

Hifi Pig

Quarterly

AUTUMN/WINTER 2019

ANTHONY LONGSTAFF PHOTOGRAPHY

MUSICAL JOURNEYS WITH MR DIBS

DEALER FOCUS WITH ELITE AUDIO

READERS' LIVES VIVEK KUVELKER

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH DAVID SOLOMON

MEET THE FUTURE OF THE HIFI INDUSTRY

I USED TO BE AN AUDIOPHILE BUT I'M ALRIGHT NOW

HAPPY TRAILS WITH PAUL MESSENGER

FACTORY VISIT TO BOULDER IN COLORADO

PLUS LOTS OF REVIEWS





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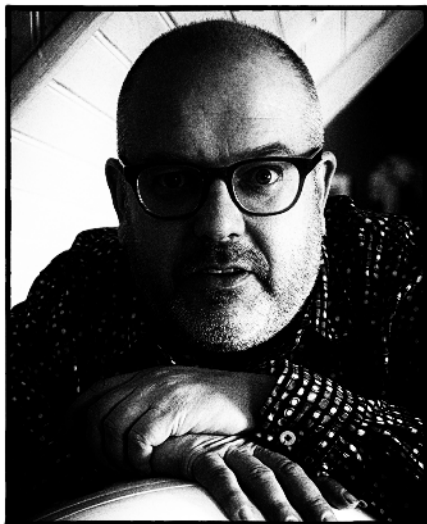
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Welcome to the Autumn/Winter edition of tHifi Pig Quarterly where we have some great content once again for your delectation.

It's been a hectic few months since our last publication and we've been to the US to visit the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, Poland for the Audio Video Show in Poland, Copenhagen and The Netherlands for the Xfi show. [You can read all about our show coverage here.](#)

One of the articles that I think will be of particular interest to readers is our interview with photographer Anthony Longstaff who share some of his tips and lots of his fantastic photographs. We're also delighted to have interviewed Dibs who many of you will know from his days with Hawkwind and his own bands.

We also get Up Close and Personal with David Solomon of streaming service Qobuz.

On the review front we've some excellent products in this issue with amp reviews ranging from tubes to Class D and some very interesting speakers.

The year is nearly over but we are still beaver away at Hifi Pig Towers and still have lots of reviews to bring you as well as our daily news section.

We've also been working on the back end of the www.hifipig.com website and have added the functionality of readers now being able to comment on any post they like. We think this will make the site more engaging for readers who can share their views and opinions. We've also added a translation service to the site so that it is more accessible to more readers around the world.

I hope you enjoy this edition and stay tuned for further developments.

STUART SMITH

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INTERVIEW

ANTHONY LONGSTAFF



Anthony Longstaff is Yorkshire based photographer specialising in producing simply stunning images of live events, gigs and festivals. Hifi Pig chats with him about his craft and motivations. We also include a selection of his photographs for your enjoyment.

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INTERVIEW - ANTHONY LONGSTAFF



HP: How did you get into photography and specifically photographing bands?

AL: I got asked if I could take a few pictures for a mate who was in a band about 10 years ago in a bar in Leeds. I got the bug instantly and it started from there really.

HP: Your images always seem to capture just the right moment; how do you go about getting just the right shot?

AL: I'd love to say it's all skill but sometimes you just happen to be in the right place at the right time. There has to be a certain element of composition and you learn timing as you shoot certain kinds of bands and artists etc... but sometimes it's just sheer luck. You have to understand your camera and how it works to attain the right settings for the best shots but you just follow the show in the small time you have to shoot.

HP: What are the pitfalls of photographing live music events?

AL: Getting covered in beer and sometimes wee, mud and rain when you're at outdoor festivals and at most gigs it can be a bit tedious sat around waiting for bands to come on stage. It's not as glamorous as most people think. You only usually get the first 3 songs to shoot, which are usually the poorest lit ones, so with most songs being around 3 minutes you have 10 mins or so in which to capture the essence of the gig. It's certainly not long at all and if you bugger it up you can't do it all again so there's a certain amount of pressure to get it right.

HP: With the advent of Photoshop everyone is a photographer, what characteristic separates the professional from the "I can fix it in the PS mix" photographer?

AL: I think it's the timing and composition element which plays a very important factor in capturing a good image or usable at the least. Photoshop can fix a bit of lighting or take out a rogue microphone stand but it can't fix a badly composed picture or if it can, can someone teach me how to do it (haha).

HP: Which was your favourite band or gig and why?

AL: God, there's been so many... Metallica at Leeds festival a few years ago was a bucket list shoot. When their song 'For whom the bell tolls' comes on it sent shivers down my spine, as did ACDC in Manchester a few years before then on their Black Ice tour, I nearly got emotional at that one. There have been a few surprise gigs I've enjoyed that I thought I wouldn't; Florence and the Machine, Rod Stewart, Elton John, artists I wouldn't normally listen to but really entertained me.

HP: And the worst and why?

AL: Again, so many, hahaha! One of the main contributing factors in lighting. A poorly lit gig is the bane of just about every music photographer. I've shot some big name artists whose lighting set up has been atrocious thus leading to just piss poor shots. I did shoot a really world-class American comedian a year or so ago and he was just a prize knob head which just really flummoxed me as my perception was he was going to be really cool but sadly.....

HP: Favourite venue and why?

AL: Leeds arena (First Direct Arena) is brilliant, sound quality is awesome, the staff are great too. Rock City in Nottingham, Barrowlands in Glasgow and Brudenell in Leeds are great for gritty, down to earth venues for proper live music lovers. Selby Abbey was amazing to shoot at too for a one-off gig. A few of the city town halls are quite good too, Leeds and Sheffield in particular.

INTERVIEW - ANTHONY LONGSTAFF



INTERVIEW - ANTHONY LONGSTAFF





HP: Is there a band or artist you have not yet had the opportunity to photograph and why would you like to photograph them?

AL: Coldplay, would love to shoot an outdoor gig of theirs but just never had the chance. Their lighting and atmosphere is amazing from what I've seen. Also, Weezer, I've gone to shoot them about 4 times but something bad has always happened and stopped me from shooting them. My gran died about an hour before I was due to photograph them about 2 years ago (for the 4th time - my gran's not died 4 times, it was just the 4th bad thing to happen). Anyway, I've given up wanting to shoot them now. Fortunately, there aren't many artists that I haven't covered. Would love to have photographed Amy Whitehouse and Nirvana and the original Pink Floyd, iconic characters.

HP: What was the worst "at work" disaster you had and how do you go about making sure you are prepared for every eventuality?

AL: Leeds Festival, 2016 I think it was; a band called Foals were on the main stage and it pissed down, heavens opened kind of pissed down. The cameras were protected with rain covers but the water seeped in even though we were only in the pit for 10 minutes if that. One camera body dead, one lens dead, took 10 days of drying out in a tub of rice and a hefty repair bill to suit. I'm much more sceptical about shooting in the rain now, cameras and lenses aren't cheap to replace. For festivals I now carry bags of rice in old quality street tubs and those silica gel packs in the car just in case.

HP: What kit do you typically use?

AL: I've always shot with Sony cameras, I use a full-frame and cropped sensor bodies with 70-200mm and 24-70mm Tamron lenses. I carry a couple of prime lenses (24 and 50mm non-zoom) which are good for portraits if I see any bands or artists milling about

backstage. The prime lenses are lower f-stop than the others which are good for better depth of field.

HP: Do you do regular band shoots over and above live reportage?

AL: I tend to shoot mainly live over fixed band shoots. There's a bit of a thrill about shooting live, the whole atmosphere of the show and the crowd's reaction is a real adrenalin rush. It's great to come away with a couple of pictures that really capture the ambience of the event. I moan like a bugger when it comes to editing which I find really tedious but there's that little bit of stimulation you get when you can see you've nailed a particular shot. That kind of makes it all worthwhile really, the driving around, the hours of sat about waiting, the weather, the rubbish contracts....

HP: What tips would you give to Hifi Pig readers looking to get into this field?

AL: Do weddings, it's far more profitable. The best advice is just to go to gigs and take pictures of the atmosphere. Crowd shots can be great, get up close at small venues, use your mobile phone (without flash), most modern mobiles are really good at shooting in low light. If you're thinking of taking it up more professionally then you need a publication and you need to follow the standard structure. Apply to a band's PR company or band management for a photo pass, have some professional equipment which can allow you to take shots in low light as mostly you can't use flash. Just get out and shoot and enjoy the adventure of it all. There are no wrongs or rights about taking a photo, you'll develop your own style. Just be polite and courteous and listen to the advice of the security at the venue, you'll spoil it for everyone else if you don't.

You can visit Anthony Longstaff's Instagram page and see more of his excellent photos by clicking this link.



INTERVIEW - ANTHONY LONGSTAFF





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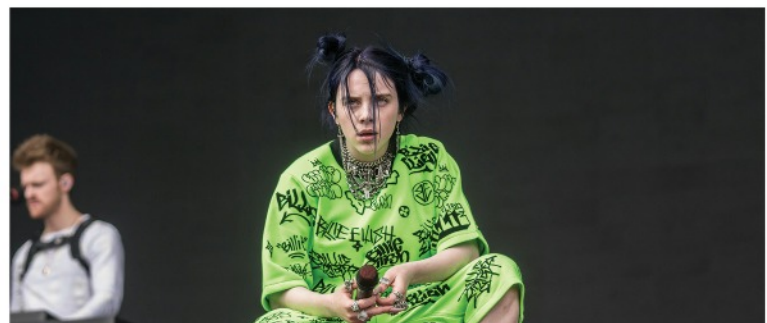


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Having collaborated with such guest artists as The King's Singers, Judy Collins, Art Garfunkel, Mel Tormé, Ray Charles, Chet Atkins, Crystal Gayle, Lou Rawls and Roger Miller to name a few, Kory Katseane, Director of Orchestras in the BYU School of 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."

MUSICAL JOURNEYS

MR DIBS



You may well know Mr. Dibs from his time with spacerock veterans Hawkwind or his band Evil Blizzard. Here he talks to Hifi Pig about what shaped his musical taste.

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MUSICAL JOURNEYS WITH MR. DIBS



Growing up, the music in the house was mainly Rock'n'Roll or Motown, two records in particular, K-Tel's 25 Rockin' Greats, and Motown Chartbusters Vol 3, as well as Ray Connie's Christmas hits and Johnny Mathis, but it was the Rock'n'Roll that truly grabbed my attention, raw and raucous. Johnny Kidd & The Pirates, Bill Hayley, Gene Vincent. Rebel music that later informed the punk scene. There was also Bowie, that ethereal alien presence on TOTP, and Glam Rock, in particular Bolan and T. Rex.

As I got older, I began listening to John Peel, hearing all sorts of different music that led to a love of Tubeway Army, Joy Division and Buzzcocks. Songs of dark, dystopian worlds, buzzsaw guitars, and heavy lyrics. It was around the age of 16/17 when I first heard anything related to Hawkwind, the 25 Years On album by Hawklords. I had no idea at the time that this was anything to do with Hawkwind, I was given the Charisma pink label cassette version by a lad at school with no box or label "here, you'll like this sh*t". Well, I did, but thought it was something more contemporary to Joy Division or Magazine, it was about a year later when someone played me Xin Search Of Space by Hawkwind that the connection was made, and I was hooked, line and sinker!

I'd been playing cello with the school orchestra, but was finding reading off sheet music tedious and soulless. One day I found the school's old bass guitar and immediately thought "this is it", much to the disdain of the music teacher, who refused to teach me on that instrument, the one I felt real heart with, so I ditched the orchestra, and in that traditional teenage punk way, stuck two fingers up to music class and went for art instead. I didn't give up the bass though, and bought a Hondo II Precision copy from my mum's Kay's catalogue, £1 a week or something like that. I must have destroyed several stereo systems playing it through them in my parent's garage, and incurred the wrath of many a neighbour.

And so it was that I ended up doing an Arts Foundation course and

consequently a BA (Hons) in 3D Design at High Wycombe college, always advertising for musicians to join a "Gong/Hawkwind" type band. High Wycombe was perfectly place to get to see Hawkwind several times a tour, within easy reach of London, Slough, Reading and Oxford, and they even had a bus service that took you straight to Stonehenge at Solstice for the festival. Heady, mad times that moulded me in to some kind of hippy type I guess. I knew after seeing how they lived in busses and all that, that would be my next move after graduating, though I went through several shitty jobs before I was able to buy my first bus.

By that time, I had joined up with some fellow Hawkfans, who'd already been playing in some Hawk type bands, one called Moonstone, and it was from there that Krel was spawned, in a shared house in Levenshulme near Manchester. Our first tape was called "Send In The Clones", named so after seeing a quote from Dave Brock in a book "what I really need is five clones of myself". We started gigging in earnest, and sent our tapes down to HW, hoping we'd get heard and noticed. Well, we did get noticed, and were invited to support them on The Electric Teepee tour in 1992. A couple of quick conversions to the bus I was living in so the band could travel and sleep in it as well, and we were off! It was an utterly incredible experience, and also a massive learning curve, but to support our heroes, and to see them coming out from the dressing rooms to watch us was just immense.

We came off that tour buzzing and full of hope, and soldiered on for another couple of years until circumstance led to me having to leave in 1995. I immediately set about forming anew band, Spacehead, initially as a solo project, but eventually becoming a full band, slogging around the circuit. In 1997, I was invited on to the Hawkwind Roadcrew after seeing them at Dracfest in Whitby. Driving one of the busses and helping load out and stage set up, even a stint on the merchandise stall, and the ultimate, a guest spot playing bass on Ejection in the encore, and we bagged a couple of support slots for

MUSICAL JOURNEYS WITH MR. DIBS



MUSICAL JOURNEYS WITH MR. DIBS



MUSICAL JOURNEYS WITH MR. DIBS



Spacehead! (As I got further in to working with the band, after a while, Spacehead was put on the back burner, although we did play a couple of the Hawkfests over the years).

This was the start of a 21 year relationship with the band, ten years on the crew, and eventually, in 2007, being asked to join the band full time on bass and vocals. I'd finally got there. All of the Krel troupe had that dream of one day joining Hawkwind, it was an amazing moment being the one that actually did it. I had the time of my life over the 21 years, and travelled all over the world, but sadly, all good things as they say, and in 2018, I was forced to call it a day. I had been guesting with a band called Evil Blizzard from Preston for a couple of years previous to my departure, and amazing combination of four bassists and a singing drummer, and had appeared on their 2018 album Worst Show On earth, playing electric cello on two tracks, so it seemed only natural to become a full time member of that band, playing electronics in the vein of Dik Mik, Hawkwind's legendary audio generator pioneer. I'd had the pleasure of meeting and getting to know Mik via a good friend Wolfie, who'd found him in a pub in Ipswich playing pool a few of years ago. Mik came to one of the Hawkwind gigs in Ipswich in 2017, so I got to play my electronics in front of the main man (he said he was going to stand right in front of me, "watching you sonny", but knew it would have probably put me off haha), Sadly, Mik died later that year, he'd been suffering from cancer for a while, and it finally got him.

Towards the end of 2018, I was invited to join another band from Coventry, called Strip Search Tramp, a kind of sci-fi space punk band, also to do the old HW style twittering devices, just in time to get involved with their EP, Assume The Position, which has gone down a storm with punks and Hawkweeds alike. We're now starting to work on a full album for release in 2020. I've now moved back on to bass with Evil Blizzard who are also starting to work on new material for 2020 and gigs coming in fast. In amongst all this, I'm working on a new space rock project with Side and Stoko from Evil Blizzard, on

drums and guitar respectively, and we have four or five songs together at the moment. It will be presented as a solo album, as there are quite a few people who want to get involved as guests, some big surprises in fact. We're looking at getting that album released on 2020, but there'll be a teaser or two unleash before the end of 2019.

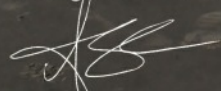
All in all, my life has seen quite a varied musical journey, from rock'n'roll, to motown and glam, to punk, new wave and electronica, heavy rock, psychedelia and spacerock, and I'm always discovering new sounds. There are some really great bands around at the moment, all giving their individual takes on all the genres I've grown to know and love. Rock music is far from dead, the business has changed and had to evolve, and that's brought back some of that old punk DIY ethic back in to it. Almost anyone can write produce and release music these days and that is never a bad thing, so onward we go! See you out there.

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.

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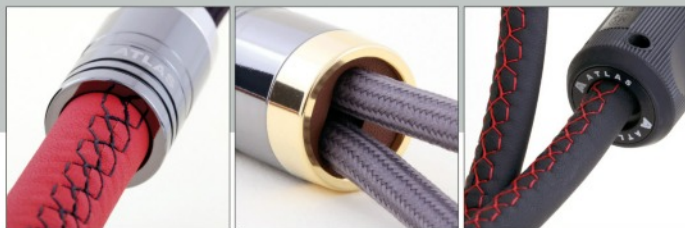
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DEALER FOCUS

ELITE AUDIO



Mark Cargill of Scottish-based distributor Elite Audio puts a system together worth over £90 000 and discusses his philosophy of why he believes this system works.

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SYSTEM

Components:

Source(s):

Digital

Antipodes CX Music Server £6700

Aqua La Scala Optologic MKII DAC £6200

Analogue

Acoustic Solid Wood MPX Round Turntable Package £5950

Manley Labs Steelhead Phono stage £8400

Amplification

Manley Labs 300B Neo Classic Pre-amplifier £6100

Manley Labs Snapper 100w valve mono blocks £7600 (Pair)

Speakers

Verity Audio Parsifal Anniversary speakers from £23927 (depending on finish)

Mains

Audiotricity Chimera Signature Power Conditioner £4990

Cables

Hi Diamond HD8 Speaker cable (3m pair) £2050

Hi Diamond HD9 Interconnects 1m (each) £1730

Hi Diamond HD4 Mains cables 1.5m (each) £1815

Total System Value: £91627 (Including all cables)

DESCRIPTION

System building is an art, there are no two ways about it and I have heard many 6-figure systems that can sound terrible and equally some <£2k systems that will make you want to listen to your music all

night. The key is finding synergy from signal source to speakers and get that right and you can unlock one of the most musically satisfying experiences you are ever likely to have – a system that connects with your soul and equally gets you emotionally engaged in your entire music collection.

What really is the holy grail? We always seem to be chasing that elusive missing ingredient! The other thing I have learned over the years is that the perfect system does not exist, however, it is entirely possible to find something that is close to perfect for you.

The system listed above may cost as much as a two bedroom flat in Cupar, but for me it gets very close to my definition of perfection and let me explain why.

Firstly, let me talk about this system as a whole – let's be honest, it needs to be a complete system as otherwise there would be no sound! There is also a level of complexity here, as we are looking at a collection of components from various manufacturers who have most likely never collaborated on design or indeed with any of the other manufacturers components in mind when conceiving and ultimately producing what they consider to be a true audiophile component. Make no mistake here either, in their own right, these components do justify that label (I am not a label fan to be honest, but it gives a perspective on expected performance). What this is about, is pulling together everything to the point where you sit and actually listen.

