technologies: steam versus extreme digital precision! In fact, I like all aspects of engineering: fast cars, photography, radio, electronics, even collecting slide rules – remember those? And following the relevant important Patents showing how technologies mesh, intertwine, and develop.

**HP: You have mentioned your technology museum; how did this come about and is it purely for your own enjoyment or do you feel it has greater importance than that?**

AA: I am an unstoppable collector of technology – and this is important as with increasing rate of change of technology, older techniques simply get forgotten. So landmark hi-fi, communications, and test and measurement techniques have to be preserved. Radio itself is interesting, being little over 100 years old, it has already been and gone and is now the preserve of the bandwidth auctions and of diminishing real utility.

**HP: Make a prediction with regards the future of music reproduction in the home.**

AA: if I could do that, I would sell shares in my vision! I cannot see any profound changes other than the obvious trend to commoditisation of everything and the reluctance of folk to think for themselves, which means that we all have to work so hard to add value to the other ongoing trend that this industry is so good at, small

incremental changes that move standards in such a way that music in the home is simply even more enjoyable for more people.

Our challenge as an industry is to help folk understand how wonderful real music is, and how easily the experience can be damaged by the compromises forced by commoditisation such as using computers and phones for music; we owe it to the musicians, whether they have passed, are currently stars, or have yet to be conceived. Music is such a basic human instinct that separates us from the lesser inhabitants of the planet. Maybe we cannot all make music, but we certainly can all enjoy it.

HIFI PIG READER CHRIS BAILLIE

## FOLLOWING A CONVERSATION WITH ALAN AINSLIE OF MELCO, HIFI PIG READER CHRIS BAILLIE CONDUCTED HIS OWN EXPERIMENTS OF RIPPING CD'S TO HIS MELCO UNIT USING VARIOUS RIPPING DEVICES.

The journey to, to quote CD's original promise of 'Perfect Sound Forever' has been an interesting journey. The original players were far from that, not getting anywhere close to delivering on its promise for decades. Naturally the same could be expected in the case of local streaming. Initially it seemed all we needed to do was install decent ripping software, such as DB Poweramp or EAC. Simple concept, rip your CD and the software does the rest, compares data to online database and re-reads any bad data until it reaches the panacea of the original slogan! How can we argue? We have software that tells us that our rips are accurate. We then feed them to our DAC's, knowing it's converting a 'bit perfect' file. Simple hey, or is it?

My own journey with local streaming, got serious late summer 2017, following the arrival in my system of a Melco NA1/2. Here I was able to feed my CD player's DAC section the same ripped file and it sounded noticeably more spacious and detailed when compared to the CD player's own transport. The dealer was using a £20 LG USB powered drive. Indeed even these files, were giving me results above the traditional CD player was able to achieve. Having experimented, I then noticed the sound was smoother and more spacious, playing files ripped directly to the Melco, rather than to a computer via DB Poweramp. How could this be? A 'bit perfect' rip, is 'bit perfect' no? So it seemed there was more to it.

Recently we've seen the arrival of some very expensive CD ripping drives, first from Astell & Kern, and now from Melco. All just marketing I hear the naysayers cry – I considered the same! At the Bristol Sound and Vision show, I got talking to Alan Ainslie of Melco. What I was astonished to learn, is that the drive you use to rip your disc, actually does its own 'on board' error correction, whilst ripping the disc. Up until this point, my understanding, along with that of many others, was that this was all corrected by the software. The upshot meaning any mis-tracking caused during ripping, results in the CD drive guessing the missing data – just like a regular CD player would whilst playing in realtime. So I decided to purchase a better CD drive, not an audiophile item, but a mains powered Bluray CD read/writer. In this case the Buffalo BRXL-16U3. It's based on the Pioneer BDR209 transport and is listed on Melco's website as an approved device. Melco are in turn part of the Buffalo Group. My initial plan was to rip a few favourites, if indeed I could hear any significant differences. Well that was the plan! I was so stunned when I compared the first few rips that I didn't stop until I'd re-ripped my entire collection of around 600 discs!

So let's start with the first disc I ripped, Muse's 'Black Holes & Revelations'. Firstly playing the version of 'Starlight' that I'd originally ripped on my LG, USB powered drive. Playing via my Melco NA1/2, into my Moon 280D DAC I was thinking how everything sounded pretty good and that I was unlikely to hear improvements, without downloading the 24/96 version from Qobuz. Upon playing the rip

from the Buffalo drive, suddenly there was greater soundstage depth and generally more space around the instruments, I had to compare the A/B results, just to make sure I wasn't imagining it – I wasn't! Next was just the first few seconds from Metallica's 'One', from the '....And Justice for all' album. This was simply a few gunshots and a yell. The rip from the Buffalo almost made me jump at the gunshot, like it jumped out of the speakers! Next was a better recording, Pink Floyd's 'Animals', the track 'Sheep'. Again the LG rip sounded fine, with the Buffalo rip the noises from the field seemed softer and in their own space and when the first few notes from the keyboard came in it was like they were floating at the front of the soundstage when compared to the more constrained sound with the LG rip. When the track got going, there was just so much more space around each instrument and what seemed like a great reduction in 'digital hash'. Tonight I played a rip of Cowboy Junkie's 'Trinity Sessions' CD. Good example here is the sense of acoustic on the LG rip is around each instrument, with the Buffalo rip it's like the whole band are playing in the same acoustic space! With certain other discs it seemed like small differences, but taken as a whole, very musically important.

Since I began using the Melco in my system, I admit I've hardly played CD rips, just not found them interesting to listen to, compared to Hi Res downloads or SACD rips. Indeed I've spent far more than I like to admit replacing my favourite albums with Hi Res versions. I admit now that the CD's can sound musically comparable, with that bit more air and detail, from the higher res versions. Yes the Hi Res files are better, but CD's are now very listenable. For me this really questions the wisdom of getting rid of CD's once ripped as you never know what better ways of ripping are around the corner! Indeed, it's certainly made me question the purchase of servers with their own internal CD ripping drives, other than for casual or short-term use.

The question now, is how much better would the rips from a top quality ripping drive, like the Melco D100? I'm told far better again, even to the extent of rivalling some of the 'hi res' versions of same albums. I can hopefully answer that when Alan from Melco has sent me his sample files, produced by their German Distributor, or indeed if and when I can prise a D100 from him.

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# **INTERVIEW**

## **PAUL CLARK OF HIFI LOUNGE**



**As Well as running the successful retail business Hifi Lounge Paul Clark also has a passion for fast cars, to the point where he has started racing Radical SR1 sports cars competitively. Hifi Pig catches up with him between laps.**

**Hifi Pig**  
**[www.hifipig.com](http://www.hifipig.com)**



**HP: When did you open Hifi Lounge and what is the “philosophy” behind the venture?**

PC: We started HFL in the summer of 2012, so now heading into our 8th year which is incredible really as I wasn't sure we would see out our first year but I was keen to give it a try. Our master plan in 2012 was to open a HiFi Shop away from the high street in a relaxed environment with loads of free parking where customers could come and stay as long as they liked with no pressured sales and hopefully at the end of their demo they knew they had the right HiFi or upgrade for them. This really worked as we hit the ground running and still offer this same philosophy today. Needless to say, I had to shout about us a fair bit online at the start as being based on a farm we really don't get any passing trade other than rabbits and pheasants who really don't buy much HiFi, but luckily with the power of the internet this wasn't too difficult - I guess 15 years ago this business model probably couldn't have worked so well, if at all.

**HP: Tell readers about your background in HiFi; what got you interested and how you turned that into a business.**

PC: So I really don't have a long background in HiFi retail, I used to have my own printing business which I decided to leave in 2011 to pursue a career in HiFi which really was driven by a love of music, especially live music, and also a love of HiFi. From an early age I was always hanging around the local HiFi Shop in Hertford, I'm not technical at all but I love the way systems are put together and how different components react together to give different presentations - system synergy is such an important part of this job so really it is equally a love of music and HiFi that led to the formation of Hifi Lounge.

**HP: You carry a very wide range of brands at Hifi Lounge, what, out of all of the brands (and you can mix and match as you like), would represent your personal perfect system and why?**

PC: Oh, that is a really tough question as when I started HFL I made a very conscious decision to only stock the brands that I like myself and would personally own. You can imagine that we get approached daily by different manufacturers to bring on different brands, but although we have quite a few brands in our portfolio I feel they all offer something quite different and there really isn't much crossover - speakers are a good example, I love speakers, personally I believe this area is the single biggest upgrade you can make to a system and we have quite a few different speaker brands, but they all offer something different so customers can really tune a system to their preference by demoing several different speaker brands. As for my perfect system, it would contain all our Brands.

**HP: Tell us a little about the music that really moves you personally.**

PC: Deep down I'm a rocker, a massive Springsteen fan, seen him around 85 times and it looks like next year he will hit the road again so hopefully I can break 100 Bruce gigs. At the moment though I'm really into Greta Van Fleet and particularly Rammstein's new album, going to see both of these live soon which should be 2 amazing gigs. For me when live I can be really moved by the power of music, seeing Bruce play Jungleland live is one of the best experiences in life, well for me anyway, but likewise I'm also a huge Radiohead and Nick Cave fan which are at a different ends of the spectrum, and I've just discovered a band called The Beatles who are pretty good too - seriously I have always had Sergeant Pepper as one of my favourite albums of all time but I had never listened to much of the rest of their catalogue, so recently I have been going through each album one by one, what has amazed me is the production, quite incredible for how old the music is, must have been incredible to have been around when The Beatles were at their height. Finally, I'm also a big Bowie and Prince fan, 2016 was a terrible year to lose two real innovators in music.

# PAUL CLARK OF HIFI LOUNGE





**HP: You've owned some pretty interesting cars in the past (as shown on the poster a friend gave you for your fiftieth birthday), what was your favourite and why?**

PC: Cars and HiFi are my 2 weaknesses in life which funnily enough I share with a lot of our customers. Luckily I've escaped the lure of Cameras and watches so far. For me Lotus Cars are my car company of choice, I love their heritage and everything they stand for. My first Lotus was an Elan M100 back in 1992, I remember seeing it on the cover of AutoCar for its launch in 1989, unbelievably it is 30 years old this year, and it was love at first sight. I was 20 at the time and worked every hour I could to save up to order one so taking delivery in 92 was a special moment, from then it was all downhill as I ended up swapping cars regularly - I owned a Dodge Viper from 1994 onwards which was good fun, but now I am back with Lotus again, although my dream car is a 1968 GT40, the only car to win LeMans 2 consecutive years but this car is valued at around £100 Million so I'm going to have to sell a lot more HiFi if that is ever going to happen.

**HP: You race in the Radical SR1 Cup, how did that come about?**

PC: I'm still not 100% sure how I ended up racing a Radical. In all honesty if I knew how tough it is to drive a downforce car I probably wouldn't have gone down this route and a Caterham would probably have made more sense to learn my race craft, but I got lured in by the looks of the Radical and the fact that included in the price of the car is a free years racing, well they say free but it really isn't as by the time you have employed a team to run the car you can say good bye to a fair chunk of cash. Saying all this though I am so pleased that I did go down the Radical route as it is a real racing car that is an absolute joy to drive. My biggest problem is my age, to start racing at 50 is not ideal, especially when you are racing 18 year olds, but every time I go out in the car I am getting quicker so can't really ask for more than that I guess.

**HP: Tell us a little about the car you race in; its engine, its specs...**

PC: The Radical SR1 uses a Radical Prepared Suzuki bike engine with a full paddle shift gear box, it produces around 180 Bhp with a 0-60 of around 3.5 secs and a top speed of 140 MPH. This is all fine, but it is the G Force that grabs your attention, going flat out around corners at over 100 MPH really does grab your attention and tests the size of your courage, this is the one area I am still improving on, when you get it right through it really is very exhilarating.

**HP: How do you think you performed in your inaugural season and how do you think you'll do this year?**

PC: The first year was a real education, I went into it thinking I'd be pretty good but I soon got a wakeup call and realised I had a lot to learn, but I ended up going into the last race weekend at Brands Hatch with a chance of winning the over 45 year old category, I just needed to beat my main rival in both races. For the first race we had a great scrap which I won but in the 2nd race we crossed the line side by side with me losing to him by 0.2 of a second, but I was happy that for my first year it came down to such a small margin.

For this year the grid is much more competitive, there are a lot of guys here that have raced before with no real rookies joining, but so far I have been on average around 4 seconds a lap faster than last year on tracks we have visited before so I am aiming to consistently be racing in the midfield, one thing for sure though I'll have to delay my F1 plans for the foreseeable future.

**HP: Your car is sponsored by "Great British Hifi Brands", how do you think the British Hifi industry is performing and where do you see the "competition" coming from in coming years?**

PC: For me Britain really does offer some of the best HiFi out there, from speakers to turntables, DAC's and amps. I feel really proud to

# PAUL CLARK OF HIFI LOUNGE



race our car under 'The Best Of British HiFi' banner and to be sponsored by some of our great brands, obviously there are other country's out there doing a great job, in America in particular I would say with brands like Wilson Audio, Audio Research, McIntosh etc, these really are iconic brands but we give them a really good run for their money. (Hifi Pig is also delighted to be a sponsor of Paul's Radical)

**HP: Do you have any ambitions to move up into higher performance cars?**

PC: Not at all, the Radical SR1 is more than enough for me, to be fair the SR1 is quicker the GT3 cars that cost 100's of thousands of pounds to run and also much faster than British Touring Cars so for performance per pound the SR1 is brilliant value so I'll just be happy to unlock more of its performance and to enjoy some great racing.



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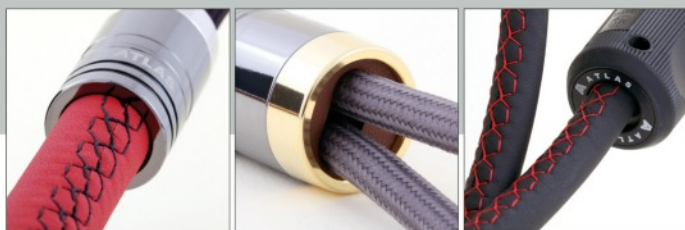
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HIFI NEWS DECEMBER 2018



# **INTERVIEW STRATOS VICHOS OF LAB 12**



**Lab 12 is a Greek manufacturer specialising in making audio equipment using valve technology. Here Hifi Pig catches up with Stratos Vischos who heads up the company to ask him about his design philosophies and his products.**

**Hifi Pig**  
**www.hifipig.com**

# STRATOS VICHOS OF LAB 12



**HP: What is your background and how did you get into the design and manufacture of Hifi equipment?**

SV: From a really young age, I was either spending my time listening to music or messing around with electronics and schematics. Therefore, I studied Electronic Engineering with specialisation in Audio Design to combine my two passions.

After my studies, I had the chance to work with some of the biggest audio distributors in Greece. For about 15 years, I was designing and installing Audio-Video Systems and dealing with a wide range of A/V products, not only HiFi but custom Home Theatre and PA as well. This working experience allowed me to get familiar with a wide range of remarkable products and people from the audio industry, and undeniably contributed in my later career, since I managed to get the main points on building a well-balanced system or unit.

Alongside my daily work, I was designing tube solutions for customers and had managed to gain a good reputation locally as an audio designer. Unfortunately, after a serious accident I had in 2011, I had to be hospitalized for several months and wasn't able to continue working until my full recuperation. However, by taking advantage of this 'free' time, I managed to perfect my designs. After finishing my first pieces, they were compared with some 'serious' products from many audiophiles, who gave unexpectedly good feedback. I had to find a name for my newborn brand; So, the little garage I was working on the 12th of our street helped me to choose the name. A year after, I participated in High End Munich Show, where I first time demonstrated my work (actually I brought them there in my suitcase). And somehow like that Lab12 was officially born.

The acceptance and the following from audio community around the world was steadily increasing and just in a few years Lab12 became a well-known brand with a great positive feedback from all of our partners and customers.

**HP: Your designs are all valve designs, what do you feel valves bring to the table that solid state doesn't?**

SV: The answer is simple, life! Our goal is to create audio devices that will result in the most realistic and natural sound that will allow the user a pleasant, fatigue-free listening experience for hours. Valves are the closest to this natural, unrestrained reproduction of sound since they provide rich harmonics able to create an overall euphonic, warm and clear sound. Valve amplifiers require passion to be designed, not only calculations.

**HP: How do you work? What is the process when designing a new product?**

SV: Let's start by saying that Lab12 is composed of a great team of people who share the same passion for music and work with full dedication and love in what we do. We are more like a big family and each member adds to the whole result.

Now, when designing a product in the first stage we take into consideration what are the needs of the market at that certain period and what we would we want to purchase as audiophiles. So, without making any compromises our primary aim is to make a competitive product that we ourselves would be intrigued to buy. Our ultimate, yet challenging goal, is to create devices with innovative features, preserving at the same time our down-to-earth prices that will make our products affordable and subsequently accessible to a wide range of customers. To achieve this in practice we mainly share our manufacturing costs at every crucial point that is responsible for the final result of sound reproduction as well as to the points responsible for the overall quality and reliability of our products. The customer gets what actually pays for.

In a second stage, designing a new product requires a lot of research and experimentation, numerous hours of designing and actual listening

# STRATOS VICHOS OF LAB 12



# STRATOS VICHOS OF LAB 12



and combining electronic parts. You surely must be both patient and passionate.

**HP: You describe your designs as “future-retro”, where do the design cues for your products come from?**

SV: One of our main designing philosophies has always been the 'marriage' between two different eras, where classical principles on sound reproduction are highlighted and enhanced by the comforts and state-of-the-art technologies that the 21<sup>st</sup> century offers. Our designs embody the merits of a classical tube-based circuit within a modern, minimalistic structure that is fully practical and easy to use. Practicality combined with absolute musicality- plain and simple.

**HP: Would you say that Lab 12 products have a family sound? If not, what are you striving for with your products?**

SV: What characterises and distinguishes Lab12 products is the realism and naturality of the sound, which doesn't tire the listener even after long-lasting auditions. Achieving the reproduction of a pure, real and natural sound is one of the most challenging tasks a designer faces. That is why we avoid the new trends of over-analysis, which can impress you instantly but after a while it becomes tedious, due to lack of natural flow. On the contrary, we are striving for the most realistic, unstrained and euphonic result regardless the kind of music or the audition time. And based on this philosophy, it's pretty clear why our Lab12 products are great match with any other products in the market and within any system.

**HP: Greece hit the world's news channels a few years ago with regards the financial crisis. How did this affect you and your business?**

SV: To be honest, Lab12 was born within and despite financial crisis that broke out in Greece in 2009. However, financial crisis is a global

phenomenon that has affected, more or less, industries all around the world in every field of activity. So, in order to rise to the challenge of starting my business activity within this difficult economical period, I had to keep a low-profile and make careful steps so as to minimize any business risks that my attempt encompassed. And thankfully, Lab12 not only grew up in these difficult economic times but step by step it became from a one-man operation to a brand which is well consolidated in the universal high-end audio market and that is gaining every day more dedicated following and higher audiophiles' interest worldwide.

**HP: Which product of yours do you feel embodies your design philosophy best and why?**

SV: Difficult question, since all of our designs are meticulously handcrafted with care and imprint our design philosophies that after all revolves around music and emotion. But I believe that some of them maybe deserve a little extra word. Gordian is an innovative power filter that has received a huge responsiveness among audiophiles. There is no other filter in the high- end audio market with these features and performance, especially in this price range. Integre4 is a world-class integrated amplifier that can assure instant emotional engagement with your music, by bringing the utmost dynamic, open and natural sound to your system. Last but not least, our newest creation melto2, is a phono preamplifier that is not only sonically performing outstandingly but ensures the user an easy, fully practical usage of the device.

**HP: Any new products on the horizon that you can share with Hifi Pig readers?**

SV: Actually, there is. We are about to release the new Digital to Analogue Converter to our range, called dac1 reference. It will be launched by this September and so prepare yourselves for a first-rate experience. Dac1 reference is based on the same philosophy and

core as our previous multi-awarded converter dac1 Special Edition. However, with our new model we managed to push the limits even further to the edge, regarding this design philosophy. Finally, I am glad to announce that we are working on a series of higher category products, and although I can't reveal more at the moment, we are sure that this new series will be quite impressive and rise interest amongst the audio community.

## REVIEW LINKS

[gordian power conditioner](#)

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Retailing for less than most arms or cartridges on their own, the B-Sharp offers sleek, low-profile looks, recalling the dearer EAT models. Whilst set-up is simplified, its performance is that of a thoroughbred: there is no rival turntable in its price category to match the performance.

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# **INTERVIEW**

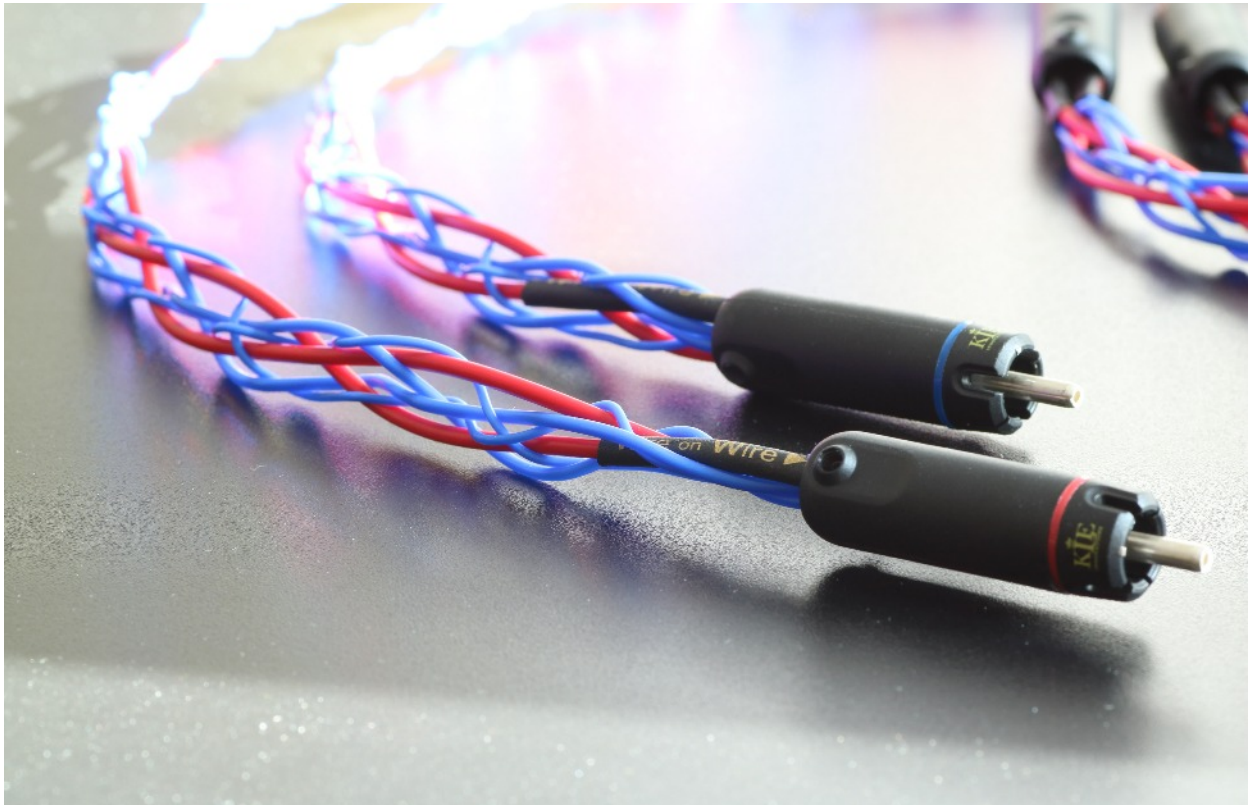
## **CHRIS BELL OF WIRE ON WIRE**



**Chris Bell heads up Wire on Wire that has a novel and somewhat unique approach to Hifi cable design. Hifi Pig chats with him about the background and philosophy to his designs.**

**Hifi Pig**  
**[www.hifipig.com](http://www.hifipig.com)**

# CHRIS BELL OF WIRE ON WIRE



## HP: What's your background in the audio world?

CB: As a kid I was always pulling apart old radios (and not-so-old radios, unfortunately for my parents) intoxicated by the shapes and colours of the components—some of them even glowed. Electronic components are duller these days but there are still some beautiful and elegant circuit boards out there that can set my pulses racing. Over the years I have built amps and loudspeakers, upgraded equipment with different components, in fact a not untypical HiFi journey. All this educates the aural palate; different shades of sound and audio landscapes become apparent. Eventually one realises that music is personal, that there isn't such a thing as a perfect piece of audio equipment but there will be the best for you and your system.

## HP: Your designs are pretty unusual; can you explain the thinking behind your designs and specifically the tuneable nature of the designs?

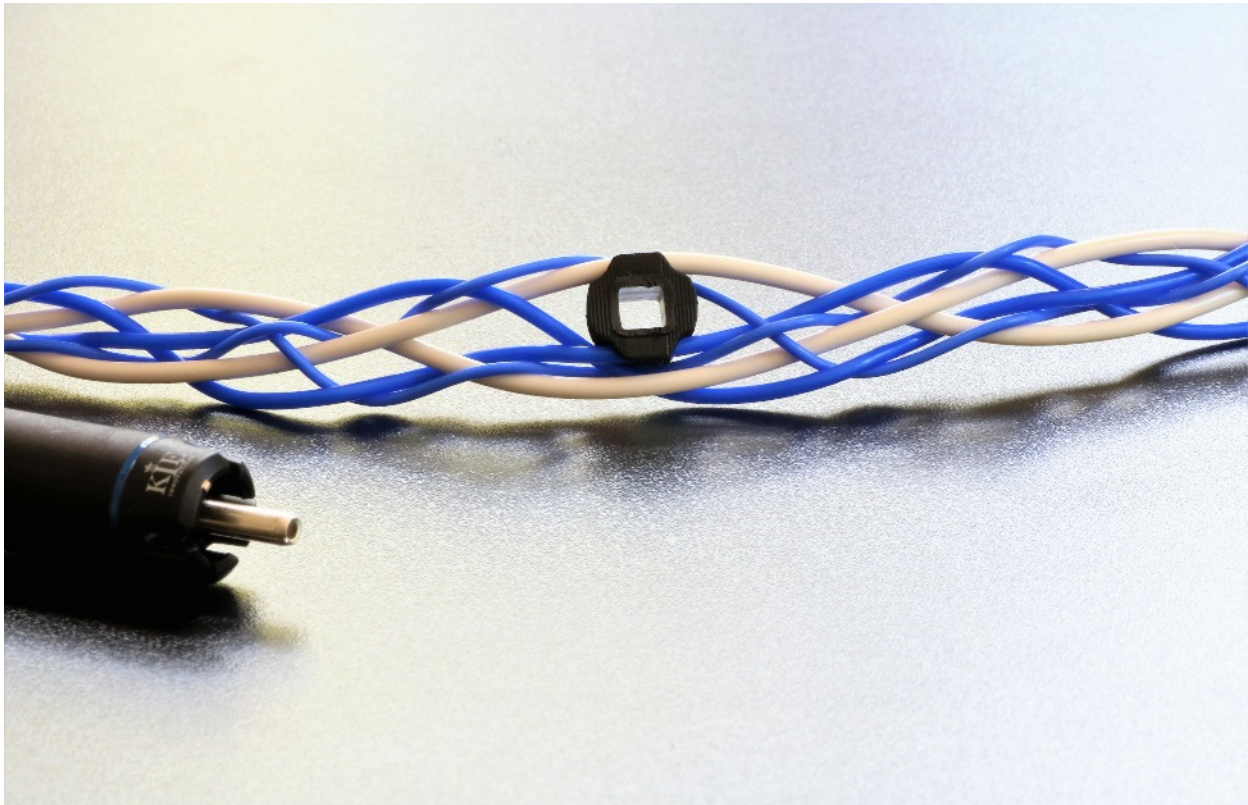
CB: My professional background is in manual medicine. To become a good practitioner, you need to understand the anatomy, physiology and pathology of the human body, but you must also learn at the feet of your clients. That experience means you add to and subtract from the orthodox medical approach if you are to become a good practitioner. The same dynamic is alive in the audio industry. Before I began to develop Wire on Wire's REDpurl™ geometry I started listening to the 'best' cables money could buy. I always found they were one tweak away from what I wanted, so the question was why? The answers were not to be found in reviews, which were bland and unquestioning when it came to matching performance against cable design. So I started my own research, some of which ended up as an article in HIFI Critic edited by Paul Messenger (*Now writing for Hifi Pig*).

My intention was to produce the best cable in the world (who sets out to produce the second best?) and I followed an orthodox approach

using the best materials and geometries, until I reached a point where the sound couldn't be improved upon. But I still wasn't happy. There would be glimpses of excellence in one aspect of the sound presentation one day to be replaced by something excellent the following day, but I wanted to hear them together. So, like any inventor I thought why not try a different approach? And my inspiration was the human body. The nervous system is essentially the body's electronic communication system (but far more integrated and complex than that implies) and its organic structure intrigues me. I was already aware that aligning conductors in an orthodox, symmetrical fashion reduced the natural sense of flow in the music, so why not try something more human, less symmetrical, less engineered? Sometime later, after countless experiments and a degree of serendipity, I found that braiding different gauge conductors produced a rather unusual shape not that different from a human neural plexus in fact. To my surprise it sounded very good, and the rest is history except there was one important step to come and that was tuning. The open structure of the design that I later called REDpurl™ Adaptive Geometry encouraged fiddling (actually, that should be experimentation) and I noticed that by altering the dimensions of the loops I could change the music's presentation. In other words, I could now tweak or tune it for my ears and my system. Research to fully explore the potential of cable tuning continues to this day.

## HP: Can you explain in simple terms how the tuning works electrically?

CB: The late, great Charles Hansen, founder of Ayre Acoustics, observed that some of the important things audiophiles could hear in their music wasn't something physicists could explain. The old adage of what measures well won't necessarily sound good is all too true. But there are some basic physics that can be explained. When we open a loop by a few millimetres we are altering the relationship between the capacitance and inductance at that loop. A very small



change but it can be heard, which is a testament to the sensitivity of the human ear. Acoustic engineers advise me that they can't measure such audible changes. Because different loops create different audible changes it is possible that we are adjusting a resonant pattern within our cables (that exists in most cables, anyway) that allows matching of audio components including our brains. The important thing in audio is always to listen.

**HP: We see you at lots of shows, how do the public react to your cables both before and after you explain the concept?**

CB: When we first started exhibiting, we were not confident that anyone else would be able to hear what we could hear. But it soon became apparent that even those who professed to have a 'tin' ear could indeed hear the difference between one presentation and another. There are, of course, always sceptics and not without reason. The audio world has had its fair share of snake oil salesmen, especially in the world of cables. One sceptic who we managed to ambush with a demonstration was you, Stuart [HiFi Pig's own Stuart Smith], which was a great coup for us. You wrote at the time, 'I have to say that I was somewhat sceptical but Chris Bell's demo was a bit of an ear opener with clear differences being apparent with different geometries being used.' Those words gave us great support at a time when we were being told that nothing new could be invented when it came to cables and we were wasting our time. People also recognised that to be able to get their system sounding right with a single cable instead of trying endless different brands and models made sense. But our cables are not all about tuning; their core strength lies in our original objective, which was to produce the highest performance in terms of detail, dynamics, colour and musicality across the music spectrum. The tuning allows those characteristics to be fully expressed in whatever system is being used.

**HP: You currently have just speaker cables and interconnects in your range, do you have plans to move into power and digital cables?**

CB: We have already designed tuneable power cables that we use in our test systems, which will appear in due course. In terms of digital systems, our company is very much aimed at an analogue audience at present, but we are interested in bringing our technology to the digital side of audio in the near future.

**HP: What do you do when away from the workshop and not designing cables?**

CB: Show me an art gallery or a museum and I am in there marvelling at human creativity.



MC Step-Up Transformers  
Phono Amplifiers  
Pre Amplifiers



# Wire on Wire

**REDpurl™**



**Variable Geometry**

UK patent pending GB1602578.5

EU Registered Design No. 002544171

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**Reference Audio Cable**

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

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The Experience**680** uses carefully chosen PTFE-insulated silver-plated copper conductors. Different diameter multi-stranded conductors add dynamic weight and timbre throughout the frequency range, whilst capacitance is kept low, thanks to our REDpurl™ geometry.

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

**Conductors:** Silver plated copper

**Insulation:** PTFE

**Capacitance:** 69pF/m variable

**Connectors:** WBT 0114 phono plugs

**Geometry:** REDpurl™

For further information contact:

Wire on Wire 01372 800605

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# **MUSICAL JOURNEYS WITH JOHAN COORG**



**Johan Coorg is a well known figure on the international Hifi show scene with him enthusiastically representing the KEF brand. In this article he takes us on his own personal music journey that encompasses everything from classical to dance via reggae and Krautrock**

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# MUSICAL JOURNEYS WITH JOHAN COORG



I consider myself to be mighty fortunate in that music has been a massive priority in my life from a very early age. My maternal Dutch grandmother was a concert pianist and my mother quite an accomplished player. Later in childhood and early teenage years, my mother attempted to “encourage” me by insisting on piano lessons: I got up to (was it?) grade 6, but mother’s zealous pushiness put me off and I all but gave up at around 15 years old. I was more interested in girls / beer / sport and “other” less legal stuff by then.

There were a couple of brief forays into performance in the 70s – the first was being associated with a burlesque cabaret rock student collective called Rubber Rhino – we played pubs who would tolerate us. But this led to my one claim to musical legend fame – Robert Plant bought me a pint. We were playing somewhere in the midlands near his local and he thought we were hilarious.

Later I also briefly deputised, due to a hungover no-show, on drums in Bristol for the Trainspotters. I was simply awful. Do you know how hard it is to play the drums badly? – really badly! That was the end of my actually playing instruments. But performance continued in other ways – more anon about this.

## THE FORMATIVE YEARS

My earliest musical memory goes back to around 1960: My parents had just invested in a Bush record player and embarked on buying vinyl, both 33s and 7 inch 45s. The singles could be stacked on the long auto change spindle which worked sporadically. The Bush had the possibility of an add on speaker for stereo, which also required purchasing a better stylus apparently..... Mum and Dad sadly never invested – I don’t think they could afford it, choosing instead to buy records. Their tastes were poles apart. Mother considered herself cultured and sophisticated, buying Beethoven / Bach / Brahms etc, whereas Dad’s taste seemed all over the place. Being an Indian by birth, he cherished a small collection of ragas and sagas discs– many

on 78rpm, some in quite battered condition. A couple were in such a bad bad state, it sounded like trying to play a poppadum – very crispy and scratchy! But his favourite album was an extraordinary LP, The Sound of the Swiss Alps, featuring cowbells and a chap who I thought looked like him on the cover, brandishing a massive alpine horn! I still have the LP and occasionally play it – marvellous!

I was not allowed at tender age of 6 to 7 to operate the cherished Bush, but I’d creep down before 6am to the lounge and quietly play records. Beethoven’s 6th (Kleber), Mozart 40th symphony, the magnificent Swiss alpine horn and yodelling LP and a selection of singles – Frank Ifield (I Remember You), Helen Shapiro (Walking Back to Happiness), early Beatles (dad was so proud to have first copy on the block of Love Me Do). On one occasion, entranced by the soft early morning sounds I did not notice my mother creep in and suddenly call my dad out of bed. I thought I was due for a good thrashing, but both mum and dad had tears of laughter rolling down their cheeks at my little boy subterfuge.

## A GROWING ECLECTIC TASTE

My exposure to such a variety of material from a very early age no doubt shaped my eclectic taste in music, which remains today. The original Bush record player found its way into my bedroom by around 11 years old first accompanied my much loved classical records, the amazing Swiss horn LP and a selection of old 45s..... how could I have missed mention of Kathy Kirby’s “Secret Love”?