Whether its vinyl, hi rez audio, this system does it all exceptionally well and frankly I would personally be extremely happy to have this as my 'last' system. To explain why is very easy. Simply put, this is one of the most engaging systems I have ever had the pleasure to listen to. It is fast, dynamic, deep and balanced bass, organic in textures, holographic in a way that makes 4D seem flat in comparison. It is a system that frankly makes you listen to your music with the feeling







that having to stop listening, will create an irreplaceable void in your musical life.

You may be asking how I am qualified to make such an observation? Well having played Violin since age 6 and worked my way to Grade V (much to the annoyance of my parents and parents' neighbours as a child) I have over the years (mainly from playing in orchestras) learned what is deemed 'natural'. A violin has a natural decay, a bite of the resin covered bow on a string and a woody tone from the hollow body that many systems can struggle to replicate. If you are reading this and play any instrument, you will know exactly what I mean. It applies to all musical instruments, which when heard naturally have a tonality that is unique to that instrument. Obviously, the way an instrument produces sound is entirely different to how our audio systems produce sound and that is where a great system pulls the rabbit from the hat – it gets you to the heart of a recording. A really good system is akin to a great story teller, you know what I mean... where you are hanging off every word, waiting impatiently to hear what will happen next. The sense of anticipation can become palpable! That's the way a great audio system should make you feel.

That leads me straight back to this system. This is a system that does exactly that, it has you eager to simply listen to music, so let's break down each part and try to understand why it does and also get a better understanding of component matching.

In my profession as a HiFi retailer and distributor, I talk daily with amazing people passionate about musical replay through their own systems, seeking advice about what the next upgrade should be or how component A compares with component B. Our listening experience makes that advice relevant and we take pride in guiding clients down the most rewarding of musical paths. Therefore, this system is a collective synergy of the fruits of that listening experience!

Let's start looking at the sources and firstly the analogue section. We all know there are many design philosophies when it comes to turntables and in the case of the Acoustic solid, we see the high mass approach. I am a big fan of this design, as for me it delivers a solidity of sound, with depth and scale that I personally believe is not always obvious with other designs. Equally (if you read the HiFi+ review of this turntable) it offers crazy value for money when it comes to price performance. The Round MPX comes with one of the nicest aesthetics of any turntable and for your money you get a factory modded arm, an Ortofon Quintet Red MC and setting up is pretty much plug and play. It performs significantly better than you might expect and while not inexpensive, it has a musical engagement element that gets me each and every time I hear any of their stunning turntables. Connected to the Manley Labs steelhead phono stage, this is a killer combination. The Steelhead is legendary in analogue circles and still regarded as one of the best phono stages at any price. I personally have not heard anything as good and Manley Labs must have exclusive access to special audio grade pixie dust in Chino California where each of these is carefully hand crafted. Everything including casework is made locally and if you are unfamiliar with the name, you have probably already got some Manley Labs already in your music without even realising it! Manley are huge in the pro-audio world and the best recording studios around the globe use their equipment and for good reason. This is the holy grail of phono stages and my advice is listening at your peril!!!! It will have you selling anything you can find on eBay, to fund the purchase.

The analogue only readers may find this next section difficult to digest, but digital is getting to the level we expect from a beautifully fettled turntable and phono stage and that leads me to the digital aspect of this system.

There is no doubt that the guys from New Zealand (Mark Jenkins - Antipodes Audio) have created a digital masterpiece in their music servers (just read some of the blogs on these). This is the CX variant,



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which is the flagship stand alone unit. You can also connect their EX for probably the best digital front end of anything currently available. Even in CX only form, it will see off most opposition – just try one at home to find out why! Very configurable and Roon core too.

Connected to any DAC it will sound great. Connected to the latest La Scala from the Italian company Aqua, you have a hugely analogue sounding digital front end that sounds completely natural and organic. No 'digital' sound here. The La Scala Optologic mkII is an R2R design dac with a valve output stage. A masterpiece of audio design, Christian Anelli has created something rather special indeed. There are more reviews than you can read of an evening, however you will find a very common thread to the reviewers comments. Musical, engaging, organic and so on, everything you would ever want.

It a great combination and we have used this combination numerous times. If you have more budget, then the Formula xHD also from Aqua is a logical step up, but make no mistake with this combination, it will challenge your perceptions of digital!

I have spoken to many people who, no matter what, will never consider a valve amplification set up. I understand where that comes from as a lot of valve systems I have heard are often a compromise. Its interesting to talk to a new valve amplifier owner. They almost always refer to the great midrange. This is most certainly true. A valve amplifier is certainly capable of delivering one of the most engaging midrange audio experiences you are ever likely to hear. The caveat however starts to manifest when you get to the low and high frequencies. Valve amplifiers are not renowned for having the best bass control. Equally when it comes to high frequency texture, they can sound like someone has removed the fine details with a 600 grit sanding paper. So you can start to understand why many are more than hesitant to give valves a try.

Enter the Manley Labs Snapper 100w mono blocks. (We will come back to the pre-amp shortly). These have of course amazing midrange, but here is the rub, they also have incredible bass control (deep and visceral) with one of the most textured top ends you will hear. In fact, there is nothing I don't like about these beautiful amplifiers. There is a great YouTube video worth searching for that compares these to some VERY expensive opposition. Trust me, if you have the desire for valves and have been put off by the caveats that are normally associated with valve amplification, then these will change your perception. Match them with the Manley Labs Neo Classic 300B pre-amplifier and you have a devastating musical combination ready to rival anything I have heard. We actually used this precise set up at the 2019 Ascot HiFi Show. We chose it for all the reasons detailed above.

The 300B Neo Classic is a work of art and it has an aesthetic balance that you never tire of. Equally, with Manley Labs studio experience, your perception (and mine previously) of any 300B amplifier, disappears in the first bar of musical listening. If you want something special and you have the need for a new pre-amplifier, have a listen. Its amazing actually.

No system will ever be complete without speakers and I have chosen the Verity Audio Parsifal Anniversary's.

I first heard a pair of Verity speakers in the late 90's. It was a pair of Verity Fidelio speakers and I was instantly captivated by them. I was visiting a client in Glasgow at the time and he had them connected to a Lavardin Ref and a Reel to Reel source playing Miles Davis Kind Of Blue. Its funny how certain listening experiences are planted in your

mind permanently and this was certainly one I'd never forget. The Parsifals take all the years experience that Verity have and simply disappear into the sound stage. In fact, you completely forget they are there at all. They are of course full range and huge orchestral pieces have impact that smaller speakers will struggle to deliver. The Manleys can drive these to sound levels your neighbours four streets away will be complaining about and without a hint of distortion either. They are hugely composed, incredible fine detail is delivered without any harshness or glassiness. Playing complex music becomes a complete joy and where other systems may be prone to smearing, the separation here is frankly breath-taking.

HiFi systems also require cables and an energy foundation. I have chosen the Audiotricity Chimera Signature Power Conditioner to take care of the mains duties. This beautiful device is manufactured in Portugal and built with the best components and the best build quality I have seen on any mains component. I know some people have an idea that mains is all smoke and mirrors. I can tell you it is not. Put any Audiotricity Power conditioner in your system, then remove it.... You will find yourself putting it straight back in with no intentions of ever removing it again! The Chimera Signature is 2nd top of the range and has dedicated conditioned sockets for analogue, digital and amplification. I agree with their design brief, that each unique component requires equally unique conditioning and the six outlets can be customised at factory build to reflect your own system. (There is also no current restrictions on these)

Hi Diamond cables are quickly becoming the cable of choice and awards from HiFi World 2019 plus other great reviews back up their growing pedigree. Like mains, many people think that cables are the product of snake oil salesman. Please visit our showroom for a fun blind test and see if you leave with the same opinion you arrived with.

As I said at the start, for me personally, this would be a system I could live with for ever and never have the desire to change anything (well perhaps upgrade the DAC to the Formula xHD). It is musical, engaging and non fatiguing. It is fast, has incredible rhythm and timing and tells one of the best musical stories you will hear!

MUSIC USED DURING TESTING

Saint-Saens Dance Macabre Op.40 (The transients at loud volume can cause some systems to go into protection mode!!!)

Tanya – Dexter Gordon

Lazy – Deep Purple

Black Crow – Angus Stone

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Hifi Pig reader Vivek Kuvelker talks us through his Hifi journey.

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I grew up in the north-east of England & studied pharmacy at the University of Sunderland in the early 90s. Unbeknown to me at the time, that place and time was also shared by HiFi Pig's Stuart & Linette who were also studying at the university over that same period. It was only earlier this year, almost 30 years later, over the course of a meal at Harvey Nichols, Bristol, that I found that we probably would've bumped in to each other all those years earlier!

My love of music & all things 'audiophile' began almost certainly because of my dad. I remember his quadrophonic system in the late 70s, comprising of a pair of Celestial Ditton 44s & Mission 770 speakers, powered by some hefty-looking JVC integrated amplifier. Those were the days of 8-track tapes, cassette tapes & reel to reel music, all of which he loved listening to. Looking back, it was properly the most mismatched system I'd ever come across, but at the time, listening to it would always put a smile on our faces.

After graduating, I spent some time training in Lancashire. I just happened to come across an issue of What HiFi, probably in early 1994. In there was a review of the Cyrus III integrated amplifier. From that point onwards, I was besotted with those little shoebox-sized audio components. It took a few months before I was back in the north-east & Lintone Audio then became my second home! They really were, & still are a fantastic audio dealership. I bought the Cyrus III amp & that was the start of my life as an audiophile. 'Upgradeitis' resulted in numerous early source upgrades, including moving from the Micromega Stage 1 to the Stage 2 CD player, then on to the Cyrus Disc & Dacmaster combination. I also changed speakers from the TDL RTL 2 to RTL 3, then to the Mission 751, 752 (still think they were fantastic speakers), 753 & then the 754 Freedom 5s. It was clear for me to see that ultimately, I could play with cables & other accessories forever, but the speakers thrived on better

amplifier control. That set me off on something Cyrus probably thought of as pure harassment!

I found out that they were in the process of completing design & prototype production of their first power amplifiers, as well as a pre-amplifier. So, I phoned the very nice Liz in Cyrus customer services in Huntingdon just about every week, to find out if the amps were ready. After a couple of months of regular phone calls, they finally buckled & the first pair of prototype Cyrus Powers & a Cyrus Pre was sent up to Lintone Audio for me to listen to. They sounded fantastic & there began my 'relationship' with Cyrus Audio. They were actually really nice, despite my constant pestering about their forthcoming equipment. They'd regularly ask my opinion of their equipment & invited me to write for some of the early issues of the Club Mission magazine which they released in the mid-to-late 90s. It was aimed at Cyrus & Mission users, particularly to help with system choice & set up.

I came to know Stuart McGregor, head of R&D, as well as Peter Bartlett, Cyrus' MD & the 'ears' behind the company, over a period of time. Peter in particular was always great to speak to & it was clear that the enjoyment of music was the prime reason behind the development of their products.

Over a period of time, the Cyrus III was switched to the Cyrus Pre, then to the the Cyrus aCa7.5, then was switched to the combined pre-amp & DAC- the Dac XP, which was later upgraded to the Dac XP Signature.

Power amplification was ultimately increased to a set of six Cyrus Mono X amps. These were tri-amped to feed a pair of PMC OB1i speakers which were later switched to the PMC twenty.26 speakers, which thrived on the power amps.

The source component changed from the Cyrus Disc/Dacmaster combination to the CDxtSE+.







That was a great-sounding transport, despite some issues with its loading mechanism & ability to read some discs.

In April 2011, as a result of the historic harassment for which I was well-known with Cyrus, they very kindly sent up a prototype Cyrus Streamline (integrated streamer, preamp & power amp) to Lintone Audio for me to evaluate. Instructions from Peter Bartlett were simply 'Viv, please don't open up the case & post photos all over the internet'!

It was a new era in music listening for me, without having to stick a CD into a transport. It sounded similar to the CDxtSE+ I was used to, but I really wanted to listen to the standalone Cyrus Stream X (later upgraded to the Stream X2), which was a streamer only & that would integrate into my system properly.

That unit arrived a month later & I'd begun ripping my CDs onto a network attached storage (NAS) unit in preparation.

I can honestly say that from the point I started using the streamer, I've never since been as interested in the music I listen to, as opposed to being 'bothered' by the sound of the equipment.

It sounds odd, but, for me, I'd always let the equipment get in the way of enjoying the music.

Being critical of the cabling, amplification, source component & other equipment was something I'd always do. In hindsight, that's something that probably stopped me enjoying the music as much as I probably could have.

Over the course of a few years, before moving away from CD playback, I became more & more interested in something in which I was previously a total disbeliever- power supply & mains cable upgrades. I used to look at the range of 'audiophile' mains cables advertised in the magazines & just thought to myself 'what a pile of cr*p'!

That was until I read a review of the Clearer Audio Copper-line Alpha. It wasn't ridiculously expensive, so I thought I'd try it, just out of

curiosity. After using it with the CDxtSE+, I've never continued with OEM

mains cabling. For me, the cost-effective improvement in sound quality was too much to ignore.

Since that point, I've tried out a range of mains products from different manufacturers. I still remember writing a review of mains cables in the Cyrus Unofficial forum in 2011. Despite it being related to my own personal view of the products I'd tested in my own system, I may as well have started World War 3, such was the effect it had on users & retailers alike!

I gradually upgraded the mains supply by fitting a separate mains spur feeding the audio system in a music room, which was a converted garage.

Furutech mains sockets were fitted, an Isotek Syncro mains AC realignment device now feeds an Isotek Titan mains conditioner & a Multi-way extender feeds additional equipment. For me, the effect of using this combination of equipment was profound- music just sounded more 'real' & enjoyable. It really was as simple as that. I think that's a lot for someone like me to say, particularly since I never believed in the concept of audio mains conditioning in the first place. Now, I'd never go back, such is the improvement for me.

Over the last 18-months or so, different factors have meant I'd decided to downgrade. The system itself has sounded superb to me, but the need for a work-related room conversion has meant I've needed to consider a smaller audio system. So, most of the components have now been sold.

I'd always admired the Canadian speaker brand, Totem. So, when I found that they were releasing their first bookshelf-sized powered speakers, I decided to use them in the new system. I'd also read numerous reviews about the Chord Qutest DAC. Normally, I would audition new equipment combinations before buying, but on this occasion I just went ahead & bought the DAC & the speakers without having heard them at all. One of the first pairs of the Totem Kin Play



speakers was shipped to the UK from the Belgian distributor, Joenit. They were shipped up to me, along with the Chord Qutest by Paul Hobson at Moorgate Acoustics in Sheffield- another fantastic audio dealership.

In order to keep the system box count small, my choice of powered speakers meant that no power amplification was necessary. I simply needed a line level source output, which was provided by the DAC. Having played around with a Raspberry Pi computer for some time, I also decided to investigate a small scale streamer, so bought an Allo USBridge digital transport. It contains 2 separate circuit boards- the main computer 'Sparky' section & the USBridge hat, which controls the low-jitter, galvanically-shielded USB output. Powering the two sections separately has also provided me with improvements to sound quality.

The digital transport is connected by wired ethernet cable from the router & feeds the DAC using an Audioquest Carbon USB cable. For source music, I have ripped FLAC files stored on a NAS unit & I also stream online music using Qobuz via ROON. It's perhaps a 'lazy' way of listening to music, but it works for me.

The upgrade bug can't stop rearing its ugly head, so I ended up replacing the digital transport with a small HP thin client. This is a small computer which acts as a music server. It connects to Qobuz & streams music onwards to the DAC. I've also been playing with alternate server software too, so I've now temporarily replaced ROON with Euphony. I've also installed a JCAT USB card Femto, which replaces the server's onboard USB output.

The effect of the software change alone was quite extraordinary. The music just sounds more natural & just more enjoyable. Left to right & front to back soundstaging has improved. Following installation of the JCAT USB card, the effect has improved further still & this is within a small system.

I'll probably look at installing a JCAT Netcard Femto too, although I'm a little more sceptical about how much more of an improvement a network card can provide.

So, that's pretty much where I am now with my life as an audiophile & I'm happy with that. As I've grown older, I've probably become less worried about the system itself & have started to enjoy the music for what it is- something that can put a smile on my face. I've got a wide range of musical tastes, but I probably enjoy listening to female vocals more than anything else. The likes of Eva Cassidy & Diana Krall always manages to send a shiver down my spine.

I used to visit audio shows around the country to hear new music systems. These days, I use that as a means to catch up with the fantastic people behind the equipment & that's what I enjoy more than ever.

I'm lucky that I've met a lot of new & interesting people in the world of audiophile equipment. I've got a lot of friends who I'd never know, were it not for the love of music & for that I'll always be grateful.

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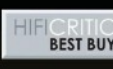
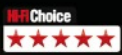
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UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL DAVID SOLOMON

HP: What is your ideal day away from the office and why?

DS: In the summer, it would have to be kayaking with my wife, a friend or just by myself. In the fall and spring, the mountains for camping. Nothing recharges my batteries like nature. I always have the best music downloaded on my phone, so there's always a life soundtrack going.

HP: Best gig you have ever attended and why?

DS: There's been so many and love most on their on merit, however, if I only can pick one, it would have to be the 2018 King Crimson tour. KC has always been unique and the musicians have always been top ranked, however, on this tour, they've added my favourite drummer, Gavin Harrison and the new lead singer Jakko Lakszyk, that IMO has taken the band to a new high.

HP: Artist you would love to see but never had the opportunity.

DS: Hendrix/Lowell George on the rock side, Charlie Mingus on the jazz side, Rachmaninoff on the classical side, George Jones on the country side and Sly Stone on the funk front.

HP: Top five tunes of all time and what they mean to you and why.

DS: I am totally an album guy, so I'll do the album with my favourite tune.

The Pretender, Jackson Browne. The Pretender put difficult situations into words that could stand on their own with no music. I can't get through the whole thing without tears falling, or at the least a lump in my throat.
Song: The Pretender

Led Zeppelin IV, I'm a drummer and hearing JB for the first time opened my eyes to possibilities my young mind had never imagined. Released in 1971, I was a impressionable 11 years old and they turned my world around. I must have gone through 4 copies starting with our Magnavox console turntable being the first. Then the Magnavox w a penny, nickel and finally a quarter to prevent the album from skipping.
Song: Stairway to Heaven

Firebird Suite, Atlanta Symphony
Finally, a symphony with dynamic and slam. This symphony moved me, and like my first Zeppelin album, had frequent rotation. The intricate detail and perfect timing of every instrument filled my room with deep and wide reproduction and often imagined myself at the performance.
Song: ALL

Mother's Finest, "Another Mother Further"
The combination of my two favourite genres, rock and funk inspired me to the core. As they are local, I saw them many times in Atlanta and still jump at the chance any time I can.
Song: Baby Love

Pink Floyd "Wish you were here" At the time, I was into Yes, Dixie Dregs, Gino Vannelli, Genesis, Kansas and others that understood music on a deeper level. Music was going crazy at the time and

creativity ruled, but there was something close and personal w Wish you were here that touched me on a level that was new.
Song: Wish you were here

HP: Analogue or digital and why?