By 13 or 14 I had my first Saturday jobs, one of which was at Macfisheries supermarket, who I seem to remember being extraordinary retailing pioneers and actually offering some LPs for sale. My very first two purchases were Cream’s Goodbye Cream and Pink Floyd’s Piper at the Gates of Dawn. On the latter the 9mins40 second track Interstellar Overdrive was the oft repeated needle drop, much to the chagrin of my mother. The die was cast!

# MUSICAL JOURNEYS WITH JOHAN COORG



A period of voracious consummation of Pink Floyd started. I forget to mention about listening to the radio. Carefully finding radio Luxemburg at 208 medium wave followed, plus religious listening to the John Peel show on the BBC. The delight of Peel's broadcasts of Floyd's opuses Atom Heart Mother and Echoes were absolutely quintessential for me. But whoah .... A friend introduced me to Led Zeppelin 1 – stand out track “Babe I’m Gonna Leave You”, for some reason always worked playing to early girlfriends allowed to come round for “tea” occasionally. Our household never had many guests. Yet around then, for some reason unfathomable to me, my mother did take a shine to the Jimi Hendrix double A side Voodoo Chile / All Along the Watchtower.

By sixth form time I’d been wrenched from our Berkshire home, and a first serious girlfriend love, to the west country. My academic career took a nose dive, refusing to go to Bristol boys only grammar in favour of the local mixed comprehensive in Weston Super Mare. The sixth form common room had a record player which was hotly contested for playtime. I was introduced to Family, Strawbs, Genesis, Black Sabbath, Emerson Lake and Palmer and more.

## AMERICAN SOUNDS AND MORE....

Music from across the Pond had never really played a part for me until, thanks to a girlfriend, I was introduced to her older brother, already of university age. A whole massive new world opened up – Jefferson Airplane, Grateful Dead, Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, The Doors, James Taylor, and last but not least Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart. These last two have remained a lifetime’s obsession for me – I must have the words from most Zappa numbers stamped on my brain. Listening sessions way into the small hours commenced – I was fully immersed. Spending as much as possible on records (and beer and other “stuff”).

And concurrent with this barrage of new material came something from totally leftfield: Krautrock. My friend had an extraordinary

collection of experimental German music – challenging, sometimes wild and sometimes minimalistic. I’d never heard the likes of it before. Early examples much played were from Amon Duul, Faust (on transparent clear vinyl) and Can. Sadly the genre is too often pigeonholed to the only band who ever found real commercial success; Kraftwerk with their (boring) Autobahn and more. This whole new discovery for me has morphed somehow into love of minimalistic music which started with Steve Reich and has continued through to the extraordinarily ubiquitous classical crossover artist Max Richter.

## DANCE DANCE DANCE!

There was one more totally parallel development in my musical formation which led me to actually earning an associated living, this, loosely described, is dance. My early signs of turning into a total hippy were disturbed and rescued by love of football. It was necessary to change my style and buy tonic two tone trousers and a Crombie jacket – attend football and the local youth club – this exposed me to Ska, and so my long term love of reggae and also soul music developed, morphing into DJaying by the time of my early 20s at the much missed Dugout Club in Bristol. Bristol had a large Jamaican community with lots of speakeasy illicit late night clubs banging out trouser-flapping bass dub tunes on massive speaker rigs. My income as DJay was soon enhanced by getting a ‘proper job’ as a sales guy and later manager at the UK’s last specialist hi fi chain- Laskys. We used to keep in stock no less than 5 pairs of Tannoy 15 inch dual concentrics (Ardens and Berkeleys) to often sell to the said clubs – often along with the biggest Nikko power amps- “how much watts man?” I bought a set of Berkeleys which were often put to party use – I still regret selling them. The system was the speakers and a Sansui AU5900 amp, Pioneer PL12 turntable and JVC cassette deck where I also spent many hours producing mix tapes. In a way the necessity of having to do this real time caused more care and thought into producing.

# MUSICAL JOURNEYS WITH JOHAN COORG



The Dugout also spawned the now world famous trip hop movement – a local street art collective The Wild Bunch used to come in and taunt me despite them being under age- “Hey Johan man, you got any music”? The Wild Bunch became Massive Attack. Sadly the Dugout saw its demise in I believe 1986 but by that time, fed up with retail and with a new girlfriend, I embarked on a year’s world journey.

And so started my life of buying 12 inch singles to Djay – extended versions often with superior sonics ..... fortunately I still have them all – much cherished and irreplaceable. I will never forget my highlight Djaying night playing a set at a festival and earning about £400 – a fortune! Only, if only, this development had been 20 years later I might have been playing Ibiza and flying in by helicopter.

## THE LAST 3 DECADES (OR SO)

The money had run out and we found ourselves back in the UK, just about penniless, have spent everything on our world tour. I really did not fancy returning to retail and desperately wanted to remain in hi fi and music but on the manufacturer side of things. I got an interview for the Polydor label but was disappointed not to get beyond the shortlist so I started to apply everywhere. Only to be told that previous repping experience was needed by all the manufacturers I applied to. I thought honesty was the best policy to explaining my year off and with extreme fortune the one company who thought me suitable was Wharfedale Loudspeakers in 1987 – impressed with my risk taking, I was employed as south of England representative. There followed brief periods at Denon and Musical Fidelity before I was approached by KEF management. Already my wife had secured a teacher position in Sydney Australia but, going for the interview, to my astonishment I got the job and we decided to stay. Now the last decades have taken me all over the world – mostly representing KEF- and always with a focus on music, which means totally different things to different individuals and cultures. My music collecting has in fact accelerated through this, having been exposed to extraordinarily different scenes

across the world. Currently I remain impressed with the fantastic scene in France and also tiny Norway, which seems to spawn more than its fair share of interesting new artists.

Music is altogether more accessible and far cheaper than ever with the proliferation of streaming platforms, however this old fashioned guy prefers to own, rather than rent – whether on vinyl or buying digital files, the latter of which are greatly improved from early 80s digital. I try to present a broad spectrum to engage as many people as possible in my presentations, hopefully to inspire them to invest in higher quality reproduction equipment.

Naturally my taste plays a big part but I consider it varied enough to have something for all in order to inspire. Perhaps my only “failure” is lack of appreciation or knowledge of heavy metal and rock but I know this is a genre amply covered by those more into it than me.

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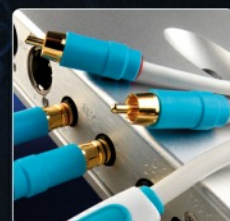
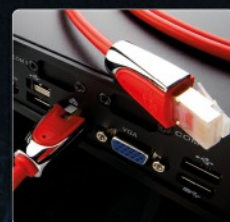
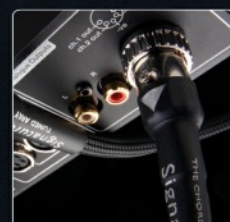
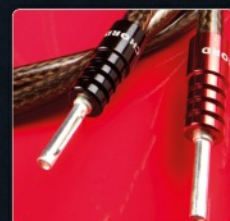


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# READERS' LIVES

## TONY SEWELL



**Tony Sewell is a Hifi Pig reader with an interesting pass-time - he's an avid field recordist, particularly of birdsong and dawn choruses.**

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**HP: What do you think was your favourite item of audio and why?**

TS: Well my favourite item at the moment is my Focal Stellia Headphones and my Quad PA one + Headphone Amp, the headphones feel like you are not wearing them, and the sound is so musical, I love the combination. But my all-time favourites are the Quad ELS 57s just love their open sound.

**HP: How did you get into field recording?**

TS: I got into Nature Field Recording when I saw Gary Moore nature recordist on Springwatch, he had a parabolic dish with a microphone - it picks up the bird sounds in the trees even if you can't see them like they are very close to you.

So, my partner Fran Dugdale bought me one and a Zoom H4n handheld field recorder, I used them for about a year or so in 2014/15. Then I heard about Binaural head microphones but they were silly money £2000 to £3000, so I built my own out of a dummy head with silicon ears and a microphone in each ear, when people listen with good headphones and close their eyes, they are there with me on that day.

I was ill for a couple of years so did not record. I've started to go out more now and I hope to get some good recordings again. It's getting harder and harder to just get the wildlife without background noise like cars planes etc, I can bring the background noise down a little bit but I love the sounds to be natural and as I heard them.

**HP: You specialise in Dawn choruses; what makes them so special?**

TS: The reason I love the dawn chorus the birds start slowly and they

get louder and when all the birds are singing it's so musical. I just love it.

**HP: Do you have any "interesting" stories around capturing recordings?**

TS: I went to north Swale on the Isle of Sheppey, Kent in South East England feeling very disappointed because there was not much sound to record. We started to drive to our caravan with the windows open and I said "Stop!" to Fran and listen. There was a very funny sound coming from the field and so I recorded it. When I got home I found out the sounds were marsh frogs, which I have never heard before and so one more sound to my collection.

**HP: What equipment do you use for your field recordings?**

TS: zoom H4n handheld field recorder, Zoom F4 field recorder, Telinga PRO-8 MK2 Parabolic Microphone, a Binaural head with a microphone in each ear, and my latest is in-ear mics I wear for stealth recording while walking around and stopping and listening - they are a lot lighter to carry. Some of my microphones and recorders get a little heavy for this old man.

**HP: Birdlife is on the decline in the UK, do you think there will come a time when all we will have is recordings of the dawn chorus**

TS: I've been recording for about 5 years now, and I have noticed that the dawn chorus doesn't go on for so long and the birds have to sing louder to get heard over the background noise i.e. cars, planes. So it might happen when we won't even hear the dawn chorus because humans are taking away nature's home for the birds and other wildlife. Something has got to be done before it's too late.







**HP: The British Library's Save Our Sounds project aims to preserve recordings of speech, music, nature and wildlife; have you submitted anything and how important do you think this project is?**

TS: I have not submitted any of my sounds yet as I don't think they are good enough. There are a lot better recordings out there from professionals but yes I do think it is very important to save the recordings. I had some bad luck I broke one of my hard drives with a lot of my recordings - I tried to recover them but to no luck so I try to remember to do backups now.

P.S. My partner Fran is partially deaf so has trouble hearing the birds, so she loves listening to my recordings on good headphones she can hear them much clearer.  
For the future I hope to carry on recording for a long-time... health permitting.

## **TAKE A LISTEN TO SOME OF TONY'S RECORDINGS**

**25. 02. 2018 Excerpt of the Dawn Chorus**

**06. 02. 17 Birds at River Cray, St Mary's Kent**

**06. 07 15 Footscray Meadows**

**Nature Sounds and the Sounds Around  
Facebook Group**

# **READERS' LIVES**

## **MARK CHARLES STEWART**



**Mark Charles Stewart works for the BBC as a Production Lighting Electrician and has been an avid Hifi fan for many years. He's very active on the UK Audiophiles Facebook page and is often called upon to share his expertise with those less knowledgeable.**

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# READERS' LIVES - MARK CHARLES STEWART



My Audio journey started when I was around 10 years old during summer holidays when I used to visit an Aunt and Uncle in Buckinghamshire England in the Summer holidays. My Uncle had a system of which I had never seen or heard the likes of before and having always been fascinated by Electricity and Electronics or anything with wires coming out of it I was immediately drawn to it and fascinated by how it all worked. The 1st time I heard it playing I'm pretty sure it was the "The Final Cut" by Pink Floyd coming from a pre recorded cassette played on a Nakamichi BX 2 tape deck and although by today's standards pre recorded tapes are arguably not particularly high end, hearing "The Post War Dream" roaring out from the big Mission 720's blew me away. I'm sure everyone else in the house had been out and this was playing very loudly as we entered, this clearly made a lasting impression on me and this would have been 1985 I think.

As my knowledge and understanding developed I learned that his system consisted of a Michell-Transcriptors Hydraulic turntable fitted with the ubiquitous SME 3009 S2i and Sure M97 cartridge, one of the 1st ever CD players Philips CD 101, Nakamichi BX 2 tape deck, fed into a Sansui-AU-317 amplifier and driving Mission 720 loudspeakers. I absolutely adored that system and luckily he had great taste in music too with a great collection for me to explore, which this was the start to my journey and ever since I have been Chasing the Dragon.

On future visits I would arrive armed with multipacks of TDK SA 90's and would spend every available minute compiling tapes from LP's and the odd CD. I would be sitting in the back of the Living Room with headphones on whilst all the adults would be chatting and watching TV. I would be rifling through my uncle's collection discovering the sounds of Jimi Hendrix, Cream, Fleetwood Mac, Golden Earring, Ten Years After and many more. For me, it was total bliss and escapism from the bereavement of my father the year before and I guess to this day it's still totally Transcendental.

When I returned home the frustration and disappointment of playing back these fine recordings (which some I still have to this day) on my pathetic Bush music centre put me on a quest to attain a good system, although the tapes did sound reasonable on my Walkman which I used to listen to whilst delivering Newspapers every morning and this gave me an opportunity to get better acquainted with the music I had recorded. After saving money from Birthdays, Christmas and my paper round I scoured the classified ads in The Evening Times and Glasgow Herald and looked regularly in Glasgow's HiFi shops for good 2nd hand buys and eventually ended up with an Acoustic Research-EB 101 Turntable fitted with an Audio Technica AT 32E cartridge, Audiolab 8000A, Aiwa ADF-260 cassette deck, Phillips CD 610 and Mission 70Mk 2 speakers. There were lots of other components that came and went around this time, a lot of which were more or less sideways steps as funds were limited, but it let me try out different combinations and find what was genuinely better and where investment was best made. It was all great fun, fascinating and part of the learning curve. I rarely ever lost money on anything as I found it relatively easy to move things on in the used market.

Amongst other part time jobs whilst studying Electronic Engineering which I had chosen with the hope of using to enter either the Audio or Music industry as a career, I managed to talk my way into a part time job working on Saturdays in Hi-Fi Corner which was great fun and gave me the opportunity to try mixing and matching components, attaining good system synergy which I feel is so important as opposed to purely selecting high cost or products that have received rave reviews. It was great to actually spend some time getting to experience some really nice equipment and find what type of sound I really liked. The manager was very knowledgeable and a genuine enthusiast from whom I learned a lot. I also got the chance of the odd trade in or faulty equipment that was beyond economical repair that I could have a go at restoring or fixing.



[illegible]



One example being an early set of Gale 301's which had 2 blown drivers and damaged cabinets which I upgraded and restored. They served me well for many years and I assume are still giving good service in an ex Girlfriends home. I always loved the Ira Gale era speakers and probably one of the best (most memorable) speakers I heard from that time were the legendary 401's.

The next pivotal experience that was actually more a realisation of what domestic High-End audio was actually possible of was one lunchtime when I was browsing in Stereo Showcase on Bath Street in Glasgow. At the time they carried some outstanding and aspirational equipment and had a fantastic demonstration room. Whilst browsing I saw for the first time what turned out to be a set of Magneplanars. Being curious as to what they were and expressing an interest the salesman very kindly offered to let me hear them - he played the 1st title track from the Michael Hedges album "Aerial Boundaries" which absolutely blew me away. The way that the system recreated dynamics was so visceral it literally hit me in the chest. Still to this day it the most impressive and memorable demonstration I've ever heard, not surprising when I learned the source consisted of Oracle Delphi Turntable and I assume it would have been SME 5, Koetsu Urushi a mixture of Audio Research and Krell amplification. I said to myself one day I'm going to get a set of those and try and attain that type of sound.

So, moving on a few years and having completed education and serving an apprenticeship as an Electrician, I starting to earn decent money and was still staying at home so now was the time to start assembling my dream system. The first thing I bought was a pair of Magneplanar MG 12 QR's which I imported from Lyric HiFi in New York as at this time Magneplanar were pretty scarce in the UK. I initially ran these with my venerable Audiobac 8000A, although I new this was just a temporary stop gap till I could get hold of a decent power amp with plenty power to fully realise their potential. One of the first attempts was with a Musical Fidelity P270 Power Amp which certainly

had plenty power, but was a bit harsh sounding in that configuration, so I then moved on to some Michell Alecto MK 2 Monoblocks which had comparable power but were much smoother and looked stunning too. By this time I had bought a Michell Gyrodec with QC (which I bought personally from John Michell which was a great honour and can honestly say he was a true Gentlemen and a pleasure to deal with). So the next step was to upgrade the pre amp from the Audiobac and I managed to get hold of a Michell Orca, which despite looking fantastic and being beautifully made and with great remote control was very disappointing in my system, which was a great shame as it was designed to complement the Alecto's and so that didn't stay long. I then moved on to a BAT VK 3i which didn't really do it for me either - it was too soft sounding and so I got rid of that and bought an Audio Research LS 15(as I had and still love Audio Research equipment) which was good and definitely a step in the right direction. I lived with that combination for some time using Michell Gyrodeck, Wilson Bessech Act2 tonearm, Linn Troika (rebuilt by the Cartridge Man) and Densen DP Drive Moving Coil Phono Stage.

The next big advancement was when I tried an Audio Zone T1 TVC (featuring Stevens and Billington transformers) in place of the Audio Research LS 15. This was a big step forward in transparency with plenty of drive but not fatiguing, so that was great and I happily lived with that for awhile until I got restless and Devaliet came on the scene. I heard their first amp when they were exhibiting along with Spondor and loved what I heard, it seemed to have an incredibly low noise floor with incredible transparency without being harsh. It also had a lot of great features in a beautifully designed and constructed enclosure with great remote control which I find essential for critical listening in order to set fine volume adjustment. It also actually represents great value when I considered how many boxes I could get rid of, plus the features it would add such as streaming from my computer over my home network. With the funds I could raise by selling off what I had it really wasn't going to be all that big an outlay, so I decided after having a home demo and finding it to be clearly



# READERS' LIVES - MARK CHARLES STEWART

superior to what I had currently, I went the Devialet D200 now called Expert and sold off all the other stuff that was now superfluous.

In the last few years, when it became apparent that I was not going to be working in the HiFi Industry, at least not for now, I thought "well this is my first love and if I'm not going to do it for a living I am just going to indulge myself and surround myself with the stuff I like and run multiple systems or have the components to do so" - I am not one of these people who thinks there is only one approach or one right solution. When I've been at shows and heard very different approaches and sounds achieved with completely different techniques and topologies, I can usually see the merits in each and enjoy each of their virtues. Whilst it may be lacking in other areas, I've never heard a system that can tick all the boxes and so this is why I like the idea of having different possibilities of playback. So I use my day Job as a Production Lighting Electrician at the BBC to fund it, maybe if I retire early or the right opportunity comes up maybe I will eventually work somewhere in audio, but with the decline in High Street shops and all the other pressing issues in Britain I just remind myself I should be grateful for what I have and be lucky to have a permanent position in work which allows me to pursue my passion.

Recently my fascination, rather than upgrading, has been building my own speakers from scratch which I have found very interesting and rewarding. Having been to many shows over the years hearing what's out there I have taken inspiration from the ones I like and tried to make something satisfying to me without spending a fortune. I have also undertaken a few restorations/upgrades from which I have learned. The Devaliet has been very useful as the online configurator is very versatile and has made it very easy for me to actively bi-amp and experiment with different crossover slopes/points etc. The good thing about DIY audio is there usually always something you can be working on or experimenting with that keeps the hobby interesting without actually having to completely upgrade components as it's not really that viable to continually box swap and take large financial hits every time you want to change something or get bored with what you have. Although I have acquired quite a nice selection of components which allows me to put various systems together to suit taste and what type of music I feel like playing etc, collecting cartridges has become a particular passion of mine. I really find them objects of desire and are so influential on the type of sound you can attain as they all sound so different and present things in a different way.

**Here is a list of some of the notable stuff I have owned and can remember a lot of which I still have and use.**

## Turntables

AR EB 101

Michell Gyrodeck

Bang and Olufsen TX 2-MMC 5

Micro Sieki DQX 500

Nottingham Analogue Dais

## Tonearms

Wilson benesch Ac 2

Rega RB 300

SME 3009 s2I(removable headshell)

## Cartridges

Rega Bias

Goldring 1042

Audio Technica AT 32 E

Audio Technica AT 150 MLX

Denon DL 304

Koetsu Black Gold Line

Lyra Argo (rebuilt by Van Den Hul with VD 1 tip)

Ortofon SPU T

Kiseki Purpleheart original with Sapphire cantilever

## CD Players & DAC's

Phillips CD 610

Arcam Alpha 1

Audiolab CDQ 8200

Rena Planet 2000

Denon DVD 2900

Musical Fidelity V-Dac with X Power

Lite Audio modified Non Oversampling DAC

## Pre Amplifiers

Audio Research LS 15

Audiozone T 1

## Power Amplifiers

Michell Alecto Mk 2 Monoblocks

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Pioneer M90 a

SMSL Sa-36a

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# **HAPPY TRAILS WITH PAUL MESSENGER**



**This month's column from Paul Messenger's covers John Howes field coils, where to find new music, Aretha Franklin, some books to check out, a record weight/stylus saving doodad and Roy Allison.**

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## FIELD COILS

I recently visited John Howes (above), a friend of some years who has been heavily involved in HiFi for rather longer than that – indeed since working for his father, who kept an electrical shop back in the 1960s. He's probably best known for his wonderful collection of original Lowther-Voigt equipment, but also for starting the twice-a-year Audiojumble, and has a strong interest in early HiFi. (He was also responsible for numerous valve amplifiers, such as the single-ended PX4-based triode monoblocks that I use as a reference, and for various modifications to a Leak Stereo 20 that I tried recently.)

Indeed, he feels (philosophically of course) that time has not served HiFi *per se* all that well. His point was that the HiFi from the 1930s was certainly as good as anything that's available today, and this he proceeded to demonstrate very convincingly, simply by playing his record player. Although my memory isn't as long, I can't help adding that the vinyl discs from the 1950s tend to sound better than vinyl from more recent eras (perhaps due to the replacement of valves by transistors, or the introduction of mixing desks).

The major secret of his system's success seems to be the replacement of regular permanent ferrite magnets by so-called 'field coils' (a species of electromagnet). I'm told this actually preceded both Alnico (the original permanent magnet) and ferrite (a rather later but much less costly alternative) in the development of permanent magnets. One difficulty in using field coils is the need for an external power supply; in the case of a cartridge, for example, it therefore requires some six (rather than four) wires down the tonearm.

Howes' system used field coils in both the cartridge and the loudspeaker – that is, every possible electromechanical location. The cartridge is particularly unusual, as the only brand that markets such a device (to my knowledge) is Audio Note (UK), and its field coil cartridge is certainly unusual in a number of respects.

The loudspeakers are very unusual too, using single full range 8-inch drivers with field coil magnets from Voxativ, and these fire through 4ft Tractrix horns. Amplification was valve (naturally), alongside transformer step-up.

The sound quality of Howes' system was certainly sensationally good, lacking the degree of overhang that one has come to accept as a norm, but which might have something to do with the 'normal' behaviour of permanent magnets. I was reminded of the Feastrex field coil loudspeaker that I tried back in 2011, a current Japanese 'audiophile' product that doesn't feature much in exports.

Although I gather Select Audio does have one or two examples available, it seems unlikely that I can get to try another pair of field coil speakers at my place. However, I have ordered a field coil cartridge to try (and possibly buy!). Such devices are rare beasts indeed, and only made and sold to order, but hopefully I'll get one in time to review it in the next Pig magazine.

## LOSING THE PLAYGROUND!

Having lost access to the school playground many years ago, I've been struggling to find interesting new music. However, BBC radio's Desert Island Discs is providing one worthwhile alternative, especially if the guest is musically literate. That's certainly true of Nitin Sawhney's recent selection, which starts off with a superb Massive Attack remix and continues with a selection of equally fascinating tracks throughout.

The bonus with Desert Island Discs is essentially that one gets the chance to hear a number of favourite tracks curated by an individual who may (or may not!) be well known, but who doesn't normally do DJ duties.

# HAPPY TRAILS WITH PAUL MESSENGER

Finding an appropriate DJ seems to be the key to finding interesting music, so let me also include a plug for Cerys Matthews' programme on Radio 6 Music (Sunday morning, 1000-1300hrs), for anybody looking for a distinctly eclectic mixture. It's worth playing (or recording) the whole show, as the track extracts on the website are either very short or unavailable.

## AMAZING GRACE

This just-released movie was recorded back in 1972, featuring Aretha Franklin singing gospel (as distinct from soul) material. An album of the same name was a considerable commercial success nearly fifty years ago, but the story behind the film has followed a much rockier road,

Back in the early 1970s, the problem was a lack of synchronisation between the audio and visual parts, so the footage was initially consigned to vault storage. Producer Alan Elliott purchased the material in 2007, by which time synchronisation was not a problem, and he also arranged editing. However, Franklin sued him, not once but twice, so the finished movie only appeared after her death in 2018 but with family support. It actually debuted in New York's Doc cinema in late 2018; the UK premiere took place on May 10<sup>th</sup> 2019.

Taking place in the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles, and with considerable backing from the Southern California Community Choir and James Cleveland, the film itself is certainly very gospel-oriented, but Aretha Franklin is in excellent voice throughout. The gospel material seemed particularly well suited to demonstrate a voice that has remarkable – nay unique – frequency and dynamic ranges.

Production credits cover some eight individuals, including Joe Boyd and Spike Lee. As a film it does seem a bit strong on the gospel stuff, especially for anybody with atheistic tendencies, and it's a shame that Aretha never speaks to the audience. But I don't regret the time spent watching the film, as her fine singing voice is so wonderfully memorable.

## BOOKS TO CHECK OUT

*Sound Man* is one book that's well worth reading. It's the autobiography of recording engineer/producer Glyn Johns, who began by engineering The Rolling Stones, and moved on to produce The Who, The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, The Eagles, Eric Clapton etc etc. Written as a series of anecdotes, mostly about the people that were active in the music biz during the 1960s and 1970s, the music is also heavily mentioned. And even though the writing style (presumably from diaries) might lack some polish, I found his rudeness about various individuals very refreshing!

I was also quite surprised at the number of albums in my own collection that involved Glyn Johns, including early LPs from the Steve Miller Band and the Ozark Mountain Daredevils, up to *Rough Mix*. A 'Select Discography' near the end will help the reader figure out which GJ albums he/she already has.

'A Fabulous Creation' is another excellent read, with a subtitle that reads: 'How the LP Saved Our Lives'. Written (rather better than *Sound Man*) by music journalist David Hepworth (whom I've never met), it essentially covers the period between the Beatles' 1967 introduction of Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band and the release of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* in 1982.

I quickly discovered that I couldn't put the damn thing down, largely because it provided numerous fascinating music industry perspectives of a scene that I thought I knew well, but only as a hi-fi enthusiast and customer.

## PRESSLIFT!

I first encountered this accessory in the Newcomers section at the recent Munich show. The small husband-and-wife operation representing the Mind-Pop Revolution company (the name behind the Presslift) is based in a small village near Toulouse in South West France. I brought a sample home to at least try out the 'disc stabiliser' function, even if the end-of-side lift seemed a bit tricky. (The importer, G-point Audio, reckons that the 'clamp' part is much more important than the 'lift'.)

It costs some £315, which is a quite substantial sum for just a clamp. However, if the lifting-off feature helps to save just one costly stylus from a great deal of wear, I guess it would be worthwhile. As a piece of metalwork it feels very encouraging, partly because of its substantial weight, but more particularly because of a detached central section which rotates separately, very freely and with very little 'play'.

This has a spiral shaped into it, and is part of the 'lift' feature (and therefore arguably of secondary importance, according to the UK importer). I don't necessarily agree: bearing in mind that my tests only used one rather unusual record player (a Rega Naiad, with a zirconium rather than steel main bearing), I have to say that the 'Press' part of the Presslift proved a trifle disappointing. The advantage of adding the unit was indeed audible, but it was also rather subtle, and didn't seem that obvious or dramatic.

I've never had much time for turntable 'tweaks' (ignoring factors like 'adjustable VTA' [vertical tracking angle], in favour of maintaining a rigid coupling between cartridge and turntable). However, I can't help feeling that some form of stylus lift seems a very useful prospect, and I have to say it seemed rather effective.

## ALLISON

A recent phone call from Jern-designer Ole Lund Christiansen asked me whether Roy Allison's legacy was in danger of being overlooked. A founder of AR, who later left to start his own brand, Allison had some very credible ideas about bass reproduction in rooms, placing his bass drivers controversially close to the room boundaries.

I was therefore pleased to find a couple of rooms at the Cranage show that seemed to recognise Allison's work. One featured a Dutch speaker called Dutch & Dutch. I chatted at some length to designer Martijn Mensink, whose good size stand-mounts had a dipole midrange plus rear-mounted bass drivers that were deliberately mounted close to the wall. Lyngdorf's 2xBW-2/MH-2 combo is deliberately as discreet as possible, placing a couple of subwoofers tight into the two front room corners, while the small satellite speakers are mounted on the wall.

# **STU'S VIEWS MUSIC AT HIFI SHOWS**



**This month Stu looks at the thorny subject of music at HiFi shows and the dilemma faced by exhibitors.**

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We've all been there haven't we? Déjà vu! You know, that feeling you get that some how and somewhere you have experienced this very moment before. Was it in a previous life? Is it just a case of quantum timelines somehow interacting with each other to cause a disruption in the fabric of spacetime? Is it something in your immediate surroundings that triggers a past memory causing your brain to short circuit and discombobulate itself from reality for a brief moment? Is something happening to your brain that you really ought to go and see a Doctor about when you get a spare moment? Or is this just another case of "Please Baby Jesus not Dave Brubreck's Take Five AGAIN!" at a Hifi Show.

Now don't get me wrong, I like Take Five and I could have picked on any number of tunes, but why is it that at Hifi shows there always seems to be the same songs playing from one room to the next. When I say "Any number" by the way I am of course exaggerating somewhat – it seems that even though through streaming channels such as Qobuz (other streaming services are available) we have a gazillion and one tunes at our disposal, exhibitors at shows seem to go for a handful of tunes. Fleetwood Mac Rumours or Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon, anyone?

And then you get the other extreme where some clever so and so think it's going to be so intellectually superior to play their unsuspecting audience one of the hits from "Now That's What I Call Obscure Shite 47". You know, something like "The North Norwich Mongolian Throat Singers Sing the Hits Of Leonard Cohen" or "Cats Do Prince" or Negativeland's "A Tape For All Deaths (Dick Vaughn's Moribund Sounds Of the 70s!)"...the last one is real by the way and is rather entertaining. Honestly, I've seen, several years ago it has to be said, a very well known reviewer walk into a room at a huge audio show with a CDR of THE most incomprehensible "music" I have ever heard and ask it to be played, going on then to explain, at length, to the exhibitor all about the music and where he found it – under a rock, hidden for millennia I'm guessing, and oh how I wish he had left it

there. What's the point of playing this kind of thing to the vast majority of people that may be present in a room? They'll not have heard it! Nor will they appreciate it! Now all that said, I was at Munich last year when one room played some Gentle Giant, a band I know but wouldn't say I'm particularly aurally intimate with and despite not knowing the quite challenging music I could appreciate the clever musicianship – only thing is the guy presenting the music wanted to go into the ins and outs of why the music and the band was so clever...which is one of my bug bears too.

Now it may seem as though I'm being negative, perhaps it's the crappy July weather that is affecting my positive gland, but come on guys let's strike a balance with the music we play at shows.

Over my right shoulder is my hippy self, saying (in a stoned-out drawl) "Hey, Man, why all the negativity, Man. What's the Universe done to mess with your Chakras, Man. Try and stay positive, Dude" but equally there's the (let's not say Evil) voice over my left shoulder screaming blue murder at me "Tell 'em Stu, it needs to be said".

In truth, in recent weeks I've taken up drinking Jasmine tea and I'm pretty sure there is some incense and a Ying and Yang stash box somewhere secreted about the house. I feel at one with myself and the World around me. No longer do I need to feel the need to "Stick it to the Man" and there has been a cloud of equilibrium descend upon Hifi Pig Towers, the likes of which has not been witnessed for some time. And so, with that in mind I am going to approach this subject like a true professional and studiously take in both sides of the discussion and see it from everyone's perspective and only then make judgement, so that what you, dear reader gets is a sensible and well thought out discussion as to why we hear what we hear at Hifi Shows.

## THE EXHIBITOR'S PERSPECTIVE

So, let's look at what the exhibitor at a show is trying to achieve from playing what he or she plays. Of course, they want a selection of tunes that will help make their system sound its best in what it has to be said are less than optimal surroundings. Chances are they will have had only a few hours to set up, will be knackered from the journey and can't wait to get some proper food and adult beverages inside them, having existed for the last 48 hours on the road on a diet of energy drinks, chocolate bars and soggy service station sandwiches. They want to bring as positive an experience to visitors to their room as possible and they want people to leave the room thinking "That was wonderful, I should buy it".

Having woken up the day of the show refreshed and raring to go and having leisurely taken in the wonderful culinary experience that is the International hotel breakfast, the exhibitors will make their way to their rooms and await the first visitors who will be greeted by, of course, music. It's early, perhaps 10am and the last thing a visitor needs to hear is Norwegian Death Metal played at corpse raising volume. No, what is needed is something appropriate for the time of day. Something calming and yet invigorating. Something not too taxing and yet familiar enough to visitors so as to be something they will want to take a seat and spend some time getting to know the system a little. So, at this point the exhibitor will think "I know, a bit of Dark Side of The Moon. That'll be perfect. But not the alarm clocks. Must turn it off before the alarm clocks". Visitors will arrive, lured into the room with the softly lilting music and immediately plant themselves in the doorway chatting loudly with their mate and making it absolutely freaking impossible for anyone to get into the room or hear anything other than what they are chatting about. ("Ying and Yang, Stuart, Ying and Yang!"). That's all well and good on the music front, but exhibitors can't just play the whole of the post Syd Barrett Floyd for the rest of the day, they need to get creative and they need to keep the audience coming into the room to hear more. Not too taxing, familiar and nothing too much for the system... "I know, some Diana Krall. She sells records, people love her and well, that's my mind made up!".

The day will go along merrily enough, questions from the audience will be duly answered and the more adventurous exhibitors may even ask if there's anything particular anyone in the audience would like to hear, at which point a middle-aged gentleman in the audience wearing slacks and a blazer will stick their hand up and say "Excuse me, do you have Stigma Diabolicum's Luna De Nocturnus? I've just had a lovely coffee and cake in the hotel's café and would really like to hear some Norwegian Death Metal!" Inside the exhibitor is freaking out and his mind is racing but he calms himself and is going to politely say that he doesn't have aforementioned tune and will pretend to look through whatever streaming service they are using on the day and after a moment or two will say " Dang, they don't seem to have it either" at which point middle-aged gent will reach to his left and pull out a pristine vinyl copy of the record only to be told that there is no record player in the room. Fear not, our intrepid potential church burner is fully prepared and says "Oh, that's ok, not to worry, I thought that may be the case, I have it on CD and on USB stick". Blind panic now descends, you can see it in the room host's face and where can he go from here? He's interacted with the audience, he's now at their beck and call - if he says he'd rather not play the tune he's going to look mean and if he does play it he's going to clear the room faster than a rat goes up a drainpipe. He plays it, middle aged man sits in the hot seat gently tapping his feet to the music and the room clears around him. See, it's not that easy for the exhibitor is it?

## THE VISITOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Let's face it, people are pretty diverse in the kind of music they enjoy. You will get a good few folks who will say something along the lines of "Oh, I have a very wide musical palate and I don't just restrict myself to one or two genres. I love everything from Mongolian Throat singing to Locomotion-days Kylie and everything in between" but the more observant among us will know that this is at best a fabrication to make the visitor look cool and knowledgeable or at worst a load of old cods' wollop. So, I can't really say what people in general want when they are visiting a room at a Hifi show, all I can say is what I would want to hear when I go around an event. Personally, I'd like to hear something that I'm familiar with, isn't going to clear the room (though there's no accounting for taste) and something that is going to tax the system just a little bit and give a feeling for what the system can or can't do. Oh, and nothing classical! Invariably I'll ask for something like Daft Punk's Contact as I know it inside out, it's a bit of a test track for us and it's relatively accessible so as not to send everyone scuttling off to another room to find respite. Others will want something else, but mostly, by the clear nature of the beats, they will want something that is familiar to them and with which they feel comfortable. Which gives us the problem and takes us no further forward in finding a suitable solution.

## ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

Long story short is that the exhibitor really is in a bit of a predicament as to what to play at a show. Play anything too challenging and they run the risk of clearing the room. Play anything cliched and they will get the finger of accusation pointed at them claiming they are boring and conforming to the standard show formula.

So, what to do? You can't let the audience have free reign and give them the iPad or record collection to make their own decisions, that would be Bedlam and you'd end up with all kinds of crap getting played - Fimbulwinter getting played from 10am to 6pm with a brief sojourn around lunchtime for some Wake Me Up Before You Go Go era George Michael?

I don't know the answer to the question, is the answer I suppose and I do feel for exhibitors who have to make these choices. When we listen to a radio station or specific radio DJ, we have a rough idea of what we are going to get, but the exhibitor's job as DJ is just so much harder; he has to be all things to all people and has to try to satisfy the wishes of people with infinitely variable taste in music whilst keeping his system within the bounds of what is possible in the space they have. Play a tune and you may get one person in the room who loves it, one that hates it and twenty-five that are wholly indifferent to it.

I know, let's just play test tones and frequency sweeps all day! In truth I bet there are some out there in audiophile-land who would relish this nightmare scenario. Can you imagine the din at a busy show of a few dozen rooms all playing frequency sweeps, only really out of time with each other? Now that would truly send a few, me included, over the precipice.

So, I get it. I get that the guy running the room has an impossible job. I get that he runs the risk of either getting flack for being too vanilla in playing the usual gubbins, or at the opposite end of the scale a whole load Tutti-Frutti for playing unknown artists and tunes. I suppose what I'm saying is that all the exhibitors can do is play people what they think visitors may want to hear, but I swear, If hear one more room playing Take Five I'm gonna flip I tell you. (Ying and Yang, Stuart. Ying and Yang). But that's the thing isn't it, sometimes I may well fancy a bit of Take Five and at others not so much.

# STU'S VIEWS

Be an exhibitor at a show and have to make these decisions? I'd rather shove wasps where the sun don't shine, thank you very much!

*Since writing this Linette and I have ben asked to sit on a panel at **Rocky Mountain Audio Fest** which will focus on music choices at Audio Shows.*

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# **BIRDS' EYE VIEW THREE STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT! HIFI, SEXISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA**



**Linette tackles the thorny issue of sexism on social media, particularly amongst the HiFi related groups.**

**Hifi Pig**  
**[www.hifipig.com](http://www.hifipig.com)**



Why is it that the hobby of Hifi tolerates a level of sexism that just isn't allowed (almost) anywhere else? Leery, sexist behaviour is, in general, being forced out of society, it's not stood for in sport, the 'me too' movement is calling it out and making it unacceptable in music and Hollywood. In most workplaces, if you were to make a sexist comment to a co-worker you would be hauled off to HR quicker than you could say 'boobies'.

Traditionally male dominated hobbies and professions have been the places where sexist behaviour clings on by it's grubby little fingernails. And there is nowhere that this is more visible than in social media groups. To be fair, this isn't necessarily just the fault of the blokes in these groups, because if you are in that kind of 'locker room' environment it's seen as 'OK' to be make certain comments or behave a certain way, 'because it's always been like that' or it's 'just banter'. Whilst social media is not the cause of the problem, it gives people a 'safe space' to behave in a certain way, however badly that is. It is difficult to challenge the behaviour and it is easier to go with the pack. Particularly difficult if there are not many women in the mix to challenge the behaviour, which brings us to the big question:

## WHY ARE THERE NO WOMEN HERE?

The constant question that audiophiles, and audio journalists, ask on social media is 'hey, why are there hardly any women here?'. This then provokes a heated discussion (usually between a load of guys) about how 'women are just wired different', 'women listen to music differently', 'guys are more into technical toys' and so on and so forth. A favourite line that gets dragged out is always 'my wife/girlfriend likes music but she doesn't care about the gear'.

Realistically, women are just as into music as men and we are also increasingly visiting Hifi Shows. (Just looking around a Hifi Show in 2019 compared with 2012 tells me this). It's easy to see more women using portable Hifi and decent headphones and buying records when

you are out and about. The Hifi Industry itself is full of women, at all levels, from hands on production to running the company. So why is there a 'no women here' feel to the myriad Hifi groups on social media platforms such as Facebook?

It's fairly simple to break it down and it's not due to just one thing, but there are probably three major contributing factors, as I see it.

## GENDER STEREOTYPES

Traditionally, Hifi, along with cars, trains, computer gaming etc has always been a 'male' hobby. I come from a generation where gender stereotyping was just the norm. As a kid, girls played with dolls and boys with cars and guns, anything else wasn't 'normal'. (I actually had a train set too, but then my Dad was ahead of his time and also doing his share of nappy changing in the early seventies.) Nowadays it's normal not to enforce this rigid gender stereotyping on kids, so they are growing up with more enlightened views of what is 'acceptable' or 'appropriate' for boys and girls, that they can do anything and be anything that they want, regardless of gender. So, there is hope for the future that hobbies won't necessarily be seen as male or female, or be associated with a particular gender at all.

But that doesn't really help where we are right now.

The reality is that Hifi is one of those things that a lot of women have not grown up with in an involved sense. So there you have your first strike, traditionally, Hifi 'wasn't for girls', so already that puts us on the outside looking in.

## HIFI HOSTILITY

Hifi can be a pretty hostile. I know, that sounds crazy doesn't it? We are talking about ways of enjoying music - this is supposed to be peaceful and harmonious, isn't it? Challenging and emotional yes, but

not hostile. Just take a look at some of the discussion groups and forums. There are raging battles about whether cables make a difference, which format is better and objectivists and subjectivists just about all-out killing each other over everything. Don't even think I am joking about this. If you believe that politics, religion and football are the most divisive topics out there, take a look at the arguments and confrontations happening right now on Hifi related social media groups....it can get pretty vicious, I can tell you.

So, strike one. You have a subject that many females have not been exposed to as much as guys the same age, simply because of their gender, and, (here's strike two) even though we have an interest, maybe have found out a lot on our own, and would quite like to join in the online discussion about the latest amplifier/cartridge/DAC/headphones, we are looking in on a bear-pit of aggression, full of people that are just supposed to be discussing this hobby, but that can't even seem to act in a civil manner towards each other.

It's hardly coming across as welcoming to us, is it?

## THE BIG STRIKE THREE

Honestly, sometimes I look at Hifi groups on Facebook and other social media channels and have to check the date to see if it really is 2019.

Now let's just set something straight. I have nothing against pictures of a naked, female body, or any body for that matter, really no problem with that at all. But do you really think, that a group that is supposed to be there for the purpose of discussing Hifi, is the place for those pictures? There's plenty of other groups that you could join if that's what you want to look at.

Now, obviously, some guys moderating Hifi groups also had the thought that naked/half-dressed pictures of women were not really appropriate in their Hifi group. But guess what was? That's right, 'Hifi related naked chick pics'. 'Aha!' Someone must have thought, 'if I post this picture of a half dressed woman caressing a loudspeaker that's OK, cos there's Hifi in it'. Oh dear.

These pictures would be funny if the implications weren't so bad. 'Damn, I need to get this record down from the top shelf and I'm only wearing a thong!', or 'whoops my skirt is sooo short and I'll just bend over to check my record player', or the classic 'I'm going to twiddle a random knob on my amplifier but to do so properly, I must be naked'.

And then of course, following the picture, comes the comments. Ranging from the likes of 'look at the woofers on that', to 'she can play with my knob anytime'...you really feel like you are in a school playground surrounded by a group of prepubescent boys who have discovered a porn mag.

Let's step back a bit, we don't need a time machine, a quick Google will do. Have a look at Hifi adverts from back in the day, the 1970's and 80's which were the times when Hifi was at it's peak, a luxury item up there with cars, booze, perfume and er, cigarettes. Massive budgets were spent on advertising and there were some really creative ads around, but there was also the ads that would always feature the piece of Hifi equipment and a young lady in either a state of undress, or even totally naked.

Advertising Standards rules have dealt with the kind of promotion that just showed women as a sexy accessory, there just to make men look

at the product or remember the brand name. However the outdated attitude that saw this as acceptable thirty or forty years ago, still perpetuates in many corners of the internet.

Can you think how it looks to a woman, who is really into music, has started to get interested in Hifi and has joined a group that is dedicated to this hobby, to see these pictures posted all the time? The big strike three, after we have got past the fact that 'Hifi is for boys', past the aggressive nature of much online Hifi discussion, is that the only way for a woman to be involved with Hifi is to be a sexy accessory. It's just another way of saying 'this place is not for you'.

If you make an environment toxic to someone, they generally don't want to be there...they try, but after a while even the most thick skinned say 'you know what, I don't have the time nor the energy for this shit!'.

If you are a guy that participates in Hifi groups that regularly post this kind of picture have a bit of a think. How would you feel if it was your wife, sister or daughter that was joining the group to learn more and share her experience about Hifi? Would you feel a bit embarrassed about how the group is behaving? Maybe think about that next time you or another group member asks 'hey, why are there no women in this group?'.

## CHANGING BEHAVIOUR

Some guys are actually challenging this behaviour, it fair warms my cockles when I see one of those 'women in a thong casually holding a record' pictures and, in among all the 'phwwwoar!!' comments is a man saying 'FFS guys this has no place here!'. And those voices are getting louder and more numerous...perhaps there is hope for Hifi yet! I applaud every one of you guys that stands up for us, you may not realise it, but we really, really appreciate the support. What we don't appreciate are the guys that don't speak up. Yes we know it can sometimes be intimidating to challenge the status quo, but you have a voice, use it, call it out. You wouldn't stand for it if someone was making racist or homophobic comments in a group, so why would you let sexism slide? Don't turn a blind eye, open your mouth or tap your keyboard or phone and say something...you will be doing your bit to make make Hifi related social media a better place for everybody.

## HIFI FOR EVERYONE

I am lucky to be in a UK Hifi Facebook group that is really well run and moderated. There's a no-nonsense approach to sexism, racism, homophobia or bullying of any kind. But guess what, it's great fun, plenty of laughs and banter is had and people enjoy being in the group, we meet up at shows and get a whole lot of pleasure from the hobby that is music and Hifi. And that is exactly how it should be. If Hifi is to survive and thrive as a hobby, and an industry, it has to be more inclusive, not just of women but of everyone, whether they are young or old, know a lot about Hifi or are just starting out.

## PHONO CARTRIDGES I HAVE KNOWN AND LOVED...OH, AND PUDDINGS.

**Regular Hifi Pig reviewer Ian Ringstead talks about some of the phono cartridges he's owned over the years...and puddings - he talks puddings too.**



My journey in Hifi started in the early 70's and LP's were king then. The choice of albums was vast, and of course you needed a turntable and a decent cartridge to play them. I have lost count of the numerous turntables and cartridges I have had over the last 47 years, but most were very good. My first foray was a Goldring G800 cartridge which was a popular budget model that served me for about a year. When I upgraded my turntable to a Thorens TD165 I got a Shure M75 ED type 2 as this was a classic moving magnet. The Thorens arm was soon changed for an SME 3009 arm and the Shure sang in it. The Shure V15mk111 was being raved about as it could track like no other cartridge then and passed the tortuous test records with ease. That's fine, but as we know it's not all about technical ability. Moving coils in comparison were heavier and didn't track as well, but they sounded great if you chose wisely. SME on the back of the popularity of moving coils developed the Series V tonearm which even today is still a reference for many.

Once I started working, I had to buy a Linn LP 12 and on it was a Grace 707 arm and Supex 900 moving coil. That was the combination of the time and I thought I had arrived. Summer 1976 was a memorable time as I went on holiday with my parents to Portugal playing golf. Whilst we were there our neighbour telephoned the hotel and left a garbled message. We thought the worse that something might have happened to my sister or relation. As it turned out it was to tell us the house had been burgled. A big relief but also worrying as to what had been stolen. My Dad was a professional footballer in the 1950's and an international for Eire. The burglar had taken his football medals and all my Hifi. The medals were never found and could not be replaced but my Hifi could. A harsh lesson in life and the realisation of what is important in life.

The theft hit me hard because my Dad's house insurance didn't cover the total loss and I couldn't blame him as I hadn't asked him to up the insurance value. C'est la vie. This meant a rethink on the turntable, arm and cartridge. Another LP 12 was purchased, but the arm was an

SME3009 again and a JVC X1 moving magnet. The JVC was a real belter as it had been designed when Quadraphonic sound was being experimented with. It was JVC's best attempt at a top cartridge design. It had a shibata stylus and a frequency response from 10 Hz to 60kHz, quite a feat then. The extended frequency was necessary in order to reproduce the carrier frequencies for the rear channels. I eventually sold it and regret doing so as it now sells for big bucks second hand.

Moving coils were making inroads in the 80's and this meant new arms had to be introduced to handle their weight and energy that they fed back into the arm and turntable. SME were hit hard by this for a while as their arms suited the moving magnets far better. Linn brought out the Ittok to handle the Azak moving coil, having dropped the Supex /Grace combination of the 70's. Exciting times and a lot of new ideas being brought to fruition. Suddenly a new boy was in town with the arrival of the Koetsu Black from Japan. This really did stir up a lot of intrigue and debate amongst audiophiles. The Koetsu was a game changer for me as it opened up a whole new world of quality sound, albeit at a cost.

After the Black a Rosewood model emerged and then an Onyx. If you are not in the know about Koetsu cartridges, then you have missed out! The brand and the man behind the legend took on an air of mystery. The founder Yoshiaki Sugano was 95 when he died, but he left a great legacy. A descendant of the notable Japanese artist Honami Koetsu, Sugano was schooled in a great many Japanese arts, not the least of which was the tradition of sword making. An oil painter, a formidable boxer in his youth and supposedly undefeated, he turned to the industry of automobile manufacturing in his adulthood and worked for Toyota. Through his years at Toyota he rose to the executive ranks and retired when he reached the age of 60. Clearly not ready for a simple and sedentary retirement life, his most prolific contributions came in his final 35 years.

# CARTRIDGES I HAVE KNOWN AND LOVED

Long before retirement from the auto industry he had a love for music, a fascination with music reproduction and a special interest in phono cartridges. He started to study and repair broken cartridges as a hobby, and as he retired from the auto industry, he decided to form his own company. Thus, was born Koetsu moving coil cartridges. The name is clearly homage to his ancestor. The Koetsu brand is legendary and deserves to be. There are more accurate brands out there but it's all down to taste and like fine wines or whiskey the consumer makes their choice. Like some valve amplifiers the Koetsu's are warm in nature but not overly coloured. They have a magical mid-range that beggar's belief and is hard to beat for enjoyment. What I also remember about the Koetsu was that it always came in a simple wooden box with no instructions or anything else. Plain and simple.

A cartridge I certainly shouldn't have sold was the Benz Micro Ace. I had lusted after this cartridge for some time and managed to get one unused at a bargain price. I used it on my Project 10 and it really sang. When I sold the turntable, I foolishly sold the Benz as well as the chap buying it hadn't got a cartridge and I felt sorry for him. He was a lovely chap, so I know it went to a good home and will be appreciated.

Moving back to moving magnets the most impressive model I still own is the Goldring 1042. Goldring are old hands in the audio business and know a thing or two about cartridges. Remember my first cartridge was a G800. The 1042 is an absolute classic that has stood the test of time and still is a winner today. Iconic and fantastic value for money it has my seal of approval.

Audio Technica are another company with a long heritage in audio, especially cartridges. I sold AT91's and AT95's as if they were sweets in the 80's and 90's. True budget gems they were incredible value and you can still buy them. Linn used to state that an LP12 with Ittok arm and an AT 91 cartridge would outperform any inferior turntable and a dearer cartridge. A bold claim that was generally true. I tried a variant on the AT95 recently which had a Parabolic stylus on it that was excellent. It taught me that there is life in the old dog yet. The AT95 is a gem and if you up the ante with a new stylus it can truly make waves and match much dearer models.

Today I also use an Ortofon Quintet Black moving coil. As I review a lot of turntables and cartridge combinations, I use a Jelco SA750 with detachable head shell. It makes life a lot easier if I need to do a comparison and the flexibility suits me.

Which type of cartridge do I prefer? Well it depends. Overall, moving coils have more body and dimensionality to their sound, but a great moving magnet can give you about 75% in the right system. It's all down to synergy and taste. Of course, with a moving magnet you can change the stylus easily, whereas with a moving coil they almost always need to be replaced with a new cartridge or rebuilt.

I have seen and heard many more cartridges at shows and when in retailing and this list is just some of my own personal favourites that I have owned or used. Someone else would probably come up with an entirely different list, but that's the fun of Hifi. This is a list of my personal faves and like puddings it depends what mood I'm in as to what I will choose. Apple pie and custard is a winner for me, although apple strudel comes close. Then again steamed sponge puddings with custard are a delight. My dad loved puddings as well, that's probably where I got the taste for them from. I have fond memories of my dad and like the cartridges listed here will forever be in my thoughts.

I hope you enjoy my history of cartridges that have shaped my life, like the puddings they certainly shaped me, after all you are what you eat!! Let's just say I'm not a slim young man anymore but I am happy with my life and my physique. No longer a bronzed Adonis (a phrase I said to my wife when I first met her), I'm more of a shining beacon. When I was young, I went to France with a friend on holiday and I was a slim chap then, so the term Adonis was rather a loose description, but I did come back tanned. Many years later, on holiday in France again, I was a little more rotund and covered in suntan lotion as I burn easily, and my wife took a picture of me stood on a pier looking out to sea imitating a lighthouse. That wasn't the intention.

Choosing a cartridge can be challenging and daunting for those who are not technical or handy with their fingers. Trust your instincts, go to shows to hear them and take the advice of a good dealer. Dive in and get in the groove.

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# AUDIOPHILIA AND THE FINE ART OF HYGIENIC TOAST EATING

**As well as being a Hifi Pig reader, audiophile and DIY loudspeaker builder Shane Fage also studied Music Composition/Arranging/Orchestration at the University of Calgary. In this one off article for Hifi Pig he narrowly avoids getting Crumb all over his shirt.**



Finding music that is interesting and well-recorded is challenging. In my opinion, I have found that chamber music is the most satisfying for critical listening. To be precise: chamber music - of one to six instruments- that has been recorded in a smaller space rather than on stage in an empty concert hall of several hundred seats. It's like the Schubertiade. A concert, generally held in a private home, of less than fifty snobby people in attendance who are there to be seen, and not because they actually like the music.

## YOU KNOW "THOSE PEOPLE"

The reason why I prefer this situation is: hearing what musical instruments really sound like, unfettered. The optimum would be standing in a practice room with a person playing a bass clarinet six feet away. You hear every possible nuance, right down to the key clicks and spittle in reed.

I have found a number of recordings that give me what I want. In my opinion, the AR / New World Records recording of George Crumb's *An Idyll For The Misbegotten / Vox Balaenae (Voice Of The Whale) / Madrigals, Books I-IV* is particularly outstanding. Each of the recordings of each of the pieces are slightly different in their digitization. "An Idyll" is DDD, "Vox Balaenae" is DAD and the "Madrigals" is AAD.

George Crumb's "Madrigals" is not music that everyone will enjoy. I would refer to it as contemporary or academic music. Rhythmically, it's not a foot-tapper. It is not supposed to be. It is more complex than Black Sabbath's "Iron Man". Harmonically, it can be described as permutations on sets of pitches to create progressions beyond what we would associate with your mother's Mozart. This ain't Mozart, to be sure. Melodically, it's more angular than your favourite Madonna tune. Finally, there are extended instrumental techniques not normally associated with music prior to the twentieth century. There are some examples of this in romantic period music, albeit very rare. To be

precise: take the A string of the guitar, pull it over top of the E string. It sounds like a snare drum. Well, you know, close enough. The 19th century example that springs to mind is Tarrega's "Grand Jota" for guitar solo.

Optimally, I'd love to have everyone go out and get Samuel Adler's "The Study of Orchestration" textbook and accompanying set of CDs but it's big ask. In the old days, you'd buy the accompanying set of CDs to go with the textbook and you could listen to every instrument in the orchestra - and all combinations of them for every example in the textbook- to learn what instruments actually sound like and how to write for them. I'd like that, but it's not gonna happen. The reason I suggest the textbook is a sort of "let's start from the start" of listening to music. Let's train our ears to know what things really sound like played upon every instrument, in every register, and every form of articulation.

I frequently wondered if I could use George Crumb's name as an adjective to describe various textures and nuances within his music. It was suggested to me that I avoid the word "Crumbian" in an analysis paper. However, we have to come to terms with describing his broad palette of sounds. The "Madrigals, Book One" begin quite simply with a bass, vibraphone and female voice. The vibraphone is played with relatively hard mallets, which serve to accentuate the upper partials of the sound of the instrument. In other words, it is relatively bright. The harder the mallet, the brighter it is, but the faster the decay, too. This can be said of most percussion instruments. In this situation, it is quite purposeful to ask the percussionist to use a harder mallet because the register which the vibraphone sounds is within the range of the singer. And no, we definitely do not want that. We want the vibraphone out of the way of the singer because, if we don't, it will turn in to a muddy orchestration mess. However, the two colours together can loosely give us a sense that there is a second singer in the room, harmonizing. From the perspective of the composer, you have to be a real pro to pull this off.

# READERS' COMMENT

At this point, I think it would be helpful to go through some nomenclature. Spoiler alert: it's a little like junior high algebra. "When the hell am I going to use this, and how in hell did you add the letters x and y together and come up with six?"

The broadest of categories would be pitched and non-pitched percussion. Piano is a percussion instrument, but you knew that, right? So is guitar. "But it has strings on it!" Technically, if an instrument is struck or plucked and the sound decays after that, it is a percussion instrument. So, piano, guitar, harp, xylophone, marimba and vibraphone are pitched percussion instruments. But, hey! You can use a bow from a double bass on a vibraphone, therefore it is being used like a string instrument! Yup, you can (Shane brushes the particles of toast off his shirt).

The other category is a source of debate for some people. Non-pitched percussion instruments like tom-toms, snare drum and cymbals are of non-assignable pitch. Translation: I can't turn to a person playing the snare drum and ask him/her to play a B flat, then an E flat. Of course, there's one in every class. There's that kid at the back with the horn-rimmed glasses and no social skills that says: "But five tom-toms can be tuned to an assignable pitch!" Shut up Thomas. I don't have the patience to deal with your crap today.

See, Thomas is not wrong. He's just really irritating. A set of tom-toms can be thought of as a melodic instrument because four or five notes can be assigned to a set of these drums. I know this because my orchestration teacher made me write this way for tom-toms as an assignment... and I hated it.

Idiophones: yeah, I know, right? Weird name. It's an instrument which vibrates as a whole when struck, such as a bell, cymbal, gong or rattle. These sorts of instruments can be a real loudspeaker crossover killer. Let's remember that a suspended cymbal is not ALL in the tweeter. Believe me, it ain't. In fact, for me, hearing the "bass" of a cymbal is a very satisfying thing. That really brings the realism of the recording up to performance level in your room. You'll know it when you hear it... then you can't live without it. There are several other categories of idiophones which I'm not going to get in to: plucked, struck and friction.

Membranophones: Yup. It's a thing with skin on it. It's a drum... but you figured that out already. Geez you're quick. The same thing goes for loudspeaker crossover issues in this register, but we're focused upon midrange and bass driver issues here. Furthermore, issues with "chuffing" in bass reflex port and cabinet design problems are going to scream at you. And, if you ever wondered about damping factor, here you go. If you want to be over-the-top critical listening about this, I'd even turn the sub off. Let's focus upon what the instruments are doing through our main monitors and really be sure about what we're hearing, first. Add the ice creme to the apple pie later. Again, there are several sub-categories but I don't think we're interested in the kazoo right now.

Metallophones: Un-hunh. They're made of metal. Gotta get up pretty early in the day to beat you, hey? They're pitched percussion instruments like vibraphone and glockenspiel. Once again, Thomas chimes in and says: "But, Xylophone isn't made of metal. The bars are made of wood. It's the same as marimba!"

Shut up, Thomas. What the hell do you want to call them? Wood-ophones? You stand in front of the thing, you hit it with a couple of sticks and it makes a note. This is the region where the tweeter is really going to be challenged, as well as room loudspeaker

placement, room treatment, tubes or transistors, stranded core or solid core wire... the list goes on and on.

That was quite the tangent, wasn't it?

From the opening of the "Madrigals", there are a number of things that jump out at us. The first thing we notice is the double bass and how it is not being played as we might expect that instrument to be played. Normally, we hear bowed or plucked (pizzicato) notes. Sure, there's some of that but what really springs to mind is that it is being used as a hybrid second percussion instrument. To further confound the issue, bowed glissandi imitate the singer and what the singer is doing. It's not being played as you might expect hearing Jazz or Classical music. The instrument is being played in a more "struck" sort of way, unless it is bowed as a harmonic reinforcement of various chordal permutations or simple diads. For audiophiles, we might focus upon those sounds to hear responsiveness in the lower registers of our systems and how the upper partials interact with the overall sound reproduction.

While we're at it, in audio, double bass is really hard to get right. I'm sure every single one of us audio nuts know of this moment in time: it's as rare as the pot o' gold at the end of the rainbow. It's the one moment when we hear a pitch (or a couple of pitches) on the bass that is round, warm, full-bodied and delicious. I know you know the moment I am talking about. It's the goose bump moment we only hear once every sixteen years. It's the moment when you don't care about all the loudspeaker design, all the engineering, and all the other blather. And here's a hint: it doesn't come from a subwoofer. I am going to say that again: it's not in the subwoofer. It's in the mid bass. We frequently hear McGowan talk about Nudell getting the mid bass right. Yeah well, they're both right. It's really hard and really rare.

Jan DeGaetani is a pretty outstanding singer. One would have to be to be able to sing this stuff. If one was to think that she's just singing a bunch of notes willy-nilly and jumping around a lot, they'd be wrong about that. George Crumb is very, very, very specific about what notes are to be played or sung, and how they are to be articulated. In fact, if you get the chance, look at George Crumb's calligraphy. His musical handwriting is shockingly excellent. I will direct you to another of the pieces upon this album, "Idyll for the Misbegotten". You can hear the piece and watch the score unfold. [Link](#)

Even if one does not read music, I think this exercise is very helpful for audiophiles. It helps us to focus and visualize upon each "event" (or note) and think of this thing as a performance. Sure, we all want to hear how our new fancy ribbon tweeters are doing their thing, but are they really that musical? The midrange? Don't get me started.

I think I have said enough about this music and recording as is necessary. It's like the quote that's attributed to a bunch of different people. "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture." At this point, it would be best to get this CD and do your own critical listening. As I said from the beginning, I like this recording because it's in a small room that really exposes the instruments. It's like attending a dress rehearsal, score in hand. Somehow it feels less formal but WAY more critical.

# Are you serious about vinyl?



Having collaborated with such guest artists as The King's Singers, Judy Collins, Art Garfunkel, Mel Tormé, Ray Charles, Chet Atkins, Crystal Gayle, Lou Rawls and Roger Miller to name a few, Kory Katseane, Director of Orchestras in the BYU School of Music, knows how music is intended to sound and had this to say about the Graham Slee Accession phonostage -

"I hadn't noticed at first that the Accession was reproducing those acoustic environments more faithfully but gradually became more aware that in addition to it sounding more like real instruments, it was also sounding more like I was in great halls as well."



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# ALBUM REVIEW AND INTERVIEW

## MASCARA QUARTET'S BARCO NEGRO ON REEL TO REEL TAPE



Stuart Smith takes a listen to Slovenian based Mascara Quartet's Barco Negro reel to reel analogue recording of music inspired by Portuguese tradition and chats with the band about what inspires them, analogue recording and more.

Photos supplied by **Andrea Pavan**

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# MASCARA QUARTET



Mascara Quartet are, unsurprisingly enough, a four piece from (surprisingly enough) Slovenia made up of Polona Udovic on vocal and violin, Timi Krajnc and Vojko Vesligaj on guitar and Mitja Rezman on bass guitar. I got to know the band through a contact in the Hifi world, Miro Krajnc of Natural Sound who makes some rather wonderful loudspeakers we first came across whilst visiting the Warsaw show a couple of years ago, and boy I'm pleased I made the contact because this is an absolutely wonderful recording, supplied here on reel to reel tape.

What here is a surprise is the style of music played on Barco Negro (Black Boat) and the fact that it is traditional Portuguese with the liner notes stating "The storm of passion and the peace of the ocean, which rest somewhere amid the Iberian peninsula, South America and their rich folklore, are the musical muse which connects Polona, Timi, Vojko, and Mitja." It's not what I was expecting at all but it is absolutely beautiful, conjuring as it does a feeling of being transported from the listening room to a tasca surrounded by locals eating plates of pesticos in the backstreets of Porto. The music has the effect of being intimate and close, whilst the recording itself is wide and deep.

Musically or lyrically I'm not going to pretend that I understand a word of it, or even know very much about traditional Portuguese music, what I do know is that music, whether we understand what it is saying or not, can on rare occasions have the ability to move us emotionally and in some way connect us with the musicians and at times a deeper, almost primeval connection that transports us from our mundane existence to a richer and more beautiful place...and that is what this music does.

Technically I'm sure the playing is exemplary and vocally Polona seems to make all the right inflections, as stated I'm certainly no expert when it comes to these things, but that doesn't matter one bit. What matters here, as it does when we listen to a truly wonderful piece of music through a great Hifi is that we feel that connection – I

bang on about it all the time as being pretty much the be all and end all of why we invest thousands of our hard-earned cash on our systems. Trust me, if you have access to a reel to reel player and a decent Hifi, then invest in this recording as it will connect you like never before – It's not my kind of music I would have said (and did say) but in all honesty it hasn't been off the reel to reel player since it arrived and anyone who comes to visit has it played to them and not once have I not seen anything but a sense of peace descend and that emotional connection... and more than once seen grown men with tears in their eyes – yes it is that moving an experience.

Yep, the music and the playing are wonderful but the recording too is spectacularly good and that access to micro-aural detail is perhaps what helps make this recording do what it does emotionally. It's recorded live and fully analogue directly to a two-track stereo master (Studer A80), from which the tape I have is taken (again using a Studer A80). For the techy amongst you the guitar microphones were Neumann U67 and DPA 4006 using a API 512 preamplifier, the acoustic bass was recorded using a AER amp with a Shure SM58 and SSL preamp plus a live AKG C414 mic and API 512 preamp and the vocal was taken using an AKG D112, a Neve 1073 and a Manley Vari Mu compressor. Additional percussion provided by Vid Usenicnik was recorded using AKG D112, Sennheiser MD421 and an SSL preamp whilst the Bandoneon (Matjaz Balazic) was recorded using a Manley Tune preamp and Earthworks 30. The recording console for the session was the SSL 4055e/g and the master bus a Masalec MLA-2 using Summit Audio Element 78 master EQ.

All that gear is very impressive, but actually all pretty simple and what it does is get out of the way and allows the music to shine through – I suppose that is the art of the recording engineer. In fact, it's better than that because you don't once get the feeling that this is has been recorded in a recording studio. As mentioned, close your eyes and you could be sat in a Portuguese tavern surrounded by tradition,

# MASCARA QUARTET



# MASCARA QUARTET

folklore and music that somehow brings emotions to the surface despite the language differences...and that is the power of this music!

Look, I can bang on all day about the recording and how wonderful it is and how the music is foreign but strangely familiar, but the truth of the matter is I just cannot get enough of this recording and despite having listened to it dozens of times, I'm yet to tire of it. It has everything I look for in life; passion, feeling, thrills and at times melancholy and as such I wholeheartedly commend this and suggest you buy it immediately! I will be taking this tape with us to Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in a couple of weeks in the hope that I can hear it on some of the world class systems that will be on demonstration there.

## Wonderful, simply wonderful!

There are still opportunities to see Mascara Quartet with more dates to follow I'm sure:

22.3. 2020 Faro, Portugal

1.9. 2019 Medana Goriška Brda

27.8. 2019 Poletje v Celju

## HIFI PIG CHATS WITH MASCARA QUARTET

**HP: Tell Hifi Pig readers about the quartet, how you formed and your individual backgrounds. :**

The Mascara Quartet was formed in 2012; the members are:

Polona Udovič - vocals, violin

Timi Krajnc - guitar

Vojko Vešligaj - guitar

Mitja Režman - acoustic bass

For us, Mascara represents friendship and love for music. All of us are classically trained musicians and we all teach at music schools. Our music is a reflection of our individual musical experiences, our artistic career pathways and intensive work with numerous artists, chamber groups, orchestras, ensembles, concert hall and festival performances from around the world.

**HP: You are Slovenian based but Barco Negro (Black Boat) comes from a whole different culture of music; can you tell us a little bit about how you connected with this style of music, a little of its history and how you came about recording it.**

Mascara Quartet is indeed based in Slovenia but that does not mean that the music we perform is foreign to our senses and emotions. Music, obviously, knows no boundaries nor barriers; if you feel the music you shall be able to perform it convincingly as well. As a group and individuals we are connected with various musical styles, from classical music to Fado and Tango, which are the basis of the album Barco Negro. We perform this music at concerts and we are familiar with both, composition and interpretation. It is a temperamental and sensual music, which allows a lot of freedom in interpretation and at the same time inspires us mutually during our stage performance. The fact that we are good friends in our private life can be heard in our playing. Our guest musicians certainly contribute to the diversity of the album: Matjaž Balažič on Bandoneon and Vid Ušeničnik on percussion. Of course, Bandoneon is indispensable in Tango and Matjaž's artistic sensitivity in performing music is giving the album a

special stamp. The same goes for Vid's playing the percussion joining us on two Fado tracks.

Barco Negro is a fully analogue recording. We believe it should be listened in one go, from the beginning to the end and experience it in the fashion presented and interpreted by our band. In the past the albums were recorded conceptually, they had a common thread and dramaturgy, from the beginning to the end. Modern ways of recording an album many times ignore this sense of organic wholeness/entirety. Our goal is to give the best of ourselves and convey our joy to the listener. The very way of recording this leads to different results in performance and interpretation as it needs to be prepared and played just like at the concerts.

**HP: The recording was made live in Studio Jork; can you tell Hifi Pig a little more about the recording process.**

We decided to record it at the Studio Jork because it is one of the few studios offering analogue recording capabilities with top-notch equipment. The recording took place quite fast as we recorded the whole album in two days. Of course, when using analogue technology, much longer preparation is required before recording. The group playing needs to be tightly connected and in our case this is a direct result of numerous concerts that we have performed together. Our common musicianship was built considerably at concert stages and I believe this shows on the album. But of course, the maturation of a musician never ends.

**HP: Was there any overdubbing or editing of the masters and what affected this decision?**

There is no overdubbing or editing on the record. Our philosophy for this concept is to be completely honest to our fans and deliver our maximum performance without technical manipulation. Choosing analog technology is only a natural consequence of this as it is superior in delivering this message and also better sounding.