DS: Both... however, I only have and have always had only one place to listen to vinyl.
Some pick one format over the other, period. To my ear, recordings always sound better on one than the other and I don't mind if it's either. I don't think one sounds better than the other 100% of the time. So when I am using my vinyl rig, I tend to stick with vinyl for at least 3-4 albums. It's great to see the resurgence and hope it continues. Otherwise, It's digital for me all the way. And if possible, in HiRes. The good news is the recording industry have finally embraced and gotten better at the digital game. Digital transfers and recordings have gotten so much better in the last few years. The other good news is there are now more HiRes albums being produced and transferred than ever before and this trend will continue.

HP: You have an opportunity to dine with one person (living or dead), who would this be and why?

DS: My Mother. I miss her so bad and would cherish even one more meal. She was the most interesting person I've ever had the pleasure of knowing and she always kept me on the edge of my seat. She was a total page-turner and changed the world in the most unique and wonderful ways.

HP: You're choosing the food, what would be on the menu?

DS: Sushi, High-end steak, salad and baked potato. Southern comfort food - Fried chicken, mashed potatoes and some thick leafy green.

HP: What's your favourite tippie?

DS: Well, I'm a total social drinker, so typically an IPA or gin and tonic. The thing about being a social drinker is that you really get social...

HP: Favourite book and why?

DS: Churchill. This book put you in Churchill's life from a boy through school, military and finally parliament. You'd think that one part would lag, however, his whole journey was fascinating. The many letters and personal accounts gave a fairly deep understanding of his determination and wisdom.

HP: Name a film you can watch time and time again.

DS: Alice in Wonderland (Depp version)

HP: If you weren't working in the Hifi industry what would your dream job have been?

DS: Well I really thought I'd be a professional drummer, however, this story is as common as the inevitable ending. Would have also liked being a producer or recording engineer. Outside of that, I've really enjoyed myself in the world of audio.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL DAVID SOLOMON

HP: What will your epitaph say.

DS: "He deeply appreciated how fortunate life had treated him" OR
"I'd do it again if I could. That was an absolute blast!"

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BIRDS' EYE VIEW

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Hifi Pig talks to three young women, working in different roles in the Hifi Industry, and finds out that the future really is female.

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We know that the Hifi Industry and hobby is, still a male dominated one. But as we have shown you before there are an increasing number of women working in the industry and enjoying Hifi. As well as the big names, the women that we all know, like Sheryl Lee Wilson of Wilson Audio and Sally Kennedy of the Chord Company, that built Hifi empires at a time when it was less usual to see women in Hifi, there is a new wave of young, equally talented women that are now breaking their way into the Hifi Industry and getting noticed for their wide variety of talents, working in all departments and roles from engineering to marketing and everything else in between.

THE FUTURE IS FEMALE

I took the chance to speak to three of these young women, one in her twenties, one in her thirties and one in her early forties, and find out what they do and how they got into the Hifi Industry. We hope that they can inspire more women and girls to join us in what can be an exciting and varied career.

The future of the Hifi Industry looks very bright, and female!

KATIE WILSON (Above) - LINN PRODUCTS

If you have been to a Hifi Show or event and seen a Linn demonstration recently, the chances are you have already met Katie Wilson. Katie is one of the most enthusiast and energetic people I have ever met. She is one of a team Brand Ambassadors who work for Linn Products and the twenty eight year old is based at Linn HQ, just outside of Glasgow but also spends a lot of her time on the road.

Linn has been designing and manufacturing music systems in their factory in Glasgow since 1973, Katie has been working for them for nearly three years. They were one of the first Hifi brands to offer high resolution streaming back in 2007 and are perhaps most well known

for their signature product, the Sondek LP12 turntable, one of the world's most famous turntables.

Linette Smith, Hifi Pig (HP): Who else do you work with, are you part of a big team or just have a couple of co-workers?

Katie Wilson, Linn (KW): The team I work in is made up of five Brand Ambassadors and we are tasked with delivering events and training all across the globe. Although small in numbers, we have a very big reach and we're a very close-knit team. We are positioned within the Sales & Marketing team and so collaborate with other members of the wider team on different projects.

HP: What did you do before?

KW: I studied languages at university. Before joining Linn I spent three years working for a Scottish company that teaches foreign languages in bite-sized chunks through podcasts. (Radio Lingua: Coffee Break French / Spanish etc.) I was involved in creating content for lessons and social media, I represented the company at exhibitions to raise brand awareness and I was involved in recording episodes in the studio.

HP: How did you end up moving into the Hifi Industry?

KW: I was looking for something new that would still involve using my foreign languages and involved communication. I have to admit that Hifi was never something I had considered until I saw the job advertised. It sounded exciting and not at all like a "standard" role, which appealed to me.

I didn't think I had a shot as I didn't know a thing about the industry but thankfully (for me!) I was successful and haven't looked back since. The industry is really interesting because it's fast-paced and ever-changing so there's always plenty to learn. I remember when I

was prepping for my interview, the innovative nature of Linn was really attractive to me. It's a fantastic role for someone who likes talking to people, and of course loves music!

HP: Tell us about what your average day at work involves, what you do, who you are working with etc.

KW: One of the things I like so much about working at Linn is that what I do changes greatly on a day-to-day basis; the variety keeps it interesting. When I'm at Linn HQ I could be hosting a tour of our facility, showing people how all our products are assembled by hand, blowing them away with any one of our systems in our Linn Home demonstration space or planning my next trip.

When I'm out on the road, I'm working with our retail partners to host events in their store or in collaboration with other like-minded brands to introduce people to Linn and how sensational sound can enrich their lives at home.

HP: What are your favourite things about your job, and what don't you like so much?

KW: There are two things that make me smile more than usual when I'm running a musical evening to showcase our systems. One is when I've just played a track and someone tells me they've heard it a million times but never noticed the tambourine or the backing vocals or a specific detail that our Linn system has just revealed to them – there is so much power in that message. We have succeeded in making someone's favourite song even better for them.

Two, when someone says they thought the artist was in the room. Music is emotional and when you see a band you love live, something magical happens. If we can recreate some of that at home, we're doing one heck of a job and I get to be part of that discovery at Linn events.

In terms of things that could be better? People think work travel is glamorous and a bit of a "jolly"! While I am so grateful that I get to travel to other countries as part of my job, in turn that means there are delayed planes, long travel days and some pretty questionable food at times as you just have to eat when you can.

HP: What is the most difficult thing you have had to do in your work and what achievements are you most proud of?

KW: Probably the same thing: Hifi Shows. The Hifi Shows or larger scale events and installs I've been involved with are monumental expeditions. The weeks of planning, mammoth days, early starts, eight hours plus of set up, still fine tuning and tweaking at 1am to ensure the system sounds the best it possibly can. All of the small details from laying our own carpet to placing reed diffusers mean the room is completely transformed to offer a truly special experience to every member of the public who steps over the threshold – of course the Tunnocks caramel wafers on offer help with that too!

The work really begins once the show is open; we generally run closed door demonstrations with full presentations so each individual knows what they're listening to and gets the best listening experience. This means our team's enthusiasm and energy levels need to be at 100% all day, every day.

It's a great feeling when the team comes together to pull off something like this. And it's made even more special when we receive positive feedback from attendees or our peers in the industry. At

Bristol Hifi Show last year, the icing on the cake was winning an award for Best Hifi Demonstration.

HP: How do you feel as a woman working in the Hifi Industry?

KW: I feel strangely proud to be one of few women in the industry. I feel responsible in a way, that I make a good "impression" and am respected in my work so that hopefully more women will consider it as a viable career path or field to work in going forward. I quite like that I'm perhaps being part of something that will end the cliché that Hifi is for men.

HP: Who inspires you in your work?

KW: My peers and my teammates inspire me. It's fantastic when we have opportunities to work together during product launches for example; we each strive to deliver our work to very high standards so we each push each other to do a little better each time.

It's incredible at Linn to have one base that everyone works from, the building is an inspiring place; the whole way the business is set up allows for collaboration between teams. Linn's almost fifty year legacy and heritage is inspiring too, everything that has been achieved in that time period and considering what could come next is exciting. I'm proud to work for a company that is still family run.

HP: Where do you see yourself in ten years time, do you have aspirations to be running the company, do you see yourself staying in this industry?

KW: Ten years is a long time and so I honestly can't say for sure. I think the industry will continue to innovate and so I hope as a result, exciting roles will still be created. There are lots of positives of working in this industry: working with music, meeting new people, being involved in the launch of some very exciting technology... There are also lots of opportunities to learn which is important to me.

Personally I want to continue to grow, develop and learn and as long as it's still challenging and offering opportunities for new growth, I can't see why I would leave the industry.

HP: Do you ever feel that your position and knowledge is overlooked because you are female/young, this may be by other people in the industry or customers?

KW: There have sadly been occasions where I have encountered this type of behaviour, yes. People like to try to catch me out sometimes! When I joined Linn I made it my priority to be equipped with information and knowledge about our products. Of course with 46 years of Linn history, there is still plenty to learn and I'm working with people who have been in the industry since before I was born (I hear that phrase a lot!). To quote an overused phrase, "knowledge is power" and I've certainly found that to be the case. I have earned people's respect because I can talk about DACs and Class-D amplifiers and that is so crucial in order to be taken seriously in this industry.

HP: How do you think that the Hifi Industry can encourage more younger people to want to work in it?

KW: I think with the recent vinyl resurgence the next wave of young people may naturally be more aware of Hifi than previous generations. They may have a better appreciation of high quality music which can only be a good thing for the industry. In terms of getting people involved in a professional capacity, brands need to



keep creating exciting, cool roles much like the whisky industry is doing at the moment.

Additionally, maybe there needs to be more awareness initiatives to encourage young people to consider looking to the Hifi industry. At Linn we've had several summer interns working in the Research & Development department and we host tour groups from schools or colleges from time to time which perhaps plants the seed that Hifi can be a viable option for students when they graduate.

HP: What advice would you give to a young woman wanting to get into the Hifi Industry, do you think qualifications are important, do they need to study relevant subjects etc?

KW: I think it largely depends on the role. If you look at my background, you could argue that I could have applied for this role without my French and Spanish degree but I think when it comes to Hifi, and especially the Brand Ambassador role, it comes down to enthusiasm, the ability to speak to people, an eagerness to learn and an unwavering love of music. That being said, an understanding of physics or engineering would not hurt!

HP: What do you see as the future of Hifi, are we heading for a world of Bluetooth speakers and streaming or do you think that there will always be a place for 'real' Hifi?

KW: Linn was the first to offer high resolution streaming back in 2007 and today we're still doing that but we've never turned our back on our signature product, the Sondek LP12 turntable either; there's a place for both.

Looking forward, with the launch of Series 3, we've brought the convenience of the Bluetooth speaker to Hifi world. It's offering everything that's expected of a modern, all-in-one system but with Linn sound and quality.

HP: Who is your favourite band/artist, how important is music to you as part of your day and how do you usually listen to music (headfi gear, main Hifi, radio, in the car etc)?

KW: I grew up dancing so music has always been important to me and my husband and I actually got together because we kept going to the same gigs!

When I travel I revert to my headphones but my job means that I get to play with some pretty insane Hifi systems.

We listen to a lot of music at home; I couldn't possibly choose a favourite, I tend to go through phases. At the moment I'm enjoying listening to Sam Fender, Kaleo, Barns Courtney, Oh Wonder and I just discovered Wildwood Kin who are lovely.

HP: What is your favourite music format...are you always streaming, or a vinyl junky?

KW: Streaming all the way! I have a Klimax System Hub at home with a pair of 530s so I get a pretty fantastic sound. I am ashamed to admit that I don't own a single piece of vinyl but I do enjoy playing with the world's best turntable every day at work so maybe that'll be my next purchase...once I've got the vinyl collection started, of course!

DAHLIA BARAKAT (Above) - DEVORE FIDELITY

I first met thirty seven year old Dahlia at this year's High End Munich, when another friend, Pam Merrigan of Tellurium Q, brought her along to our annual Women In Hifi Munich meet up. We get together in the beer garden for a chat and catch up with Hifi industry women from all around the world. Dahlia was immediately likeable and obviously creative and passionate about her work, plus we discovered a shared love of cats! Dahlia is the Production Manager at New York based DeVore Fidelity and has been there for just over two years.

BIRD'S EYE VIEW

DeVore Fidelity was founded at the end of 2000 by John DeVore with the goal to produce speakers that had high sensitivity and were very easy to drive, but looked and behaved like 'normal' speakers, rather than more 'out there' designs like horns. The company continues today in that same vein, still designing and building award-winning speakers in Brooklyn, New York that are known around the world for their flexibility, sensitivity and natural transparency.

Linette Smith, Hifi Pig (HP): Who else do you work with, are you part of a big team or just have a couple of co-workers?

Dahlia Barakat, DeVore Fidelity (DB): We are a total of four people at the shop, including John DeVore; our boss and owner of DeVore Fidelity. He designs the speakers, and we build them, pack them and make sure they are ready for shipping.

HP: What did you do before?

DB: So many things...my last job before this one was as a cake icer and carpenter (it didn't last very long because the company closed its doors). Before that, I worked in custom furniture design and sales in the Washington DC area for three years. I also work in the theatre backstage stage managing/assistant directing/set building in my "spare time".

HP: How did you end up moving into the Hifi Industry?

DB: Honestly, complete coincidence. I was forwarded a job ad from a friend, and the ad called for someone who loves music and cats, and I am very much both of these things. I like to work with my hands, building things, working with power tools, so this is really the perfect job for me. Before this job, I had no experience in building speakers and was quite unfamiliar with the Hifi industry.

HP: Tell us about what your average day at work involves, what you do, who you are working with etc.

DB: That's a tough one. It's hard to describe just one day honestly, because each day is so different from the other. But I will describe what happens in a typical week. Usually first thing Monday, I'll find out if I need to go to our local finisher to go and pick up cabinets, baffles, stands, or anything else that we've sent to get finished. Depending on what I bring back and our orders, John will decide what needs to get built and their priority levels. We build the speakers that are needed, and ideally depending on speaker model, we will get it built, wired up, tested and packed up and ready for shipment. If we are low on crossovers that need to be built, I leave the building of speakers to my coworkers and I will make the crossovers needed.

Some of my administrative duties include getting international shipment quotes, printing shipping labels and keeping track of inventory and what has been sent to the finisher. Any other errands (Home Depot runs, post office, etc) that need to be done are run by me.

HP: What are your favourite things about your job, and what don't you like so much?

DB: I pretty much love everything about my job! I love that there are 2 resident kitty cats at work (Lulu Bear and Roxy). I love that I get to work with my hands (a huge passion of mine) and using power tools. I don't think I have a least favourite thing about my job. It sounds crazy, but I have strived to make sure that no matter what job I take, it is

always something that I love to do. I don't even think I can complain about my hour long commute, since I take the subway, I either use the time to catch up on much needed sleep or read a book.

HP: What is the most difficult thing you have had to do in your work and what achievements are you most proud of?

DB: The most difficult things I've had to do are all very physical tasks like strapping crates and carrying our GX speakers which weigh 76lbs each. Now these tasks are relatively easy for me, and I still remember the day I asked John if he had oiled the strapping tools because all of a sudden it felt easy. I hadn't realized I had just gotten stronger.

I think the thing I'm most proud of is when John asked me to go to the Munich show with him. Doing that show made me feel accomplished.

HP: How do you feel as a woman working in the Hifi Industry?

DB: I am told that this is a boys' club. And when I was at the show in Munich, or when John throws a "listening party", I am very aware of how much of a boys' club it is. But considering that I like to work with my hands, I've been accustomed to squeezing myself in regardless. And I think that when they (the men) find out what it is that I actually do, they're more impressed than anything else.

HP: Who inspires you in your work?

DB: I think the people that inspire me are the people that I work with that REALLY understand what they're doing. Whether it is John DeVore, or Tony or Dave from next door at Box (they build our cabinets for us), or Diego who does some finishing for us. The way they really understand the material and can think outside the box and get creative with their solutions is the level I would like to reach. Hoping I can explain this the best way possible, but I am currently at the level where I still follow instructions, and when there's a hiccup, I need to ask what the solution is. Once I run into that hiccup again, it's alright, I can manage now, but if there's a new different hiccup, then I'm at a loss again because I'm still not 100% sure of how things work together in that capacity.

There is another person that inspires me every day, outside of the Hifi industry. A woman I worked with almost 10 years ago; Rosemary King. She must've been in her 70s at the time. She was so petite and old and deceptively strong. You would take one look at her and assume she instructs the builders on the stage what to do. But no, she would carry the lumber on her shoulder herself, and build a whole set on her own; it was so magnificent and impressive. I want to be like her.

HP: Where do you see yourself in ten years time, do you have aspirations to be running the company, do you see yourself staying in this industry?

DB: I can definitely start by saying that I do not have any aspirations to run the company (or any company). I think there are people who are born wanting to run their own business, and people who aren't. I belong to the latter. I enjoy working for others and helping them run their businesses smoothly. Who knows what the future holds? If I am still working for DeVore Fidelity in ten years' time, that will be a win for me.

HP: Do you ever feel that your position and knowledge is overlooked because you are female/young, this may be by other people in the industry or customers?



DB: My position and knowledge is not what's overlooked. I think most people whether they are in the Hifi industry or outside assume that since I am female and young that I must have an administrative position. I think I've had to say the words "who do you think builds these speakers?" so many times when I've had people (typically men) try to carry the speakers on my behalf.

HP: Do you encounter sexist attitudes at all, do you ever get 'mansplained' to for instance?

DB: Again, I think the only sexist attitudes I receive are about my perceived strength. Silly example, but at Home Depot when I have to go and purchase lumber, I get a lot of "can I help yous?" and "oh, look a [female] contractor". I don't think I can say I've ever been 'mansplained' on the job. Considering my position, and my superiors' positions, anything that has to be explained is simple. I happen to be female, but I also don't have the information, therefore, my superior who happens to be male has to explain it to me. But in the "traditional" sense of 'mansplaining' I am fortunate to say that this has not happened.

HP: What advice would you give to a young woman wanting to get into the Hifi industry, do you think qualifications are important, do they need to study relevant subjects etc?

DB: As idealistic as it sounds, I would say don't even focus on gender as an issue. I think all you need is passion for learning the industry. Find someone who is willing to give you the chance to learn and try and absorb as much as you can. I believe in hands-on experiences as much as possible. Yes there's a lot of information in books, but (for example) there's only so much you can learn about how speakers sound without actually listening to a pair.