**HP: Let's get to the techy stuff; What influenced your decisions in the equipment you used in the studio??**

We feel that going completely analogue is a statement for itself. To make it happen calls for a lot more devotion than to let's say doing it the modern way, digitally with all the help exploited that the tools offer. Analogue has yet to be surpassed sonically. Digital is just a lot more convenient and helluva lot cheaper and faster. Better sounding? We doubt it will ever be. Our goal is to offer the very best the analogue world has to offer and the gear used is chosen accordingly. The tapes we offer are very small volume limited edition so to speak and are intended for those with refined ears that care for all the little nuances the analog tape has to offer. You can go hi-res digital up through the roof with sample rate and bit depth but it will still lack that refined low level resolution and microdynamics of the live thing and maybe even those tiny imperfections that tape as a medium imposes but are complementary to the perceived quality of the sound.

**HP: Why do you think there is a whole lot of interest in the use of reel to reel again and do you see it as a fad or something that is here to stay?**

Too many people perceive and consume music as fast food – consuming it on the surface and not digging into the deeper layers. There may be many reasons for this, life in the fast lane might be to blame but also the recording industry probably carries some responsibility. That's why we wanted to go back to the good old way

# MASCARA QUARTET



# MASCARA QUARTET

of recording the album as a whole. We like the look of active VU meters, mechanical rotation and scent of the tape, the feeling of hot tubes and the slight nervous feeling during the recording of songs, because we are aware that it is not possible to correct errors. To us, this seems more involving and, of course, in the end, we decided to do this because of the sound provided by analogue recording appears more real or lifelike if you will.

## **HP: What do you say to the people who are pirating recordings and selling them as originals?**

Our intention is to present the music to people in the best possible format.

The R2R market is growing steadily, but there are very few true analogue tapes. There is a lot of digital copying on the tape under the pretext that it is "true analogue experience". If anyone sells digitally recorded tape and is honest and tells it then nothing is wrong with this. If, however, this is not the case then these people are doing damage to the whole R2R market – and to those who work hard and insist on pure analogue recordings. It would be right for people to start to realize what they are buying and do not waste money on false "analogue" clips.

We also see the problem in the term "Master Tape". Many people are not even aware of what this means. Master Tape can not be sold as a bulk product, Master Tape is the basis for producing LP or all subsequent R2R copies. Among the providers, however, they appear quite regularly specified as "Master Tape", which is unacceptable as it is a falsehood. Even copies of older cult recordings of famous musicians are practically impossible. Master tapes of these recordings, if they still exist, are carefully guarded by publishers who are the owners of rights and are not selling or giving them around. If a copy of such recording accidentally appears, it's probably at least a fifth generation or even a digital clip but it's certainly not a "Master Tape" or a "Master Tape Copy 1st generation". For our tape, we can guarantee that it is a copy of the master tape, which we, of course, have.

## **HP: Are you planning to record a new analogue album in the future?**

The new album is already recorded and we are currently working on creating an image for LP and R2R, and creating the basis for the LP. We recorded the album together with the string quartet and a percussionist. The tracks were arranged by Peter Urek and were processed exclusively for the new album which we recorded in the Studio Peer.

## **HP: Where can Hifi Pig readers buy your recordings?**

Currently we have distributors in the following countries:

Asia: Joy Audio [www.joyaudio.com.tw](http://www.joyaudio.com.tw)

Canada: Red Leaf Audio [www.redleafaudiomarketing.ca](http://www.redleafaudiomarketing.ca)

Customers from other regions can contact us directly.

[www.mascara.si](http://www.mascara.si)

E mail: [vojko.vesligaj@gmail.com](mailto:vojko.vesligaj@gmail.com)

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Photographs supplied by Andrea Pavan [www.pavanandrea.com](http://www.pavanandrea.com)

# REVIEW

## GOLDNOTE MEDITERRANEO

### TURNTABLE



The Mediterraneo from Italian brand Gold Note is their top-level turntable and it's certainly a bit of a looker, but how does it perform. The UK price for the Mediterraneo in Italian Walnut is £5,445.00 and this includes the B 5.1 Tonearm. Stuart Smith finds out how it performs.

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# GOLDNOTE MEDITERRANEO TURNTABLE



## CONSTRUCTION

I picked up this particular turntable from a reviewer based here in France and so can't really comment on how it was packed, but I do have all the packaging and it all seems well done. For the purposes of this review I've been using the supplied Gold Note Tuscany Red cartridge (I use one in our reference turntable and so know it well), the supplied arm all through the Lab 12 melto2 phonostage whose review we published recently.

The turntable itself has a 60mm wooden base made of Italian Walnut "slats" with a 20mm polished acrylic board above it. The whole is reinforced by a 3mm thick steel board which is there to improve strength, stability and dampening.

Power to the turntable is an in-house device using a quad-core micro-controller that "reshapes" the AC current to drive the 12V synchronous motor which Gold Note claim cancels all vibrations and improves torque.

The platter is made from 45mm Sustar in whilst the spindle is made of hardened "carbon-rectified" chromed steel and the bearing itself is ceramic. The platter bearing spindle is 60mm and the bearing system is made of polished bronze which Gold Note say is polished to 1/100mm tolerances. The whole point here is to try and give as smooth a rotation as possible of the platter when in use and to reduce noise getting back to the stylus, and hence your speakers.

Technical spec provided by Gold Note are a rumble figure of -80dB and wow and flutter of 0.1%. Speed stability is said to be within +/- 0.1% and speed is changed electronically between 45 and 33 RPM with the ability to fine tune pitch should you feel the need. It's a belt drive design, we had to ask for a new one as the cat decided to eat the first one we had and I can only assume our eldest cat has some kind of polyvinyl fetish.

Dimensions are WHD 470mm x 210mm x 360mm and the whole thing comes in at 20KG. Helpfully the turntable comes with a nice dust cover and a platter mat. It also comes with a stabilising weight so add your cartridge of choice and you are off.

Aesthetically the turntable is an absolute stunner and oozes (sorry) Italian style. The wave of the lower walnut plinth looks wonderful on the rack and is offset by that highly polished acrylic top. Speed control buttons are well placed on the left and are effective in their use. Fit and finish are exemplary and set up is a doddle. There are lots of turntables available on the market and I can quite honestly say that this is up there with the best-looking turntables I have come across. It is elegantly simple and stylish and I like that a lot and the large "spikes" below the deck really set it off nicely. I also like that the turntable is essentially plug and play with you only needing to add the cartridge of your choice. If we were to judge this turntable on looks and build alone it would be a winner. Gold Note have, since this review was written, introduced a new version with a gold coloured instead of wood plinth and it too looks fab!

The review sample had fitted the Gold Note B-51 tonearm which is a bit of a looker too – it was also simple and intuitive in use. Inside B-5.1 there are four precision micro ball-bearings manufactured by GRW in Germany and then singularly sealed and packed with Gold Note saying "Extreme precision is a crucial factor and it allows B-5.1 to function in ideal noiseless condition to reproduce without effort every musical detail." The tone arm features a double counterweight system to set up most phono cartridge (up to 15 gram mass) with extra weights being available to handle cartridges with higher mass. The vertical ball-bearings are pivoted through stainless steel bolts that are manually adjusted whilst the horizontal movement is driven by two micro ball-bearings directly inserted in the main rectified pivot. It's a very good looking tonearm that compliments this turntable very nicely.

## SOUND QUALITY

# GOLDNOTE MEDITERRANEO TURNTABLE



# GOLDNOTE MEDITERRANEO TURNTABLE

Piano is the reviewers go to instrument to go to when looking to assess speed stability, any issues and it will be immediately apparent that something is amiss with an unmistakable wobble. I'm a fan of direct-drive turntables for their absolute pitch stability and our current reference from Origin Live, whilst being belt drive, has a feedback system to ensure absolute speed control. Pitch is a weird one and I'm particularly susceptible to a vinyl spinner that is less than stable, I suppose this may be years spent working out the BPMs of all my records when DJing. The Gold Note record player has no such mechanism as the Origin Live, but playing a couple of piano tracks highlighted no issues that I could perceive on both 33 and 45. One feature worth mentioning here is that if you do make any adjustments to the speed (I didn't feel the need) they are automatically stored in the controller's memory – nifty.

Bass was presented rock solidly whatever tracks I threw at the turntable. With Dub Syndicate's *Strike The Balance* the Gold Note dug down deep and was unfazed by this heavy dub reggae album. I've experienced this record on a load of turntables and it's not always presented as solidly as it is here. There is weight and authority to the bass on the Gold Note, allowing the bass to underpin the tracks but without over-dominating proceedings – even-handed is a word I'd like to use here and whilst on balance I prefer our current reference, were that to go I'd be very happy using the Mediterraneo. Regular readers will know that I bang on about bass overhang a lot but the Gold Note stops and starts on a penny with regards to the lower registers. With Deep Purple's live version of *Smoke On The Water* (another bass test track for me) it has the right amount of growl when it comes in.

Moving on to a bit of house (Kinky Trax) and again I'm impressed by the pace and the rhythm the Mediterraneo allows. Hardly your usual audiophile fodder I know, but house is music done on machines and as such is temperamental when it comes to speed variations and you'll be happy to know there are none here. You Got Me Up by Dajae opens with a wailed female vocal and I've played it hundreds of times (much to the chagrin of Linette) and if the speed is not stable it sounds, like pianos, terrible – again, no issues here! The job of a turntable and its arm is, for me, to spin at the right speed consistently and allow the cartridge to dig down into the grooves of a record and extract as much information as is possible without adding colouration. Get this right and a vinyl front end can be a truly wonderful thing – OK I know that's pretty simplistic but it's not far off the mark – and the Gold Note does just that. Detail retrieval is there in spades and particularly on well recorded albums (Kind Of Blue on 45) you are allowed to see well into the recording and, importantly, you are able to connect with the music on an emotional level. Musicians and instruments sit in their positions and stay there giving you a visual/aural perspective to the recording.

The turntable was for the duration placed on our rack as our wall shelf had been taken down for relocation and here we may have an issue for the Gold Note. We have suspended floors and it was nigh on impossible to walk around without footfall affecting the deck and as such, unless you have solid concrete floors, a wall-mount is pretty much essential. To be fair the Gold Note is not on its own here, but our Origin Live does fair a smidgen better in this respect, despite it not being a suspended design. I can't help thinking that the cone feet are not helping here and perhaps an alternative solution could be found – though that would affect the aesthetics of the turntable and if you do have a record player of this standard and price, you really ought to get yourself a properly sorted wall mounted shelf. On the other hand, I could not detect motor noise getting back to the cartridge and it was very quiet between tracks.

We use the Tuscany Red cartridge on a daily basis on our reference turntable and arm and it is a very good match, as you would rightly expect, with the Mediterraneo. The combination represents an excellent way to get information out of the grooves of your records and to your phonostage without adding too much of itself to proceedings and all in all that is all you can ask for.

## CONCLUSION

The Mediterraneo from Gold Note is a bit of a stunner. It looks absolutely spectacular in an understated kind of way and goes to prove that a high-end sound does not need to come at the sacrifice of beautiful aesthetics.

Sonically it performs its job without fuss and comes close to our reference – we use the same Tuscany Red cartridge, so a comparison is perfectly fair I feel – with the Origin Live winning out by a smidgen on getting the last bits of detail out of the grooves and feeling more solid in its presentation bass-wise – but it was a close call. It favours no one genre and can rock along, rave along when required but it can also be cool and refined when expected.

If you are looking for a great looking, very good sounding turntable that is both easy to set up and listen to then get yourself a listen to this.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Beautifully designed and well built. Easy to set up and easy to use.

**Sound Quality:** Speed stable and with very low rumble. Lots of detail.

**Value for Money:** Not cheap but then it was never going to be.

**Pros:** Add a cartridge and you are ready to go. Beautiful to look at and well built. Dust-cover is a nice touch. Great sounding turntable that digs deep into the groove and has speed and rhythm to its presentation. Bass is deep, taught and controlled but doesn't come at the expense of the other frequencies.

**Cons:** Susceptible to footfall in our environment but invest in a wall shelf and you are sorted.

**Price:** The UK price for the Mediterraneo in Italian Walnut is £5,445.00 this includes the B 5.1 Tonearm.

The B 5.1 is available separately at £809.00.



**REVIEW**

**EAT C SHARP TURNTABLE,  
E-GLO S PHONO & LPS POWER SUPPLY**



**Janine Elliot has previously reviewed the EAT C Sharp turntable, but now it's available in a supercharged package with its own phono stage and power supply. The combo is £6494 in the UK, but is it worth the extra lolly?**

**Hifi Pig**  
**www.hifipig.com**

# EAT C SHARP TURNTABLE, E-GLO S PHONO & LPS POWER SUPPLY



I reviewed the EAT C Sharp turntable (distributed in the UK by Absolute Sounds) a while back, giving it a glowing report for the price, so was delighted to be offered it again but this time combined with a linear power supply and matching hybrid phono stage. At £2798, £1198 and £2498 respectively the whole combo comes in at £6494, not a lot for the complete vinyl kit of this quality. EAT (European Audio Team) is a Czech company run by Jozefina Lichtenegger, the lady married to Heinz Lichtenegger, who many will know as the CEO of Pro-Ject. Many will not know that EAT actually started out as a maker of high-quality audio valves and accessories. Then they introduced their first turntable, the Forte, which still remains to this day their flagship deck, complete with the E-Go 12" tonearm. Since their beginnings, the range of products has grown to include a large line-up of turntables, tonearms, phono preamplifiers, cartridges, power supply and vacuum tubes, plus the famous EAT valve cooling damper. They have even started a range of candles and perfumes "for our senses", though I'm not sure if they actually improve the audio.

There are certainly links between EAT and Pro-Ject, such as the use of carbon fibre and MDF, but this is a completely different company and I particularly liked the raked aluminium edged platter and carbon-fibre arm of the C Sharp turntable when I originally reviewed it. Now with the LPS power supply added and the E-Glo S phono stage the products look even more upmarket. Both these additions are available with piano black or Makassar wood cheeks and matt aluminium front and top. Makassar is a very dark and gorgeous wood finish, in-case like me, you didn't know.

## THE KIT

### THE C SHARP TURNTABLE

The C# comes complete with the C-Note tonearm carbon fibre/aluminium uni-pivot arm, not bad for under £2800. For £3,298 it

even comes complete with the excellent Ortofon MC Quintet Black cartridge, as used in this review. The Carbon fibre in the construction means it can be an extremely low table by virtue of its strength; indeed, it is quite challenged in height department, especially when sat next to the Forte. This low-profile base chassis is made out of highest density MDF. On this base the motor is mounted, as well as 10 damping feet made from energy absorbing (and therefore damping) TPE (Thermoplastic Elastomers). All the rumble of the platter or bearing is therefore directed in the TPE columns where it is absorbed so that it doesn't get as far as the arm and cartridge. Finally, the cone-shape TPE columns carry the Carbon Fibre suspended plinth. The bearing is an oversized and inverted bearing shaft with a ceramic ball atop on which is placed the sub-platter, and the main heavy platter being placed on top of that. There is a 700g mass point at this bearing so that all the energy is sucked up and converted to heat. The platter itself was disconcertingly close to the carbon plinth, though free from any friction. The motor is attached to the lower chassis so that no vibrations make their way to the platter bearing and to the arm. As this top platter has angled edges it is not easy to hold, and therefore the record clamp is screwed into it and used as a handle to lower carefully onto the sub-platter. Obviously, you previously will need to affix the belt to the motor and the sub-platter. Many turntables seem to charge extra for record clamps, but this one comes gratis, largely because it is a necessity in setting up the deck. I am a fan of record clamps since my original free "Richer Sounds" plastic clamp I obtained in the 80's. Whilst that one has long gone to meet its recycle bin in the sky, the EAT aluminium affair is a forever necessity and is really good looking. EAT recommend you don't screw the clamp down when playing records, but rather that it just sits on the record. It is heavy enough to work well in holding records securely to the platter.

I did love the ease at setting up the unit, the review sample coming complete with Ortofon Quintet Black S cartridge. This cartridge gave an effortless playing of the music, and was particularly good with vocals. The tonearm itself includes a combination of cardan and uni-

# EAT C SHARP TURNTABLE, E-GLO S PHONO & LPS POWER SUPPLY



# EAT C SHARP TURNTABLE, E-GLO S PHONO & LPS POWER SUPPLY

pivot bearings, immersed in special damping fluid designed to damp the tonearm and cartridge resonances by more than 50%. The cardan or universal joint was coined by Gerolamo Cardano, an Italian, and this tonearm, by combining both friction-free pivot simplicity and cardan flexibility makes it very steady and robust. This arm is actually quite complex in design, with cardan joint for the horizontal and two ball race ABEC7 bearings for vertical and uni-pivot damping pin to complete the setup. The whole isn't perhaps as beautiful as some tonearms, it being fairly large in size, but it is very practical and a doddle to set up; Only the clever bias compensation caused me yet again a few moments brain searching. I had the same problem last time affixing it to the arm. The manual doesn't explain it in enough detail to confirm the path of the thread. Similarly, the counterweight is very loose on the arm which did make me nervous that it would move about and change the cartridge load, but it stayed glued to the same spot for the few weeks of my review, set at 2.35g for the Quintet Black S cartridge.

Speed selection and control is via a tasty looking black box connected to the rear of the turntable, which flashes the speed you have selected until it has reached stable velocity, in around 2-4 seconds depending on whether 33 or 45rpm. Normally a small wall-wart power supply feeds this, but for the purpose of this review the substantial LPS power supply was deployed.

## E-GLO S

The E-Glo S phono-stage is one step up from the E-Glo Petit and below the excellent E-Glo model topping the family. Common to all in the range are the use of vacuum tubes. The E-Glo S is a hybrid design with ECC83 tubes (twin triode) in the first and second gain stages. This not only achieves good gain but also low noise. In the first stage is a cascade connection of tube with two parallel-connected low-noise J-FET transistors to keep noise down. The RIAA equalizer is passive and split in two steps in order to achieve excellent impedance matching between the gain and equalization stages. The E Glo S is a work of art and dual mono design. Beautifully constructed and very minimalist in looks and matching the LPS linear power supply. The E-Glo S is mightily big in features, working with both MM and MC cartridges. There are 6 load impedances for MC (10, 30, 50, 0, 100 and 1000Ω) plus 47,000Ω for MM. Similarly, there are a total of 7 load capacitance choices for your MM cartridge (50, 150, 270, 370, 520, 620 and 740pF) plus a variable output gain setting for the RCA output to your amplifier (45, 50, 55, 60, 65 and 70 dB). With the more sensitive MM cartridge output is set at 45dB. It also has a subsonic button should you wish to use it. A series of blue LEDs at the front indicate the settings you have selected, and all settings are operable from four top-grade metal toggle switches on the top of the unit at the right, plus an off/on switch at the left. I am so pleased that they have not put that switch at the rear. Those familiar with my reviews will know I have a dislike for switches at the rear. Protruding out of the top of the unit are two ECC83's valves with the excellent EAT cooling damper and all protected by two pairs of doughnut-shaped aluminium covers. Therefore, no other units can be placed on top, not that you would want to. The rear is sparse with just in/out RCA sockets plus an earth connection. The top-of-the-line E-Glo phono-stage is a two-unit affair, with a power supply sitting underneath the 4-valve phono-stage. For this review rather than using the supplied wall-wart power unit I was supplied with the matching LPS power supply turning this "S" model also firmly into a 2-box affair.

## LPS POWER SUPPLY

EAT has always believed that the power supply should be a major part of the signal path as it can significantly contribute to the sound quality. Whilst the supplied power supply works well, having a more advanced product that not only feeds the turntable but also the phono stage was an obvious step to take. There are predominately two types of power supply, switching and linear mode. The LPS is a regulated linear power supply, or rather it is actually two independent power supplies in one box, with a 15v DC output for EAT turntables (and Pro-Ject 15v turntables) plus 18v DC to power EAT phono stages (and most of Pro-Ject phono stages). It comes with full bridge rectifying circuitry using ultra-fast diodes followed by an 8800uF filtration bank. Voltage regulation is fully-discrete and no operational amplifier is used. The Voltage reference is TL431, a three-terminal programmable shunt regulator diode. Aimed at producing a fixed voltage irrespective of the loading on the device, power supply variations, temperature changes, and the passage of time, this all results in very low noise and excellent regulation. In many respects, it works as an over-performing battery power supply. Ripple voltage is lower than 1 microvolt with voltage accuracy better than  $\pm 0.05\%$ . EAT claim the "temperature drift is beyond every level of standard power supplies". The LPS can deliver the 15v and 18v simultaneously via the choice of three (2.1mm, XLR 4pin and 2.5mm) cables that are included. The on/off switch is conveniently located at the front of the unit with a blue LED to the right.

## SOUND QUALITY

The idea of this review was for me to see what improvement there was using these three products together. I have already written a glowing report on the turntable itself, particularly the arm. Therefore, my listening time was spent looking at the complete kit rather than evaluating each unit separately. It did become apparent right from the start just how good that power supply was, not just in controlling the turntable speed, but giving the E-Glo S more headroom and dynamics. I didn't expect to hear much improvement from the turntable itself, but overall control of the music I listened to was actually notably improved. Since the stylus picks up the slightest motor speed variation alongside the music and amplifies it some 8000 times through your speakers, that includes any weaknesses from the power supply driving it. It was a number of years ago that I realised just how important good power supplies were in turntables, and a number of manufacturers have up-rated supplies to improve their turntables, as well as changing from AC to DC motors. Changes I heard in the E-Glo S were more obvious; as well as improved noise floor and increased dynamic range over the wall-wart plug, even the soundstage improved. Listening to the usual rather bland remastered Genesis "Selling England By The Pound" the E-Glo S gave a detailed and tightly controlled rendition but a very gentle performance. Turning to Supertramp 'Breakfast in America' it was clear to me that the power supply was improving the noise floor, particularly the long fade-up at the start of the album. Similarly, the phono-stage provided a richer and more musical sound as well as lower distortion. Don't misunderstand me, the supplied wall-wart cable is adequate, but switching over gave increased depth to the sound and lower floor as well as freedom from RF. The music sounded faster, though that is, of course, impossible; it just had more purpose to it. The piano in the title track was secure and detailed.

Turning to Julian Bream's 'Guitarra' album this gave me a chance to check speed accuracies and control of the music. This album is a mixture of Renaissance, Baroque, classical and Vihuela guitars performing music from Spain. This was a delicate and tightly controlled performance delivered impeccably by both Julian and the EAT combination. Noise floor from both turntable and phono-stage

# EAT C SHARP TURNTABLE, E-GLO S PHONO & LPS POWER SUPPLY



# EAT C SHARP TURNTABLE, E-GLO S PHONO & LPS POWER SUPPLY

was impressive. Boccherini's 'Fandango', here arranged for two guitars, was spectacular through my Krell/Wilson Benesch setup. The musical performance was well controlled with both instruments well separated in my room. Turning to 'Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers' the instruments were again given wide stage in my listening room with tight drumming from Art and the trumpeter reaching far more forward than the other instruments when the latter took to blowing solo. This heavy-weight vinyl was highly infectious and the combination of turntable, cartridge, phono-stage and power supply working as well together as were Art and his band. I couldn't possibly moan listening to the famous opening track "Moanin'". Only the badly mic'd piano let the performance down. Everything else was just right, tightly controlled and delicately delivered, an almost silky performance. I am always in love with valve amplification, and the mix of valve phono and transistor Krell made for a compelling combination. The LPS and E-Glo S added to the C Sharp turntable took the performance from the turntable to a whole new level. Timing was perfect along with the decays and reverb in "Along Came Betty" which were allowed to decay to the very end. As mentioned earlier, the E Glo S comes complete with a subsonic filter. This removes the very lowest frequencies by 18dB/octave, caused by warped records operating below 20Hz. I have to admit I didn't notice any benefit from it, largely because my records were flat, though I appreciate its inclusion.

Turning to my brilliant Brubeck "A Cut Above" direct cut disc that I bought in 1978, the C Sharp played admirably with only the odd difficulty coping with the occasional initial transients as well as it does on my own choice of phono-stage. The phono-stage did, however, give an excellent performance covering all frequencies and dynamics in a way that should please anyone looking for a phono-stage even up to £4000. It is exceptionally quiet, the only noise being the surface noise from the record. Whilst choice of load settings is less than is on the top-of-the-range E-Glo, the "S" is a fine product and I was able to get the best out of the Ortofon cartridge.

Manuel de Falla's 'Love the Magician' (Chandos, London Symphony Orchestra) is one of the composer's best works and my favourite, a ballet composed between 1914–15 and sometimes referred to as "Wedded By Witchcraft". It always gives a magical performance for the audiophile. There is everything in this work, from depth of soundstage, dynamism, choice of instruments and vocals, and frequencies from bass bite to cymbal sizzle. The E-Glo S gave this performance a characteristically silky finish that was highly seductive. Being able to adjust impedance easily, was a great feature to achieve the best from the cartridge. Some phono-stages I have reviewed have dip switches, often at the back or underneath, which is not only highly inconvenient but also don't give the user a chance to alter parameters on-the-fly. All components in this set-up were a pleasure to operate, working so well together, as they should. I could see why Pedro from Absolute Sounds, who supplied the combination for review, wanted me to listen to them. The more I played the more I liked. The C Sharp is a great turntable with an impressive arm, working well on both low and high-end cartridges. The E-Glo S is an impressive phono-stage; full of features to enable it to drive any cartridge, very quiet and giving a detailed portrayal of the music with a silky-smooth sheen. The LPS power supply livened up the music still further, and on its own is a very valuable upgrade. Just see how many upgrade power supplies are being offered these days. "Wall-wart" supplies are like the cables that come with your hi-fi; just about adequate and cheap. Just as we wouldn't want to be seen using a 50p cable on our expensive equipment, so, too, we need to consider the adequacy of our power supplies.

## CONCLUSION

This is a really good trio of components. The turntable is highly recommended, as is the E-Glo S, but using these together with the LPS set all components onto a new level, and therefore has to be Highly Recommended bordering on Outstanding. The effects are subtle but very real, and both the phono-stage and the power supply should be considered if you buy the C Sharp. What is useful is that if you upgrade the turntable to a Forte, you can still use them.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** The LPS and E-Glo S are beautifully engineered simplicity

**Sound Quality:** Silky smooth but detailed phono-stage, and a power supply improving dynamics and detail from the phono-stage as well as controlling the turntable taking it to a new level

**Value for Money:** £6,494 is a good price when you consider it is for all three products making a complete vinyl section

**Pros:** Detailed and well-rounded sound, working well on all types of music. Long listening sessions without fatigue. The phono-stage, not too far removed from the more-pricey E-Glo. n excellently engineered power supply. Combined they take the C Sharp to new levels (C Double-Sharp?)

**Cons:** Not at these prices.

**Price:** £6494 total (including C Sharp turntable)



# REVIEW

## LAB12 MELTO PHONOSTAGE



The melto2 from Lab12 has different equalisation curves, mono and stereo options, three inputs, balanced outputs and on paper at least looks like an interesting proposition. But does this flexibility come at the expense of great sonics? Stuart Smith finds out when he listens to this €3750 phono-preamplifier.

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# LAB12 MELTO PHONOSTAGE



Lab12 are a Greek company headed up by Stratos Vichos and based in Athens. I first became aware of their products a few years ago whilst attending the Munich High End show where I got to have a look at their products and subsequently we've reviewed a couple of their products. Indeed, their gordian power conditioner and pre 1 pre-amplifier are key components in our mid-priced system. Most of their products (obviously not the power conditioner) are valve based and feature a distinctive and attractive retro look to them. The retro look, however, belies the complexity and usability of their products. Adding to the appeal of the Lab2 products, they come with a full five-year guarantee, which to me suggests that Stratos and his team have a good deal of confidence in their designs and the longevity of their products.

What we have here with the Lab12 melto2 is a fully adjustable phono-preamplifier that will handle up to three cartridges of either MM or MC design. Adjustments can be made on the fly and you can choose to change cartridge type, gain, impedance, capacitance, equalisation curve and whether you want mono or stereo output. So, a pretty flexible unit on the face of it, it would seem. One of the features mentioned here that will interest collectors is the ability to change the equalisation curve and you get the normal RIAA curve, but in addition both Decca and Columbia curves. Most readers will be aware of the RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) curve that has been the industry standard since the mid-1950s. Before this standardisation it was standard practice for different record companies would use their own equalisation – obviously something of a problem for collectors and radio stations. It's not the purpose of this review to go into the technical side of the curves, suffice to say that different curves have different pre-emphasis on certain frequencies at recording and de-emphasis on playback, with the RIAA curve the recording made with low frequencies being reduced and high frequencies boosted, whereas on playback the phonostage does the opposite and boosts low frequencies and reduces the high frequencies. So, with that in mind, the melto2 will be an interesting

proposition for serious collectors of vinyl whose collections span many decades and different labels.

I mentioned also that input impedance can be adjusted and we have a range of 50 ohm to 47Kohm available with input capacitance being adjustable from 0 to 300pF. Gain for Moving Magnet is 38dB and for Moving Coil cartridges 64dB. This would suggest then that the target market for the melto2 is not only the serious record collector but also vinyl aficionados who use more than one cartridge for playing different records, something that seems to be becoming increasingly popular amongst audiophiles.

I mentioned this a valve/tube design and the complement inside the melto2 is 2x E88CC dual triodes and 2x 6n2p-EV dual triodes. The design of the circuit is a no feedback design and Lab12 use two proprietary implementations – SRSG and Fine Symmetry. The step-up transformer inside the unit is by Lundahl who have been making transformers in Sweden since 1958.

Build-wise the unit continues the high standards of other Lab12 products I've had the pleasure to review and the front panel is made of 5mm Aluminium which is available in matt black or frozen silver – the review unit arrived in frozen silver. On this panel you have a large and easy to read OLED display, a knob for turning the unit on (or to mute it) and another knob that allows you to navigate the different settings. The latter sounds pretty complex, but, like their gordian power conditioner, it's all pretty straightforward and you can do it all from the comfort of your armchair with the simple but effective remote control. All in all, the melto2 looks very attractive on the rack and certainly has a retro feel to its design.

Dimensions of the melto2 are 43x11x29cm (WHD) and it weighs in at a reasonable 8Kg. It arrives in simple but well-done packaging.

Round the back of the melto2 you have a total of three RCA inputs with each having its own grounding post. Output to your pre-amplifier

of choice is either by RCA (unbalanced) or the increasingly popular balanced XLR. This is a nice touch and from a marketing perspective a sensible decision on the part of Lab12. Other than the AC mains IEC input and the master on/off switch that is your lot. Everything is well spaced and there is plenty of room for your cabling – some products seem to space their sockets so close together as to make it all but impossible to get all your cables in there.

So that's the physical aspects of the melto2 taken care of but what about the sonics – expectations are high given the features and build so let's hope it delivers!

## IN USE AND SOUND QUALITY

OK, I'm not a serious collector of older vinyl and I use only MC cartridges, having given my only MM away some time ago and so for the purposes of this review I'll be using just the Gold Note Tuscany Red that is bolted onto the Origin Live Zephyr tonearm mounted on their Resolution record deck. This vinyl front-end has been our reference for a good while now and takes pride of place in our main system which comprises Merrill Audio Thor power amps along with a Music First Baby Reference II pre-amplifier. Cabling for the purposes of this review is all Tellurium Q, other than power which is by Atlas and Tellurium Q. Speakers are our Avantgarde Duo XDs but, as these have active bass, I also auditioned the melto2 using a pair of Xavian Perla stand-mounters with Franc Audio Accessories slim footers added.

Switch the melto2 on and you are presented with a screen that says "melto is warming up" and a countdown from sixty seconds. The screen is clearly legible from my sitting position about 3 or so metres away which is a good thing. You can then scroll through the settings using the remote. First up, set the input you will be using, then the cartridge type, then high or low gain, then the equalisation curve, capacitance is locked at low, impedance is set to 25ohms (you can scroll through 25, 27, 34, 40, 60, 66, 73, 79, 88, 100 and High Impedance) and you can set whether you want a mono or stereo output. Finally, you can change the contrast of the OLED display but I kept it on full brightness as it made it easier to read. All this set up took a matter of a couple of minutes and, as I said, was all achievable from the comfort of my listening chair – I like this. I'm a bit of a prat when it comes to remote controls and never seem to get the hang of them with Linette being the guardian of remotes for television, satellite box etc, but this experience was hassle free and very intuitive. Good work Lab12 as I really hate the whole having to learn a new product thing – In a world of plug and play (and let's face it laziness) there's no excuse for over complicating things.

First up, and it was the first record that I came to, was John Martyn's Solid Air (Half Speed Master) which regular readers of my reviews will know I reckon to be one of the finest recordings out there. The first thing I notice is the that there is absolutely no noise that I can hear being put into the system by the melto2 – it is silent between tracks other than the odd crackle and pop that are on this very well-played record. The second thing I note is the width of the soundstage, which I'm aware is a characteristic most influenced by the speakers, but it is wider than it was previously for sure. Thirdly I note the clarity and purity of tone in Martyn's voice and instruments. First impressions of this phono are VERY encouraging and I find myself sat listening to the whole record, only pausing to take the odd note and to turn the record over at the end of side one. Imaging also feels somewhat sharper than I'm used to, again a characteristic influenced mostly by speakers, but the melto2 is definitely doing something positive to the whole and I'm liking it...a lot!

Next up I dig out a copy of Handels Messiah (Decca LXT 2921), a mono recording from 1954 giving me the opportunity to switch between RIAA curve and Decca and mono and stereo outputs, again from the comfort of my listening position. Now I don't know this record particularly well but switching to the Decca curve and mono did seem to bring the recording to life a little more, with a perceived improvement in top-end and low-end definition when switching to the Decca curve. I'm in no way an aficionado of this style of music and it is pure coincidence I picked up this particular version at a second-hand shop some time ago, but it does show that for people who do go out and search this stuff down, the melto2 is a useful tool to have in your artillery.

Another delve into the record shelves and I pull out Daft Punk's Random Access Memories, again a record that gets a lot of play here at Hifi Pig Towers. It really is a tour-de-force in what can actually be achieved with electronic music, which, let's be fair, does have its fair share of detractors in the audiophile world. I'm particularly enthralled here with the perception that there is more air around noises and "instruments" on the track Motherboard and the open-spaciousness I'm hearing on Fragments Of Time. I'm also aware again of the very low (imperceptible) noise-floor of the system allowing me to delve right into the recording and pick out little nuances previously veiled ("oh, no he's going to use the phrase "a veil has been lifted" I can sense it!") to an extent. Again, I'm aware that the track feels to have more space – this is not a clinical kind of thing and the word I'd use is, perhaps, organic...or natural. Whatever, it's a nice sound that feels very unforced, and whilst there is masses of detail coming through the speakers I'm not feeling overloaded by the detail, a characteristic that over the days led to me spending more and time listening to the system without once feeling fatigued. I know that is a bit of a cliché too but the melto2 really does produce a sound that is easy to get on with without sacrificing detail and (oh god he really is going to use it!) ...micro-detail. I really am able to pick a record to pieces should I choose with the Lab12 in place but equally I'm able to just sit and enjoy my records. This is a good sign to me.

## CONCLUSION

In the time I've had it in the main system and in the mid-priced system I've fallen in love with this phonostage and what it brings to the music that I'm hearing, so much so that it now sits in the main system having replaced a unit costing somewhat more than the asking price of the melto2. Yes, I bought it. I'll rarely if ever use the different curves, and chances are that that particular setting option will never again move away from RIAA, but some will find this feature invaluable - in my Decca experiment outlined above it certainly works! Likewise, the mono setting, though I'm sat looking at the rack and thinking "I could add another turntable to the set up now, or add another arm and cartridge to the Origin Live record player."

Sonically this is the easiest to get on with phonostage I've heard in our system. It is quiet to the point of silent in operation, allowing me to really get into a recording's detail, but at the same time it is relaxed, unhurried and natural sounding in its delivery. There is a definite feeling to music having more space around individual instruments and those instruments sit in the soundstage with a solidity that is uncanny.

I've outlined a few records I listened to during the evaluation process but the melto was completely unfazed at whatever style of music I played through it, being equally at home with Dutch gabber from the early 90s to Miles Davis and everything in-between.

There is little to criticise here: set up is simple, build is great, sound is wonderful and perhaps all I could suggest to Lab12 is they bring a

# LAB12 MELTO PHONOSTAGE



more basic version out without the mono function and without the different curves, though I fully understand why they have chosen to include them.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Simple and elegant styling allied with good build quality and materials. The OLED is easily visible from your sitting position.

**Sound Quality:** Exceptionally good sounding with an organic and mellifluous presentation that manages to still have all the detail present in the recording. Very low noise-floor and very un-fatiguing sounding.

**Value For Money:** Even with the features I'm unlikely to use very often I feel the asking price is exceptionally fair for the sound I'm enjoying.

**Pros:** Good looks. Simple set up. Super sound. A bit of a Swiss Army knife of a product for those that need or want those EQ curves. Remote set up is very useful.

**Cons:** For me, some of the features are superfluous.

**Price:** 3750 Euros



# REVIEW

## AUDIO NOTE UK JINRO INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



Whether it is measured in pounds and ounces or pounds and pence, John Scott finds that Audio Note's Jinro is a heavyweight champion that doesn't pull any punches.

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# AUDIO NOTE UK JINRO INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



When you discover that you are going to be spending some time at home with Audio Note UK's celebrated Jinro integrated amplifier there are many thoughts and emotions that might run through your head. Personally, I experienced a brief combination of gratitude and excitement before a more practical concern burst my bubble. Quite simply, where was I going to put it?

The Jinro is not, in any sense, your average integrated amplifier. At 26 inches deep, or more likely long, – do you know anyone who has a 26-inch deep shelf? – and weighing 85 pounds, the Jinro might have been able to sit lengthways on my glass-shelved Stands Unique rack. Maybe. It was also possible though, that after about 30 seconds, there would have been an almighty crack and the whole shebang, Jinro and all, would have come crashing to the floor. And that wasn't a phone call I wanted to make. Fortunately, a couple of weeks previously, I'd had cause to stand on top of an old wooden Victorian blanket box and knew that if it supported my weight without complaint then 85 pounds wasn't going to be a problem so it was pressed into service as a hifi support and, damped internally by blankets and cushions, a jolly good job it did too.

The Jinro is an integrated design running pure Class A and utilising a pair of 211 output triodes to give a maximum output of 20 Watts a channel.

## UNBOXING

The Jinro used for this review was supplied by Audio Note dealer Carlo Marengo of Audio-philía in Edinburgh. Carlo not only delivered the amp but also supplied a pair of ART Monitor Diamond speakers and a COS D1 DAC along with DRAM speaker cables and interconnects and a pair of Incredibly solid Target speaker stands. Altogether, this would create a system that cost more than my first three-bedroom house and ought to help show the Jinro off to the best of its ability.

One of the most exciting things about Hifi reviewing is that moment when the courier arrives and the subsequent unboxing of the equipment. On this occasion, the courier was Carlo and he did the lion's share of the unboxing and setting up which is exactly the service I would have received had I been a real customer. A good thing too, as it took our combined efforts (and a small trolley) to move the Jinro, the speakers and the stands from Carlo's car to my living room.

Carlo's familiarity with the equipment ensured that the Jinro was quickly freed from its sturdy packaging and fitted with its complement of six valves. With the ART speakers equally quickly installed and the COS DAC fed by my own Roon Nucleus + server, we powered everything up and took a quick break for a cup of coffee before settling down for a listen.

As the Jinro I had for review was a demonstration model from the Audio-philía showroom, it was fully run in and, although Carlo was keen to point out that its sound would improve after it had been powered up for an hour or so, we were both equally keen to have a listen before he left. Knowing that Carlo is a big Chet Baker fan, I fired up Baker's version of George and Ira Gershwin's But Not For Me from The Best Of Chet Baker Sings. After a couple of minor adjustments to speaker position and another couple of tracks, Carlo declared himself satisfied and left me to it. With uncharacteristic restraint, I decided not to launch straight into an extended listening session but instead to wait until later in the evening while the Jinro settled into its new surroundings.

## BUILD QUALITY

So, setting aside the Jinro's sound for a moment, what about its aesthetics? The Jinro's design has its origins in the Ongaku amplifier manufactured in the late 1980s by Audio Note Japan (a different company from Audio Note UK who make this particular amp, but that's a story for another time and place). The Ongaku was a money-

# AUDIO NOTE UK JINRO INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



# AUDIO NOTE UK JINRO INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

no-object amplifier using silver wiring throughout and the highest quality components. The Jinro tweaks the design and takes a more cost-conscious approach, with copper wiring and less esoteric, but still high-quality internals. Did I mention that it weighs 85 pounds? Given its pedigree, you will not be surprised to learn that what we have here is not 80 pounds of casing with a few pounds of components rattling about inside. Much of the weight comes from the three massive transformers that sit atop the base, but every part of this amplifier exudes solidity and first-class build quality; the input selector knob provides a satisfying click as it moves between inputs and the volume control turns smoothly and authoritatively. At this price point you will want to feel that you can see where your money has been spent and the Jinro certainly provides reassurance on that front.

## SOUND QUALITY

I spent a fidgety couple of hours pretending to watch the TV before getting down to my first serious listening session. Choosing the first track to play is always a difficult decision but I settled on an old favourite: John Martyn's Solid Air. It's a track that I've known for nearly forty years and has been played on dozens of different systems, from humble 1970's music centres to systems costing tens of thousands of pounds. How would it fare with the Jinro? Rendered on a high-quality system, I often think of this song as hanging in the air between the speakers like smoke. The combination of the Jinro, COS DAC and ART speakers provided all of the smoky atmosphere I was expecting but I wasn't prepared for the sheer level of detail that I was hearing. This was like being in the room when Martyn, Danny Thompson, Rabbit Bundrick, Tony Coe and Tristan Fry laid down the track, or at least as close to it as it seems possible to get. I thought I'd been there before with other bits of hifi kit but clearly, I'd been wrong.

Herbie Hancock's River: The Joni Letters is a tribute to Joni Mitchell featuring an interesting collection of guest artists including Tina Turner, Corrine Bailey Rae and Leonard Cohen. Cohen intones the lyrics of Mitchell's The Jungle Line as a poem and The Jinro pulled out all the depth and gravitas of not only that famous voice but also all the tones, and overtones, of Hancock's piano, rendering it as a living instrument.

Moving on to some classical music, I picked one of my favourite test pieces- Benjamin Britten's A Young Person's Guide To The Orchestra. After an introductory theme played by the entire orchestra, Britten takes us on a tour as each section of instruments plays their own variation on the theme before they all come together again at the end for a fugue and a reprise of the theme. It's a really enjoyable piece of music in its own right but also a great way of getting to know the individual instruments of the orchestra. Sitting in the dark as the valves of the Jinro cast a rosy glow over in the corner of my living room I was transported to Philadelphia's Scottish Rite Cathedral as the orchestra unfolded in front of me. Simply magical. Incidentally, the Scottish Rite Cathedral is not an actual cathedral but an architecturally impressive Art Deco Freemasons Hall, now sadly demolished. For the next 15 minutes or so though, it was resurrected by the Jinro along with the almost palpable efforts of the orchestra members as they transformed physical movement into music.

That's all well and good, John, I can hear you say; but that's a whole new system you've got going there. How do you know that it's not the COS DAC or the DRAM speakers that are the star performers here? There was only one way to find out. Much as I would have loved to have spent the whole week listening to this system, I knew I was going to have to pull it apart to get to the heart of the Jinro's sound.

Going almost from the sublime to the ridiculous, the £8000 COS D1 was replaced firstly by my Spectra DAC and then the Allo Boss DAC that forms part of a self-built raspberry pi-based streamer/DAC. Each of these come in at around £100 so are not even in the same universe, never mind ballpark, as the D1. That there was a difference was immediately audible; it would have been astonishing had there not been. A loss of detail certainly, a reduction in ambience. But did the Jinro expose these DACs as utterly unworthy companions; did the DACs render the Jinro's considerable charms mute? Fortunately not and far from it. The Jinro may have revealed the limits of both DACs' performance but they were still sounding better than they ever had before. When the DRAMs were swapped out for my Audio GE Sincerus 80s, I'd reduced the cost of the system by more than 60% but I was still left with a setup that simply outshone anything I'd previously heard here at home. Does it make sense to partner a £20,000 amplifier with supporting kit at a fraction of that price? You'd be surprised.

I spent longer than you might imagine with this configuration. Yes, the urge to upgrade DAC and speakers would be undeniable in time but this was a set up I would be more than happy to live with.

The final test was, of course, to pair my reference amp, an Etalon Supra, with the D1 and the

DRAMs, removing the Jinro from the equation entirely. Had I been reviewing either of these in isolation as an upgrade in my own system, I'd have been delighted with the improvements but it was clear that this set up simply didn't sing in the way that even the "budget" Jinro configuration had.

Some amplifiers garner a reputation as "rock amps" or "classical amps". The Jinro is simply a music amplifier. Whether you throw a Mahler symphony at it or some dub reggae, it just gets on with the business of putting on a musical performance, portraying the recording as close as possible to what the producer intended. Each listening session stretched on into the night as I picked out hitherto unnoticed details in what I thought were familiar recordings. If I could sum up the Jinro's core quality in a single word it would be: Holographic. Playing Felton Lonnin from The Bairns by Rachel Unthank and The Winterset, I could practically see Rachel clog dancing on a wooden stage in front of me, flanked by upright piano and double bass, in what I imagined to be a small church hall.

## VALUE FOR MONEY

One of the questions people often ask me about high-end audio equipment is: "Is it worth paying all that money?" On average, people spend around £22,000 on a new car and you can get a pretty decently specced one for the cost of a Jinro. You might argue that a car is a necessity and a hifi amplifier isn't but, treated properly, the Jinro will outlast any number of cars and will be cheaper to maintain and fuel into the bargain. If you really care about music reproduction, it's an investment that will repay itself by providing many, many years of listening pleasure.

And it is, in fact, a pleasure that is really difficult to relinquish once you have experienced it. A couple of days after he had delivered the Jinro, the COS D1 and the DRAM speakers, I got a text from Carlo asking how I was getting on. "Sorry, who is this?" I texted back. Would it be possible to move house in a week without Carlo finding out? I was beginning to think it might be worth a try. When the time did come to hand back this wonderful beast and return to my own system – which I had been perfectly happy with by the way – I found myself not really wanting to listen to music much for a couple of

# AUDIO NOTE UK JINRO INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

weeks; that special magic that the Jinro had brought just wasn't there. Time, however, is a healer and while I've got used to living without the Jinro again, the time we spent together won't be forgotten.

## CONCLUSION

There is no denying that the Jinro isn't for everyone. It is a piece of equipment that needs to be accommodated; you are very unlikely to be able to simply slot it into your listening room in place of your current amplifier. However, if you are prepared to give it houseroom, its stunning sound quality will repay your efforts in ways that really have to be experienced to be appreciated. It's a hefty investment, but one that will pay dividends over a very long time.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build quality:** No unnecessary bells and whistles here, just top-quality components expertly put together as a beautiful, solid package.

**Sound quality:** Breathtakingly detailed, the Jinro makes the most of any musical genre from whisper-quiet ambient jazz to full-blown orchestral climaxes. If you think you know your music collection inside out, the Jinro will show you otherwise.

**Value for money:** At £20,000 the Jinro won't be in everyone's budget but if you are considering an amplifier at this price point it demands an audition. Unless you are an incurable box swapper, it may be the only amplifier you'll ever need.

**Pros:** Build quality is second to none. Incredibly detailed and refined sound. Hugely enjoyable to listen to.

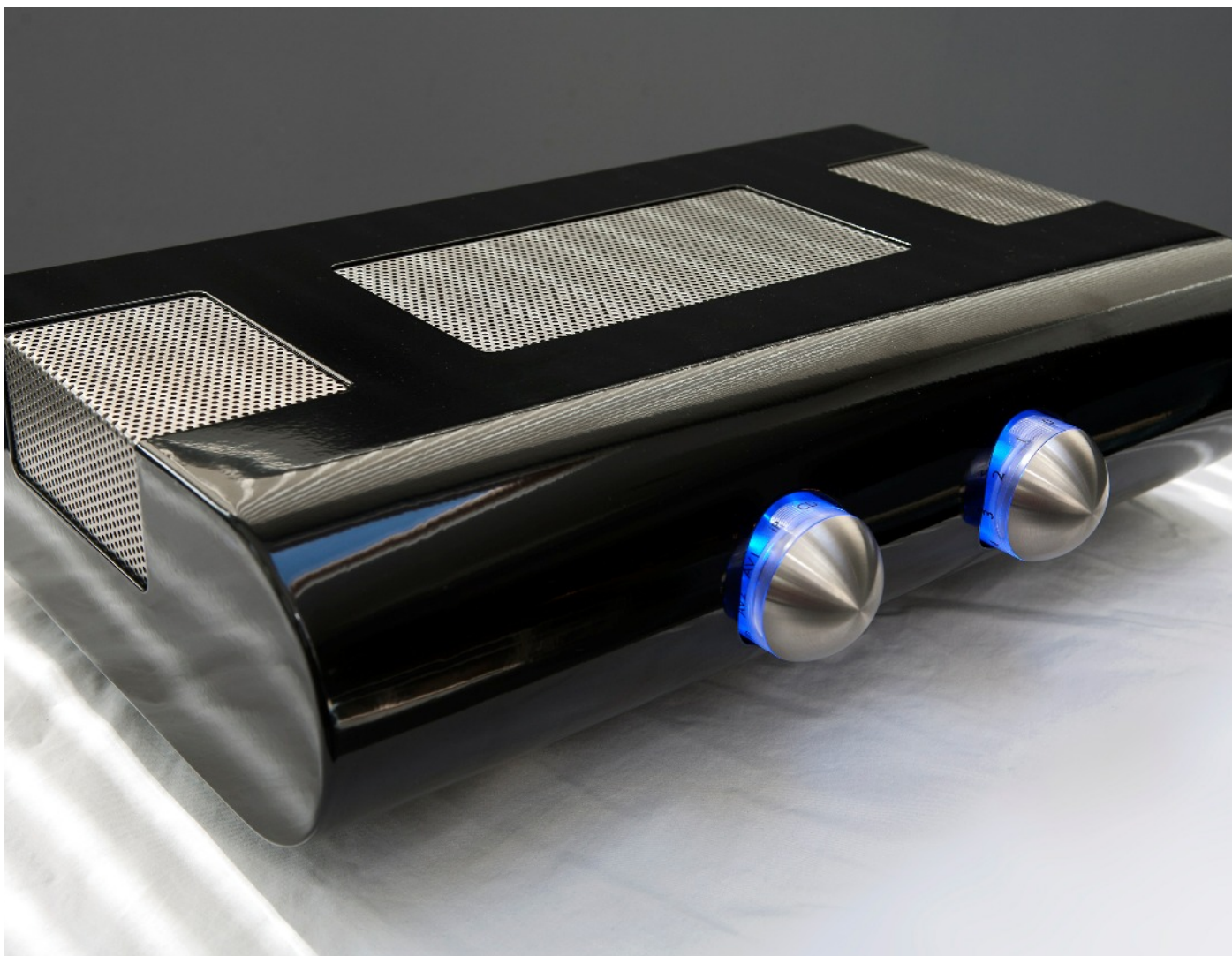
**Cons:** Expensive. Uncompromising size and weight. Carlo made me give it back

**Price:** £20,200



# REVIEW

## EVA MINUET' INTEGRATED VALVE AMPLIFIER



The Eva Minuet' is a British built integrated valve amp with onboard phono-stage and costs £3250. Janine Elliot takes it for a whirl

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# EVA MINUET' INTEGRATED VALVE AMPLIFIER



My favourite valve amp is my modified Leak Stereo 20, an amplifier dating from 1958 but which still beats many designs from the 21st century and can fetch well over a thousand pounds in the second-hand market. There are several reasons for this in my humble opinion; a great and simple design, trusted valves, and shorter point-to-point contacts rather than a PCB. To be sent a new amplifier on the block from Geoff Kremer, owner and creator of EVA Ltd (English Valve Amplifiers) that is based on a modified version of the Stereo 20 was an exciting opportunity for me, though it would have some stiff competition from Harold Leak if it was ever to get my sign of approval.

Geoff Kremer will be known to many for his excellent repairs to amplifiers and reel to reel tape recorders, including my own (and mine-Ed), something he has been doing since 1968. His knowledge of valve and transistor designs is second to none, having hitherto produced the beautiful looking Proteus integrated amplifier. His favourite amplifier is also the Stereo 20, though he understands its failings. He openly admits that Minuet' is based on the Leak and that he has a great love for valve designs due to the fact that the sound they make, including distortion, is more akin to the way our ears hear than are transistors or digits;

"Very simply, valves have a character and sound more suited to our analogue ears, they are not as hard and brittle sounding as solid-state amplifiers. A lot of listeners might say that valves sound 'warmer' and that might be misconstrued as 'woolly' or ill-defined, far from it. A properly designed and built valve amplifier will be just as fast and accurate as any solid-state amplifier indeed, many good valve amps are considerably faster than their solid-state equivalent"

## CONSTRUCTION

The brief for Minuet' (he likes to call it Minuet' rather than with an 'a' or 'the' preceding it, showing he sets high regard to this design) was to create a simple but very high quality integrated that could take on the very best out there, capable of holding its own with the very best

HiFi amplifiers on the market. To create it he didn't use lots of calculus but rather his own ears using DBE (design by ear). Indeed, even the phono-stage was created by listening to lots of music and altering the values of components, rather than trying to emulate the RIAA curve. He sells Minuet' directly rather than through dealerships in order to keep the retail price lower. At £3250 this is a competitive price.

Where the Leak Stereo 20 was one of Harold's famous "point one" series of components so named because astonishingly (at that time) they had less than point one percent of distortion, Geoff has worked to give Minuet' at least the same specification. Indeed, he set himself four major considerations in designing it;

very low distortion below 0.1% at 10W.

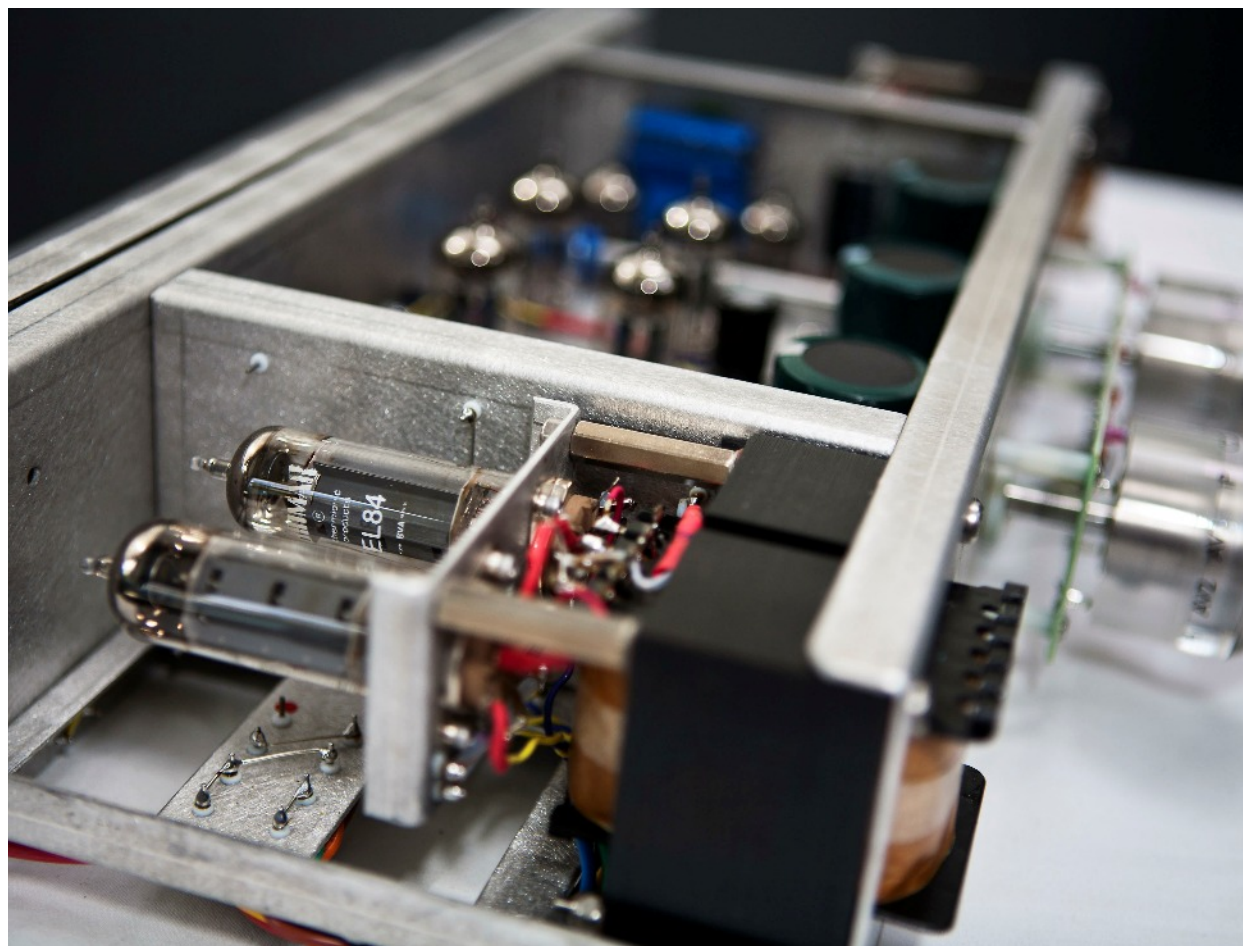
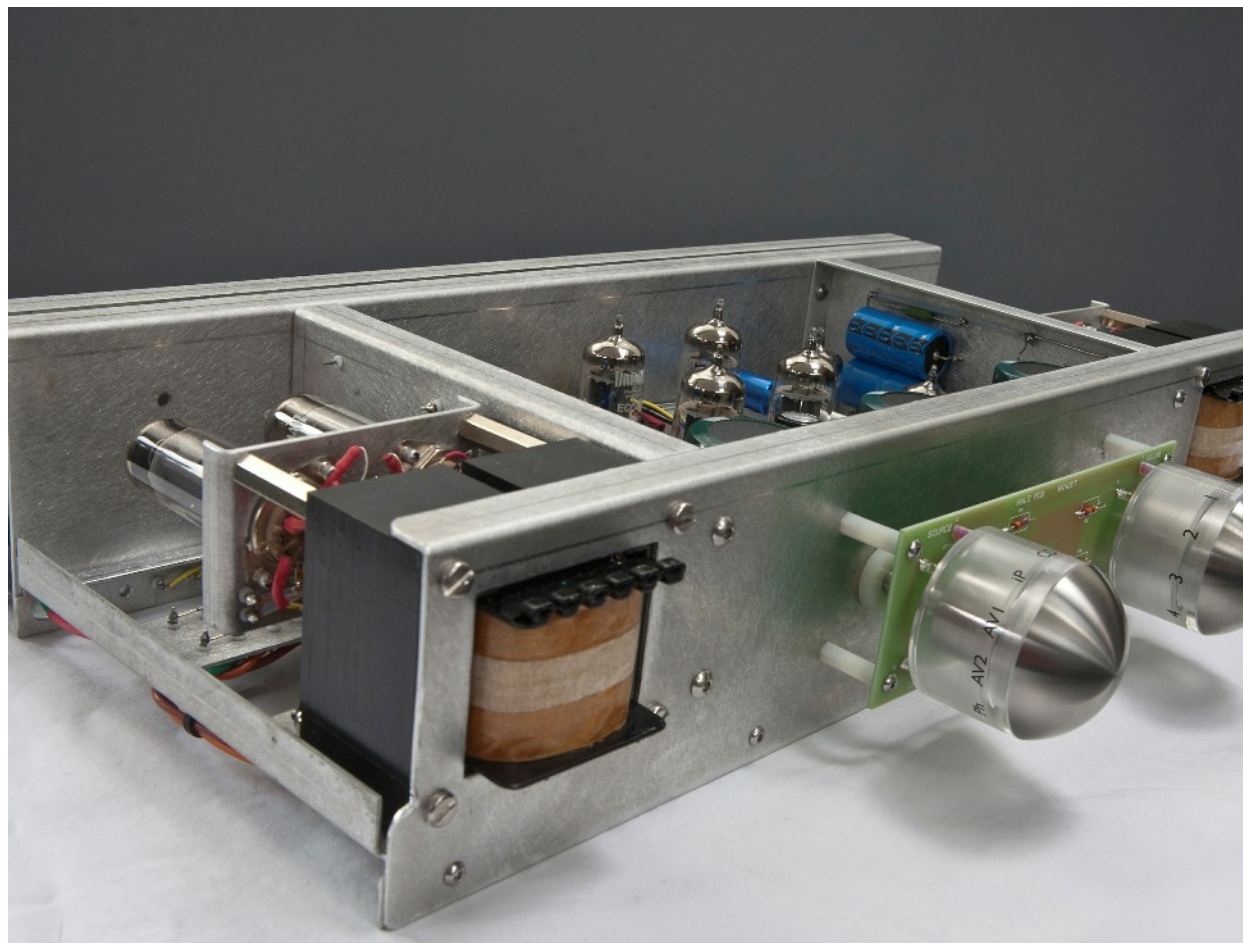
A wide bandwidth with particular consideration to the low-frequency end.

A fast response; Geoff states that a good valve amp can be faster than a solid-state design.

It must be unconditionally stable in all circumstances. Consequently, Minuet' will deliver 12WRMS and from 6-60,000Hz within 1dB.

Where the Stereo 20 was designed to be retrofitted in a box or cabinet unless you were happy to see the valves and transformers (indeed I actually think it is a beautiful looking amp in the nude), Minuet' has been placed in a minimalist curved steel case with the power supply in a separate box meaning the unit is visually not so high plus technically minimising hum and noise. The output transformers are largely based on the Leak design. It has been designed to optimise performance. Where the Leak had the choice of 4, 8 and 16ohm speaker impedance changeable via a movable link, Minuet' can be adjusted by soldered links internally. This might seem inconvenient, but Geoff says it ensures that all of the transformer

# EVA MINUET' INTEGRATED VALVE AMPLIFIER



# EVA MINUET' INTEGRATED VALVE AMPLIFIER

windings are used all of the time, unlike many amplifiers that used taps which leaves some windings unconnected and thus inefficient. The review sample was set at 8Ω for my Wilson Benesch and Graham Audio loudspeakers. To attach loudspeakers the sockets at the rear are recessed 4mm red and black, though I wished they were multiway sockets like I fitted to my Leak so that I could attach spades as well as bananas. The HT system is smoothed by three very high value smoothing capacitors, which not only ensures stability but provides enough energy for those really low frequencies in the music. The cabinet is hand made using painted steel with bonded stainless-steel perforated grille. Some may not like the design of the cabinet, but he has kept costs to a minimum to keep the overall price very competitive, unlike his beautiful looking Proteus which had a very expensive cabinet.

There are four RCA line inputs plus phono input for cartridges with an output between 2.5-5mV, and RCA "tape out" sockets. Selection and off/on switch are via the left knob with volume altered from the right. Internally, components are set to ensure minimal interaction between them. That means as well as point-to-point wiring heat sensitive components such as electrolytic capacitors are kept away from high temperatures. The horizontally mounted EL84 output valves, which run very hot, have their own isolated and cooled areas at the edges whilst the phono stage is placed in the centre away from the heat, high voltages and signals. Even the input sockets, input selector, volume control and associated wiring is contained within a double-walled rear panel that isolates them the rest of the amplifier.

Where the Leak had a total of 3 ECC83's for the input stage and two EL84s output valves per channel plus GZ34 rectifier, the Minuet has an ECC83 input coupled to an ECC82 feeding a pair of EL84 pentode valves running in Class A/B push-pull mode. The phono-stage section consists of two ECC83's per channel. All valves supplied are from Brimer. The similarity in design is obvious to the elder but what was important was whether it sounded the same or even better. Where the Leak was typically 50s in looks, the Minuet' reminded me of 1950's space age with its black gloss curvy fascia. It comes as standard in black gloss, though a choice of colours like silver, pink or blue would go down better I think, and indeed colours other than black are available from Geoff, though not a brushed steel finish. The mains unit is less radical and more functional than attractive. When switched on Minuet' really comes alive with the two large machined stainless-steel knobs that have an Acrylic collar starting to glow red when in standby and then blue when switched on. That black fascia was all but forgotten now. Even the mains unit glows green. That blue glowing knob can be dimmed, if you so wish, via a 2-position switch on the rear.

## THE MUSIC

The unit needs only fifteen or so minutes to really start to sound good. Before using the inbuilt phono-stage I connected my trusty and familiar Manley Steelhead. Berlioz Symphony Fantastique (Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Claudio Abbado) has dynamism as well as constraints, a Fantastique work, full of highs and lows and Minuet' worked well to perform the deepest lows and tops. The bass end was particularly good, and better than the Leak, dare I say. Trumpets and trombones shone through the string section atmosphere in a way that was tidier than the Leak could do. Instruments performed in a genteel fashion in a large soundstage predominantly behind the speakers. This was a highly musical performance. If you want bells and whistles look elsewhere, despite there being a percussion section containing bell plates and bass chimes. This amp is realistic and not over excitable, it wants to tell the truth and not exaggerate the facts. It is valve through and through and noticeably faster than my own Leak

despite my own modifications. Where the Leak rolls off at both ends, the Minuet' had an excellent bass and better top. It was also extremely quiet in operation. Only the power supply makes its very gentle hum but that can be placed well away from ears.

Next to play was my newly reconditioned (by Geoff) Sony TC-766 high-speed half-track machine. For this, I chose two excellently recorded Hemiolia recordings. First to be laced up was "May This Be Love" (Davide Pannozzo Trio – 'A portrait of Jimi Hendrix Reel 1'), a beautifully engineered mix of guitar, bass and drums. Percussion, particularly cymbals, were tight and very realistic and the intentionally distorted guitar was as you would expect it to sound if you had the guitar amplifier in front of you. It sounded so human I actually enjoyed the distortion, something I don't usually do!

Turning to clarinet and acoustic guitar with "Aria de Operetta" (Gabrielle Mirabassi (Clarinet) and Roberto Taufic (guitar) – 'Ao Amigo Guinga') the close mic'ing of the clarinet was particularly clear and realistic with the excellently recorded guitar filling in to make the duo work solidly and humanly.

Time to try the inbuilt phono-stage. It was quite obvious that Geoff and his trusty helpers have spent much time listening to get the best possible sound for the ECC83 based phono-stage. Firstly, a new album for me supplied by Vertere on their own new record label, the band Caezar and 12" EP 'The Prayer'. Side two "The Presence of Love" suffered from the lack of presence from the bass guitar and the next track "Time" lacked bite from the drum machine. Though well recorded the album is not the most exciting Listening; the music lacks imagination with very predictable key modulations. Turning quickly to Pink Floyd the speed and clarity were immediately apparent. Vocals were crisp and instrumental detail included depth of soundstage and channel separation was excellent in this iconic LP. It only lacked the excitement that I have come to expect from this album listening on top-end separates, but for an inbuilt phono-stage this is an excellent design. That reduced excitement was notable at the lowest frequencies, for example; the "explosion" in track 3 just wasn't quite as exciting as I know it can be. Indeed, whilst this phono preamp works well with higher output and higher impedance inputs namely MM and also high-output MCs (the specification suggests 2.5mV and 50kΩ load), it would be great to have provision for lower load impedance to allow greater flexibility of use. That higher load impedance can also change the frequency pattern of certain cartridges; for example, my 100Ω moving coil Audio Technica AT33Sa had a more subdued bass-end than my MM Ortofon VMS20E, 2M Red and Stanton 681 EEE which were ideally suited to a 47kΩ loading. Having a 100Ω/50,000Ω switch at the rear might, therefore, be an idea for those higher output MCs. Nevertheless, the phono-stage gave a very realistic warm and inviting sound and Geoff's EQ setting worked well.

Turning to classics and one of my favourites Saint Saëns Symphony No3 in C Minor op 79 (Jane Parker Smith Organ, London Philharmonic Orchestra – Serge Baudo). This great work with iconic piano and organ runs was originally composed for the London Philharmonic Society in 1886. This work just lacked decisiveness, though the music was clear and there was good space and depth of soundstage. Whilst this is a 2-movement work there are numerous definitive sections. In the 'Finale' at the end of the second movement is the famous melody section starting with two very poignant organ chords leading into the beautiful theme including rippling piano arpeggios. The quiet piano undergirding the string tune was beautifully placed showing the valve phono-stage working well to distinguish all components of the music. This was a great performance from Minuet' especially for an in-built phono stage, and

# EVA MINUET' INTEGRATED VALVE AMPLIFIER

unquestionably better than the phono-stage that accompanied the Stereo 20 in the form of the Varislope pre-amp from the 1950s! Only the long notes in the lowest octave of the organ foot pedal "B – G – C" appearing near the end was not as clear as I hoped it would be.

'On the Third Day' is my favourite ELO album and "New World Rising" my favourite track with excellent definition of the musical instruments in the soundstage, particularly the analogue synth, percussion, voice, piano and strings. Minuet' gave a very clear and exciting rendition of this track showing that the phono-stage and the amplifier both work in harmony. ELO music is complex in orchestration and some amplifiers can make the music sound confused. Not in this case.

Finally, I listened to the excellent Jethro Tull 'Live' album, giving me another chance to listen to classical instruments combined with those more common to rock. Ian Anderson's flute was exciting as was the vocals, much of this due to his jovial eccentric nature as to the playing. Detail and speed were there particularly in the mids and highs (glockenspiel and drums, marimba, mandolin, synthesiser, etc), but again that bass just needed a little bit of Ian's eccentricity to get me excited.

## CONCLUSION

This is a highly competitively priced integrated amplifier based on a modified Leak Stereo 20. Sound wise this was a very musical performer with an extended bass end on all line-inputs and an excellent top end and a tighter and faster sound than Harold's amp. Music was easily definable and natural in all types of music. It was nice to see EL84s and ECC83s making music again. If you would like one of the valve best amplifiers of the 50's, and indeed of all time, but that's now even better, then this could be your ideal partner.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Well-built design including well engineered inside.

**Sound Quality:** Excellent detail from lows to highs, with the bass-end of line inputs very special. Bass could be a little more forward in the phono-stage.