HP: What do you see as the future of Hifi, are we heading for a world of bluetooth speakers and streaming or do you think that there will always be a place for 'real' Hifi?

DB: I hope not! I think between the luddites and the audiophiles in the world, there may always be a place for 'real' Hifi, and I would hope that doesn't change. But for the average person, I think their world is definitely changing and it's a shame.

HP: Who is your favourite band/artist, how important is music to you as part of your day and how do you usually listen to music (headfi gear, main Hifi, radio, in the car etc)?

DB: The radio is always on at work. We alternate different stations depending on our moods. Sometimes we (my coworkers and I) will hook up our phones and listen to specific playlists, and sometimes I will use my earphones and listen to my personal playlists. Usually my music of choice is 90s grunge, if I have to pick a favourite band it would have to be Live. But lately I've been sparing my coworkers from listening to my latest addiction which is filled with songs from musicals (#nosname).

HP: What is your favourite music format...are you always streaming, or a vinyl junky?

DB: I do stream music via Spotify when I have to, but I'm a young luddite at heart and I cannot give up my CDs and definitely still purchase and listen to them.

ARWEN LEHMANN-DAVIES (Above) - AXHORN LOUDSPEAKERS

Axhorn Loudspeakers is a small family run business which was started in rural Wales UK forty years ago, by Fred Davies, who has been designing and manufacturing concrete horn loudspeakers his whole life. They produce OEM products for Hifi and PA companies and, among other things, created the pedal power PA at Glastonbury. Their own Axjet and Superjet speakers were the first incarnation of

the models they are taking into production and were introduced at High End Munich 2019, they hope to have the final model ready by Spring 2020. Arwen is the self confessed 'Pushy Bitch Sales and Marketing Director' and at forty three, she has worked in the industry for twenty five years. Her passion for music and energy is evident the minute you meet her and she works alongside her dad, partner and brother in a tight-knit family team.

Linette Smith, Hifi Pig (HP): What did you do before?

Arwen Lehmann-Davies, Axhorn Loudspeakers (ALD): Alongside my work at Axhom I have worked as a production manager at various festivals but the bulk of my time has been spent on a business I run with my mum, as a nutritional therapist and allergy tester.

HP: How did you end up moving into the Hifi Industry?

ALD: Growing up in it with a dad that had built in concrete horn loud speakers into our house, my first memories of music were falling asleep on the upstairs landing listening to John Michell Jarre.

HP: Tell us about what your average day at work involves, what you do, who you are working with etc.

ALD: I have to split my time efficiently as I have a five year old daughter. I spend two days a week filled with clients for allergy testing. Then I spend two or so days a week working on Axhorn loudspeakers. I maintain the Instagram account and Twitter feed and have been working on getting both websites running smoothly. We as a family all work together as an ongoing project.

HP: What are your favourite things about your job, and what don't you like so much?

ALD: I like everything about this "job" my first love is music and I want everyone to hear how incredible music can sound through the Axjets! I hope to get busier so I can transition to working in the Hifi industry full time.

HP: What is the most difficult thing you have had to do in your work and what achievements are you most proud of?

ALD: The most difficult was auditioning a pair of Axjets in a listening room at the top of a spiral staircase. One of my proudest moments was running a 2000 person dance tent for three days.

HP: How do you feel as a woman working in the Hifi Industry?

ALD: It feels easier in 2019 as there are many more knowledgeable woman around. My first experience of a Hifi show was back in 1992 I was only 18 at that time and it seemed to be a very male dominated industry.

HP: Who inspires you in your work?

ALD: My family oh and Sven Väth! (German DJ and producer) I think I listen to him on drip feed!

HP: Where do you see yourself in ten years time, do you have aspirations to be running the company, do you see yourself staying in this industry?

ALD: Dad will always run the company while he is able but I feel a great balance with my family as we all take on board each others

opinions. In ten years time I hope to be running a very busy company making and exporting Axjets worldwide with the product being recognised by many in the sound industry.

HP: Do you ever feel that your position and knowledge is overlooked because you are female/young, this may be by other people in the industry or customers?

ALD: I found at Munich High End show some men were amazed that a woman knew so much?!? However that was a small percentage of older men from a different generation so I let them off the hook!

HP: Do you encounter sexist attitudes at all, do you ever get 'mansplained' to for instance?

ALD: Fortunately not with my family but I did notice a little chauvinism at the High End Show in Munich this year. Unfortunately its endemic in most industries.

HP: How do you think that the Hifi Industry can encourage more younger people to want to work in it?

ALD: By getting away from 'old mans Hifi' so they can discover how good their own music sounds on real world Hifi.

HP: What advice would you give to a young woman wanting to get into the Hifi Industry, do you think qualifications are important, do they need to study relevant subjects etc?

ALD: I don't think qualifications are specifically important. I have a degree in Management and I am a qualified nutritional therapist but my qualifications for doing this job are a self taught love of music and ability to hear sound. I have learned huge amounts from my dad about the technical side. I think enthusiasm and commitment is the most important thing to have.

HP: What do you see as the future of Hifi, are we heading for a world of bluetooth speakers and streaming or do you think that there will always be a place for 'real' Hifi?

ALD: As a Keen DJ and vinyl junkie we have been told for years that vinyl will die a death and it hasn't, in fact it has made a comeback. I think the quality of files is becoming more universally available there will continue to be a demand for real Hifi, in fact it may become expected.

HP: Who is your favourite band/artist, how important is music to you as part of your day and how do you usually listen to music (headfi gear, main Hifi, radio, in the car etc)?

ALD: I live and breath music and have done from a really young age, because of dads love for Jimi Hendrix and mums love of Joni Mitchell I suppose. I grew up being dragged around festivals like Glastonbury and Blue Moon. I have a very eclectic broad taste in music, although I have become an ear snob when it comes to quality of sound! I love to play electro techno and thats probably because I am part German! There are many producers that I follow e.g. Anthony Rother with my favourite DJs being Sven Vath, Laurent Garnier. My favourite female artist right now is Fever Ray. I have been fortunate to see some of the best live bands/shows in the world like The Foo Fighters, Jean Michell Jarre, Underworld at Cocoon, Gorillaz, Bruce Springsteen, Orbital, Aphex Twin, The Orb, Kings of Leon, The drummers of Berrundi, the list just goes on and on.

At home I listen to music in my lounge I have a graffiti sprayed set of prototype Axjets. If i'm out and about I have a Plenue with basic Sennheiser headphones.

HP: What is your favourite music format...are you always streaming, or a vinyl junky?

ALD: I do both really. I like Bandcamp so often purchase vinyl and get the download too. I like discogs to collect old vinyl stuff I've missed. I find it difficult to just stream music as our Internet service in West Wales is poor and I haven't got over my ownership of music. Besides what if there was a power cut and the streaming stopped! Basically I just love the smell of vinyl. The one thing I am lacking is a vinyl cleaner that's on my Christmas list.

Right now my big interest is modular synthesis and I have been having lessons. I have bought a little Plaits VCO and need to complete a basic kit set up so I can muck around at home and make some of my own strange sounds.

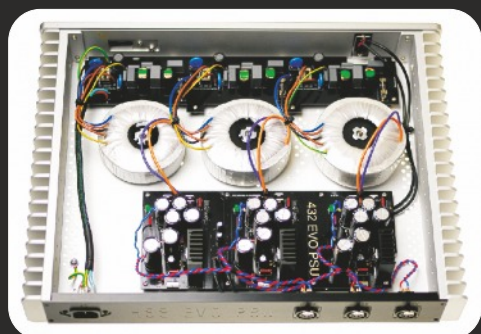
So there you have it, three inspiring women who are making this industry a more vibrant and diverse one to work in. I for one look forward to meeting many more and I hope that this goes some way to encourage other women looking for a career to consider the Hifi industry.



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If you are reading this, then the chances are that you are either:

- A) An already committed audiophile; also known as a lost cause.
- B) Audiophile curious; you've heard about this hifi stuff but you're not quite sure if it's really for you.
- C) Hopelessly lost in the murky depths of the Internet and you've no idea how you got here; press that back arrow now, there's still time to escape.

Audiophilia can strike at any age, but, just as no sensible person sets out with the intention to become addicted to hard drugs, stroopwafels or The Great British Sewing Bee (self-help groups are available), no one wakes up in the morning seized by a sudden desire to be an audiophile. Typically, you'll be going about your day-to-day business, quite happy with whatever audio reproduction equipment you currently own until, without you really realizing it, something happens to plant a tiny seed of disquiet in your soul. Maybe you'll have read an article in a magazine or overheard some chat about how vinyl is really what's going on. More often than not, a friend (or "enabler") is involved. They can't wait to let you hear their latest bit of "kit", you're sceptical but you go along with it – he's bought beer in – and before you know it you are listening to your favourite band, your toe is tapping, you've noticed some details in the music that you hadn't heard before and you're asking questions like: "Can you buy this stuff round here?" and "How often would I have to change the needle?" Before you know it, your friend has arranged to take you along to his local hifi shop and you are walking out with your first hifi system, having parted with a wodge of cash. "See you again soon." says the

shop owner with a twinkle in his eye – they're not called "dealers" for nothing.

So now you're an audiophile. But just as there are different classes of amplifier, various types of speaker; there are an assortment of audiophiles. Which kind are you? Let's take a look.

MR YOU CAN'T HEAR A DIFFERENCE ANYWAY

Mr You Can't Hear The Difference Anyway still has the Amstrad all-in-one system he bought when he started work 30 years ago. He once met a bloke who worked in an electrical discount store at a party who told him that all hifi really just sounds the same and he has trotted that out as gospel ever since. Not actually an Audiophile.

THE SMUG GIT

The Smug Git set a budget and stuck to it. He arrived at his dealer's shop knowing exactly what he wanted and left with it. He has had his kit for a few years now and has no intention of changing it as he is perfectly happy with what he has. Many will argue that this lack of ambition means that he is not a real audiophile at all but deep down inside, they envy his sense of serenity ever so slightly.

THE VINTAGE DUDETTE

The Vintage Dudette holds no truck with any audio kit manufactured after 1979. Brushed chrome facias and teak sleeves are where it's at for her amps. For the Dudette, digital means using her finger to lift the SME 3009 tone arm on her Thorens TD 125 MkII turntable. Vinyl hasn't made a comeback here, it never went away; she has a collection of CDs garnered from the covers of music magazines but they have never been out of their boxes. Fellow audiophiles come to

smirk at her lava lamps and starburst wall clock but leave secretly surprised at the sound of her system.

THE BRAND CHAMPION

The Brand Champion fully endorses the philosophy of hifi separates, as long as they are all made by the same manufacturer. No mixing and matching for him, thank you very much. He has heard multi-manufacturer systems of course – once at an audio show he even heard a British turntable hooked up to a Polish amplifier and had to go for a lie down to recover. If pushed, he will reluctantly concede that such cobbled together set ups can be "quite enjoyable" but for him, nothing will ever beat the synergy provided by an end-to-end system from his favoured brand.

THE BOX SWAPPER

The Box Swapper is the polar opposite of The Brand Champion; loyalty is not in his lexicon. The Box Swapper never stands still; no sooner has he wired up a bit of kit and settled down for a listen than his mind is wandering onto his next upgrade. Birthdays and Christmases are marked by cards from his local hifi dealer but his buying power is boosted by scoping out the second-hand market; he'll often be found bleary-eyed late at night, finger poised ready to snag an eBay bargain. The thrill of the chase is often tempered by that nagging sense of dread as he wakes the next day, unsure of what he may or may not have "won". Be sure to make friends with a Box Swapper though, their cast offs could be your keepers.

THE TWEAKER

The Tweaker just can't leave things alone. Having eschewed upgrading, he's hell-bent on wringing every last drop of performance from his equipment. Accessories are his true passion. His obsession began years ago with actual real products, manufactured with the intention of improving the hifi experience but, having totally lost his marbles (part of a failed isolation platform experiment along with some blu-tac and a memory foam mattress he stole out of a skip), he is now most often found at car boot sales forlornly searching for Marvel rubber shoe soles, as sold by Woolworths for sixpence in 1956. Easily spotted at audio shows due to the triangles of Peter Belt foil stuck to his earlobes; approach with caution.

THE SOD IT ALL AUDIOPHILE

The Sod It All Audiophile really has no hope left and may as well be shooting speedballs straight into one of the very few veins that he has left. He's hopelessly addicted and will go to any lengths to secure the latest piece of kit that has taken his fancy. He, or indeed she, will stop at nothing to get what they want and will gladly sell his mother/children/cat/dog to feed his addiction. It's more than likely that this poor unfortunate will have been through rehabilitation on more than one occasion and will have experienced the horrors of cold turkey first hand. He'll have sold up, sworn blind he'll never go there again, only to be seen a few days later loitering outside his dealer's shopfront gazing longingly at the myriad silver and black boxes and knowing in his heart of hearts that maybe not today and maybe not tomorrow but some day soon he'll be back in there and handing over his money in exchange for product. Like Mr. Young once sang "Every junky's like the setting sun" and sure as eggs is eggs, he'll be back the next day for more.

And so there you have it. However you get your audio fix, be assured that so long as you are happy then that is all that really matters. Music is the drug you are really addicted to and the kit is just the means of administration. Personally, I know I'm far too gone down mainlining my tunes through the best kit I can afford to ever go back.

See you at sun up.

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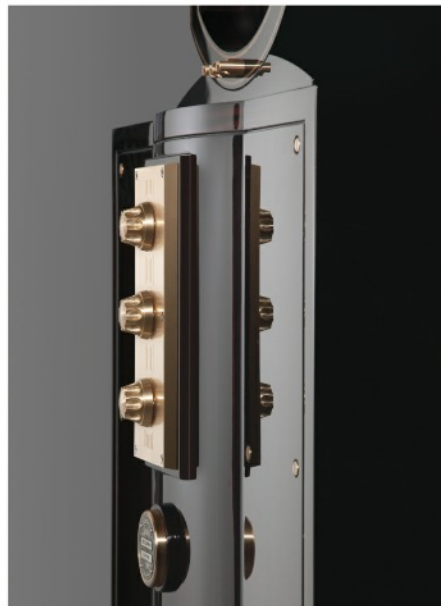


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HAPPY TRAILS WITH PAUL MESSENGER

Loudness capability seems to be an important factor in today's HiFi, and would seem to be a major reason behind the move from valve to solid state. I myself have tended to reduce volume to the point where intelligibility is maintained, rather than attempting to replicate 'live' levels. I went to a concert recently, with a couple of folk artists that called themselves Lunatraktors, and was astonished at how loud the two were generating in a large theatre.

While I myself will always be associated with the Linn/Naim axis which did much to transform HiFi during the 1970s, had I been born a few years later, I might well have gone for Audio Innovations (or Audio Note [UK]) instead – and perhaps rediscovered valves too. As very much a child of the transistor era, I automatically rejected valves as old-fashioned, and did so without really listening to them.

With the benefit of hindsight, I'm now coming to the conclusion that valves do indeed sound better at low levels, but there's little substitute for solid state power at high levels. My Howes-built PX4-equipped monoblocks can indeed sound better than the Naim NAP500 power amp that I regularly use, but 3.5W/ch doesn't really compare to 140W/ch in terms of loudness capability.

Indeed, when visiting the (very successful) Polish Hifishow in Warsaw recently, I noticed that a considerable number of exhibitors were using valve rather than solid state power amps. I wouldn't say they were actually in the majority yet, but I'm certainly planning to compare the two during my next Warsaw visit.

AUDIO NOTE

In my last column I promised to try an Audio Note (UK) Io Ltd cartridge, which uses a field coil instead of a permanent magnet, and have now had a chance to check it out at home. Ultimately, it didn't disappoint, at least as far as the sound quality is concerned (though price will remain a powerful disincentive). The factor that particularly impressed me was its reproduction of consonants, and a consequent substantial improvement in vocal intelligibility.

However, I didn't just manage to borrow an Audio Note Io Ltd.; in fact I tried a number of other Audio Note components, which proved very interesting and entertaining indeed. I particularly like the fact that Audio Note's products are structured as a number of 'levels', so that customers can choose which level of performance they are prepared to pay for.

There are, for example, nine levels of amplification (including a couple of negative solid-state examples, which lack Audio Note amps). Audio Note models begin with level zero Class AB push-pull pentode and triode models, moving up to Class A versions (level one), then the directly-heated triodes with zero feedback, followed by a number of degrees of silver wiring and superior components.

Io LIMITED

However, the real reason for this review is a cartridge. It's by a substantial margin the most costly cartridge I've ever encountered, using a field-coil electromagnet instead of a permanent magnet. It's called an Io Limited, and I first heard it on a day visit to John Howes. JH was using it in a system that he'd put together, using 4ft Tractrix Voigt field-coil loudspeakers, whereas I chose to use a complete Audio Note system – hence the Meishu, plus a pair of AN-E speakers, and various other bits and pieces (cables etc.).

One essential point about a field-coil cartridge is that, compared to a permanent magnet, two extra cables are needed to provide the electric field. Furthermore, the output from an Io Ltd is very low indeed, so a special 'high gain' transformer is required, alongside an MM-type phono stage.

The thing that most impressed me about the Io Ltd was its reproduction of consonants. That in turn means that lyrics are more easily heard and understood, which is very important (especially for one who struggles to make out the words of a song, such as yours truly).

In most normal respects the Io Ltd behaves itself impeccably. In balance terms, and apart from its exceptional reproduction of consonants, it sounds very similar to the Rega Aphelion that I normally use. While the Io Ltd certainly offers a significant performance advantage over the Rega, one crucial question must therefore be whether such an advantage is really worth the considerable price premium involved.

An Io Ltd (with its power supply) actually costs some £17,000, compared with the £3,000 for an Aphelion, so we're talking a serious increase in money here. Add in the cost of a transformer to boost its very low output (up to MM equivalent output) and the total comes to more than £33,000 – which is more than 10x the price of an Aphelion. Whether I can afford such a premium remains to be seen – I suspect not, but can't deny the temptation!

AN TT THREE

To start with I used the Io Ltd cartridge in my own Rega Naiad turntable, but subsequently borrowed an example of the brand new Audio Note TT Three turntable. It's an intriguing turntable with no fewer than three motors driving the periphery of a low mass acrylic platter. Available in white or black finishes (the latter in satin; high gloss is an extra). It has three alternative power supplies; our sample came with the most costly and elaborate supply with a price of £10,450 (simpler supply versions are priced at £8,500 and £5,950).

It came fitted with a 6-wire version of the AN-Arm3 tonearm, which costs around £1,500. Unfortunately, it wasn't possible to play this record player through my regular system, for geographic reasons.

It's not the quietest source I've encountered, and is certainly significantly noisier than my Rega. Sonically it did the business, though I don't see any need to swap it for my Naiad, and I did feel that it tended to 'smooth off' the sharp edges, somewhat negating the advantages of the cartridge. However, there's no denying that it delivers a first-class result.