**Value for Money:** £3250 is a very keen price for a hand-built marvel.

**Pros:** Very musical performance. Very low distortion. Excellent coverage of frequencies with great speed.

**Cons:** Some may not like the curved architecture of the cabinet. Phono-stage lowest octave lacks bite.

**Price:** £3250



# REVIEW

## LEEMA HYDRA

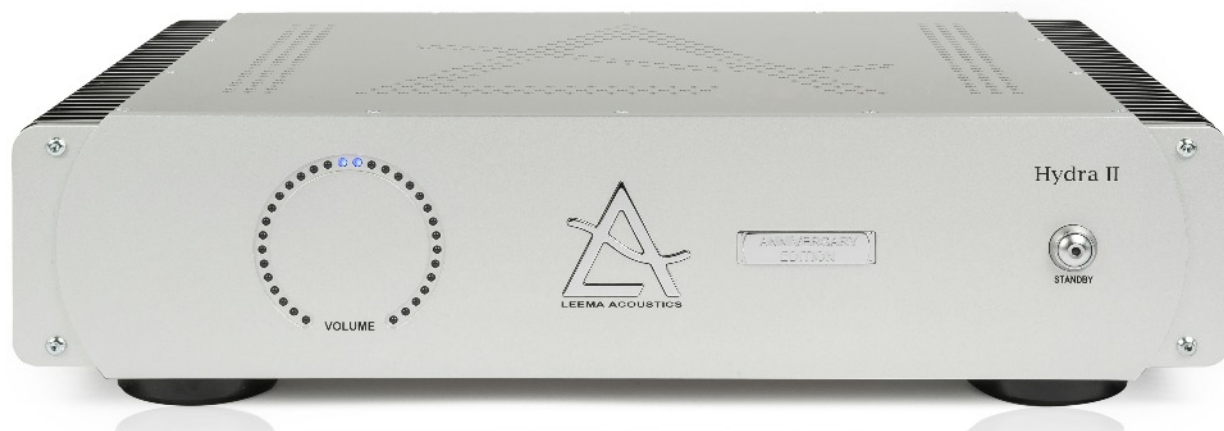
### ANNIVERSARY EDITION AMPLIFIER



**Made in Wales the Leema Hydra II Anniversary Edition power amplifier is an updated and upgraded version of the company's popular power amp. Janine Elliot takes it for a whirl.**

**Hifi Pig**  
[www.hifipig.com](http://www.hifipig.com)

# LEEMA HYDRA ANNIVERSARY EDITION AMPLIFIER



So many good things have emanated from the BBC; Spendor, Harbeth, Trilogy and PMC, to name but a few. Just as the names Spendor and Harbeth are portmanteau words, that is parts of real names (SPENcer Hughes and wife DORothy, and Dudley HARwood and wife ElizaBETH) so too Leema is a word made up of its founders Lee Taylor and Mallory Nicholls, both also ex-BBC engineers. And, just as Spendor, Harbeth and PMC were companies set up to develop speakers beyond what was currently available so, too, Leema Acoustics was originally founded in 1998 as a means of developing a loudspeaker, the Xen (review here), a project that took some 4 years of intense work. They are perhaps better known, though, for their amplifiers and distinctive looking cabinets. The first of which was the Tucana integrated amplifier, released early in 2006. The following year the company began working with a local Welsh electronics manufacturer. In 2014 the two companies decided to join forces working under the same roof. I have always been interested in following this company, not just because I am ex- BBC myself, but particularly their approach to producing some world-class products that not only sound excellent but also look as good as well.

## CONSTRUCTION

The Hydra II Anniversary Edition is in effect the Tucana II AE integrated amplifier without a volume control. That amplifier has won respect from the audio press over the last few years, with one magazine putting it as important a product in the history of audio as the PMC Cor, Naim 32/Snaps/250, Mission Cyrus One and A&R Cambridge A60, to name four. The Hydra II Anniversary Edition (£4795) is an updated version of the Hydra II (£3795) now some 10 years old, modified by co-founder Lee Taylor, including a new front panel machined and chrome plated and made from a solid billet which has the Delta logo and an "Anniversary Edition" badge on it. The top has drilled holes in the shape of the Leema logo that act as air vents. Additionally, the printed circuit boards inside have been uprated with twice the amount of copper to reduce the resistance of PCB traces

and improve power delivery. The circuitry also uses Nichicon MUSE series capacitors, and internal wiring now uses Leema's Reference 2 cable which features no less than 16 woven cores plus multi-strand high-purity copper with individual strand silver-plate. Additionally, all the transistors are hand selected and matched in amplifier sets for optimal performance and the lowest distortion. The power amplifier transformers are Noratel units in order to ensure perfect power delivery free from hum or excessive heat generation.

The Hydra II Anniversary is a bridgeable dual mono Class A/B design with two power transformers for each channel plus a third transformer for the control circuitry, that way completely isolating the microprocessor from the audio path. It also has full LIPS (Leema Intelligent Protocol System), which is Leema's own communication system for use with other Leema products, controlled via a single XLR or 3.5mm sockets. Three small switches on the rear of the unit plus an excellent instruction manual help you to select the correct combination. Indeed, the writing next to the switches is so small (for me!) that the instruction manual is very handy. So many manufacturers fail on their instruction books, and I often see loose A4 sheets or all the information tightly squeezed onto a single sheet, it is a delight to have a full colour 28 page A5 instruction manual that tells you everything you ever need, including technical discussion.

Whilst the simplicity of the front of the Hydra II AE gives it a chunky beauty. The back of the amplifier is covered in sockets including balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA inputs. To select either of these is an intentionally hard-to-get-at recessed pushbutton. There is similarly a recessed pushbutton for selection of either stereo amp or bridged mono-block operation. Whilst I get what they are trying to do, I would actually rather it was easier to access these switches. Funnily enough, the three tiny switches to select LIPS operation or mono left or right could easily be knocked when reaching to the back of the unit to do some pluggery. Other RCA sockets offer pre-out, bi-amp out and multi-channel inputs, plus the speaker binding points accept all common connectors. The whole weighs in at 18kg and offers 150W

# LEEMA HYDRA ANNIVERSARY EDITION AMPLIFIER

into 8Ω (290W into 4Ω), more than enough for the power-hungry audiophile, and incorporating many ideas from their reference mono-block, the Altair IV.

## THE LISTENING

Turning on the unit was a pleasure. Not only that the knob is on the front rather than on the back (I like easy access!) but that the Leema was very quiet in operation. What is confusing is that when the unit is switched off but connected to the mains the on/off knob actually glows blue but then goes out as soon as you turn on the amplifier. At that point, the top two LEDs on the large circle of blue LEDs lights up to show that the unit is now switched on. Confused? If I used LIPS controlling the amplifier from another source then the circle of LEDs would indicate the appropriate level set. I just wish the LEDs would at least do a quick song and dance when you switch it all on, like my car's speedo! The LED dial does, however, do an anticlockwise roll when it switches off, which is pretty. Enough of distractions, what I needed to do was listen to my music.

My first source was actually my Krell KPS20i CD player, an excellent source despite being 16bit. I played Max Richter's "Memoryhouse" album that I used in an earlier review, so I could compare notes. This album is pure Philip Glass minimalism with bits added to thicken it all up. Its ethereal beginnings – and indeed most that follows it – gave me a chance to take in not only the atmosphere but the positions of the instruments; violin, cello, piano, glockenspiel, sound effects etc. I have to say immediately that this was one of the best performances of this album I have yet played, being highly engaging, giving me a chance to get close to all that is going on. The speed of transients without any distortion and the precision of pace and timing was a pleasure to listen to. Sometimes Class A designs can make the music unreal, like when you add too much contrast on your TV picture, but this Hydra was set just right, being very honest in all that it played. Indeed, I actually listened to the whole album. I don't often do that. Then I survived a few tracks of my own album 'Boxed In' as I wanted to hear how close it was to the original that I knew so well. It wasn't too far from the truth, just a slight sibilance in the vocal. The violins had space and depth to the sound with clarity from the percussion adding to the gentle piano.

Next, I set to listening to LPs with good frequency response and energetic delivery in order to test the precision and dynamism of delivery. Initially, it was STSs Harbour Jazz-band, recorded live on the professional Philips tape recorder loved by the company at the XFI Premium Audio Show. This jazz band have been around since 1956 playing music including Count Basie, Glenn Miller and Louis Armstrong, to name but three. This album is notably punchy and extremely well mic'd for a live concert (including audience applause; often live recordings don't provide a separate microphone for this important contribution!) There was an excellent presentation on hi-hat and trumpets with the Leema producing an honest rendition with just enough punch to give it a very believable performance, being totally in control of all that was thrust its way. Playing Pink Floyd's 'The Division Bell' gave me a chance to test its Class A/Balls. Everything was there just as it should be, being more controlled though not quite as exciting as my own Krell powerhouse. The Hydra is rated at 150W RMS 8Ω which should be good enough for even the most neurotic speaker, but if you really want oodles of bite, and particularly bass welly you might need to listen with your choice speakers before you buy; the speed and detail really make up for any shortcomings, though.

Turning to 'Binaural Baroque' from Mike Valentine's "Chasing the Dragon". Vivaldi's Guitar Concerto sounded articulate, accurate and well-spaced in the room. Even though it is recorded binaurally, more

suited for headphone listening, the guitar, harpsichord and strings were quick and well positioned in the sound space, showing that binaural can indeed work through speakers. Continuing with the letter 'B' I turned to Brahms 2nd Piano Concerto (Pollini/Vienna Philharmonic orchestra/Claudio Abbado). I have a real fondness these days to play Brahms. I didn't particularly like the symphonies until I personally got to play them in an orchestra and could understand what the composer was getting at. As a child I also performed much Brahms on piano, particularly wanting to hit those deep chords on a Steinway Model D 9-footer in the music school hall, as they sounded so good. I wanted to hear those deep bass notes through my Wilson Benesch Arc or Graham LS5/9 speakers, and whilst everything was all there it just wasn't as 'biting' and resonant as I wanted it to be. However, the more I listened the more I could hear where Leema were trying to do; that is that the control of the music should take precedence over the power. Controlling the musical performance allowed the timings of notes and speed of delivery to be very real. The piano could breathe in its own space and violins and cellos and wind instruments similarly found their own seats in front and behind the speakers. A test I often do in a review is listening from another room. If it sounds like the musicians are actually in my living room, then it must be good. Some systems make the sound filling the room so unreal. Try this next time you go to a hi-fi show and about to walk in a room. If it sounds like hi-fi and not a live orchestra, then don't bother entering!

To confirm my findings on the bass I finally turned to 'Variations' by Andrew Lloyd Webber, with its deep Moog synthesiser atmosphere-inducing introduction followed by brother Julian playing on the cello. That bass was indeed all there, just not quite as grandiose as I would perhaps like. The detail from the instruments was intense, particularly the percussion and saxophone. Only the mid frequencies showed a slight over emphasis, something I had also noted in an earlier album. In this and in earlier listening the presentation and musicality was almost valve-like but with the detail you expect from transistor. Indeed, turning again to Pink Floyd and the 'Echoes' album the well-known track "Time" just sounded a bit too tame. Everything was all there, but very polite and without guts. It was like having a partner who always wants to do everything exactly by the book when you would actually like to take risks. This was a very well behaved performer that just did everything right. Some might, however, want something a little more daring.

## CONCLUSION

Hearing a Class-A amplifier with this amount of control and musicality was enlightening, and I very much enjoyed playing the Hydra II AE. It worked on all types of music with enormous detail and sensitivity. Only the bottom end was perhaps too refined for those used to Class-A grunt. Whilst it might not be a bargain in terms of Watts per pound, in terms of delivery of music the Hydra II AE was an absolute bargain.

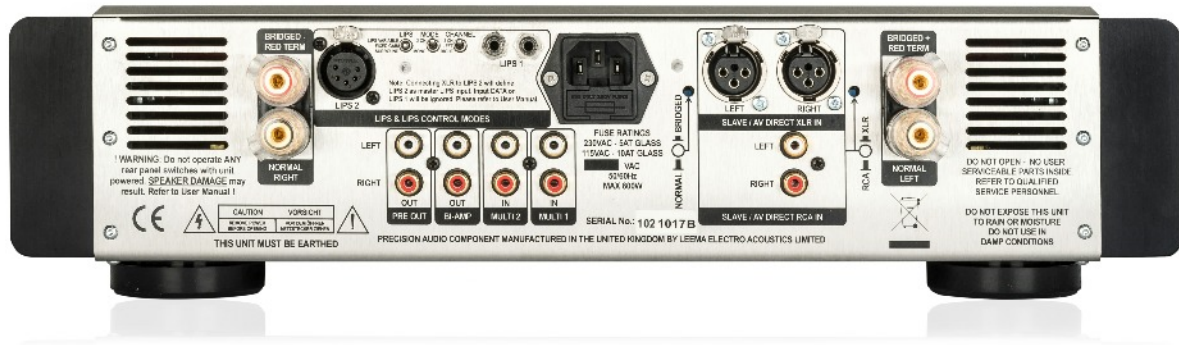
## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Externally constructed to a very high standard, typical Leema in style, and with excellent components in the inside including Nichicon MUSE capacitors.

**Sound Quality:** Excellent speed and accuracy of delivery, with particularly good mids and highs. Grandeur without the grunt.

**Value for Money** £4795 is excellent value for such a musical producer of sound.

# LEEMA HYDRA ANNIVERSARY EDITION AMPLIFIER



**Pros:** Very low distortion and noise. Excellent pace and timing. Works on all types of music.

**Cons:** Some might want more muscle

**Price:** £4795



# REVIEW

## IOTAVX SA3 INTEGRATED AND PA3 POWER AMPLIFIER



IOTAVX may not be a name that many readers will know, but at £399 for a full integrated amp with DAC and a separate power amplifier at £299, it may well soon be. David Shevyn takes a listen.

**Hifi Pig**  
[www.hifipig.com](http://www.hifipig.com)

# IOTAVX SA3 INTEGRATED AND PA3 POWER AMPLIFIER



Whilst in discussion with Editor at Large Stuart Smith about amplifiers that would suit my slightly above budget (but in terms of high-end audio still very affordable) set up he suggested I may want to undertake a review of the SA3 Integrated Amplifier from IOTAVX which I was more than happy to do. I reviewed the SA3 Integrated Stereo Amplifier with built-in Wolfson DAC as a standalone unit for £399 as well as part of the Power Amplifier set up with the PA3 which is an additional £299.

## BUILD AND FEATURES

**SA3** – Before you even get on to sound quality the SA3 is going to have you shaking your head saying only £400? It seems vastly under-priced for the functionality alone setting aside the build and size of the unit. It's not a small unit measuring 435mm wide by 59mm high with a depth of 240mm; weighing in at 6.5kg in its steel casing. Looks-wise, it's as bold as it is big, but the choice of either having the lights bright and digital or dimmed for a subtler look is a nice touch.

Audio input-wise, again you will be surprised by what they have covered. First it has 5 (yes 5) RCA inputs to a sensitivity of 200mV, 1 x S/PDIF coaxial, 1x Toslink optical, 1 x Bluetooth (IOTAVX Bluetooth adaptor required and is sold separately for an additional £25), 1 x Phono (MM) (input sensitivity 2.5mV). For outputs, there is a Rec Out, pre-out to connect our PA3 and a sub out if needed.

Due to the size of the amp the layout makes it very simple to use. In fact, one of the strengths of the SA3 is the simplicity of use. It was super easy for me to connect in my turntable, speakers, and my laptop via the analogue ins without even having to refer to the manual. The manual itself again though is straightforward and simple and within minutes of unpacking, you are ready to go.

Also included is a nicely set out remote which can also be used with the NP3 CD player if you were to have one as well. Again, straightforward and easy to use, making it easy for you to change the

input, the volume or the bass, treble or balance (which is adjustable up 10db in 1db steps). If you choose to use the control on the front of the amp a large volume button controls all the menu choices and is smooth and easy to work.

Power from the SA3 alone is 90 watts per channel into 4 ohms

**PA3** – Again this is a steel black box that compliments the integrated amplifier until but without the LED screen. It can be connected in such a way that all the features available on the SA3 can be used in conjunction with this amp also.

## SOUND QUALITY

**SA3** – Again I have split this review separately and spent quite a lot of time with the SA3 Integrated Amp before going on to add the PA3 Power Amp. I tend to consume music in a number of ways, at home I use more Bluetooth, in the office I play straight out of my Apple Mac and finally my joy of joys is playing vinyl. So, when choosing an amp to suit my set up I generally would be considering all of these set ups.

What's immediately apparent is that for the price range the SA3 provides a very evenly balanced output; it is a pretty linear device with not much colouration which at first compared to the amp I was using was a change, but once I got to listen to this amp for a while I got to appreciate more and more. There is the added bonus that there is the option to adjust the treble and bass on the output. I opted to boost the low end by 3db and that was enough to give me a little bit more thump in the low end and give the output a little bit more flavour.

Interestingly, as I am an acoustician by trade and I ran this amp through some room tests. We often talk about the effect of the room on the speakers but what about the effect of the amp on the output? It brought up two really interesting points, one is that the low end of this amp was actually better than what I was using, the need for my 3db boost was more to do with the null in my room (this is an office so I

# IOTAVX SA3 INTEGRATED AND PA3 POWER AMPLIFIER



# IOTAVX SA3 INTEGRATED AND PA3 POWER AMPLIFIER

have lots of demo acoustic panels in place, but it is not fully treated to that extent) than the output of the amp. The other discovery is that the output across the frequency range really was as linear as I suspected.

IOTVX claim on their website that 'The Class AB amplifier technology achieves a high degree of efficiency and thanks to the special amplifier circuitry, offers minimal distortion and maximum precision to the sound. Music enjoyment at the highest level and with maximum dynamics is thus nothing in the way'. So far so good, so let's put it through its paces and see how it deals with some of the different outputs. I mainly listen via a mac and the RCA inputs and this it handles very well. An album I am really familiar with on vinyl is Beirut's 'Galliot'. Part of the reason I love this so much on vinyl is the warmth of the sound of the record and the depth to its feel, but how does the SA3 compare via those RCA's? Actually, pretty good, due to its clean output what you get is the full, lush, multi-layered instruments, in the background and when you start to hike the volume up. Dynamically it's rather exciting, with trumpets punctuating the mood in a desperate bid to be heard and various other instruments all playing their part. The sound at times seems a little middy, with the vocals clearly standing out and some of the delicateness of the record perhaps being lost, but this is being played via Spotify and for the price mark I would be more than happy with this sound reproduction. The SA3 reproduces the highs a bit brighter than I am used to and the cymbals at the start of my next choice (Fontaines DC 'Big') shine out. The SA3 has enough of a dynamic range to make this record exciting but perhaps not grab you by the throat and shake you about as the record deserves.

So, onto vinyl, and I have been obsessively playing These New Puritans 'Inside the Rose' recently, so let's see how the SA3 handles my MoFi Studio Turntable with a bit of art-rock-experimental-pop goodness. I had to make some quick adjustments to that bass as it was now way too present and was rattling the windows. This is very easy to do via the remote though and we were off. I actually listened to the turntable when I first unpacked the amp and I felt it was a little bit too high, lacking a little of the warmth that I was used to from the MoFi and amp combination I had been using. I don't think the SA3 does a bad job and when less is going on in a track the sound starts to float and materialise with the stereo imaging and clarity I like from my vinyl, but it still lacks a little something that makes me fall in love with the output when it comes to vinyl.

Finally, I wanted to give the Bluetooth option a go. We all know that the quality coming out of even the higher definition files on Spotify via your phone can have mixed results, so this was something that I was interested in, but like many others, this doesn't make or break an amp for me as this would only ever be used for casual listening. The Bluetooth option does not come as standard with the SA3 and it is an additional £25. It plugs into its own port in the rear of the unit and supports the latest AptX audio standard. It couldn't be easier to use, however - you literally plug it in, choose Bluetooth, connect your phone and you are away.

This is definitely an added bonus for me, the sound and clarity on via Bluetooth is very good. Very clear, very balanced and without a doubt worth the extra £25. It's clear that digitally the SA3 is a great buy and I would highly recommend it. I am only kicking myself that I did not use the Bluetooth earlier in my temporary tenure of this amp. I was expecting an inferior quality sound and what you get is most definitely the opposite. It has the dynamics but a great casual listening sound and reproduced very well.

PA3 – So now for the big test. We are going to add the power amplifier to the setup. Again, this was very simple to do and took only

a couple of minutes. Previously most of my experience has been with integrated amps, so I was interested to see what adding this additional power amp to the speakers would actually achieve. I understand the concept of separating it out this way. Using a separate power amp allows the amp to perform just one function rather than dedicating space over to the many other great benefits the integrated gives us. Basically, a much better layout means that the signal paths can be as short as possible. So, does it give us the performance boost the science suggests it should? How audible will that be? Obviously, just for fun, I did some room testing again and they again did pretty much back up what we would expect, a bit more evenly distributed power. Using this type of software for this only really shows us some aspects, just the power being distributed, the rest of the results are going to be completely affected by the room and sometimes obviously more power in an untreated room could amplify pre-existing room problems.

So, is it actually better? Let's go back via our MAC and RCA inputs and the answer is an immediate yes. I tried the same files as previously and the difference is apparent. Take Fontaine DC's 'Big' - the cymbals at the beginning of the track are still clear but not so harsh on the top-end now. The slight mid issue I was concerned about has been vastly reduced. The vocals are clearer now and rather than standing out and above the music, they now sit on top of it and there is more rock and roll energy in the guitars. I was so impressed with the difference of Beirut 'Galliot' that I actually played it non stop for about 2 hours this morning - the sound was much more reminiscent of my own amp and turntable combination. Enjoying myself I next go for Justin Sullivan's 'Navigating by the Stars'. A beautiful album which when played on the right system really comes alive. Again, I am impressed with the sound quality of the PA3 / SA3 combination. Without a doubt, the power amplifier has worked well with my speakers and with this format. How about the vinyl though? The SA3 alone, had left me feeling a little flat as if my analogue sound source was without character, feeling a little too digitalised perhaps? The difference here is more apparent. Any minor criticisms I may have had from the SA3 alone instantly disappears when used with the PA3. The bass is hug, the separation is distinct, the track floats and more importantly has that overall soundstage that made me fall in love with the format all over again. It's still linear as before but that distributed power has brought the dynamics back to life.

## CONCLUSION

The SA3 integrated amp is great value for money for £399 and if you want a linear amp that offers you a lot of different listening options, is easy to use with full remote and simple EQ options I would not hesitate in recommending the SA3. It is basically a lot of amp for the money. I would further recommend the extra £25 for the Bluetooth addition, as this is where I think you will be pleasantly surprised and using the DAC it has excellent sound reproduction.

If you are thinking of using this as your main amp I would have no hesitation in adding the PA3. It's almost a no brainer at only £299 extra. Basically, you get all the good bits of the SA3, its usability, its linear output and it just supercharges it. This is the XRi (Boy racers of a certain age will get this pocket rocket motor reference) version and a little bit like that classic car, when first browsing you may feel you don't need its extra turbo capability but once you've tried it out you will be grinning from ear to ear and happily will pay the difference.

# IOTAVX SA3 INTEGRATED AND PA3 POWER AMPLIFIER



# IOTAVX SA3 INTEGRATED AND PA3 POWER AMPLIFIER

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Both the SA3 and the PA3 are large, steel made units and present excellent value for money at this price range.

**Sound Quality:** SA3 is very linear in its output with an excellent even frequency output. Add the PA3 to supercharge this very decent set up to the next level.

**Value For Money:** Either as a standalone or as part of the power unit the performance from these amps is fabulous for the price we are talking. Add the Bluetooth option or you miss out on one of the highlights of this system

**Pros:** It has a lot of input options and is super easy to use. The onboard DAC is incredibly accurate. The Bluetooth is one of the best I have heard for this level of system. Add the PA3 and this set up is taken onto a whole new level

**Cons:** The SA3 alone may not necessarily fulfil all your listening needs if this is your main reference system. The Bluetooth option is an additional cost.

**Price:** SA3 £399. PA3 £299 Bluetooth option an additional £25



# REVIEW

## MICROMEGA M150 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER, DAC & STREAMER



In which John Scott confronts a philosophical pachyderm, feeds it a bun, pats it gently on its trunk and sends it on its way. Or John Scott takes delivery of the Micromega M150 Integrated amp/DAC/streamer costing £5499.

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# MICROMEGA M150 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER, DAC & STREAMER



Let's try a quick magic trick: Think of a French amplifier manufacturer. Have you got one in your head? Now think of a French amplifier manufacturer whose product can be placed on a shelf or hung on the wall. Does that change anything? Now think of the name of that manufacturer and the letter of the alphabet that its name begins with. It's D, isn't it? Thank you ladies and gentlemen and good night.

I hadn't been aware of Micromega's M series of amplifiers before I was asked to review them but as I read the marketing material, I couldn't help but think that there were, at first glance at least, a number of obvious similarities between the M150, and its little brother the M100, and Devialet's Expert series. Both have a similar form factor and footprint – more like a large laptop than a conventional amp. Both can be hung on the wall. Both incorporate a DAC and streaming technology. Both can utilise speaker-correcting software. When I took delivery of the M150, it seemed like an elephant had also slipped into the room; an elephant that sat balefully in the corner, silently willing me to make continuous comparisons between Micromega and Devialet. The M150 is distributed in the UK by SCV Distribution.

## UNBOXING AND BUILD

The Micromega M15 arrived in a sturdy cardboard box inside of which was another sturdy cardboard box. Opening this revealed the M15 firmly snuggled within a polyurethane (I'm guessing) liner, keeping it safe from any bumps. The liner also held a remote control, power cord and microphone, lead and mini-tripod in separate boxes. A quick set up guide was also included with the full manual available online.

The case of the M150 is machined from a solid block of aluminium and as a result it feels satisfyingly solid. Two grooves cut across the width of the top face, dividing the top into thirds and adding a little bit of character. The amplifier has two LED displays: one on the top face and one on the front edge; this ensures that the display is easily visible regardless of whether the amplifier is wall or shelf mounted.

Control of the M150's functions is via 4 small buttons – one at each corner of the top face display.

At the rear of the amplifier is a comprehensive range of inputs along with a pair of high quality speaker terminals. The top surface of the amplifier overhangs at the rear which hides the inputs from view and makes connecting inputs and speakers slightly more tricky than it otherwise would be. Given the dimensions of the unit, space on the rear panel is at a premium but the layout of the various inputs and outputs is logical and uncluttered. I placed the M150 on a soft towel on the floor in front of the shelf I wanted to place it on then tipped the unit onto its front edge so that the inputs were facing upwards. After I made the connections I was then able to place the M150 on the shelf.

While the elephant settled itself in the corner, I got on with setting the amp up, which was as straightforward as you would expect an integrated amp to be, once I'd got my head around the rear overhang. I expect that if you wanted to mount the M150 to the wall, this would add a level of complexity but I didn't, so I can't comment on that.

The M150 is available as standard in silver or black finish. I was supplied with the black version which I liked it a lot. It looked really classy, in an understated and elegant way, sitting on my shelf. Custom colours are available at additional cost so if you have ever wanted an amplifier in Hifi Pig Pink, the M150 could be just what you are looking for. Additionally, through a partnership with French loudspeaker company Focal, if you own a pair of Focal speakers your amp can be matched exactly to the colour of your speakers.

The M150 is supplied by a solid remote control that echoes the shape of the amplifier. The surface of this features 17 little buttons which control power/standby, volume, mute and Bluetooth connection. In addition, each input has its own button. This makes changing inputs straightforward but I might have preferred a less cluttered layout where one button cycled through the input options. Also, not all of the

# MICROMEGA M150 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER, DAC & STREAMER



# MICROMEGA M150 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER, DAC & STREAMER

amps functions, for example balance, sensitivity and room equalisation, are controllable from the remote.

## A BRIEF TECHNICAL INTERLUDE

First and foremost the M150 is, as the name implies, a 150 watt per channel amplifier (at 8 ohms). I mentioned earlier that the M150 is not only an integrated amplifier but also contains a DAC and a streamer. I've reviewed a couple of amp/DAC/streamer all-in-one boxes before and as good as they were, something about their design made me think that compromises were being made by bundling all three elements together. The design and build of the M150 seems to put the emphasis on this product very much as an audiophile integrated amplifier. Throughout the time I spent with it I found myself forgetting that it was actually carrying out DAC and streamer duties as well. This is a product that truly is integrated; integrating not only pre and power amplifier functions but everything that you need for digital playback. Your turntable hasn't been forgotten though, a phono input, switchable for both moving magnet and moving coil cartridges, is also included.

You would be forgiven for thinking that with a height of only 56mm, including clearance provided by spiked feet, the M150 must be a class D design. Class A/B amplifiers are big, thick, chunky things aren't they? Well, not this one. A combination of dual power supplies - one per channel - and a cunning heat dispersion system allows a class A/B design to function efficiently in a smaller space. Heat is dissipated not only through the aluminium casing but also through a convection tunnel that runs across the width of the unit, drawing in air at one side and expelling with the aid of a magnetically levitating fan at the other. Any concerns I may have had about fan noise were quickly quashed; the fan is inaudible at all but the closest distance.

Streamer duties are handled by a downloadable app. The M150 can stream digital files from UPnP servers or via Bluetooth. Up to 32 bit resolution is supported at sampling frequencies up to 768KHz for PCM and 11.2 MHz for DSD. If you've read any of my previous streamer reviews you will know that I am particularly fussy about streamer apps - even more so since becoming a Roon user. Micromega's app is not the most elegant I have seen but it is far from the worst and it does the job adequately as well as mimicking the functions of the supplied remote. I have to be honest though and say that for the majority of the review period I bypassed the M150's streamer and used my Raspberry pi as a Roon endpoint into the M150's USB input.

The Micromega Acoustic Room System (M.A.R.S) is Micromega's Room equalisation system which comes as standard on the M150 and is available as an extra on the M100. Micromega claim that M.A.R.S "...irons out any incidents in the amplitude/frequency response coming from reflections, absorption's or resonances in the listening room [and] it also corrects imperfections in the speakers".

I glanced over at the elephant. Maybe I was imagining it [You think? - Ed] but it was beginning to look a bit uneasy. Perhaps it could tell that I was quickly coming to the conclusion that comparisons between the M150 and any other French amplifier were really not necessary.

## SOUND QUALITY

Time to get down to some listening. To begin with, I connected the M150 to my Linn Keilidhs, streaming from my NAS into the M150's LAN input and using the inbuilt streamer. Trust In Me from Bria Skonberg's Bria album immediately impressed with robust but realistic upright bass, delicate percussion and vibraphone, and Bria's smokey

vocals and elegant trumpet. Spraying with female vocal, I moved on to The Jungle Line from Joni Mitchell's The Hissing Of Summer Lawns, noting some extra grunt in the Moog bass and lots of detail in the Burundi background chants.

It was time to try out the M.A.R.S room equalisation system. This involves connecting the supplied microphone to the M150 and taking three readings of the full frequency sweeps that the M150 produces from the speakers - one reading from the centre listening position followed by one from around 20cm to the left and then 20cm to the right. Two equalised settings are then available - Auto and Flat. I replayed the same three tracks with the Auto setting engaged and found that the bass frequencies had been tightened up considerably. There was still oodles of bass but it seemed faster and more musical. On the other hand, the Flat setting took too much away from the music for my liking leaving it sounding exactly that - flat. Perhaps in other rooms it might come into its own but not in this room.

I swapped the Keilidhs out for my Audio GE Sincerus 80 floor standers. These are larger than the Keilidhs and front ported, and generally sound better in this room, with a more controlled bass. The same tracks were played again, with and without the room correction (the calibration measurements have to be redone whenever speakers are changed). As before, I preferred the corrected sound in the Auto mode although with the Sincerus 80s, there was less of a difference between the uncorrected and the corrected sound.

Finally, I hooked up a pair of Sonus Faber Sonatto II stand mounts that I had in for review. Yet again, the corrected sound was my preferred option and I suspected that the combination of the M150 and the Sonatto IIs really might be something special.

I looked the elephant squarely in the eye. It looked back, slightly sheepishly I thought. "Time to go?" I said. It nodded, packed its trunk (sorry, not sorry) and saw itself out. I wasn't sure whether the absence of a philosophical construct would require me to re-run the room calibration but I did - just in case. The Sonatto's stayed in for the remainder of the review period.

While I was satisfied with the M150's streaming capabilities, I was missing the versatility of my Roon Nucleus+ streamer so I switched it in. I also wanted to see how the M150 shaped up purely as an amplifier so I bypassed its internal DAC and tried my Spectra portable USB DAC. At around £100 this couldn't hope to compete with the Asahi Kasei AK 4900 "Velvet Sound" DAC chipset used by the M150 but the underlying qualities of the of the amplifier shone through and I found myself not in any particular hurry to swap it back out.

Finally, for headphone users there is a 3.5mm output on the front panel which uses binaural technology to provide an enhanced headphone listening experience. I don't do a lot of headphone listening and it didn't particularly encourage me to swap headphones for the Sonattos but if you are a headfi fan it might well float your boat.

## CONCLUSION

Over the time I spent with the Micromega M150 its qualities shone through a variety of music from jazz to heavy rock to classical to electronic. It is not a cheap option but given that it is an all in one amplifier, DAC and streamer, I think it represents a solid investment that you would be unlikely to want to replace in a hurry so will give years of pleasure. Also you may find that the less powerful, and cheaper, M100 might meet your requirements. I was, however, so

# MICROMEGA M150 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER, DAC & STREAMER

impressed with the M.A.R.S EQ system that I would definitely recommend adding that to the cheaper model.

My only real regret is that the M150 is not "Roon Ready", and therefore requires a separate endpoint to enable it to work with Roon. I really think they have missed a trick here. Had it been Roon Ready, I'd have been setting booby traps up the garden path to prevent the courier from taking it away.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Machined from a solid block of Aluminium and reassuringly solid feeling.

**Sound Quality:** Excellent and flexible with the on-board M.A.R.S speaker correction software.

**Value For Money:** Given it's an amp and DAC (and a very good one too) this represents a solid investment.

**Pros:** Stylishly designed all in one audiophile unit. Effective room equalisation software. Plenty of power.

**Cons:** Idiosyncratic remote control (not a big deal though). Streamer app could be better. Not Roon Ready.

**Price:** £5499



# REVIEW

## MITCHELL & JOHNSON

### 800 SERIES PRE AND POWER AMPS



Mitchell & Johnson may not be a name you are familiar with, though you may well have come across their relatively budget-priced headphones. However, they also make a small range of electronics built here in the UK. Alan McIntosh has a listen to the brand's 800 series pre (with on-board DAC and MM/MC phon-stage) and power amplifiers costing £1299 a box.

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# MITCHELL & JOHNSON 800 SERIES PRE AND POWER AMPS



Mitchell & Johnson are perhaps better known their aesthetically and musically pleasing low to mid-budget headphones but I confess it's not a company I was very familiar with, so when I was offered the opportunity to review a Pre and Power Amplifier combo, fully manufactured here in the UK I was keen!

## CONSTRUCTION

Taking the S800 Pre amplifier first there is a lot to talk about. Faced in brushed aluminium with 2 rotary controls – one volume (backed by a Burr-Brown stepped attenuator to maintain sound quality) and an input selector. These are an “infinite turn design. The rotaries sit astride the large Blue lit LCD readout showing input selected, volume and menu adjustments. Pressing the rotaries accesses the setup menu. On/off control (positioned same on the S815) is the somewhat retro-styled 3-way rocker switch. When connected by a 12v trigger the pre's rocker also brings the power amp to life. Completing the front is the useful addition of a 6.35mm Headphone socket.

A super range of input options is available with 6 Analogue inputs (5 RCA/1 Balanced XLR) and 3 digital (both optical and Coax) and an Asynchronous XMOS USB input for those preferring it. The Asynchronous nature of the USB removes any clocking compliance issues between your source device and the M+J internal DAC.

The digital end of things are admirably taken care of by the well respected and great sounding ESS 9018 Sabre DAC, all inputs on the S800 are restricted to 24bit/192kHz but will happily handle DSD64 & 128 which will take care of most Hi-Res streaming needs for all but those running extreme resolution, but I suspect if you are, you already have a capable DAC for that purpose and would bypass the M+J one altogether. Having the ESS9018 on board is a big win for M+J in my eyes and the achievement to have it at this price point is to be applauded.

You get an MM/MC phono stage which can be selected via the S815's settings menu – again in lower/mid budget amps this is uncommon and removes the need for more boxes, while still giving you the flexibility to move between cartridge types in future.

Outputs are 2 RCA outputs, line level tape and subwoofer as well as XLR balanced.

One small niggle with the display is that up close its easy to read but found at my seating distance the “haze” of the blue made it hard to discern compared with clean higher resolution displays on some peer offerings.

Via the menu you can rename the inputs which is, in my opinion, essential. I say essential as there is an interesting feature of the S800 which switches output volume to around -90dB each time to you change input (to protect the listener/speakers from loud surprises M+J tell me) and then returns it to a listenable level based on “last listen”. Clever, but I'm not sure it's necessary and did cause me at first to struggle to tell what source was in which input when scanning through, as I had to wait for it to defeat then return each time. Fine when you have set all the names in the menu but not when setting up, as you don't often know what sources you have plugged into which numbered inputs round the back without crawling about on hands and knees.

The remote has a real quality in both look and feel and not plasticity, but the layout needs some work as the volume buttons are quite small and initially hard to find among many buttons making source selection a little confusing. The unit comes in at a light 6kg but be aware the two should not be stacked, to allow for heat dissipation.

Moving across to the partnering S815 Power amp and that aluminium continues. This time to the centre of the fascia is a VU meter window showing Left and Right “power” levels (actually

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displayed as dB) and a Peak led between them. I'm a bit of sucker for VU's and it continues nicely the slightly retro, established look and feel of this pair.

Under the hood is a Class A/B design handled by 2 pairs of 6 output transistors from Toshiba with power driven by XW eXtra Quiet toroidal transformers by Noratel, flanked by substantial heatsinks taking the weight of the unit to a mighty 16kg. Power is listed at 150W per channel at 8ohms with close to double that into 4 ohms at 280W and a not to be sniffed at 104db signal to noise ratio. All in all a pretty stonking set up for the money!

Inputs are unbalanced RCA and balanced XLR, 2 sets of good quality binding posts offering Bi-wiring if desired and there is also an unbalanced RCA output for those with speakers that will take it such as the classic Rogers Studio 1.

## SOUND QUALITY

Spoiler alert – it is impressive! After a week of settling, I got down to listening to some of my usual test tracks beginning with (via the MC Phono stage using the highly modified SL1210 and the incredibly detailed Dynavector 17d2). First up is Heartache Tonight from the Eagles. A great test for any HiFi set up as it is a great, well mastered pressing - its staging, detail and richness of percussive strike really shine through and the S800/815 combo brought it to life wonderfully with a richness to the sound overall. Rock, I think, is the real home of this pair, perhaps a stride behind peers such as the Audiolab 8000 for sheer resolution and detail, feeling a little more laid back, however far from lazy. However, somehow the M+J doesn't feel lacking because of it, the musicality overriding any deficiency in granularity – just a great sound! To test the MM input I swapped to my other SL1210 with Ortofon 2M Red and again the on-board stage stands up admirably vs a lower priced external stage (the Project DS+ in this case), not shoulder to shoulder but a close run thing - not unsurprisingly of course with the fairly rounded Red stylus profile. For an on-board stage at this price I'm impressed.

Switching to the USB DAC input from my Auralic G1 I kicked off with the new Dido album Still on My Mind with its glassy smooth vocals and synthetic, ambient house sound before moving to the beautiful, fine playing and vocals of Dhafer Youssef's middle-eastern jazz epic Sound of Mirrors. The G1 delivers hi-res files superbly so is a great test of any DAC and the M+J combo really came to life and genuinely surprised me when compared to the Audiolab MDAC+ which is my usual reference DAC. Staging if anything was bigger and better than with vinyl, again the musicality and richness is impressive, and there was very, very little in it between this on-board DAC vs the external MDAC+ , the latter only outpacing the former on some air and enthusiasm, more owing to the available filters and increased investment in power and stage engineering, but I would be lying if I said it feels that the extra expense of the MDAC+ is really worth it as the M+J really stood up and delivered. Sticking with digital I plumbed for Gegory Porter's Take Me To The Alley and then the seminal 80's classic Sweet Dreams from Eurythmics. Both were reproduced wonderfully, that smooth mid and high of the synths and Lennox' vocals just hitting you where it matters and with warmth and a human edge to Porter's voice. Add to this the sheer delight of the piano and sax in Don't Lose Your Steam we had a superb, vibrant and fun listening experience and that went on for the rest of my time with the M +J pairing.

To reduce (a little) the risk of waffling I'll just say that CD playback via RCA input delivered the same great results. Floyds Welcome to the

Machine and Shine on... re-created in all their glory, that grinding low rawness and high silkiness balanced well to show off just how strong an offering at this price this UK built partnership is.

## CONCLUSION

The Mitchell + Johnson combination is, when all is said and done, a great one! A company perhaps better known for budget offerings (carrying that perception of higher build costs that come with "UK manufacturing") have taken a risk here and it has paid off. Stacked against my Michell Argo and Alecto's they can't quite keep up - but it's a close run race, and the M +J do take the advantage with digital playback - and they are at least half the price!

Personally, I'd say it's impossible not to enjoy the sound of these two. Musicality and power shine through. The detail is good, maybe not the last word in resolution around the middle bands, but makes for a very enjoyable listen. Staging is good, best via the DAC I found and with very capable phono-stages built in making this a pretty sweet proposition at an aggressive price point for such a well-built Pre and Power solution. The pair were never lazy or poor in delivery! They may not be to everyone's tastes with regards aesthetics (I actually like them in the main) but the M +J are a pre and power pairing you simply must audition for their sonic prowess.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** UK built. Great range of inputs on a well machined Aluminium chassis with high-quality materials and strong aesthetics. Large powerful toroidal transformers. Very well regarded DAC technology. VU meters are lovely. Remote could do with a rethink. Blue LEDs not for everyone.

**Sound Quality:** Overall very strong; they drive a musical and refined sound with good detail and less clinical than some peers which will suit many ears. They are great for electronic and rock alike and so pair with a great source and reap the rewards. Digital playback, in particular, impressed me. Staging was good, and I believe you'd have to spend considerably more to gain an edge and more dimension. Phono-stage is also as good as, or better than, many budget external stages.

**Value for Money:** It's a busy market but these are well engineered, UK manufactured (not mass market) which normally comes at a premium and sound great without being fussy on source – to achieve this combination of quality and price point is rare for UK production so pricing to me represents good value for money and would be cash well spent.

**Pros:** Build quality, manufactured in the UK, sound quality and punch, decent staging, range of inputs, aesthetics. Both the MM/MC stage and inbuilt DAC impressed!

**Cons:** Some discrepancies between manual and function (updated now hopefully), Blue LED may not suit everyone, remote could be better laid out.

**Price:** S800 Pre £1299, S815 Power £1299



**REVIEW**

**ECLIPSE TD510 MK 2**

**LOUDSPEAKERS AND STANDS**



**Paul Messenger takes a listen to the Eclipse TD510Z Mk2 Loudspeakers with matching stands and costing £3840 a pair.**

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# ECLIPSE TD510 MK 2 LOUDSPEAKERS AND STANDS



Eclipse is a Japanese brand. Currently owned by three companies (Fujitsu, Toyota, and Denso), the parent company used to be called Fujitsu Ten, but since late 2017 it has been known as Denso Ten, as a result of Denso (a major name in automotive OEM technology) purchasing Fujitsu's controlling interest in the operation.

Irrespective of the change in ownership, Eclipse still operates in a way that's similar to before, and the models have been around for some fifteen years. I remember reviewing earlier models, including what was presumably a Mk1 version of this TD510 some ten years ago.

## DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

The initials TD stand for Time Domain, and provide the clue that the prime purpose of this design is to create a speaker that accurately reproduces the timing information, which many would argue is the very essence of musical performance. To this end, a solitary 'full range' drive unit (the term is used advisedly) covers the whole audio band, using just a single voice coil with no intervening network components. It stands to reason that if the whole of the audio signal is fed to a single, solitary voice-coil, most of the timing at least will necessarily be spot on. (The extra bass output via the port will undergo a modest phase shift.) Regular speakers with more than one drive unit and phase-shifting crossover networks rarely achieve such tight timing.

To operate high into the treble, a solitary drive unit must necessarily have a small, light diaphragm, the example here is actually made from woven glassfibre, and is just 70mm in diameter. However, even with help of a rearward firing port, such a small driver means that bass output is bound to be rather limited. At the same time, the laws of physics dictate that the top end will tend to 'beam' quite strongly once the wavelength being reproduced is smaller than the cone diameter, so best results are likely to be found when listening fairly close to the main forward axis.

The TD510ZMk2 is one of a number of Eclipse models, differing largely in the size of the drive unit (and to some extent its associated sensitivity). The '510 is second from the top of the range. It has a drive unit that fires through a 10cm diameter orifice, and a sensitivity of a lowish 84dB/W. (There's also a '712 that costs around £1,000 more and uses a 12cm orifice.)

The enclosure is a large egg-shaped affair – a veritable dinosaur of an egg in size terms – and it comes with a matching stand. The price is a quite high £3840/pair, though the stand accounts for half of that sum, as the price without it is just £1,920. (Performance without the stand – ie without a 'Z' in the name – is reckoned to be around 80% of a model that uses it.) A +15/-10 degree of angular adjustment allows the speaker to match the seated head height of a listener.

Inherently a strong shape with exceptional distribution capabilities, the port-loaded 'egg' is decoupled internally from the drive unit by a 5-leg strut with damped ends. It's a two-piece casting, high pressure injection moulded in a mineral loaded, fibre-reinforced resin. The internal shape disperses reflections and avoids standing waves; the outside shape somewhat resembles a human head, which should assist speech reproduction.

Furthermore, the 'egg' is effectively decoupled mechanically from the vibrations generated by the drive unit, and the drive unit itself is mass- and ultimately stiffness-loaded, via a bracket down through the stand. Any vibrations created by the driver or its mass damper are fed down into the stand independently of any vibrations within the 'egg'

Blunt 'spikes' are used at the top and bottom of the stand: three at the top (clustered closely together), and five well spaced around an almost circular cast alloy base. The stand's vertical pillar leans forward a little at the top, the front edge is pointed to avoid causing reflections, and grooves at the rear keep one's cables tidy. Apparently, it has a sand filling that has been specially dried and

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graded to absorb broad-band vibration. Finish could be silver (as in our examples), white, or a rather more discreet black.

## PERFORMANCE

Let's deal first with the impedance trace, which is around 6ohms through much of the lower midband, rising steadily through the treble region (apart from the zone around the port tuning frequency, at around 57Hz). The load is therefore quite easy to drive, though it is somewhat compromised by a below average sensitivity of around 85dB/W.

One of the neat things about reviewing speakers for a living is that one never stops learning about them – no more so than exploring the output of a single driver speaker like this Eclipse model. I well recall bringing the earlier Eclipse speakers up close, to some advantage. I therefore began my listening to these latest Eclipses 'up close' before moving them back to my normal listening locations.

What really impressed me was the simple fact that these small loudspeakers sounded a whole lot better when used 'up close', and that the addition of room reflections was entirely negative. In a way, listening to these speakers when they were relatively close to me was halfway towards headphone listening, albeit without all the unpleasantness associated with the need to wear a headset!

I thought it would be interesting to measure the speakers in various locations, and found the results fascinating. Obviously, the bass here is very limited, and the basic driver diameter means that you don't get anything much below 50Hz. The treble proper, again rather inevitably, does depend very much on the listening axis, giving fine and well-balanced extension provided one is directly on-axis, but a quite rapid roll-off if listening off-axis. Crucially, the 1-2kHz peak observed in the Mk1 seems to have been engineered out of this Mk2 version.

I'm very impressed by a notable lack of coloration from the enclosure, and although the frequency balance requires some care, taking the time to align it carefully can deliver results that are quite magical (above 50Hz, naturally). Imaging is top class, assisted no doubt by the fact that the 'egg' shape promotes fine distribution characteristics.

Does the lack of deep bass really matter? Surprisingly little is the true answer. However, those who do miss the bottom octave can always to add a subwoofer (or two) if desired. Sadly, the simple REL T/5is that I borrowed when recently reviewing a small cast-iron JERN speaker had been returned to the manufacturer. Nothing was therefore immediately available, though a number of options do exist, either from Eclipse or others (eg REL, JERN, B&W etc.).

Irrespective of whether or not subwoofers are used (and one quickly adjusts to their absence) this Eclipse speaker delivers a remarkably smooth and well-balanced sound, with outstanding imaging and splendidly tight focus, provided the distance between speaker and listener is relatively short. I must admit to being very impressed, far more so than I had been with the Mk1 version, largely because it no longer sounded distinctly 'presence forward'.

Out of interest I played my copy of Joni Mitchell's Hejira, and was surprised to hear some lyrics on Coyote that had not been audible before. While it's maybe true that the system I'm using has been steadily evolving, and this might explain the extra vocal clarity, the fact that these were audible through such small and essentially simple speakers must say something very positive about their capabilities.

## CONCLUSIONS

This is a superb little loudspeaker, which gets much closer to the ideal of handling the whole audio band from a single full-range drive unit than anything I've yet encountered. The combination of a single full range driver that has evolved into a relatively smooth and flat transducer, with an egg-shaped enclosure that ensures minimal coloration and first-class distribution, is very encouraging indeed. To get the very best results they should be used 'close up', well away from walls and in fairly small rooms, but there's no avoiding their stunning all round performance.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Excellent build throughout; very stylish too, in its distinctively individual way.

**Sound Quality:** Sounds great within the inevitable limits of a small full-range drive unit. Sounds best when used 'close up', to avoid room reflections. Sounds a bit like headphones without the encumbrance of a headset!

**Value For Money:** Difficult to assess, though it can sound wonderful within certain constraints.

**Pros:** Magical time-coherence and imaging. Entirely free from box colouration too. Should be used 'close up' for best results, which deliver sound like 'headphones without a headset'.

**Cons:** Limited bass extension (though subwoofers can be used). Treble tends to 'beam', so one needs to be precisely 'on axis' for best results

**Price:** £3,840/pair



# REVIEW

## NIME AUDIO DESIGN

### MYA LOUDSPEAKERS



**Made in Italy and with an unusual aesthetic, the Mya speakers from Nime Audio certainly look the high-end part, but what do they sound like. Stuart Smith cocks an ear to these €12500 beauties.**

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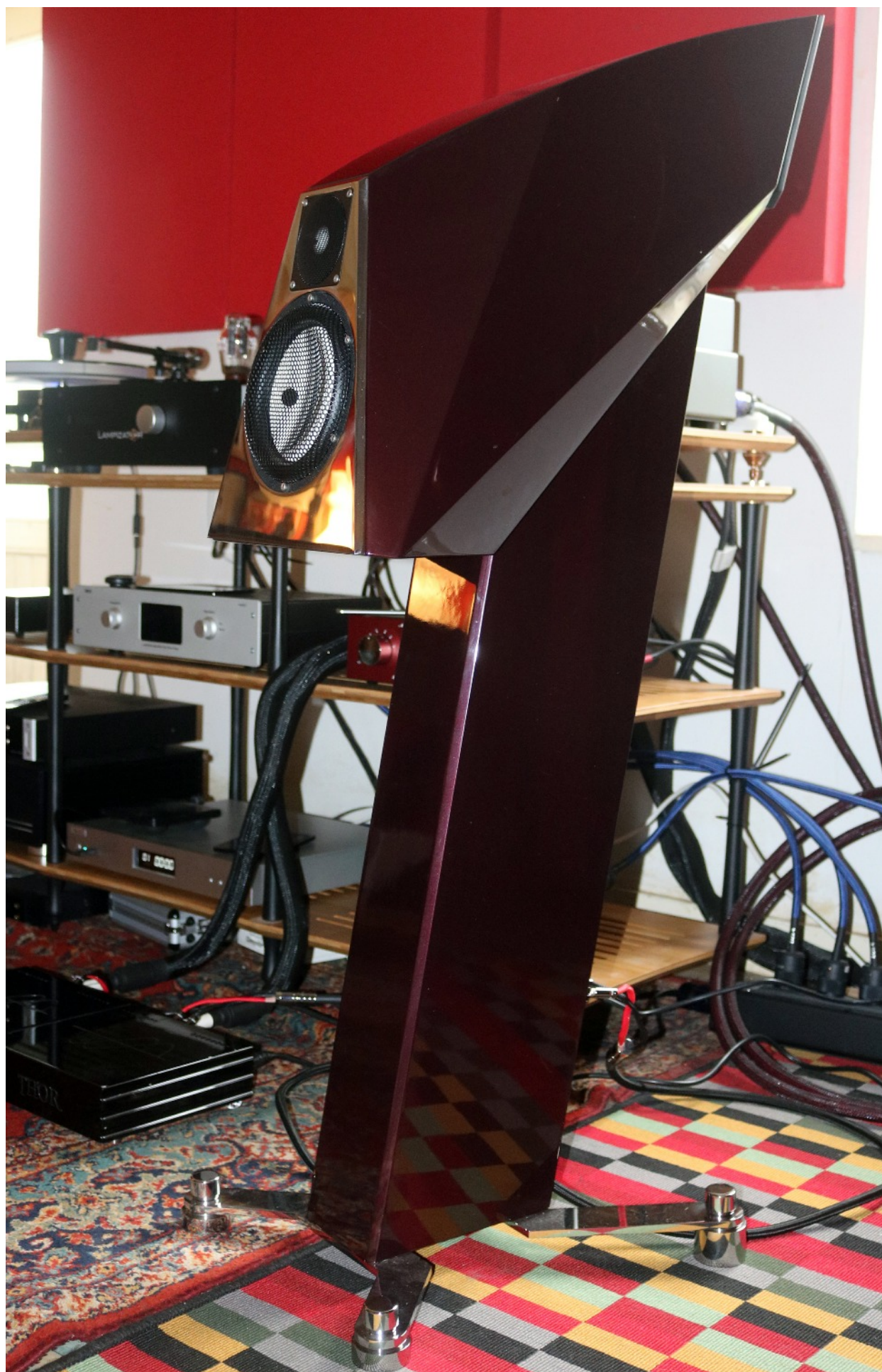
## DESIGN AND AESTHETICS, FIT AND FINISH

Let's jump straight in and discuss the elephant in the room with regards the Nime Mya loudspeakers – they look like no other speaker I've encountered before. Nico Memoli is the person behind the Nime (Nico MEmoli) brand and during the course of this review I got in touch with him to ask him about his philosophy of design given the very different aesthetics of his loudspeakers and here's what he had to say: "I am a lover of beauty and design of all kinds; clothes, cars, shoes, furniture etc and I thought that even within the sometimes esoteric world of High End, specifically the loudspeakers needed a refresh with the design. I believe this to be the case because the modern furnishing market is having a great aesthetic evolution, and I believe that the "old" box-shaped lines are no longer current in luxury or contemporary furnishings. In 2010 I designed the first Elite One model loudspeaker and I proposed it to the market in 2012. In my opinion, the Elite One managed to combine both design and functionality, creating a high-performance diffuser which, like a piece of furniture, was easy to fit into modern furnished homes, enhancing the location wherever it is placed. All my present and future models take this rule into account." And so there you have it. With regards the design and aesthetics, it is bound to cause differences of opinion and personally I believe this to be a good thing – too many times designers follow the same tried and tested formula without wanting, or daring, to stick their heads up above the parapet and do something a little different, individual and from their heart. The Mya could never be accused of being a shrinking violet and whilst it is certainly arresting in its design concept it works. I genuinely believe that within pretty much any space the Mya would be a talking point – a work of functional art if you like. I can imagine these speakers looking fantastic in a sparse loft, in a home decorated with high-end modern furniture and even in a space that is occupied by older furnishings where the juxtaposition of the old and the ultra-modern would work brilliantly. OK, I'm no Laurence Llewelyn Bowen (for those that don't know he's a "British self-styled "homestyle consultant" and television personality best

known for his appearances on the BBC") but personally, I love the way these speakers look and the way they integrated visually into our listening room - though they proved a bit of a 'mare to photograph. Many people have seen the Myas and the first comment from many is "Alien" and I get that and they do have a touch of the H. R. Gigers about them, particularly in the shape of the actual "box" and its back-sweeping curves. Aesthetically, I loved these, but then a beautiful design is never going to cut the mustard if the sonics aren't on a par – the Myas are making a statement (and it's a bold statement) so they had better live up to them on the sound front – but more on that later.

The speakers are essentially a standmount, but the stand is an integral part of the speaker and so for all intents and purposes you can see them as a floorstander, or a standmounter – you get my drift I'm sure. The design of the driver enclosure is such that it is multi-faceted in order to avoid and control internal resonances. The Mya is a two-way bass reflex design with the port being at the rear and through which you are able to see some of the internal bracing. Driver compliment is a 25mm ceramic dome tweeter and a 170mm ceramic mid cone, both coming from Accuton. Now here is an interesting point and I say it whenever I hear a speaker that uses Accuton drivers – I have never heard a bad sounding speaker that uses them and were I suddenly to take the urge to go into loudspeaker manufacture, it would be their drivers I would look to explore first of all. The Myas have a claimed frequency response of 40Hz to 20 KHz, have an impedance of 8 Ohms and a sensitivity of 88dB. Nime suggests an amp of 15 to 120 Watts to drive them and for the purposes of this review we utilised our Merrill Thor Class D amps. Dimensions for the speakers on their stands is 1080 x 280 x 700mm (HWD) and they weigh in at 30Kg each. The speakers arrived in their own purpose made crates and were very well packaged, ensuring they arrived safe, sound and unharmed during transit from Italy. The stands on the review models were gloss black (or so I thought up until very close inspection) with Chromed legs and the actual speakers were the same gloss "black" with a highly polished steel (?) front plate – loads of finishes are available. In actual fact, the "black" finish is a very, very

# NIME AUDIO DESIGN MYA LOUDSPEAKERS



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dark red colour. Round the back and integrated into the stand are a single pair of good quality binding posts on a metal plaque which has details of the speakers and Nico's signature. Finish is frankly stunning and the attention to detail is second to none.

Positioning was a doddle and we had them firing across the main, and larger, of our listening spaces. They were about 1.5m from the back wall and at least 3m from side walls on both sides. I had them set about 2.5m apart with the main listening spot making up the triangle. As mentioned the amps were out Merrill Thors which we know very well, along with the Music First Baby Reference preamplifier and Lampizator Big 7 DAC which was being fed zeros and ones directly from our Melco unit. Cables were a mix of Tellurium Q, Atlas and O2A with power conditioning being from a balanced mains unit.

## SOUND

After the speakers arrived they were left to play to themselves for a good while by way of run in and before any serious listening took place, thereafter they had all kinds thrown at them from Hip-Hop to Neil Young and most ports between. Too often I see reviews of speakers and other kit that seem to want to pander to the products strengths rather than testing them for their weaknesses and so without further ado I searched for Hardfloor (acid techno pioneers who are still making some immense music) and their classic Aperience 1, but this time the stonking Kiyoshi Sugo remix, which to be fair I don't know too well. Volume was turned up and I settled in. I posted pics during the listening sessions on our Facebook pages and one person made the comment that music made for a club environment can sound cold and sterile on high-end systems and whilst I get this my thoughts are that a good loudspeaker should be able to convey all music equally. We listen to a wide range of music and so to me a speaker is neither use nor ornament if it can't handle everything we play through them. Anyway, you'll be pleased to hear the Myas coped very well with this track – it's got that sidechained compressor pump that seems to upset folk in the audiophile community, but without it

the tune wouldn't have the same sonic impact and the Myas pump along with it brilliantly. There's still that analogue 303 bassline bubbling away in the background and the Myas bring to the fore a metallic percussion "ting" on the left side of the mix which to me shows the tweeter to be very detailed. Bass-wise I was a happy bunny and whilst we're not getting the same depth that you could possibly expect in a club, they go low enough and with enough detail to satisfy. Switching to the original version of this tune (it's a lot more stripped down and I know it a LOT better having played it out at raves, parties and clubs hundreds of times) the bass kick of the analogue drum machine is thick and analogue sounding whilst the main hats are crisp and precise and when a much quieter set of hats come into the mix they are clearly heard. The cowbell on the 808 is realistic and convincingly like the real thing on the classic drum machine and the acid box (Roland TB303) has the right feel, timbre and bite. This is a surprisingly complex track with a few 303s doing their thing and it can become muddled on some systems, particularly during the breakdown to just 303s, but the Myas never become muddled or befuddled and when the snare roll moves us on to the next section of the song it's a bit of a hands in the air like you just don't care moment – a good sign. The standout here is the portrayal of the rasp and growl of the various 303's the duo use, with each different line being easily differentiated from the others. Turn the volume too high and things can get a little broken at the top end, but we are speaking about volumes few would bother to listen to unless trying to push the speakers to their limits. All in all, a good start to proceedings with the Nime speakers feeling powerful and yet detailed.

Hotel California is up next and it's another tune I know very well and the first thing that strikes me at the start of the tune is the little percussion shakes and taps on the cymbals come from well right and left of the speakers' physical position, which is a nice touch. There is also what sounds to me like a reverbed cymbal that passes from right to left and back again, and whilst this is a very subtle effect it is easily identifiable here – again very nice detail. Speed on cymbals and snare hits is fantastic and this is a characteristic of the Accuton

drivers as I've heard it before with speakers using their products. All in all the song is presented coherently and without emphasis on any particular frequency and is highly detailed in its presentation through the Myas. The guitar solo and the way in which notes stop and start also show these speakers to be agile and speedy. I like this.

You may not know the music of Simon Lomax (you should) but he creates wonderful soundscapes that are, to use a cliché, cinematic in their scale. Listening to his All That Is Gone tune gives you an idea of how wide a soundstage these speakers throw, and yet it doesn't feel to be over exaggerated. This song builds textures upon textures and goes from very quiet to being very loud, but not once do these speakers seem phased and respond quickly and present the whole so you can "see" the layers of sound and almost feel the waves of the pads wash over you. It all feels very organic and natural again with control and speed in the way sounds disappear and come to the fore.

Let's change the tone a bit shall we and pop on a bit of Roy Harper in the form of his fantastic Flat, Baroque and Berserk. His voice is delicate, to the point of being on the edge of breaking at times and this is conveyed beautifully by the Myas, with Hangman sounding fabulous. Harper's guitar playing is more complex than it initially seems and again detail is presented really nicely through the Myas. The album ends with Hell's Angles with guitar panned for the main to the left channel and organ to the right with drums panned between the two and Harper's voice being mainly central but with hard panning left and right at times and again this is represented very well with the Myas – I've said this about a few pairs of speakers we have had in for review recently but there is a very "monitor" kind of feel to the Nime speakers which I enjoy. Now, this track is a complete departure from the other tunes on the album being more rock orientated, but the Myas are unfazed and what stands out for me is the rock-solid bass guitar that sits bang in the middle of the mix throughout whilst the rest of the mix goes a bit mental. These speakers feel accurate and solid in their positioning of instruments in the mix however hectic things get and I like that a lot! There's a bit at the end of Hell's Angels where the recording is just of Harper in the studio talking and giggling with loads of reverb – "jazz cigarettes" may have been involved I feel - and you do get a real feeling of being on the other side of the glass looking in on Roy in a bit of a state in the live room. By the way, if you don't have this record or know Roy Harper then go and buy it, it's quintessentially English and superb throughout!

A tune that really does it for me emotionally is Lady Bird by Natalie Merchant and with the Mya's I'm once again connected to the tune. Her voice is presented beautifully with all the feeling and subtle nuances being there. Strings are separate and yet part of the whole and there is that layering of the sounds whilst still being a complete track. Detail (some will call it micro-detail but that phrase always sounds a bit contrived to me) on the snare is great with the actual snare (the metal spring doodads) being easily identifiable and slightly loose. Again, it's in the detail.

I don't play much classical at all but I do have a soft spot for a record by Norbert Gembaczka, Russian National Orchestra and Mikhail Pletnev on Pentatone (Manfred Op. 58 by Tchaikovsky) and I listen to it once in a while and do enjoy it. At lower volumes the Myas still manage to convey that you are listening to a full orchestra and I feel sat about halfway back in the stalls. Positioning of the instruments and players is presented in a three-dimensional arc around the back of the speakers which adds depth and realism to the recording. Despite me playing this at lower levels I'm still able to pick out individual instruments, where they are in the orchestra, both left and right and forward and back and there is still a feeling of the dynamics

of the orchestra. I particularly enjoyed the speed of the decay on the timpani.

## CONCLUSION

OK, €12500 isn't a drop in the ocean, but neither is it a huge amount of money when put in the context of high-end audio and this is what we have here. Fit and finish are absolutely superb and in keeping with the high-end, and what you are buying into from an aesthetic point of view is a piece of aural furniture. Look, we are not in the league of buying expensive Italian furniture but I did a quick search and found a sofa by Mario Bellini for £35K...used, which puts things into perspective somewhat.

Sonically what you get is a great performing speaker that has fantastic speed to decays, great insight and detail into both recording and recording space and a sound that expands well beyond where the speakers are placed...but still not artificial sounding. At lower volumes they perform beautifully with no loss of detail and whilst it is a detailed sound it is not at all fatiguing. To use a car analogy, I suppose I'd liken these speakers to a Maserati Gran Turismo – elegant, beautifully finished, comfortable and yet furiously fast.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Outstanding fit and finish with superb Italian styling. The speakers are not and do not feel mass-produced – they feel individual and artisanal (in the best sense of that word).

**Sound Quality:** Detail, speed and scale are these speakers' hallmarks.

**Value For Money:** This is going to divide opinion, but for what you are getting here, I think €12500 is a very reasonable asking price.

**Pros:** Stunning looks, fit and finish. Detailed sound that is fast and controlled.

**Cons:** At very loud volumes there is top-end breakup. Looks may well divide opinion.

**Price:** €12500



# REVIEW

## KLIPSCH RP-600M

### LOUDSPEAKERS



Klipsch is an American brand operating since 1946 and probably best known in audiophile circles for their Klipschorn, La Scala and Heresy loudspeakers. However, they also make more conventional loudspeakers and here Adam Billingham puts a pair of their £625 RP-600M stand-mounters through their paces.

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# KLIPSCH RP-600M LOUDSPEAKERS

I think most audiophiles would agree that choosing equipment is as personal as our musical tastes and what we listen to on our beloved electronics. There are many things to take into account when splashing our hard earned dosh on a new bit of kit; sound, obviously should be at the top of our list but we all have different ears and brains. Yes, we are all individuals – “I’m not.”

As well as sound there is features, ease of use, style and a perceived sense of value. Arguably nothing affects the sound coming to our ears more than our choice of speakers, the physical creation of sound waves to send to our ears and the engineering used to create these waves is a vital part in choosing a system that will put us in touch with the artists we love to listen to, that and maybe a decent glass of your favourite tipple and a comfy chair.

I have always been a fan of stand-mount speakers as the kind of budget I have to spend on speakers, for my ears, bookshelf speakers generally give me greater detail and imaging than similarly priced floor-standing counterparts, especially as I do not have the luxury of a massive listening room. The RP-600M stand mount speakers are one of the latest offerings from well regarded US company Klipsch and distributed in the UK by Henley Audio.

## BUILD AND FEATURES

The first thing to strike you when taking these speakers out of the box is the quality of the build. They are beauties, I’m usually a fan of black speakers but my review pair came in walnut. However, with their spun copper cerametallic woofer, which looks sexy as hell, matching copper detail around the composite coated Tractrix horn and black frontage I would happily live with these stunners in my living room. The black magnetic grilles are a lovely touch too. These speakers could happily sit next to speakers twice their price and hold their own visually.

Klipsch uses the Tractrix horn on a lot of their speakers and it provides more efficient way of using power. At a claimed 96dB sensitivity these speakers should be a lot easier to drive than many of their rivals so a big beefy amplifier shouldn’t be necessary to get them to sing.

The rear of the speaker has quite a large rectangular port and keeping them away from back walls is advisable. Also, a pair of bi-wire speaker connectors are featured for those who want to bi-wire or bi-amp.

## SOUND QUALITY

As with many speakers, the first thing to note is you have to spend a little time on placement to get the ideal sound. Initially, I put them in the same position as my KEF LS50s which are quite toed in to my listening position. This had the effect of making the Klipsch’ a little too bright for my ears. However, once I had a fiddle about with positioning (which is a thing lots of us audiophiles love to do anyway) the perceived brightness of the treble disappeared and the imaging greatly improved. For my room, I had them about a foot from the rear wall and toed in around 5 degrees towards my listening position.

The first album I listened to was Gregory Porters fabulous Liquid Spirit. His silicone smooth voice was presented beautifully centre stage while instruments had fabulous definition, the piano tinkled along beautifully, while the horns struck with excitement and presence. The double bass hit fabulously and while not being as low

as maybe a similar priced floor-stander, every note was heard with clarity and not just the notes but the attack on the strings as well and with no muddiness. The initial brightness I had heard when first setting up the speakers had totally disappeared and snares and hi-hats were smooth.

Next up I thought I’d check how these slick Americans would deal with some LA hip-hop. Dr. Dre – 2001 is a masterpiece of hip-hop production, all sub bass, tough 808 snares, funky guitars, Moog leads and Funkadelic samples. The 600’s handled everything with aplomb. Bass still had enough movement at moderate levels that I could feel it in my chair, kicks had thump and snares snapped with presence. As with Gregory, one thing these speakers really excel in is imaging of vocals. It felt like Dre and Snoop were really right there in the room with me, I think they might have had something to say about me only puffing on my vape.

So Jazz and hip-hop definitely work with these speakers but how about thumping rock? Royal Blood is an earth-shattering 2 piece from my home town of Brighton. Despite only being 2 members of the band they create a significant punk rock wall of sound. The Klipschs thumped along nicely, not getting fussed or flapped by the heavily distorted guitars or compressed drums. This kind of music should only be listened to at one volume in my opinion, loud. The 600s rocked along at party volumes while still retaining the excellent imaging and dynamics I had heard on the other music.

Damien Rices’ ‘O’ is one of my favourite melancholic acoustic guitar albums and I felt would suit the talents of the Klipschs perfectly. I wasn’t wrong. Goosebumps were felt as the Klipschs showed the mastery at vocal tone and saturation while mid-range guitar had delicious clarity and presence.

I listened to lots of music in the few weeks I had the speakers and the biggest compliment I can give them is how I just wanted to keep listening. Pulling out album upon album and listening at various volumes the Klipschs just constantly made you feel the emotion of the music and made you want to come back for more.

## CONCLUSION

There is a great deal to love about the 600s. Build quality is excellent, they are easy to drive, they sound fabulous and are especially good with imaging and presence. They are perhaps a little brighter than my LS50s but in no way fatiguing. Bass, while not delving down really low is tight and precise. I can definitely see these being a very popular choice for the sub £1000 mark and should sell very well. I think Paul W Klipsch would have been very happy with these speakers and the no-nonsense no ‘bullsh\*t’ sound they produce for the money.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** As good as anything I’ve seen in the sub £1000 mark and better than a lot of speakers twice their price.

**Sound quality:** Nice open sound with all sorts of music at all sorts of volumes. Can rock hard and convey subtle details with equal measure.

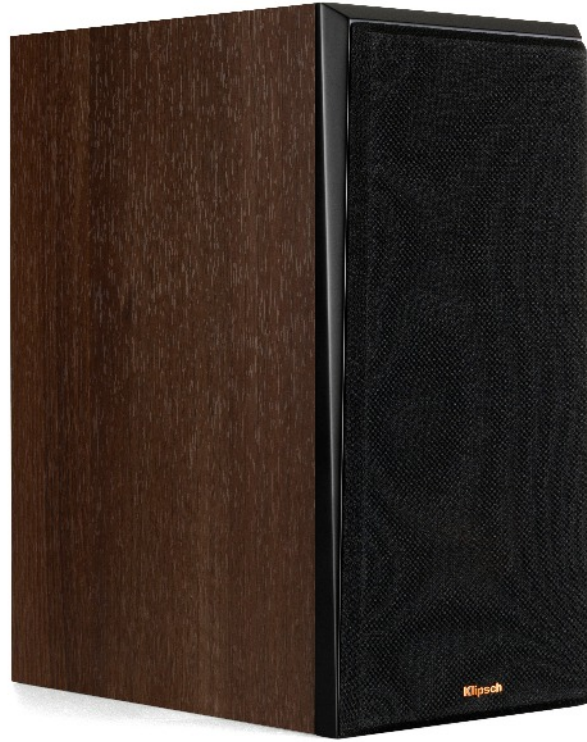
**Value For Money:** With their great build and sound these offer excellent value for money.