AN MEISHU PHONO SILVER

It seems that I'm fated to review valve amplifiers at the height of summer. I recall previously borrowing an Ongaku and a two-box The Lars at this time of the year, so the arrival of an Audio Note (UK) Meishu should have come as no surprise.

This single-box integrated amplifier is an unusually large and heavy example of the type (27.5kg; 46x22x53cms., wxhxd). One reason may well have to do with the built-in phono stage; the more likely factor is that this amp uses single-ended 300B triodes, with all that that involves in terms of hefty output transformers. Subtitled 'Phono Silver' and designated Level 3, the Meishu comes in six versions,

HAPPY TRAILS WITH PAUL MESSENGER

depending on the degree of silver content, and with/without a phono stage.

Rated at (an ample!) 8W/channel, I haven't attempted to measure this amplifier in any way, though I'm very happy with the sound it creates. Indeed, my only real objection is that it lacks any form of remote control, which is a bit of a nuisance if the unit is out of reach. On balance, I'd say that the sound matches my Naim combo in quality terms, though it does fall a little short of the Howes PX4 monoblocks driven by the Naim Statement pre-amp.

AN TYPE E LOUDSPEAKERS

The AN-E is an unusually large two-way loudspeaker, using a 200mm main driver that's port-loaded to a very low 33Hz, and intended for corner-mounting. This is not possible in my room, they could be used close to a wall, and that alone meant that they were well out of the way when compared to most loudspeakers. This did seem a surprisingly big advantage in a room setting, especially in the context of a speaker as bulky as the AN-E.

An extra advantage of the E is its relatively high sensitivity, which might be somewhat below that which horn-loaded designs achieve, but at a nominal 96dB is certainly high for a direct radiator design. That said, and accepting the observation that the speaker is normally rather further away than usual, I'd still struggle to find a figure greater than 93dB, though by way of compensation, the impedance is nice and easy-to-drive.

Interestingly, when the system was originally delivered it featured some very costly SEC speakers. When these were replaced by the much more affordable SPE HEs (despite using a superior connecting speaker cable), I was very conscious of the change, finding the reduced performance rather dull and therefore somewhat exasperating.

AN CONCLUSIONS

Even though my experiences with the complete Audio Note system were mixed, the original purpose of examining the 'field coil' lo Ltd cartridge was unquestionably successful. It has led me to believe that field-coils do sound superior to permanent magnets, as the latter seem to incorporate a degree of 'memory' that slows things down. Field-coil magnetics simply sound 'fast' – 'faster' than any permanent magnet.

WIRE ON WIRE

A clever cable company called Wire on Wire has been created by Chris Bell, with has the ability to 'tune' the sound of a cable by inserting different spacers within the woven construction that carries the signal. Initial work was based on three pairs of phono-to-phono interconnects, each roughly 2m long, while comparison with the much more costly EnKlein Davids provided a useful reference point.

While the plain untreated cable sounded decent enough, it clearly fell somewhat short of the David. However, my foot really started tapping when I changed over to the cables with the gold spacers. This is invariably a good sign, and it turned out to be my personal favourite. Although the cable with red spacers had a pleasing overall

coherence, it was a little too polite and laid back for my taste. I therefore returned to the example with gold markings, and found my foot starting to tap again.

How does it compare to David? I could probably live with either. Both the gold and the red cables had some six spacers, even though they're arranged differently, since they certainly sounded quite distinctive. Happily, the Wire on Wire spacers do work, and do create worthwhile differences between the various interconnects that I tried.

Having carefully assessed three interconnect versions, which certainly helped confirm the efficacy of the approach, I subsequently tried some speaker cables, causing some surprise by asking for 5m lengths! I already use expensive Vertex AQ silver cables that have damping blocks at each end, and it was soon quite clear that these sounded rather better than the less costly Wire on Wire cables.

Priced at just £120/metre (2x5m therefore costs £1200), the latter are hand-made and carefully aligned, I found that adding a spacer at No7 gave some improvement; adding a spacer at No58 improved the focus, but No54 proved to be a step backwards. Adding a spacer to No53 did help slightly, while dynamics were assisted by the addition of No51.

I ended up purchasing my favourite interconnect, complete with its gold-coloured spacers, as this was comparable in performance to the David and also turned out to be rather easier to use. However, I decided not to worry about the speaker cables, as I'd already got some high class speaker cables.

Which is not to say these speaker cables are not very good value for money, which they most certainly are. Ultimately I have to say that I regard silver as a superior conductor to copper, though whether the price difference is justified will always be a matter for debate. Wire on Wire's speaker cable might have its performance limited by the conductor it uses, but amongst those using copper it would seem to be good value even without the tuning capability. Alongside the tuning capability it would seem to make excellent sense (especially for anybody who enjoys tweaking).

JERN12 WS

Two very heavy boxes arrived in early July 2019, a couple of months after the model made its debut at this year's massive Munich show. I wasn't too surprised, as each box contained a new version of the JERN loudspeaker, which meant it was bound to be heavy as the JERNs have a cast iron enclosure.

JERN is Danish for iron, and the blurb describes these loudspeakers as a "return to the iron age", which is a good marketing slogan at least. The 12 WS is intended to be used in small rooms, mounted about 12ins from a wall and with the listener's head about 12ins away from the wall opposite. The combination of room-gain with the sealed-box alignment should therefore give a reasonably flat response down to 40Hz in the smaller room.

Accordingly, I moved the JERNs up to a small bedroom and positioned them quite close to a wall. I then moved the test gear up to measure the speakers, and placed the measuring microphone quite close to the opposite wall. In fact I compared the mike close to the wall with the similar mike in free space (ie well away from walls).



HAPPY TRAILS WITH PAUL MESSENGER

The difference between these two measuring positions was actually quite dramatic: bass roll-off varied from 70Hz in free space, yet was down to c32Hz when close to the wall. That observation alone would seem to be perfect justification for the designer's assertion that this is a 'small room' speaker.

Taking the speakers and the test gear back downstairs emphasised the extra advantage of cast iron as a speaker material, as each weighs around 12kg (compared to roughly 5kg for a BBC LS3/5a)! I also discovered that the close-to-wall measurement boosted the low bass in the larger listening room, but by rather less than before.

Auditioning the JERN12 WS gave fine overall results, with vanishingly low enclosure coloration, though it did seem rather better suited to the close-to-wall siting of speakers and listeners in the smaller room. The presence band (c2-4kHz) is a little recessed, and the sensitivity (c85dB) is somewhat below average.

Designer Ole Lund Christensen on the JERN12 WS:

The room/loudspeaker partnership is crucial. A good loudspeaker wrongly placed in a bad room can give frequency response errors of 10 or 20dB, which is much greater than the small errors encountered in electronic components. Roy Allison, then chief engineer at Acoustic Research, wrote numerous AES papers that greatly influenced my own thinking about loudspeakers and rooms.

Most loudspeakers have a bass reflex port, and roll off at 24dB/octave below the port resonance. However, a closed box only rolls off at 12dB per octave, which is much more suitable for room gain. Allison showed that placing the woofer close to walls can increase the deep bass level, giving 9—12dB more at 30 or 40Hz. This can extend a JERN 12WS' bass from 65Hz to below 40Hz in-room.

A normal loudspeaker has fixed distances from the cabinet to the wall that will cancel at specific lower midrange frequencies and their harmonics. However, the JERN12 WS' curved shape changes the distance to the wall and diffuses the sound waves, so it can be close to walls with fewer midrange problems. Add a subwoofer later and the JERN12 WS' can be moved further away from the walls in the classic audiophile setup.

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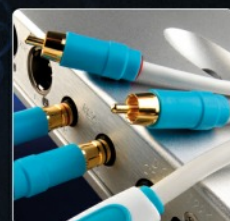
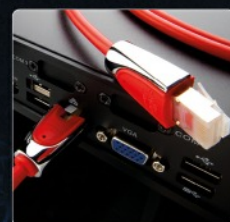
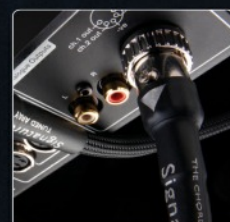
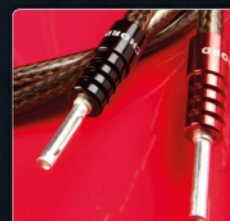


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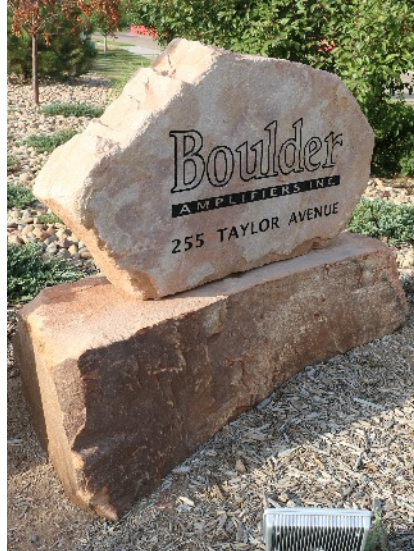
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FACTORY VISIT

BOULDER



Hifi Pig's Stuart and Lin visit Boulder's facility in Colorado.

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FACTORY VISIT - BOULDER



SOME HISTORY

Whilst at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest we were delighted to be invited to visit Boulder and were hosted for the day by Rich Maez, the company's sales and marketing director.

The company has been in business for around thirty years with the company originally being incorporated in 1984, though the principle designer was based in San Diego well before this and involved in the pro audio and broadcast industries. Jeff Nelson was largely self-taught and owned a recording studio as well as building mixing desks for other studios. Whilst at Pacific Recorders, Jeff developed the Tomcat cart which anyone who has been in a radio studio will be aware of – it's the tape cartridge used for ads and jingles, though I now guess that has been superseded by digital playback. Whilst in Southern California, Jeff met Deane Jensen who was best known for his 990 gain stage.

The move to Boulder was the perfect place to escape the hectic pace of Southern California and in 84 Jeff launched the Boulder 500 amplifier which found popularity in recording studios, loudspeaker manufacturers and broadcast facilities. As well as the 500 amp Boulder was also making the ML series of modular preamps and microphone preamps that have something of a cult following.

Following on from the 500 Boulder gave us the 500 AE with the AE denoting Audiophile Edition which was the first mainstream use of the aforementioned 990 gain stage. The 990 would be used in the entire AE range including the 500AE, 250AE and 250AE power amps plus the L3AE and L5AE preamps. Whilst well received these amps, in the words of Boulder themselves, they left something to be desired aesthetically and so the M series of products was launched which had a much more luxurious look. In 1995 Boulder launched the 2000 series which marked something of a turning point for the company.

The concept of the 2000 series was based around the concept that if a part was required to make the product better then it would be designed with no constraints on engineering nor cost. The 2000 series are all machined from aluminium with everything being hand finished. And it is this attention to detail that struck me most whilst touring the facility. The 2010 Isolated Balanced Preamplifier used the improved 993 gain stage and the 2000 series was a merging of both the digital and analogue worlds meeting in a luxurious chassis. Along with the pre, Boulder introduced the 2050 Mono Class A and 2060 Stereo Class A power amps with each weighing in at 240 pounds.

Growth saw the company move to its current home in 1998 which allowed for a dedicated machine shop with its first Haas CNC vertical machine centre.

Now Boulder hand-builds and designed in Boulder, Colorado with pretty much every aspect of the manufacturing process being done in-house and at the factory. The 1000 Series was born which followed the same philosophy as the 2000 series but with the products being built to a more affordable price point. To this end the 1000 Series uses a combination of discrete surface-mount transistors and "monolithic" microcircuitry in place of the 993 gain stages and this new gain stage, exclusive to the 1000 series, was named the 983. In 2000 Boulder unveiled the 1012 DAC Preamplifier at the CES show and it won many awards thereafter.

Two years later at CES Boulder would launch the 2008 Phono Preamplifier created for owners of the 2010 who wanted a matching phonostage. Boulder presumed that the 2008 would be a limited run that would be built to request but demand saw the company only finally catching up years later. A nice position to be in. Again, this phonostage won many awards with one US based magazine having to create an entirely new A+ rating for it.

FACTORY VISIT - BOULDER



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FACTORY VISIT - BOULDER

The year 2003 saw the 1050 Mono Power Amplifier and the 1010 Stereo Preamplifier added to their product range. The 1050 Mono Power Amplifier was created to meet customers' demand for a smaller and less expensive model than the 2050 but it still packed a healthy 500Watts per chassis.

The company showed steady growth and invested in offices, machine shop, assembly area, testing labs and also a listening room – of which more shortly. This growth saw the facility effectively double in size and workforce. Boulder invested considerably in computers and software (we got to see one of the original Macs they used) most notably a sophisticated 3-D CAD program that allowed the company's designers to make more detailed and intricate designs whilst minimising lead in times. Essentially, new designs could be sent digitally to the machine shop where prototypes could be made in a fraction of the time previously taken. The company now has four of the Haas CNC vertical machining centres plus equipment for tumbling, polishing, sanding, cutting and metal finishing including an impressive blasting room that we got to have a look around.

In 2005 Boulder launched its first new product line in six years with the 800 Series built completely with the new CAD design system. The 850 Mono amp was the first in the series, a small, Class A/B 200 watt amp housed in a half-width chassis. A year later we saw the 810 Stereo Preamp offering four line-level inputs and with fully balanced operation. The 810 had fully encapsulated left and right channels and Boulder's own discrete stepped attenuator volume control. The 860 Stereo Amplifier followed in 2007, as did the company's first integrated, the 865.

At CES 2008 the 1021 Network Disc Player was unveiled and marked the company's first source component. As well as many innovations the 1021 could, when connected to a computer network, decode and play digital music files streamed from a UPnP media server – remember, this is way back in 2008.

By late 2009 the first 1008 Phono Preamplifiers were shipped which used the company's newly acquired surface-mount circuit board manufacturing system which enabled Boulder to be in control of every part of the manufacturing process. This attention and obsessive quality control led to a circuit board production fall out to drop to just 1%. The 1008 employed another new discrete gain stage, the 985 which made use of the surface-mount circuit board tech which was all "clam-shelled" in an entirely machined housing.

Then came the 3000 Series, Boulder's "all-out endeavour to find the limits of fine audio reproduction". CES of 2011 saw the 3050s debut and they were huge; 450lbs (204kg), 1500watts, five transformers, no 90-degree angles on the exterior chassis. The 3050 was a huge success with every pair having an owner before being built. The 3060 Class A Stereo Power Amplifier came next in 2013 and whilst it weighed "only" 360lb plus a 75lb polished granite and stainless steel base it can't really be called a lightweight.

2013 saw the release of the revised 2100 Series including the all-new 2010 Preamplifier and the 2150 Mono Amplifiers. The new 2100 Series had a dark grey paint and powder coating but the chassis metalwork no longer used heavy sheet stock and instead was machined from solid billet.

July 2015 saw Boulder begin to make moves to construct a 23 000 square foot facility as they had now outgrown their previous home. A three-acre plot was purchased in Louisville, 15 minutes East of Boulder. There is full LED lighting, automation, individually zoned

heating and cooling and a more streamlined production line. It's an impressive place.

2016 saw the launch of Boulder's 2120 DAC which is most identifiable by its huge full colour display.

One of the things that really struck me about the company was the loyalty and dedication of every member of the workforce. All were happy to chat (all were music fanatics) and show off their individual skills.

I asked why the strange lines on the front of their products and was amazed to learn that its actually a representation of the contours of the nearby Rockies. I like that!

The very latest product from Boulder wasn't actually finished when we were there but it was later released in November. This is the 866 integrated amplifier available in two versions; one is an all-analogue version costing (\$12 250) and the other is an analogue and digital version costing \$14 450. This new amp is the successor to the 865 Integrated Amplifier and the first of their integrated amps to feature the option for digital inputs.

THE LISTENING ROOM

This for me was the highlight of the visit. This is a purpose-built space with built in room treatment and with every attention to detail ensuring that the room just lets the products shine. This is perhaps the best non-live musical experience I have had and we got the chance to listen to a whole load of music of our choosing. Absolutely stunning is all I can say.

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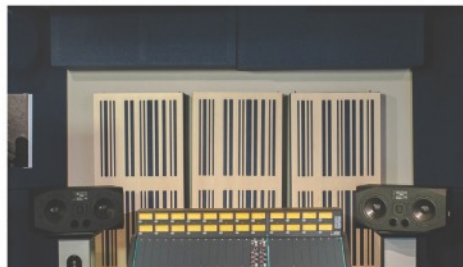
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REVIEW

AUDIO RESEARCH VT-80 AMP AND LS28 PREAMPLIFIER



The Audio Research VT80 Amplifier and LS28 Preamplifier are the entry-level products from this American icon, so will they be worth their £17,000 pricetag? Stuart Smith finds out.

Hifi Pig
www.hifipig.com

AUDIO RESEARCH VT-80 AMP AND LS28 PREAMPLIFIER



As a teen and getting into Hifi and music in a more serious way I used to devour all the magazines and one of the names that was always on my “wants” list was Audio Research, or to give them their full name Audio Research Corporation. The classic of the time if I remember correctly was an Audio Research preamplifier feeding a big Krell power amp and a pair of Celestion SL6, and later SL600s moving the air. Needless to say, the dream front end would have hailed from Glasgow. So, when the opportunity came up from the good people at Absolute Sounds, the UK distributor of Audio Research, to take delivery of their VT80 amp and LS28 preamp I jumped at the chance. I’m going to go on here a bit so please indulge me but the Audio Research brand has always seemed to be a manly kind of Hifi (GuyFi anyone) and I loved the slightly test-lab look of their products, and this industrial/scientific look has continued right down to the front-mounted carrying handles that just do it for me for some reason on the aesthetic front. However, the story of Audio Research goes well back before the mid-eighties and my minor obsession, with a Minneapolis company called Electronic Industries headed up by a guy called William Zane Johnson who launched a three-chassis mono amp in 1951 with Audio Research Corporation being formed in 1970...via Bill working for and having sold his designs to a company called Peploe. The breakthrough product for Audio Research came in 1972/3 with the SP-3 preamp; much lauded in the audio press of the time. Anyway, my thoughts are that you don’t manage to run a successful audio company for well over fifty years without doing something right, so let’s stop the history lesson and get on with the products we have to hand.

VT80SE POWER AMPLIFIER

The VT80SE uses, like ALL other Audio Research amplifiers, the KT150 power tube, in this case, a pair per channel, – previously the non-SE version used the KT120 tube but AR suggest that the 150s 3000-hour lifespan and performance make it a winner in their book. It’s an interesting valve and a relatively recent addition to the tube

armoury and is the most powerful octal beam tetrode on the planet with a plate dissipation of 70, with the ones supplied being branded PrimLuna. In the VT80SE you get a massive 75 Watts of power per channel which should be enough to drive even very demanding loudspeakers. It’s also a bit of a beast in the weight department and you’ll need a good deal of space above the amp for heat dissipation with AR suggesting a minimum of 6”. The VT80SE handily uses auto-biasing circuitry and so set up is simple and straightforward – no meters and no inserting screwdrivers. Insert valves, wire the amp and pre up to a source and speakers as per the norm and off you go.

Round the back you have the usual suspects of 4 and 8 ohm taps, balanced and single-ended inputs, an hours indicator so you know how long you’ve used tubes, a defeat/auto-shut-off switch (the latter allows you to set the amp to switch off after two hours of no output), a 12V trigger in to remotely switch the amp on and off (I didn’t use this function) and the switch to change from balanced to single-ended. Other than that, you have the juice input and that’s it.

Round the front, you have the on button and when pressed the amp goes into mute mode for thirty seconds. There’s a green LED to let you know everything is getting power and that’s it. Oh, handles, it has handles which, I don’t know if I mentioned, I’m rather partial to.

You get a valve cover too to protect valves from accidental damage or prying little fingers but why would you want to hide those tubes – or so I thought until the cat showed an interest!

All in all, everything looks to be very well put together and with high-quality components being used throughout. Add a Made in USA and a three-year warranty and there is a good degree of confidence in this being a product you could rely on for years to come.

LS28 PREAMPLIFIER

AUDIO RESEARCH VT-80 AMP AND LS28 PREAMPLIFIER



AUDIO RESEARCH VT-80 AMP AND LS28 PREAMPLIFIER

The LS28 is a line-stage only preamplifier (AR make separate phonostages too for vinyl aficionados) offering four balanced and four single-ended inputs with two single-ended and two balanced outputs plus an output for taping, which is a nice touch and not always seen on preamplifiers. Inside the box, the tubes used are a trio of 6H30P, plus a couple of 6550WE and in the supply, another 6H30P is used.

The front panel is nicely laid out and you get a 103-step rotary volume knob and the same on the other side to select input. Also on the front are buttons for power, menu, enter, mono and mute, but in all honesty pretty much everything you need can be done on the very nicely made remote control that is weighty and is ideal for the armchair enthusiast. Indeed, if you are streaming your files, as I did for the duration of the review there is no need to move from your chair other than for refreshments.

Surprisingly the preamp feels pretty lightweight when compared to the amp, but it's equally nicely made and complements the amp perfectly in a visual sense. The front display is easy to read from a distance and is understated even at full brightness, but should you wish you can dim it by several notches or turn it off completely you can – I actually quite liked it glowing green at full brightness.

The pre has handles too – did I say I like handles on kit?

Set up of the pair is a doddle with everything being nicely spaced on the back panels allowing for plenty of space for cables. Plug everything in, let everything get up to speed, choose your input channel, turn up the volume and play your tunes.

For the review process I used the Big Six DAC from Lampizator being fed by a Melco unit. Cables were from Vermouth Audio, Chord Company, Atlas and Tellurium Q – note that the VT80SE doesn't use a standard IEC. Speakers were Xavian Perlas which, despite their relatively modest price-point, proved an excellent match for the Audio Research power and pre.

SOUND QUALITY

Let's face it, given what I opened this review with the expectations of this pairing, though entry-level products for Audio Research, was pretty high and from the first album I put on (10 000 Maniacs' *Our Tim In Eden*) it was clear this was a class act. I wasn't intending to listen to this record at all, it was simply one of the first records that popped up on the library, but I ended up listening to it all the way through and really enjoyed it – as I did with the 300B amp from Fezz I recently reviewed. One thing I did find useful here was the balance control which I had set one notch in favour of the right-hand speaker, allowing me to really snap the stereo image into focus from my chair. I don't really know why balance controls fell out of favour as they offer a good degree of fine-tuning of the listening experience and allow for the vagaries of folks' hearing and room set up. Anyway, as I said, I ended up listening to this record all the way through and was really drawn to the vocal performance that was presented with ease and clarity without a hint of harshness or feeling things were being pushed, despite me listening at relatively high volumes (20 on the pre). Detail was there in buckets and I was particularly drawn to cymbal splashes on Jezebel that just started and stopped as they should. It's a bit of a cliché I am well aware, but the vocal was "in the room" real on *How You've Grown* but didn't dominate – it sat slightly forward, bang central and with instrumentation sitting where it should – slightly back in the mix with lots of (reviewer cliché alert) lots of "air" around instruments. Even at loud volumes I never felt I was getting too much information or that one frequency was dominating proceedings and this is a very good thing. Balance and poise were my

first impressions from this pairing but on rockier sections there was grip and power and no hint of the amp being anything but in control of the speakers.

The Waterboy's *Fisherman Blues* got an airing at one point (we'd just watched the *Film Fisherman's Friend*) and what really shone through was the detail and separation of instruments in the mix – that word *air* again. Mandolins were clearly distinct, fiddles likewise, and holding it all together the beat was presented rock solidly. I think there is a misconception out there in the world that valve amplification can be slow and sluggish, but this pairing was as nimble and sure-footed as pretty much anything I've heard in this system. I spend a bit of time in front of monitors in my little studio and what you look for is something that can tell you exactly what is going on in the mix and that's what I'm getting here – of course, the speakers play a big part in this and it's one of the reasons we chose them as our reference at this level, but the Audio Research kit seemed to add a little extra by way of uncluttering the mix and presenting it in distinct but still cohesive layers.

AC/DC's *Back in Black* remained, again, rock-solid (excuse the pun) and with great feeling of the recording space, particularly at the intro. I've heard this record sound muddled, muddy and confused on lesser systems, but what we have here is a (very) well defined, clear and non-fatiguing sound. There's a lot of screeching guitars and Brian Johnson's vocal delivery is on the verge of screaming (in my opinion) but I never got overwhelmed by it all, which is a very good thing as I have been put off this record (and Gillan era *Deep Purple* for that matter) because I've been exposed to it on some systems that made it all a bit too much – play it on a great system and it's a joy, however. Now, having said all that you may get the impression that I'm suggesting the Audio Research combo are rolling things off at the top-end – they are not – what you have is detail and clarity in the high frequencies without them ever breaking up and descending into "noise".

By *The Throat* by Ben Frost is a brutal assault on the self and on the system with, like the aforementioned AC/DC record, the ability to descend into a confusion of noise on poor systems. Play it on a great system and what you actually have is still a brutal assault on the self, but one that is full of different textures and tones, and that is what you have presented with the Audio Research pairing. What I'm particularly enjoying with this pre and power combination is their ability to really bring out the make-up of a record, and indeed the sounds that go together to make it. Listen closely and what may have appeared to be just a noise is actually made up of several different noises that combine to make the whole. Over analytical? Not at all! I think the thing when folk say a particular piece of equipment or system is over analytical is that the top-end has been artificially boosted. What we have here is to a great degree the reality of what is coming out the DAC. Yes, there is flavour to the sound and I would say the mid-band is pushed a little forward, but play a record like Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson's *Winter in America* and that actually becomes a positive in some ways – the vocal is often the thing that we as listeners hook onto and with this record that's certainly the case for me. Having that little mid-boost allows you to hear more of the tone and more of the texture of the vocal and I think this will appeal to others also. Now, this may seem as if I'm suggesting a certain warmth to the sound – I'm not. What I am saying is that in this system and to my ears the mids are ever so slightly lifted in the mix.

Although complete overkill on the power front I put this combo onto the Avantgarde Duo XD's which are around 107dB sensitive and have active bass. I did this for a couple of reasons: 1. To see if it would be worth investing in such a powerful amp and 2. Because I could and I

AUDIO RESEARCH VT-80 AMP AND LS28 PREAMPLIFIER



thought it would be fun. It was fun and proved to be a really wonderful partnership. And had I the money I'd have contacted Ricardo at Absolute Sounds and ordered this pre and power combo without hesitation. You get that wonderful ease of sound but with the detail too and the Avantgardes just allow the Audio Research kit to sing even more. I loved it!

CONCLUSION

There sometimes comes a point in reviews and you ask yourself, can I afford or warrant another purchase of kit? And that is what happened with my time with the Audio Research pairing, despite them being their entry-level products, though I think I'd have had them in black. They are by no means cheap products, but what they bring to the table is a true audiophile listening experience that is both detailed and expressive, but they also connect you emotionally with the music you are listening to. I liked them a lot; they give the feeling that whatever you throw at them it is they that are in control of proceedings and in all my time with them and with whatever music I played through them they never once felt anything but sure-footed and poised. They have power in reserve in the system I used them in and never once did I feel like they were running out of steam or struggling with fast changes in dynamics.

Words I want to use are speed, agility, poise, air, grip and detail. I also want to say that I feel the amp is like a very well executed 300B amp but with real balls in the bass department – I want to say this because of the really beautiful and slightly pushed mids and I think this is down to that wonderful KT150 tube.

Build quality is, particularly in the power amplifier, very good, though I didn't like the feel of the buttons on the preamplifier, but then only used them once to get a feel for them as the remote did everything I needed – I'd guess that all but the die-hard knob fiddler would be perfectly well catered for with the excellent remote control. On the other hand, the source selector knob and remote knob were both

excellent to use. Some people may find the power amplifier difficult to accommodate on their rack as it is very deep, but if you are spending this kind of dosh then get something made.

What we have here can certainly be classed as high-end product and whilst not cheap, they certainly give the listener a desire to hear what products further up the Audio Research line-up can bring to the listening experience.

We don't have an Editor's Choice award but these would certainly be in consideration if we did.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Build quality reflects the price and is excellent. My only gripe was the buttons on the preamplifier but then the excellent (and weighty) remote made them pretty much obsolete in day to day use. Those handles on the front are the icing on the cake.

Sound Quality: Controlled and speedy but with poise and detail too. A wonderfully non-fatiguing listen with detail aplenty.

Value for Money: Audio Research kit is never going to be cheap but I'll use the old adage that you often get what you pay for. they are solid and American-made.

Pros: Build, looks, great sound and a huge pride of ownership factor. Power and poise in equal measure.

Cons: My ONLY gripe was the buttons on the pre but your mileage may vary.

Price: LS28: £7,998. VT80SE: £8,998



REVIEW

FEZZ AUDIO MIRA CETI INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



The Mira Ceti from Fezz Audio is a 300B integrated amp using toroidal output transformers and costing £2330 in the UK. Stuart Smith plumbs it in and gives it a listen for Hifi Pig.

Hifi Pig
www.hifipig.com

FEZZ AUDIO MIRA CETI INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



Fezz Audio is a Polish-based brand and is a division of Toroidy.pl who are well-known transformer manufacturer. Indeed, in the balanced mains unit I use there is a huge Toroidy transformer employed. Needless to say, their transformers are used in all their amplifiers, including this 300B model. Fezz tell me that the Mira Ceti is the World's only single-ended amplifier based around toroidal output transformers. Other amps in their range include the Silver Luna PRESTIGE (see review), Titania, Mira Ceti 2A3, Alfa Lupi and Omega Lupi. Fezz also produces a range of cables to complement their amplifiers. The amplifier, like all Fezz Audio products, are designed and built-in Poland.

Fezz Audio's philosophy is to provide outstanding sounding products at relatively affordable price-points with the Mira Ceti being around the €2600 mark in Europe and £2330 in the UK. Now that is still a good chunk of money in anyone's terms but in the realms of quality 300B valve amplification it is a very keen price, though cheaper Asian amps are available.

I make no secret of my love of the 300B valve and love its presentation, particularly in the mid-band, when done well.

CONSTRUCTION

Packaging of the amp is simple but effective with clever use of the space to house valves, cage and the amp itself and the unit arrived safe and sound. This is a good first sign and I always think that if thought has gone into the packaging the same should follow for the product itself. Looks-wise the amp has a pleasing retro feel and it is compact in form. The case is made of folded steel and the transformers are encased in shiny cases...see the pics. The review sample arrived in a rather nice burgundy but is also available in red, black and white. Overall it is nicely put together in a no-frills kind of way. Despite its kind of retro looks, the amp won't look out of place in the modern home, and the optional colours add a degree of choice.

As well as the amp's chassis the package includes two Electro-Harmonix EHG (Gold) 300B valves, a pair of Electro-Harmonix 6SN7 tubes, a protective cage (that I didn't use) a power cable and the user manual.

On the front panel we have the input selector on the right and volume pot on the left. That's about it other than the Fezz Audio nameplate. There is the option for a remote control too.

Round the back you have three RCA inputs, 4 and 8 ohm taps and the IEC inlet and fuse holder. Some may need more inputs, but for me, three is absolutely fine and for the duration I used the amp with Xavian Perla speakers and being fed music from the Lampizator Big 7 DAC.

Atop the amp you have sockets for the valves and the two transformer casings. All is well laid out and despite its compact form factor nothing feels cramped in.

Set up is simple with all the valves being marked and with clear instructions as to where they should go. No biasing is needed as an auto-bias circuit is employed in the Mira Ceti. Plug in your source, connect speaker cables to the appropriate taps, connect the power, switch the unit on and play your tunes. From unpacking to listening to tunes was a matter of minutes.

SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output from the Mira Ceti is the expected 8 watts a side in single-ended Class A operation. Harmonic distortion (THD) is less than 0.4% and it has a frequency response of 20Hz to 65kHz. Power consumption is 115watts and the whole unit measures 340x360x215mm and weighs 14Kg.

SOUND

FEZZ AUDIO MIRA CETI INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



FEZZ AUDIO MIRA CETI INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

I didn't want to do any critical listening until the unit had had a chance to run in a bit but from the off, I was drawn into the sound of Neil Young's Live Rust album and ended up listening to it all the way through on Qobuz. It's an album I really love and must have played hundreds of times but rarely do I sit and listen to it all the way through nowadays, but I did this time. I'm not going to write about the experience or thoughts on the sound here as the amp needed to be run in, but I was certainly well impressed with what I was hearing. I was expecting to have to really crank the volume up as the Perla speakers are only 88dB sensitive, but in what is a pretty big room I had the volume at around the 11 o'clock mark and the volume was well loud enough. I find it amusing sometimes when I look at some folk stating how they "need" 200 or 300 watts of power from their amplifier – yes, if you have massively power-hungry speakers you may well do, but for normal speakers you just don't need that much power at all to get good levels of volume, though a degree of sense is needed.

So, the amps had a while to run in and warm up and so I settle in for some serious listening. From my initial listen to Neil Young expectations were pretty high. I had thought of partnering the amp with a more moderately priced DAC but in truth I listen to the Big 6 fed by the Melco more than any other source and so that's what stayed, even though it costs six or seven times more than the Fezz amplifier.

Now I don't usually play records I don't know inside out for reviews but Manchester legends 808 State have a new EP out and I've given it a few listens over the last few days via Qobuz and it's a good work out for any system with lots going on at all the frequency extremes. Let's bust a myth about valve amplifiers here and now – they may get hot but that doesn't mean to say they have to be warm sounding and that's definitely the case with the Mira Ceti. Yes, it has a degree of mid-band bloom but, on this record at least, it digs deep down with clean and fast bass and crisp and sharp tops. I've recently had the pleasure of reviewing an Audio Research pre/amp combo and whilst the ARC kit was definitely more "audiophile" and refined in its presentation the Fezz certainly would be embarrassed by it. There's a lot going on in this record and it's deceptively complex with lots of dynamic changes but the Fezz is just not fazed at all. It's certainly an exciting an entertaining little amp in this setup and with this program.

Let's change the tempo a little and get some Miles Davis playing and my go-to album Kind Of Blue. I've got a few versions of this but here I'm playing it through Qobuz at 96/24. Flamenco Sketches, the last track on the record, sounds rather wonderful actually. The delicacy of the playing shines through and there is fantastic detail in the amount of information that is coming through the speakers as well as in the tone of the different instruments – you do get a real feeling of being in a smoky jazz club. The drums, little more than hi-hats and cymbals, in reality, are set well back in the mix on this record but you can hear everything and it's pin-sharp. The horns are wonderfully presented too and the (apparently) simple piano shines through whilst the bass underpins everything. I certainly don't think I'm missing out on anything and even the younger cat has popped himself between the speakers for a listen, ears all a twitch. Soundstaging is wide and deep too and I have to keep reminding myself that this is a sub-£3K amplifier. It's also absolutely, well as far as I can ascertain, deadly quiet, with no noise in-between tracks that I can hear at all – insert inky blacks and all the other review cliches.

I used Back In Black in a recent review of the Audio Research combo and commented that it can sound a bit harsh and mushed up on some systems. The ARC kit presented the title track brilliantly but in comparison the Fezz feels ever so slightly more reeled in and constrained in its presentation – it feels "smaller" and with less scale,

if that makes sense. Now, we're comparing apples and oranges here and perhaps that's a little unfair on the Fezz but to be frank the Fezz does a very, very good job indeed.

Regular readers will know that kit doesn't last long at Hifi Pig Towers if it can't play Daft Punk's Contact. It's a complex piece that builds and builds and though the sounds may appear simple they are made up of lots of different, for want of a better word, textures. To play this well an amplifier needs to be fast, dynamic and detailed. The Fezz amp played it well. Compared to our Class D monos it didn't feel quite as dynamic or exciting on this track but tonally everything was there and you could hear the make-up of the different sounds in what is a pretty busy mix. Again, comparing to our Class Ds I'd say it lacked a bit of their dynamic punch and drive but then popping back to the much simpler Get Lucky there was punch and a better degree of drive to the rhythm tracks. What I'm getting at here is that on the very busy track the Fezz amp got a little stressed out but on the simpler track it sounded fab again. Pharrell Williams vocal on Get Lucky was beautifully presented and had height and was slightly forward in the mix. To completely turn this on its head and at the risk of contradicting myself, the new Slam record sounded great and with dynamic drive, detail and energy that went deep and dirty. Funny old game isn't it?

Jazz at the Pawn Shop is an audiophile classic and many readers will know it well. As a test track it's a great recording to get a feel for the recording space itself. Musically I can take or leave it if I'm honest but I did catch myself tapping my toes throughout...which has to be a good sign. Everything sits properly in the recording and there is a feeling of being there and with the audience – which is what it is supposed to sound like. Tonally everything sounded right to my ears and what really impressed was how the amp managed to keep everything in its place in the stage – you could literally see the musicians in front of you.

CONCLUSION

The Mira Ceti is a very good amplifier at a very good price in my opinion. Only our killer test track really caught it out in any way and it felt a little confused in handling everything that was going on. Likewise, Back In Black (another difficult track) sounded a little hemmed in when compared to our references. I see it as my job to throw killer tracks at the kit. The simple conclusion to draw would be to say the Mira Ceti can't play rock or complex techno, but that just wasn't the case in the vast majority of cases, the 808 EP I mentioned at the start of the review, for example, sounded brilliant, as did Slam's Echo Enclosure and likewise so did a lot of rock albums I played with great dynamics and drive. Indeed, if the amp hadn't fallen down a tad on these two tracks it would be getting an Outstanding Product award.