**Pros:** Great sound, handsome looks, easy to drive and excellent value.

# KLIPSCH RP-600M LOUDSPEAKERS



# KLIPSCH RP-600M LOUDSPEAKERS



**Cons:** Can be a bit bright if not positioned properly, a sub would help pull out lower frequencies.

**Price:** £625



# REVIEW

## TELLURIUM Q SILVER & SILVER DIAMOND MAINS CABLES



Tellurium Q Silver and Silver Diamond mains cables are both new additions to the Queen's Award For Enterprise winning company's product range. The Silver is their entry-level Silver power cable and the Silver Diamond is the top level of their Silver range. They cost £1200 for 1.5m of the Silver and £2200 for the same length of Silver Diamond. Dan Worth takes a listen.

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# TELLURIUM Q SILVER AND SILVER DIAMOND MAINS CABLES



It's always nice to have some TQ paraphernalia arrive here. It's always so well presented in its sleek and stylish packaging. It makes me laugh sometimes when cables arrive in gold leaf CNC cut boxes as I think "Jesus, how much of my money is going towards packaging which is just being stored in a cupboard?". On the flip side, some manufacturers make some wonderful cabling which comes in a plain brown box or Jiffy bag... if you're lucky. Well Geoff Merrigan of TQ manages to hit a sweet spot here, with the solidly made, custom-made classy packaging that all TQ cables come in - yes, the higher priced items are reflected by a step up in quality of packaging but I still don't look at it and feel I've wasted money in unnecessary areas.

Much like the packaging scenario, TQ has gained recognition throughout the years for allowing their products to speak for themselves - they don't fill each product's page with blurb or convincing marketing spill about how fantastic each product is, forcing the customer to believe "this is what you will hear", and this approach I really respect. This ethos to business has gained TQ a worldwide reputation with enthusiasts knowing that they will be receiving a product that is built with great care and will perform with great potential. This commitment to business is why TQ were awarded recently with the "Queen's Award For Industry".

## THE CABLES

The Silver is a fairly chunky and surprisingly flexible cables which has more stiffness at each end but still able to bend at quite sharp angles from the outlet of its gold Furutech plugs. Under its jacket it has a relatively thick protective outer layer, no doubt chosen to compliment its inner dielectric layers and its weight promotes flexibility of the inner conductors whilst retaining their integrity.

The Silver Diamond is the Anaconda of power cables, a cable almost twice as thick as the silver, yet still flexible and bendable enough behind the Rhodium Furutech plugs to get into slightly tighter spaces, unlike many big thick cables. I'd imagine that there is a lot of tension

in the cable, which is difficult to manage when maintaining flexibility as damage to the conductors will be a key issue for the team. I have some experience in cables and their construction and although the cable looks simplistic with its tube-like outer shape, what will be going on inside will be nothing short of an array of very critically laid out factors, which all determine the overall performance of the cable, even down to terminating pressures and conductor finishing. You will just have to take my word for this as TQ aren't going to explain the fundamentals of their cables - they just want you to make an informed decision on their performance through trial and not give you any preconceived ideas of what you should hear, as previously mentioned.

## SOUND

### SILVER POWER CABLE

Firstly I installed the Silver power cable. Run in time on cables is realistically going to be a couple of hundred hours, but I have a burn in machine which is a useful tool for me to speed up this process and not use up valuable time on my expensive preamp tubes. Even after burn-in on the machine, I always feel that cables take up to a further 48 hours to just settle into the system and perform consistently.

With the Silver feeding my Balanced Power Supply (which then feeds the entire system) I could gain a good impression of what the Silver is offering across the board.

A slight polish over my Reference cables is one factor to note, with a cleaner overall appeal. The top end is crisp, silky, finessed and detailed, with a small loss of inner detail over my reference, but not so much so that I felt I was missing a great deal of information that took me away from retaining an interest in the music. On the flip side I gained more prominence in leading edge detail in the upper bass. Midrange depth is a little more forward and vibrant, yet balances

# TELLURIUM Q SILVER AND SILVER DIAMOND MAINS CABLES



# TELLURIUM Q SILVER AND SILVER DIAMOND MAINS CABLES



extremely well with the position of other frequencies. A little more vibrancy in vocals with a cleaner effect on vocal tonality was clearly observed. My system is well put together and I know it well and it is great in highlighting forward and bright details, it's incredibly transparent and at the same time tonally rich and well tuned to my ears, so any changes are well conveyed and understood by me. So, although a fraction more forward than my reference point, the Silver is not an inherently forward sounding cable.

I like the tunefulness of bass notes and how quick transients are. The Silver is a fast cable which decays well also. It is tonally clean but still expressive and has good naturalness. Its ability to convey bass weight in this position between wall and power supply is very strong and I'm hearing a very deep rendition of bass and the cable doesn't seem to restrict the broader lower spectrums. Soundstaging is nice and wide and although a touch more forward than my everyday cable in this position, it has great height and I still hear artefacts around me, which is a quality I must retain when making changes in my system as I like to feel more encapsulated in the music rather than have a huge wall of sound in front of me. It's a very accomplished cable that gives a great deal of performance for its price indeed.

## SILVER DIAMOND POWER CABLE

Introducing the Silver Diamond to my system in the same position as the Silver instantly provided clarification of a family sound. Although the Silver and Silver Diamond are each a separate range, their commonality in tonal reproduction is similar. Much like going from Tellurium Q's Black to Ultra Black, there is a general consensus that these family members live in the same house but their hierarchy is clear to determine.

My first impressions with the Silver Diamond was how much more space there was around instruments and how much more space each instrument had to playfully dance. Smaller decays faded from around each of the instruments into their own areas of darker acoustic space.

This gave better overall pockets of depth and three-dimensionality to the overall soundstage. The encapsulating effect I love was larger and more complex and with the whole image being more vivid and vibrant.

Tonally it's easy to hear that there is a bond with the two cables, with the Silver Diamond extracting more texture and instrument timbre from the recording. The Silver does an exceptional job of conveying music, the Silver Diamond does a better job of exploring music.

Top end is very concise, precise and controlled, with a silkier and more micro detail and micro-dynamic complexity to it. It keeps me in a position which I am more used too, hearing right into the music and all its delicacies but against my reference cable it gives a bit more vigour and vitality to my sound, without pushing anywhere close to a brightening of the sound, it's simply cleaner and with more finesse.

I found more dexterity in the bass, compared with the other two cables and bass Information was fantastic and arguably a better match to the integration of my Rel S3i subwoofer, with its clean deep controlled bass lines.

Midrange, tonality and shape is a stand-out feature with the Silver Diamond, all that additional space and depth over the Silver was a pleasure and the Silver Diamond no doubt reflects a good system. The cleanliness of the upper-midrange got a touch closer to what I would like in ultimate cleanliness, but still relaxed and effortless. I only had one of each cable for review and maybe more would have changed my opinion slightly but if I was to liken the Silver Diamond to the cherry on the cake or the Flake in an ice cream, this is how I feel within the parameters of what I have to work with here, it's a very special sounding cable and due to me spending so much time and effort on balancing my system my impression is that it enhanced the tonal vibrancy, added a little space and integrated my bass with the subwoofer a little more accurately.

## CONCLUSION

Both the Silver and Silver Diamond Power cables have obvious benefits to recommend. They both have a distinctively clean and controlled sound, that has great extension and tonal qualities that bring the vibrancy out in the music whilst retaining musicality.

It's not very often that I come across power cables that balance this act so well and a lot of their performance is so critically aligned with geometry, dielectric and cable tensioning, not just conductor choice. I can imagine that when creating these cables that there were times where the prototype was either dull and full, or bright and lean and finally combining all elements in a recipe that became as tasty these cables are must have taken many hours, if not days/weeks, of critical testing. I have my suspicions on certain parameters within the cable and these suspicions only make me appreciate them more.

Each cable I feel performs exceptionally well within its price bracket and promotes TQ's abilities to offer a range of cables suitable for any system dependant on what the end user wishes to achieve tonally. Even if your budget can't reach say a Silver Diamond or Black Diamond, you can still choose a cheaper cable from each of their respective family ranges. Similarly, dependant on each piece of equipment you have in your system and their own characteristics a TQ cable from the same horizontal range yet of a different family flavour will give you similar performance with more accurate tonal matching. For instance, a Silver with a valve amp and a Black on the CD Player, or a Black Diamond on the DAC or digital source and a Silver Diamond on the amp - the Black range of cables are warmer sounding and the Silver range cleaner.

I'd strongly recommend both of these power cables and suggest that if your system and wallet can entertain the Silver Diamond you will be nothing short of delighted. If the Silver is where your budget is, rest assured performance will strongly reflect the outlay.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Solid, surprisingly flexible for their thickness and with great plugs.

**Sound Quality:** Clean, finessed, controlled, vibrant and playfully musical and with great detail.

**Value For Money:** Very reasonable and with a feeling of pride in ownership.

**Pros:** Bags of performance for their respective prices. Detail-rich, clean with great finesse and spacious sounding. Fantastic build quality utilising high-performance, quality hardware components.

**Cons:** The only against I can say is that tonally the Silver range may not perfectly match each component - but that's where TQ can still accommodate with a suitably performing cable with a different tonal quality elsewhere in the family.

**Price:** Silver £1200 - 1.5m. Silver Diamond £2200 - 1.5m



# REVIEW

## TITAN AUDIO NYX HIGH CURRENT POWER CABLE



Klipsch is an American brand operating since 1946 and probably best known in audiophile circles for their Klipschorn, La Scala and Heresy loudspeakers. However, they also make more conventional loudspeakers and here Adam Billingham puts a pair of their £625 RP-600M stand-mounters through their paces.

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# TITAN AUDIO NYX HIGH CURRENT POWER CABLE

I firmly believe buying the very best components for my budget in all aspects of my system and it has derived aggregated incremental gains as a result. That includes the power supply, of course. I have been starting to add higher grade power cables and blocks from different manufacturers into my system over the last few months, including DIY kits and usually the change, while at times very subtle, has been audible. Will you hear what I hear? Who can tell, we are all working with very different personal and architectural components in our rooms, but I for one am always interested in new components coming from good stables in the cable arena and so was very interested to hear Titans latest offering which is just hitting the market now.

## CONSTRUCTION

Continuing on the theme of Greek mythology, Titan Audio has launched a new power cable called the Nyx. As a Titan user already I was keen to be one of the first to try it out, and with power cable among other things aiming to shield our music from unwanted noise, it's apt then that the Nyx is so named after the Greek goddess of Night. The desirable inky darkness in the background of our music was perhaps a cue for the naming of this cable.

Throughout their range Titan power products have impressed me with a solid construction, high-quality materials, clear sonic results and strong aesthetics – that they are built here in the UK is a plus for many. Why do I mention aesthetics you may ask? When I am investing in components I want to see that investment from the manufacturer being evident throughout the full design and build process, it gives me a sense that the overall products is held up to inspection from drawing board to shipping, and confidence that those working on them take pride in what we as consumers implement into our beloved HiFi systems. Of course, function must match or exceed form when it comes to playback.

Like all their products and very unlike many well-known power cable manufacturers who leverage China as a production base, the Nyx is hand made in Belfast, Northern Ireland and is positioned within the range as a High Current power cable, coming in above the Styx and below the Tyco with regards to price-point, both of which I already own (as well as the superb Helios). With three and half times the number of conductors than the well-priced Styx I think we can safely say that's "high current", so ideal for those looking to power key source components or amps.

Until now it felt like Titan had a slight gap in the pricing structure that the Nyx fills perfectly and with such high-quality IEC, plug and conductor content the £130 tag (1.5m) is exceptionally keen – a coup for Titan in an increasingly competitive market. The materials alone make this a very competitive solution in my eyes.

Cable construction itself is OFC (Oxygen Free Copper) with a PTFE sheath that's dressed in Titan's lovely woven outer. Each Titan cable has a signature colour with the Nyx being Black and Copper, with a matching transparent red IEC. The whole construction is designed to offer robust RFI shielding and high current delivery. Where the entry level, but very competent Styx has a decent but fairly basic black moulded plastic IEC and simple wall plug, the new Nyx has been graced with a custom high-quality copper watt-gate style model previously only available on the higher end Tyco and Helios cables, making this a very attractive solution indeed.

Titan has taken the decision to also offer Nyx with an improved wall plug that bears the Titan branding and available in either a UK, Euro or US variants. This "permaplug" style can be seen on some much

higher-end offerings in the market typically coming in around £450, so you are getting a serious bang for your buck here – both plugs on Titan products are cryogenically treated – something that many manufacturers do provide, but often at a charge.

The Nyx, like many high-quality power cables has a certain girth and stiffness to it (to accommodate those conductors and shielding) so it's very suitable that Titan offer the Nyx in a 1.5m length as I feel a 1m cable would have been slightly too short to fit some restricted back wall clearance systems when you factor in the curvature needed.

Suitable for running Amplifiers or the Titan Styx power blocks as well as key source components I wanted to test it in various configurations. Fitting the Nyx IEC to my Audiolab MDAC+, Auralic G1 or Arcam SACD it connected very snugly into the female connector. When dealing with power I want nothing less than a solid, snug connection. I have found with some other cables, especially with self-build kits, that some IEC's are somewhat loose in the female sockets of my set up, this doesn't give me a good feeling and tends to distract me from enjoying the overall listening experience as I know it's just not right. No such niggles with the Nyx.

The Nyx like all Titan products comes with an individual registration number and carries a lifetime replacement warranty.

## SOUND QUALITY

As my the test Nyx was brand new I connected it first to my Arcam CDS27 SACD player on repeat for a day or so before settling down for a more introspective listen.

Working my way through some well known CD's I almost immediately heard a difference, which only deepened over time as either the Nyx continued to burn in or my listening became more acute to the improvements. As I worked through The Division Bell by Pink Floyd and then into a core test price - Melody Gardot's Live In Europe - I was struck first by the edge of clarity brought, especially to percussion and drums – rim hits, snare and bass were just crisper, clearer - "thwackier!" - in The Rain, a pacey and complex Jazz journey, the emotion of the piece was much more evident, drums were more immediate and I was surprised to find the bass digging deeper and with more "grunt" than before.

Time to move the Nyx to my Audiolab MDAC+ (being fed by my beloved Auralic Aries G1) and get to listening to tunes such as Kayleigh on Marillion's Misplaced Childhood (Deluxe, 16bit/44Mhz) and again there is that enhancement of focus and space from an already strong starting point and with Alan Parsons Project's Pyramid the kinetics and timbre of guitar on What Goes Up was brought into sharper relief and the whole tracks was imaged more deeply. Throughout that night, subsequent nights and even over the next few days, I had numerous moments where I just had to smile at how good my system was sounding. Massive Attack's Angel from Mezzanine sealed the audio deal and I'd never heard it sound so good!

It's unusual for most of us to have enough wall sockets for 6 or 7 components so we tend to use power blocks. I have invested already in Titans Styx block, which has a detachable power cord and so after running directly to source I moved it to power the block to allow me to compare like for like vs my a bog standard power lead. Overall vs the standard cable the lift was less evident that directly into source but it has the edge – Simples Minds Someone Somewhere (in Summer) came across fuller and better controlled, the bassline not boomier but certainly denser, and the whole piece came across as having a slightly improved imaging and avidity.

# TITAN AUDIO NYX HIGH CURRENT POWER CABLE



# TITAN AUDIO NYX HIGH CURRENT POWER CABLE



Suffice to say, I've had a couple of great weeks with this cable and yep, its staying... and I've already ordered and installed more of Titans offerings to gain the benefits across my whole system!

**Cons:** Nothing at this price.

**Price:** 1.0m = £100. 1.5m = £130. 3.0m = £220

## CONCLUSION

A superbly constructed cable offering great quality materials and a noticeable lift in playback. Providing a lift to energy, air and resolution especially on digital sources in my system. Versus the hot competition in the market today Titan has somehow managed to include genuinely class-leading components at an incredibly sharp price point and the Nyx should be on everyone's audition list. I've now invested in more, as well as complimentary products. A bigger improvement for me direct into source but an improvement over the Styx when into one of the Titan power blocks.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Superb! The materials, plug and IEC are all a class beating and are of great standard, and well above the norm for this price point, sheathing and termination are visually very attractive.

**Sound Quality:** Substantial improvement over my standard supplied cabling, while mostly it's a revealing effect, the sense of energy, drive and clarity especially around percussion and detail is clear, with good ability to dig into and grip mid and bass.

**Value for Money:** With the inclusion of the high quality copper watt-gate style IEC, super quality wall plug and that tripling of the conductor material plus cryogenic treatment I frankly think you would be crazy to pass the Nyx by if looking to get into high-quality power cables for your amp, power bar or source components (Which I recommend to all!) .

**Pros:** The clear sonic improvement, build, aesthetics, quality of conducting material, fit of IEC, warranty



# REVIEW

## TRIANGLE AIO 3

### CONNECTED LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM



**Multiroom speakers are all the rage these days. It seems that every brand has their own “All In One” system capable of wifi streaming and Bluetooth connectivity. Triangle is a well-known French speaker brand known for their superb build quality and has been around for over 35 years and has now decided to throw their hat into the ring with the AIO 3. Our resident youth and gadget-head Harry Smith takes a look at this £499 connected speaker.**

**Hifi Pig**  
**www.hifipig.com**

# TRIANGLE AIO 3 CONNECTED LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM



The AIO 3 has launched alongside the AIO C (pictured below) that brings the functionality of the AIO 3 to any speaker setup, but it is the AIO 3 we are testing here. Triangle's music streamer is on sale for £499 which puts it in competition with other affordable music streamers.

## CONSTRUCTION

It definitely looks the part; the top and bottom sides are constructed from brushed aluminium that is cold to the touch and the rest of the unit is draped in a woven fabric courtesy of the Scandinavian brand Gabriel.

The design is very minimal, there are only 4 buttons on the front and one LED indicator. The volume indicator is embedded underneath the fabric so as not to be intrusive.

The cabinet measures 7.67 x 14.17 x 5.9" making it rather compact and it weighs in at 11.24 lbs.

Underneath the aluminium and fabric is a wooden cabinet similar to a traditional speaker.

The AIO 3 is available in four different fabric finishes (lime green, slate black, granite grey and arctic blue) and two different metal finishes (Gold Champagne aluminium and Silver aluminium). The finishes are rather muted but I don't see this as a negative as their natural look means that they can blend in anywhere in the home without being boring.

All in all, the look and feel of Triangle's new all in one is very clean and sleek look.

I'm a great fan of how the AIO 3 looks and it would be at home in any modern living room or bedroom.

The included remote on the other hand is a bit of a disappointment. Its plastic build feels cheap in comparison to the rest of the speaker and the buttons feel mushy and don't lend any sense of purpose when controlling the AIO 3. The need to point the remote directly at the infrared sensor on the speaker is a little impractical. I feel that not using Bluetooth to communicate between the controller and the speaker is a bit of a missed opportunity but I can understand why as it saves on battery life. I would compare the remote to the one that you get included with a £25 Amazon Fire TV Stick and considering that the AIO 3 costs 20 times as much, a lot more could have been done in that department. It's a bit of a shame that none of the design language or materials of the speaker carried over to the remote. Ergonomically there is nothing wrong with the remote, but I was left a little let down when comparing it to the speaker.

Thankfully when controlling the speaker, I relied mostly on my smartphone using the well-designed triangle AIO app or Spotify/TIDAL over Bluetooth. The remote is the only let down in terms of build quality and the rest of the AIO 3 definitely makes up for it.

## SETUP & FUNCTIONALITY

The AIO 3 is a very versatile bit of kit and has a variety of inputs - you can play music over your wifi network thanks to the AIO android and iPhone app, connect via Bluetooth, or connect via a 3.5mm jack. Switching between the sources once they are set up is a breeze and you are able to cycle through them with the remote or by using the input button on the speaker (the LED indicator tells you which source you are using). Connecting via Bluetooth is also made easier thanks to an NFC pairing chip.

Setting up the AIO 3 was a rather simple affair, however, my first time was unsuccessful because my wifi router did not support the 2.4 GHz bandwidth. After getting a new router the setup process took less than a couple of minutes. Although I only had one AIO 3, you are able to

# TRIANGLE AIO 3 CONNECTED LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM



# TRIANGLE AIO 3 CONNECTED LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM



control up to 10 speakers dotted around your house from within the app. (If using wifi and not Ethernet you are limited to 5 speakers)

The app is very well designed and grants the user plenty of control and choice when it comes to streaming music. All the streaming services are available to use straight from within the Triangle app. (Spotify, Tidal, Deezer, Qobuz and TuneIn for digital radio stations). You are also able to play music stored on your mobile device or access files stored on a NAS drive connected to the same network. I only experienced a couple of crashes from the app over the weeks I used the AIO 3.

## SOUND QUALITY

For the purposes of the review, I used the speaker from within the app along with Tidal and Spotify. I also tested the sound quality over the 3.5mm jack and Bluetooth.

The AIO 3 is a great allrounder and shines with most genres of music. It is able to fill a room with ease and can get to being very loud, which was quite surprising considering the small size of the unit. It delivers a very pleasing sound that is extremely listenable and doesn't distort at higher volumes. The ability to control the levels of bass and treble are a nice touch and allows the user to tune it to their own personal preference.

Hip-hop definitely sounded great on the AIO 3, on "Winners Circle" by Anderson Paak, the funky bass guitar riff and unique lyrical work took centre stage, while the kick drum provided a great punch. Across the whole album "Ventura", the speaker performed very well and was able to stand up to a lot of the heavier parts which was very impressive considering the size of the speaker.

"Brianstorm" by Arctic Monkeys was another highlight as it can sound a bit hectic on some systems that aren't able to provide great separation. The non-stop loud distorted guitar riffs and relentless fast

drumming didn't melt into one and I was able to make out the intricacies of every instrument. "The Way You Used To" by Queens Of The Stone Age was similar in that the speed and weight of the track didn't overwhelm the AIO 3.

On "Your Song" by Elton John, I was able to hear every instrument's part in its entirety. The acoustic guitar and Elton's signature piano played great off the classical rhythm section that builds throughout the track.

Electronic music was at home on the AIO 3. "F for You" by Disclosure brought echoey looping vocals and heavy bass to the table. Disclosure's signature laidback house sound was great on the AIO 3.

I found myself listening to album after album on the AIO 3. I would definitely recommend purchasing a TIDAL HiFi subscription along with it as it was able to showcase the "Master Tracks" and I could easily tell the difference when using Spotify along with the AIO 3.

I only experienced skipping very occasionally when using it over wifi and the problem was non-existent when using an ethernet connection.

The AIO 3 performed very well over Bluetooth thanks to its use of Qualcomm's apt X technology.

## CONCLUSION

The AIO 3 is a fantastic compromise for someone who doesn't have space for a traditional setup. It is able to fill a room with music and the multiroom functionality is very well implemented. If your main source of music is from streaming apps it is easy to recommend the AIO 3 as it brings a certain level of class and style to the table without compromising on sound quality. I would go as far as to recommend purchasing a few of them to place around the house.

# TRIANGLE AIO 3 CONNECTED LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** The speaker itself is very well built. I was let down by the included remote but that was my only complaint.

**Sound Quality:** Surprisingly loud and versatile, able to faithfully reproduce anything I threw at it.

**Value For Money:** I think £499 is a very reasonable price when considering the build and the fact that you don't need to buy anything else other than a smartphone.

**Pros:** Able to handle anything you throw at them and also able to fill a room with ease. Very impressive considering the size. Excellent build quality. They are easy to set up and the accompanying app is very well designed.

**Cons:** The build quality of the remote

**Price:** £499



# REVIEW

## KANTO SYD STANDALONE SPEAKER SYSTEM



**SYD by Kanto is a standalone speaker that you can connect a turntable, CD Player, TV and even by bluetooth. It costs £289.99 and here Harry Smith puts it through its paces.**

**Hifi Pig**  
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# KANTO SYD STANDALONE SPEAKER SYSTEM



The world of HiFi is an expensive one to get into, of that there is no doubt. There are a load of different components to buy in order to build your first setup: speakers, amplifier, pre-amplifier, DAC, streamer, the list goes on. All this can seem a little overwhelming and expensive for someone looking to improve their home-listening experience with one purchase.

Kanto is aiming the SYD at people looking for a one-stop solution for all their musical needs. And at for a penny under £290 it seems like a very low cost one at that.

## BUILD AND FEATURES

The SYD is built like a tank, it is quite heavy (4.5 kg) considering its size (17.5" x 6.9" x 5.7") and comes with a robust metal speaker stand that puts it facing up at an angle.

I like the look of the SYD, it kind of looks like Kanto have taken two of their YU4 speakers and fused them together after putting the tweeters slightly off-centre.

On the left-hand side is an LED indicator to tell you what input you are using and on the right-hand side is a volume knob that also works as a button to cycle through the different inputs. (which is useful if you manage to lose the remote like did on a couple of occasions).

They're definitely built for purpose and don't try to be anything they're not in the sense that there are no unnecessary frills when it comes to the design.

The matte finish is done well but unfortunately is only available in four colours (burgundy, pink, black and white). It's a bit of a shame none of the more striking colour options carried over from their other speakers (for example, the Kanto YU4 are available in 8 finishes). It features 4' Kevlar drivers and silk dome tweeters that definitely seem durable. (However, there is no speaker grille provided). It has an

integrated class D amplifier with an output of 140W at peak power and has a frequency response of 60 Hz to 20 kHz.

The remote is surprisingly well built, it is quite chunky and the buttons have a nice "clickiness". I'm not a fan of the glossy plastic on the top as it is a bit of a fingerprint magnet but that is more of personal preference. You are also able to control the levels of bass, treble and balance from the remote which is a handy addition although there aren't any visual cues to either of these.

The SYD has a plethora of inputs (3.5mm jack AUX, RCA with Phono Switch, Optical, and Bluetooth 4.0 with Qualcomm aptX technology) meaning that you can run pretty much anything through it. I had it set up to my TV, turntable and connected to my phone via Bluetooth all at once. There is also the option of adding a subwoofer and you are able to charge your phone via a 5V 1A USB port on the back of the speaker.

## SOUND QUALITY

I decided to test the Kanto SYD with TIDAL over Bluetooth, with my ProJect Essential 2 turntable and also though my TV as a "soundbar".

For music, I was very impressed with the performance of the SYD. The first track I tested was "Around the World" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. The very apparent bassline sounded surprising clean and played nicely off the bright Fender Stratocaster guitar tones throughout.

"Them Changes" by Thundercat was another highlight as the bassline took centre stage again with a bit more of a funky edge with help of what sounded like a wah-pedal. The bottom line is that on tracks where you wanted to hear the bass guitar, Kanto's speaker was able to deliver.

# KANTO SYD STANDALONE SPEAKER SYSTEM



For rock fans out there it performs very well. Fast drum beats and distorted guitars are at home here. “Old Yellow Bricks” and “Dancing Shoes” by Arctic Monkeys shone as they are pretty fast and heavy compared to their more recent music. The experience was definitely improved with the addition of more volume. In fact, I found myself using them at high volumes for most of the time as they were very easy to listen to. I only felt the need to adjust the levels of bass and treble at lower volumes.

Hooking up my turntable gave me the chance to test out a track that many speakers struggle with, “Contact” by Daft Punk. Although they performed admirably for the first 3 minutes of the track, they fell a little short as the track grew in complexity and didn’t bring the same oomph that my main setup is able to. But then again, I had to keep on reminding myself that these cost a lot less than my main setup. However, the rest of the album “Random Access Memories” sounded great. The more funky tracks like “Get Lucky” and “Give Life Back To Music” were definite highlights.

“We’ve Got To Try” by the Chemical Brothers was able to showcase the strengths of the system when paired with electronic music and how easy it was to fill a room with sound. The Motown style vocals paired well with the drum and bass backing track as the speakers were able to provide plenty of bassy notes at higher volumes.

Watching movies with the SYD was a great experience. Voices sounded clear and although they were not as impressive as they would be with a subwoofer for more action movies. (however, there is the option to upgrade the setup with the SUB6 by Kanto that costs around £220). It was no mind-bending Dolby Atmos setup, but it performed better than I expected and is a worthwhile improvement over most TV’s integrated speakers.

## CONCLUSION

I think the Kanto SYD is perfect for students, it’s relatively cheap and delivers more than decent sound quality in a compact package. It is a one-stop solution and is unapologetically basic in its design. A great all-rounder and for the price provides a good listening experience across the board for music and movie lovers alike.

It is fantastic for electronic music and although it falls short when you compare it to a traditional setup that costs almost four times as much it is able to deliver a crowd-pleasing sound across many different genres.

## AT A GLANCE

**Build Quality:** Very solid and I’m a big fan of the included speaker stand. The remote is a bit of a fingerprint magnet but is well-built overall.

**Sound Quality:** Fills a medium/large room easily and delivers a crowd-pleasing bassy sound.

**Value for Money:** Incredible value for money considering they cost less than most budget passive speakers.

**Pros:** A very versatile bit of kit that sounds great with music and movies alike for a very competitive price.

**Cons:** Struggles with some more complex tracks.

**Price:** £289.99



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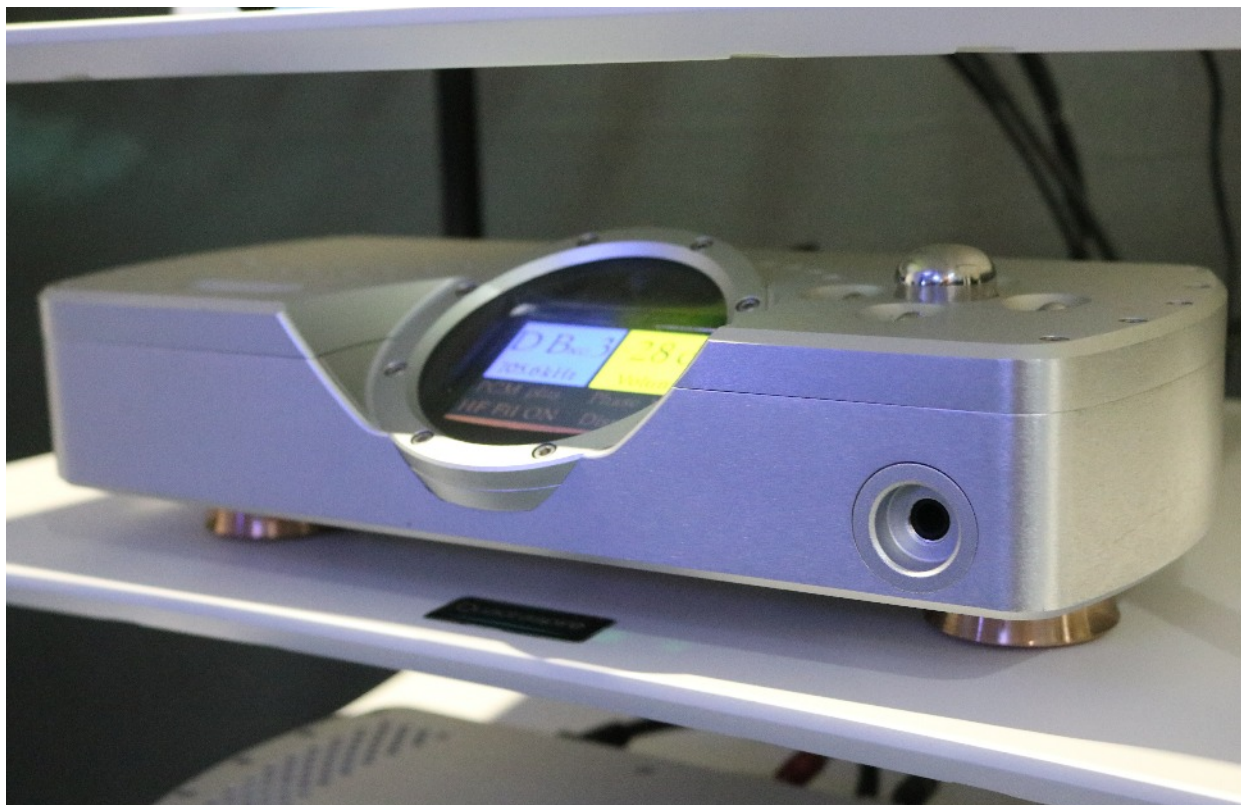
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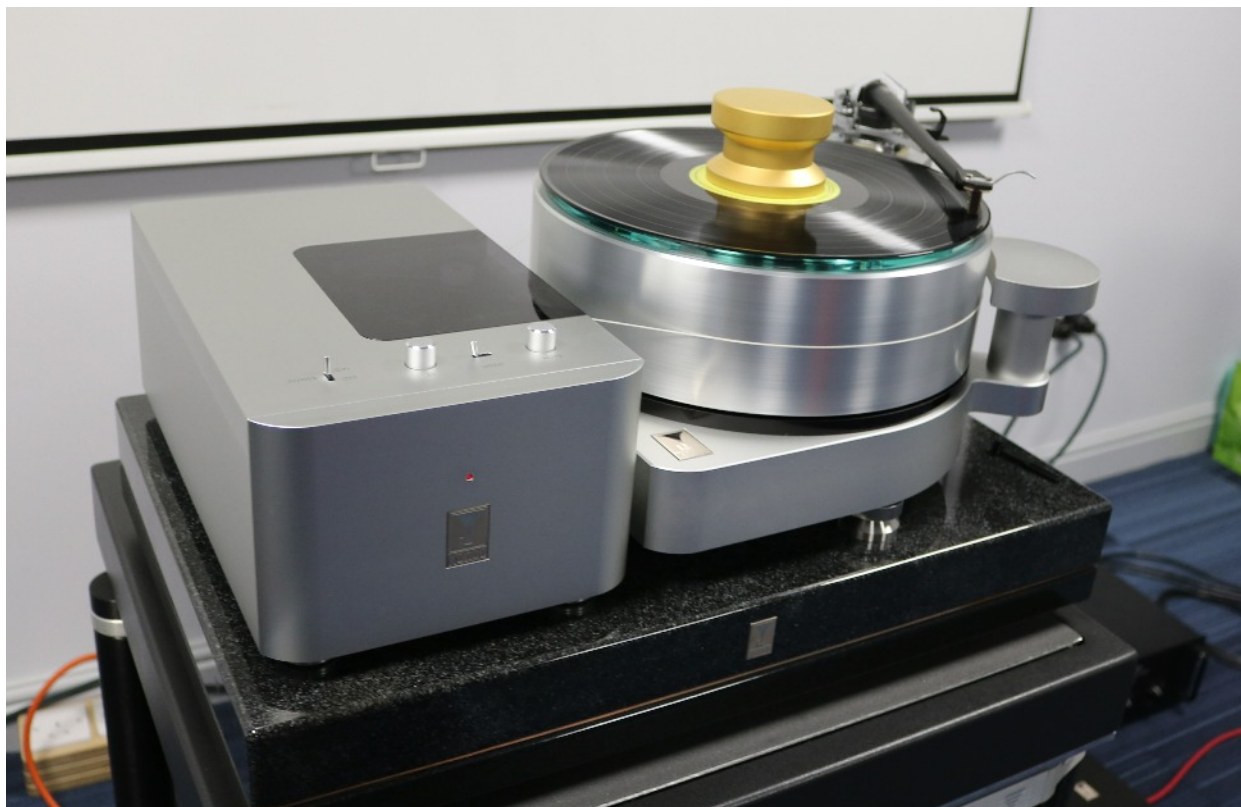
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