The Fezz amplifier offers listeners a real insight into the tone of instruments and I particularly enjoyed the jazz I played whilst listening to it – in some ways more than on our reference Class Ds. There seemed to be more texture and better tone to the instruments and a little better insight into the playing style of the performers – our reference pre and power combo is a lot more than 4 times the price. Perhaps this is the slight mid-bloom I mentioned during the review and perhaps our references err on the side of analytical. I also enjoyed (a lot) the vast majority of techno I played with the Fezz amp digging deep but without being overpowering in the bass and with lots of detail throughout the frequencies, good insight into the effects being used and great dynamics.

FEZZ AUDIO MIRA CETI INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER



It's well built, looks good and performs very well at this pricepoint and should you be looking for an amp in the sub £4000 price-bracket then you should do yourself a favour and get yourself a home dem of this.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Great looking and well built. Available in different colours to match your furnishings and home.

Sound Quality: Excellent in the vast majority of cases. Digs deep in the bass but remains balanced throughout the frequency range with a slight emphasis on the mid-range frequencies which some will love. Don't be put off by the modest 8W a channel output, this goes loud even with the 88dB efficient speakers I used.

Value for Money: There are cheaper 300B SET amps to be had from the far East but this is a unique product at a very keen price built in the European Union.

Pros: Good looking. Well built. Simple set up. Subtle when needed but at the same time dynamic too. Great insight into the texture and tone of instruments. Banging with techno.

Cons: Got a little confused on our killer test track and I just don't understand why as it played other techno and rock wonderfully.

Price: £2330



REVIEW

RUSSOUND MBX-AMP

STREAMING AMPLIFIER



Hifi Pig's Millennial Scribbler Harry Smith takes a look at American brand Russound's MBX-Amp, a one-box streamer and amplifier costing £599 in the UK.

Hifi Pig
www.hifipig.com

RUSSOUND MBX-AMP STREAMING AMPLIFIER



Streaming has rapidly become many people's main source of music and has made its way into more of the world of HiFi and music-loving homes with the introduction of high-fidelity services such as Tidal, Qobuz and others.

Rusound is an American brand that been going since 1967 based in New Hampshire and specialising in multiroom audio systems.

The Rusound MBX-Amp is a one-box solution to all your HiFi needs and adds a lot of modern functionality to your passive speakers. Rusound also makes a preamplifier with the same design that adds the streaming functionality to your already amped up system.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

The MBX-AMP is a compact bit of kit (measuring 21cm wide, 17.8cm deep and 4.5cm high) and definitely looks the part. It is made out of aluminium and a combination of matte and glossy plastic. It is only available in black.

I'm personally not a fan of glossy plastic as I feel that it is a fingerprint magnet and scratches easily, but the restrained use of it here doesn't bother me too much. Although I wouldn't call it a premium build it is definitely well-built. The Buttons on the front, although I never found myself using them in day to day use, have a good "clickiness". You could argue it looks a bit emotionless and boring but I don't think the Rusound wanted it to draw too much attention to itself. They even suggest attaching it to the back of your wall-mounted TV.

It is passively cooled and gets quite warm to the touch after using it for a few hours but it never got worryingly hot.

Rusound doesn't include a remote in the box and with any other amplifier/ streamer I would see this as a negative but the fact is, I didn't miss it. The truth is that all the controls you need are already built into the app so why bother?

File-wise the Rusound will play MP3 (CBR, VBR), WAV (8, 16-bit), OGG Vorbis, FLAC (8, 16-bit), AAC, AAC+ with support for up to up to 24-bit/192kHz. Some may miss DSD support but I don't have any files of that kind and so didn't.

SETUP AND FUNCTIONALITY

This MBX-Amp is hands down one of the easiest streaming devices I've ever set up. You have two options when it comes to this. Either download the MyRusound app to connect it to your network. Or, if you have an Android smartphone/tablet, go on the Google Home app (that should already be installed), press "add device" and it will detect the Rusound amplifier and connect to your network without the need of faffing around with passwords. This is thanks to the integrated Chromecast functionality and it as seen as one by all your compatible devices.

I rarely find myself using voice control but it is important to note that it supports both Amazon Alexa and Google Now commands straight out of the box.

The app itself is functional and easy to use, although I feel the user interface is a little dated. It looks like something from an older iPhone. Also, there is a slight delay of about 3 seconds when opening the app even while playing music where the app is "searching for available devices". These are small annoyances and could easily be fixed with a software patch. (I was using a Pixel 3 with Android 9.0). I don't know how the experience differs for iPhone users but my guess is that it is very similar.

Although I only used the MBX-AMP in one system, you are able to install up to 16 of them (or the preamp) over the same network for a multi-room setup and control each individually with the MyRusound App. It's very versatile with a plethora of inputs/outputs including a 3.5mm analogue input, an optical digital input, plus a USB socket for local music files. It also features a dedicated subwoofer output.

RUSSOUND MBX-AMP STREAMING AMPLIFIER

SOUND QUALITY

I tested the MBX Amplifier with a pair of Wharfedale D320s bookshelf speakers but at 50 watts per channel, this little amp has the power to drive much bigger speakers than my own.

The sound quality was impressive overall and I was a big fan of the ability to adjust the equaliser on the fly through the app.

Without messing with the bass or treble levels, the MBX is wonderfully transparent and didn't add any unwanted colouration to the sound. At lower volumes, you can activate an "Equal-Loudness Contour" that ups the level of bass but overall provides a fuller sound without being loud. I actually found myself using this feature quite a lot being in a small room but this amplifier definitely has the oomph to fill a much larger space.

The ability to stream 24Bit/192kHz high-resolution audio is very welcome and I did the majority of my listening on Qobuz. I found myself listening to album after album. Although while switching between tracks I noticed a slight hiss when there's no audio playing. You can't notice it in the background when listening but it is a little off-putting between tracks or when waiting to play music. You can mute the amplifier from within the app and this gets rid of the hissing problem. Perhaps having the ability to auto-mute in between tracks in a software update of the MyRusound App would be a long-term solution to this problem.

I tried to find fault with the audio performance by playing testing tracks such as "Contact" by Daft Punk but it managed to reproduce it very well. Not overwhelmingly bassy while providing plenty of detail in the more complex parts of the track.

Acoustic guitars were probably the only thing that I found didn't sound as natural as I've heard on some valve amplifiers. The live version of "Keith Don't Go" by Nils Lofgren definitely showed this flaw. If that's a dealbreaker for you, get the MBX-Preamplifier and pair it with your favourite valve amplifier.

It wasn't overwhelmed on the bass front on my new favourite track to test bass performance "Black Skinhead" by Kanye West managing to stand up to the powerful drums and violent vocals.

The bottom line is that anyone can get a pleasurable listening experience out of the Rusound MBX-Amp thanks to the personalisable levels of bass and treble. A great performer at low and high volumes. I do have to keep reminding myself that it costs under £600.

CONCLUSION

The Rusound MBX-Amp is definitely a fine example of what is to come in the future of mass-market HiFi. We are slowly, in many circles, moving away from big bulky amps and searching more and more for a compact, one-box solution. Pair this with an affordable pair of speakers and you've got yourself a very competent streaming system for under £1000. The ability to place multiple MBX systems around the house and jump from one to the other with ease fights the case of putting one of these in every room of the house.

It lacks some of the emotion or "wow-factor" that you can get from some amplifiers that cost more but most don't have anywhere near the same levels of functionality as the MBX-Amp. One of the areas Rusound MBX scores over one box solutions that include speakers is that you can tune the system using your preferred loudspeakers.

Put simply, it does its job and does it well!

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Although it is predominantly made of plastic, it is still solid and well built.

Sound Quality: Well-balanced at both high and low volumes. At 50W per channel, it is a very powerful amplifier considering its size.

Value for Money: Quite affordable considering the sheer amount of functionality this can add to your system.

Pros: A compact, versatile solution for most people's audio needs without skimping on sound quality.

Cons: I feel that the MyRusound App needs a little work but this shouldn't be a dealbreaker as this can be fixed with software updates in the future.

Price: £599



REVIEW
SERHAN + SWIFT BRIGADIER
MU.2 LOUDSPEAKERS



Steve Crowe visits Sydney, Australia and Serhan + Swift to listen to their Brigadier Mu.2 Loudspeakers costing £4950 in the UK.

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SERHAN + SWIFT BRIGADIER MU.2 LOUDSPEAKERS



BACKGROUND

I recently spent six weeks in Australia and, being an audio enthusiast, I wanted to hear some of what the Australian HiFi industry had to offer. Researching what was available in the Sydney area I found that Serhan + Swift, makers of the Brigadier Mu.2 was only 20 minutes walk from where I would be staying. I'd previously heard about the Brigadier Mu.2 from Paul Clarke at HiFi Lounge in Biggleswade. He'd been raving about them and said that they were one of the most musical speakers he'd ever heard. An initial visit was arranged, and I met with Brad Serhan at his small unit in a storage complex.

Brad has been involved in designing and manufacturing loudspeakers for over 30 years and is well known for his Orpheus Loudspeaker brand. Brad won 2017 CES Award for 'Best Sound in Show' for their BA.2 speaker. Brad also won the 2016/2017 Lifetime achievement award at the Sound And Vision Awards 2017.

A few days later I met Morris Swift. Morris, an experienced electronics engineer, with a successful electronics company to his name. He sought out Brad in order to form a loudspeaker manufacturing company, leading to the establishment of Serhan + Swift.

Over a few weeks I was able to evaluate the Brigadier Mu.2 in different settings, including two dealers, and also speak to Morris, Brad and their business associate Les Davis of Les Davis Audio. Les provides the isolating materials for the project, more of which later.

CONSTRUCTION AND SPECIFICATIONS

The basic box construction is birch ply, which is available in a variety of wood finishes as well as mirror black and mirror white. Brad is also experimenting with Corian, a reconstituted stone product (think kitchen worktops). This material does add considerable weight - and cost.

Dimensions are; height 32.2cm, width 18cm and depth of 23.6cm. They weigh-in at 10kg per speaker and have a sensitivity of 84db/1m. The nominal impedance is 6 ohms. Speaker drivers are ScanSpeak.

Visually, the ScanSpeak 1" ring radiator tweeter has a rather spiky phase plug. Probably not child-friendly, but few speakers are. If you prefer your speakers with their clothes on, Serhan + Swift supply a magnetically secured grille.

Continuing the ScanSpeak theme is a 5" Revelatory mid/bass driver. Brad described matching the tweeters and mid/bass drivers in each speaker pair and how he can hear the two units 'click' together when the in-house designed and hand-built crossover hits the sweet spot. Attention to detail is evident in everything Serhan + Swift do, from the superb finish to the cabinets to selecting matched capacitors for the crossovers, after rejecting components that don't meet their exact specifications. Speaker testing is carried out at Sydney University in an anechoic chamber, and electronics labs using laser interferometry.

The crossover, hand-built in-house, is a split design with separate boards for the treble and bass speakers. All components are connected directly using a 'point-to-point' process.

In Australia the Mu.2 sells for AU\$6,500 and in the UK for £4,995. They are also available in the U.S. and Germany.

LISTENING

Having been involved with audio for over forty-five years I have naturally drawn conclusions about what works and what doesn't. Two of these 'givens', for me, were that if you want deep bass you get big speakers, and isolation needs to be reasonably substantial to be effective. Spending time with Brad Serhan, Morris Swift and Les Davis seriously debunked those perceptions.

SERHAN + SWIFT BRIGADIER MU.2 LOUDSPEAKERS



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SERHAN + SWIFT BRIGADIER MU.2 LOUDSPEAKERS

Hearing the diminutive Brigadier Mu.2 for the first time, in less than ideal conditions in a workshop, was a revelation. This rear-ported speaker can create a believable 3-D soundstage and seriously deep bass, at even modest volume levels. It does a lot of things 'right' and, above all, is exceptionally musical. The partnering system for this first listen was an Arcam CD transport, a PS Audio DAC and a 1974 Rotel 'wide-body' 50-watt receiver.

Brad recommends the use of 'Solid Steel' three-legged speaker stands which are often sold at a discount in combination with the speakers.

Brad and Morris work closely with a fellow audio enthusiast, Les Davis, who has a self-named audio company. Over recent years Les has been experimenting with isolation materials and has produced a multi-layer sandwich of a specialist material which is just 1.5mm thick. This is precision cut into gaskets for the ScanSpeak 5" drivers, reducing direct excitement of the cabinet. The material is also used to isolate the crossover from the cabinet. Small squares of the material can be used under audio components and Les has developed a wood sandwich construction with isolating material on both sides of a piece of oak for isolating the power supply board. In addition, he sells a turntable mat made from the same material.

Listening to Lou Reed, Walk On The Wild Side, in, as mentioned, less than ideal conditions in the workshop, the soundstage was wide of the speakers and quite deep. As an experiment, we removed the Les Davies materials, following which the soundstage reduced slightly but noticeably, although the speakers retained their exceptional musicality. Just to check, we repeated the process with the same results. The combination of speaker and isolation was quite extraordinary.

The best demonstration of the speakers took place at Sturman's Audio in Wollongong, about an hours drive from Sydney. Michael Sturman is a dedicated audiophile as well as one of the country's leading HiFi and audio-visual specialists. In a rather large demonstration room using Serhan+Swift's preferred amplification, Pure Audio One 100 watt integrated amplifier (manufactured in New Zealand by Gary Morrison), the stock speakers were fired up. Despite the low sensitivity, there was no difficulty playing them loud.

I had loaded a memory stick with a lot of familiar tracks which helped with making comparisons with my own system.

'Castilian Drums' from Dave Brubeck at Carnegie Hall had a massive soundstage with all instruments properly positioned. This track has a large dynamic range from delicate, as well as heavy, drumming, to full-blooded piano, sax and double bass. The performance was completely believable, belying the small size of the speakers.

Our listening session lasted over two hours and I just wanted to keep listening to familiar tunes. Jen Chapin's 'You Haven't Done Nothin' from 'Revision: The Songs Of Stevie Wonder' had a rich and dynamic texture with a sense of presence which is often difficult to achieve. The opening bars of 'Soothing' from Laura Marling's Semper Femina had the ability to push you back in your seat. The bass in 'Sort Of Revolution' on Fink's 'Wheels Turn Beneath My Feet' hit you in the stomach, just where it should.

The common theme through the listening session was how the speakers just pull you into the music. Compared to my usual system of Melco server, PS Audio DirectStream DAC via a Bryston 4B3, and Vienna Acoustics Klimt Series – 'The Kiss' speakers, all of which cost considerably more than the demo system, they Mu.2s appeared to be more musical and less clinical, with no reduction in detail. These units

do an awful lot right. The speakers I heard were a frequently used demo pair and therefore fully run in. According to Brad they sound pretty good out of the box, even better after about 10 hours and are fully run-in in 50 to 100 hours.

The soundstage generated is very impressive. Even more so is that the sense of width and depth stays with you even when off-axis. Yes, the soundstage is skewed slightly when sitting opposite one of the speakers but, unlike the vast majority of HiFi speakers, the soundstage doesn't collapse completely.

The Mu.2 goes down to 45khz, which it does with little fall-off in volume. For some, they will want deeper, but this speaker will satisfy most in terms of smoothness of treble, dynamics and bass.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Plans are underway for an advanced version of the speaker with higher quality capacitors together with a kit of additional isolation pads. I had the opportunity to hear a prototype pair and, whilst they retain the original sonic signature, you just get 'more'.

At the time of my visit, Morris was experimenting with creating both analogue and digital active versions of the speaker. I was fortunate to hear the first prototype of the analogue version - in mono, as only one amplifier and crossover had been completed. Morris has designed and built an external electronic crossover together in the same box as a two-channel Class D amplifier. This connects to the speaker with a cable terminated with a four-element Neutrik connector. Morris says he wants to compare passive, analogue active and digital active with a view to meeting the demands of both die-hard analogue fans and digital enthusiasts. If customers want to use their own amps, there will be versions for those too. In the sort of quantities, we are talking about here, each build will be to the customer's requirements.

There is a further speaker in the range, the Ba.2, which uses a ribbon tweeter. There is also talk of a possible floorstander to go alongside the Mu.2.

CONCLUSION

The best way to describe the sound of the Brigadier Mu.2 is musicality, and ease of listening at all levels. Great recordings sound superb, average recordings are listenable.

Over the six weeks I was on vacation in Australia I spent quite a bit of time with Brad, Morris and Les. They were very candid in their conversations, which gave me a real insight into the issues which audio manufacturers in general face and, in particular, the vast number of small companies, where every sale of their product is truly important. The care with which Serhan and Swift put together every speaker is astounding. I've heard them play at their best, well set up and with good partnering equipment, and they sound sublime with a huge, natural and detailed soundstage. I've also heard them in less than ideal conditions with great partnering equipment and, whilst they still sound good, the 'magic' was just not there. I began to understand the faith that Brad and Morris have to put in their dealers and, overseas, also in their distributors, hoping that their product is demonstrated at its best.

The Brigadiers Mu.2 is never going to be an easy sell. It is basically a small box, which won't appeal to HiFi buyers who require visual confirmation of the money they've spent. For those whose main goal is an experience which draws them into the music and encourages

SERHAN + SWIFT BRIGADIER MU.2 LOUDSPEAKERS



them to put on another album, a properly set up pair of Mu.2 speakers is remarkably good value for money.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: First Class, hand-built to a very high standard.

Sound Quality: Very musical across the frequency range. Smooth treble, clear mid-band and well-defined bass. Not the last word in low frequencies but exceptional for the size of the box.

Value for Money: At £4,950 they are not cheap. However, if you can get past the diminutive size they will better many other standmounts and floorstanders in the same price range. In driver integration, they can compete with the best.

Pros: Excellent musicality. Wide sweetspot.

Cons: Some may prefer a deeper bass.

Price: £4,950 per pair.



REVIEW

DIAPASON ASTERA

LOUDSPEAKERS



Paul Messenger takes a listen to Italian manufacturer Diapason's Astera standmount loudspeakers, now available in the UK through G Point Audio and costing £7896.

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DIAPASON ASTERA LOUDSPEAKERS



Diapason is a well-known name, though the observation that it's also the name of a leading French classical music magazine will create some confusion. (The word 'diapason' can mean a number of things, mostly associated with music. Dictionary definitions are complex and variable, including tuning, harmonic richness, and indeed the whole concept of the octave, from the Greek).

However, this review is focused upon just one product, from a Diapason operation located near Brescia in Northern Italy. Incidentally, Brescia is apparently as important as Cremona in the original development of stringed instruments and is widely regarded as 'inventor' of the violin. As a result, it also has a history in high-class cabinetwork, which undoubtedly has an important place in loudspeaker manufacture.

THE ASTERA

The Diapason brand was founded by Alessandro Schiavi at the end of the 1980s. Early on he created the Adamantes (£4,980), a multi-facet stand-mount two-way that was subsequently developed into this broadly similar Astera. The Adamantes (named after the diamond that inspired its shape) continues in MkV form and shows strong similarities to this Astera, but also some notable differences.

Crucially, both share the same diamond-inspired front panel and the solid walnut wood cabinetwork. First launched in 2009, the Astera has a larger diameter tweeter (29mm rather than 19mm) and a correspondingly lower crossover point (1.6kHz compared with 4.6kHz). The Astera is also slightly larger, somewhat heavier, has a lower sensitivity, and a higher nominal impedance.

Diapason is clearly very keen on two-way designs. Such a format applies to seven of its total of eight models; six of the eight are stand-mounts too. (Indeed, the entire range includes just one three-way £40k floorstander, called Dynamis.) At £7,896/pair, the Astera must

be just about the most costly example of the two-way stand-mount (an observation that's by no means restricted to Diapason models).

Furthermore, due to weather difficulties, our review samples could not be properly run in. A fully run in pair might have been considered ideal in achieving a fair and representative review, but we did have a couple of weeks of run-in time.

According to the distributor, it was also important to use the partnering stands. Somewhat taller than most at c725mm (rather than the 600mm norm), these stands are both very heavy and also very costly at £1,920/pair. However, they do include some decoration, flanking the four substantial steel legs with shaped vertical panels that match the wood used for the speakers. Each also has five studs set into its top plate, three of which are designed to fit into sockets set into the base of the loudspeakers.

Despite the unquestioned elegance of the whole package, there's no denying that this stand-mount is a very costly proposition, with or without its matching stands. The question at the heart of this review must, therefore, be whether or not it represents decent sound quality value-for-money, compared to a similar size alternative (albeit probably rectilinear in shape, and made using veneered MDF).

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Despite mounting the speakers well out from the wall behind them, and placing the stands on Townsend decoupling platforms, the mid-bass output measured substantially too strong at around 50Hz (by some 12dB!), though happily – and unusually for any stand-mount – there was still some output at 20Hz. One point of information is that the rear port is tuned to 40Hz here. Another is that the mid-bass peak proved inaudible in practice!

Elsewhere, the upper bass was rather lacking and the midrange proper (250-800Hz) was somewhat uneven. Above 800Hz everything

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DIAPASON ASTERA LOUDSPEAKERS



DIAPASON ASTERA LOUDSPEAKERS

looks good, with just some mild restraint through the presence zone (1.5-2kHz). Given the unevenness, it's difficult to specify a particular sensitivity, though around 86dB/W is perhaps the figure that will represent a decent average. Happily, that value is not compromised by an impedance which averages around 8ohms and stays above 6ohms throughout.

SOUND QUALITY

The tonal balance might not be the smoothest around on our measurements, but this didn't seem to be a particular deterrent, as any box colouration was entirely absent. Indeed, the substantial mid-bass peak proved entirely inaudible in practice, which came as quite a surprise. Indeed, the very solid and cunningly shaped wood enclosure seems to provide this loudspeaker with an exceptionally quiet and effectively 'dead' background, which has got to be a major plus.

While I wouldn't describe it as sounding in any way aggressive, when played loudly using solid-state amplification, a degree of 'forwardness' might be considered unpleasant by some listeners. Happily, the hardness seemed virtually to disappear when my solid-state Naim amplification was changed for an Audio Note Meishu integrated valve amplifier.

However, the sound balance seemed to work really well at lower levels, where intelligibility is excellent, via valve or solid-state amps. This whole business of loudness, relative presence output and valves versus solid-state deserves further investigation. This is certainly beyond the scope of this review, but close attention ought to be required nonetheless.

Timing is unquestionably excellent, as is the stereo imaging (which one would anticipate, given the enclosure shape). Even mono recordings worked well, giving a sharp central image between the two speakers on Eddie Cochran's timeless Summertime Blues. It was time for a stereophonic recording, such as The White Stripes' album Elephant; this showed the expected spread across the soundstage, without clustering around the speakers. Much the same was clearly audible when I dug out a couple of old favourites (Let It Bleed by the Rolling Stones, and the Grateful Dead's Anthem of the Sun).

I remain somewhat perplexed by the observation that although the measurements showed a massive peak at around 50Hz, this seems to be entirely inaudible. Indeed, the overall balance tends to be somewhat bass light, and there's absolutely no boominess that I could detect. Although my measurements do usually correlate with sound quality, they appear to differ in this case; since I firmly believe that subjectivity rules, I must, therefore, disregard the measured findings on this occasion.

CONCLUSIONS

Although there's no denying that this loudspeaker looks great and is capable of fine sound quality, the problem remains the price, which is undoubtedly high, for both the speakers and the stands. Despite some measured unevenness, this didn't prove in any way audible, so on performance alone Recommendation is mandatory, even though value for money doesn't come into the equation. Provided money isn't the major priority, this is arguably the most attractive looking package currently available.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Excellent high-class build.

Sound Quality: Very impressive (despite measured problems).

Value For Money: Unquestionably costly.

Pros: Lovely sound and gorgeous styling.

Cons: Costly.

Prices: £7,896; stand £1,920; grille £216



REVIEW

MELLOW ACOUSTICS FRONT-RO LOUDSPEAKERS



Mellow Acoustics FrontRo is a £7500 loudspeaker of small proportions that employs a novel electrostatic panel for high and mids and a conventional driver for bass frequencies. Janine Elliot plugs them in and takes a listen for Hifi Pig.

Hifi Pig
www.hifipig.com

MELLOW ACOUSTICS FRONT-RO LOUDSPEAKERS



Very few things make me fall in love at first sight, but the Mellow Acoustics FrontRo was just one such thing, the most beautiful and unassuming work of art that would look great permanently sat in my living room or Tate Modern. Alas, I only had access to this speaker for several weeks; a triangular bass body and a circular electrostatic head, the whole standing only 80cm from the floor. Designed in the UK by Mr Tim Mellow, he has been an expert on electrostatic designs for many years, and this now becomes the only truly British electrostatic design out there, being built in Berkshire.

My two heroes of the past were Harold Leak and Peter Walker. The latter, also a hero of Tim's, is synonymous with electrostatic speakers, and whilst Tim never met him, he worked with his other acoustical hero Leo Beranek. The 2nd edition of the book which he and Leo have produced, called "Acoustics: Sound Fields and Transducers" is due for publication as I write this review and this new version contains a 43-page chapter dedicated just to electrostatic loudspeakers. Tim initially worked as an electronics design engineer, as an acoustical engineer and then at Nokia at Farnborough until its closure in the UK. When he left Nokia in 2011 he founded Mellow Acoustics. After about two and a half years the first prototype was made, though it had too many compromises to be of any commercial value;

"After a one-year break, I started to completely redesign it using different materials and a more sophisticated delay line. I think the design really matured after another two years (mid 2016) but then there was the problem of finding a manufacturer willing to take on the electrostatic unit"

One major stumbling block for any designer and manufacturer is CE testing. This slowed things up for the first production sample and subsequent modifications. "Hence, the total timescale has been more than seven years". This delay allowed him to write the book plus do acoustical consultancy work. And now HifiPig have got the chance to audition the end result of all his toils.

CONSTRUCTION

The FrontRo is a hybrid electrostatic loudspeaker employing an LP-sized lollipop shaped electrostatic unit to handle the mid-range and treble frequencies (from 600-20,000kHz), while a tetrahedron shaped box employs the conventional 5.25" dynamic woofer to handle the lower midrange and bass taking it down to 40 Hz. The company are conscious that the lower end is limited due to the size of the enclosure, which is designed to be as unobtrusive as possible in the home, and anything below 40Hz is deliberately filtered to prevent distortion. More on bass later. Of course, deeper sound can be obtained from a subwoofer, and Mellow are indeed contemplating designing one in the future (perhaps called the BackRo?).

For the review, I chose not to use my Wilson Benesch Torus sub, so I could just hear the FrontRo on its own. Speaker placement was not a problem for me in my living room, not least because the electrostatic loudspeaker is usually less sensitive to room placement than a conventional loudspeaker box. However, as the electrostatic diaphragm has a figure-of-eight output, sounds will be heard equally behind as in front, so placement near to a reflective surface is not suggested. The bass section being infinite baffle made overall positioning easier, though at least a foot away from the nearest object was found to be the best starting point. The unit is finished in light oak, with a choice of non-removable grille cloths in gunmetal, navy or burgundy. Underneath the cloth of the electrostatic unit is a special screen that keeps out dust and moisture.

Like Mr Mellow, I am a big fan of the principle of electrostatics. Not only does it mean doing away with both a cabinet and 'slower' conventional drivers that are both prone to adding their own signature to the music, but the electrostatic panels are incredibly light and therefore much more responsive to the signal. The sound has low colouration and low distortion, but generally they are not quite so efficient as conventional drivers. However, trying to get a realistic

MELLOW ACOUSTICS FRONT-RO LOUDSPEAKERS

portrayal of the music from an electrostatic loudspeaker is far from easy. If it isn't designed well an electrostatic unit can be quite forceful and only sound good at a single sweet spot on the settee. Martin Logan created their distinctive curve-shaped electrostatic hybrid to enable a far larger dispersal of mid/high frequencies, allowing more than one person to sit on the settee and enjoy the music to the same extent. Mr Mellow considered curving the diaphragm, but this would add distortion to an otherwise distortion-free loudspeaker and curtail the lower notes due to increased diaphragm stiffness. I did feel the small size and slant of the combined unit meant the electrostatic membrane was angled too low for my head, though the screw-in feet do allow some adjustment, but a few back copies of old Hifi mags were finally put to good use propping it up a few centimetres more.

I mentioned my Hifi hero Peter Walker, the original CEO of the Acoustical Manufacturing Co. Ltd, later known as Quad. I even once owned an ESL63. What makes Walker's ESL63 different from the earlier ESL57 is largely the use of concentric anode rings with tappings from a delay system from the centre working its way to the edges to replicate a conventional speaker to imitate a point source behind the diaphragm. Tim's approach is to create a spherical waveform – to mimic the natural sounds we hear – by employing six rings fed from a tapping on a delay line that progressively increase from the centre towards the outer edge, so that by the time the audio comes from the edge, the sound from the centre has already had a head start, and since it is a distance from the diaphragm it creates a curved wave-front. Incidentally, Peter Walker was to do this a different way in what became known as 'Peter's Balls'; a pre-production spherical creation built just before his untimely death that had three diaphragms and four plates in front of each other with a time delay going forward in order to create a spherical waveform (Indeed, it actually had two sets of time delays, a rear-ported cardioid design that the company thought wouldn't be popular due to its revolutionary shape, so was shelved). A spherical wave is ideal because it has constant directivity and a perfectly smooth frequency response. The perfect dipole sound source is a rigid sphere oscillating back and forth in free space because it spreads the sound out in the same pattern across the entire musical spectrum. If Tim could construct the perfect diaphragm no attenuation would be needed, as was required in the ESL63. Conventionally, the delay has to be attenuated, or "windowed", due to the electrostatic diaphragm's fixed size. However, Mellow's dipole behaves like an oscillating sphere and so is 'self-windowing'.

"In summary, whereas the ESL63 delay line has resistance losses added to compensate for the finite size of the diaphragm when reproducing a "virtual point source" behind it, the FrontRo doesn't need this because it is imitating an "oscillating" sphere. In both designs, the outermost rings roll-off naturally due to the analogue nature of the delay lines which smooth out any irregularities that would occur due to the discrete rings."

He explains much better than I ever could his designs in his thesis the FrontRo unit, largely due to its size, is not as efficient as other electrostatic speakers I have reviewed (84 dB @ 1m for 2.83 VRMS) so any intentional attenuation would be unwanted as they need to hang on to every decibel they can! However, I didn't find this a drawback in my evaluating, and indeed, the speaker worked better at low sound levels than many speakers I have reviewed. As an aside, the pattern of holes on the diaphragms is apparently the same as the seeds on a sunflower head, showing that a link to nature is perhaps possible. Sweet. And because the membrane is flexible, each part can move more-or-less independently from the rest according to the signal on the nearest ring.

The triangular woofer box containing the 5.25" driver is made of half-inch thick birch plywood that is heavily damped with special lining material, just as was used in BBC LS3/5a's. And like that iconic speaker, this is an infinite baffle design meaning positioning is not quite so critical as with a rear-ported design. As Tim explained;

"Originally, there was a gap under the front cover so that the woofer could fire through the floor of the box, which looked cool, but this didn't really work acoustically. Removing the gap has enabled the box volume to be increased and improved the bass, although the recess below the cover still gives the impression of a gap".

The box has separate connectors for the dipole and woofer, should you want to bi-wire it, and a green light in the ear indicates you have powered it up. My only gripe was the connectors allow bare wires and spade connectors, but bananas need to be inserted in the holes reserved for bare wires. Not an issue in practice, and one that will be rectified. Inside the box are all the electronics and power unit to operate the speaker, with no need for an external wall-wart unit, rather a figure-of-eight socket to connect directly to the mains. The unit has a green LED on the rear of the unit. Two internal circuit boards do all the important things like generating the 2000V polarizing voltage to charge the electrostatic membrane, and two audio stepping-up transformers to drive each of the stators of the electrostatic unit, plus a pair of delay lines which are mounted on a separate delay board. Tappings from each delay line are connected via one of two ribbon cables to the copper rings on each stator.

THE MUSIC

How appropriate that I should start the review with Voyager 'Eye Contact' since the FrontRo was delivered by their PR manager Chris Hook who was the bass player in the late-70's pop-rock band, that also originated in Berkshire. The opening track in this 2006 album is "B.A.B.E. Babe" which starts with a deep bass intro to announce the track, covered well by the speakers down to 40Hz. Mid vocals were clear, and tops excelled with the dated analogue synthesisers. Only the bass drum could have been a little more forceful, but when you consider the size of the bass unit it was acceptable. Whilst the company might suggest using a sub – and I hope they do design their own one day – I decided not to use mine for the review so I could get an accurate impression of the FrontRo. The top end was particularly where the speaker showed its laurels. It was lovely to hear the speed of initial transients and clarity of placement and positioning of musical instruments when I was sat correctly.

Playing Syd Lawrence Orchestra "Hawaiian War Chant" (Mike Valentine – Chasing the Dragon) gave the speaker a chance to excel, especially now that the angling of the unit was adjusted for my ideal sitting position. At that point, the sound just opened up. "Too Darn Hot", featuring vocalist and broadcaster Clare Teal, was quick, exciting and precise with the music ably filling all the room. Since the electrostatic membrane creates sound behind as well as in front, I could hear a very spacious and natural rendition of the music.

The piano in Chasing the Dragon II track 5 (Mozart piano sonata no. 15) was clearly and cleanly delivered. Bass was also well delivered. A real test for that bass, however, was Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor, excellently performed and presented on the same album, and only missing out on that lower octave.

Vocals in my listening sessions were clearly and realistically delivered, due in part to the 1st order crossover point being 600Hz. I don't like crossovers in the important 3kHz area. Listening to Mark Knopfler's 'Get Lucky', his vocals were cleanly and naturally delivered

MELLOW ACOUSTICS FRONT-RO LOUDSPEAKERS



MELLOW ACOUSTICS FRONT-RO LOUDSPEAKERS

and the clarity from the mid/high unit enabled me to hear details in the recording I have previously missed out on. Indeed, a distortion in the right leg in the track "Hard Shoulder" showed up an unintentional hard shoulder on the record groove. I hadn't heard this before. I decided to turn to a double-album I know has good audio engineering. Eagles 'Long Road to Eden' starts side 3 with an eerie wind blowing before keyboard and guitar take it on its journey. I did, however, feel there was a need to sit in exactly the right position to get the perfect 3-D experience. Where the speakers were very good in the mid/high range that bass really needed some help, especially with the prominent bass-tom in the title-track. Adding my excellent Wilson Benesch Torus subsonic generator would have helped enormously. I was so tempted. The Mellow might be mellow in the lowest octave but that top-end does give great depth of sound, positioning instruments in front and behind, especially from the percussion. The strings in "I Dreamed There Was No War" were so clear I could position each violin in the soundstage. This was highly absorbing, and I could hear what Tim was trying to do in creating a realistic soundstage. Only that I could hear a slight bump around 2.2kHz spoilt the enjoyment for me, plus of course missing that lowest octave. The former was mostly rectified by careful placement. Tim did try a larger bass unit but found it didn't actually add any bass extension. A larger box would also take away the "cute" look of the speakers.

Listening to my favourite British classic work 'The Planets' by Gustav Holst was a chance for me to explore the depth of soundstage if perhaps missing out on the unfortunate sounds of lorries driving past the Lieu d'enregistrement in Vienna, where it was recorded in 1961 (Herbert Von Karajan, Vienna Philharmoniker, DECCA). I once had the pleasure of sitting at the piano where Holst put pen to paper and composed this great work at the London school where he taught. It was also the last location-recording I did for a BBC Radio 3 feature on the composer before I left the corporation. Just as I needed that to sound good, I needed this performance to be good, too. The mid-band still required me to do some adjustment of placement to keep under control that mid-range so that it was as clear and precise as Karajan would want it to sound. What a good listen, though. Whilst glockenspiel and triangle were perfectly formed, I still found brass bursts, particularly in "Jupiter", were less than clear when put against the string passages. Once all hell settles into the famous British theme the strings sounded as good as I would expect. Jupiter, the bringer of jollity lived up to its name. Despite not hearing the lorry rumbles passing the cello section I didn't feel bass was unduly missing; The repeating riff from the cellos and bass in "Saturn" were all there. To complement this the final phrase from strings was beautifully performed on the FrontRo. I really was on the front row of this brilliant performance. The clarity from individual instruments in this performance was just as I had hoped the electrostatic membranes would give out, even to the point of hearing page turns on the first desk of the violins, and someone's foot hitting a mic stand! I remember reviewing Flare Audio's first headphone for HiFi Pig and though it wasn't the best headphone by any means I could see what a future the company in terms of what they were trying to achieve. Now they are leading the world in IEM design. I can see a similar future for Mellow. This is a highly commendable product, and am excited at what could be next.

CONCLUSION

For a first attempt, this is a superb offering. The ideal source is a rigid sphere, and Mellow's delay line and rings bring this closer. Where Quad failed to realise it in production, Tim Mellow now brings the aim of perfect reproduction of soundwaves that much closer. What makes the FrontRo special is that I wasn't listening to loudspeakers but rather I was listening to music. Accepting the bass limitation this is a

very able product and well worth listening to, working particularly well on classical and jazz music.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Well-built unassuming design that will interest visitors to your house

Sound Quality: Excellent detail in mids and highs. Bass could be a little more forward. Better at lower levels.

Value for Money £7500 is not cheap but this takes dipoles to a new age.

Pros: Very low distortion. Excellent 3-dimensionality of sound. Works particularly good at lower levels.

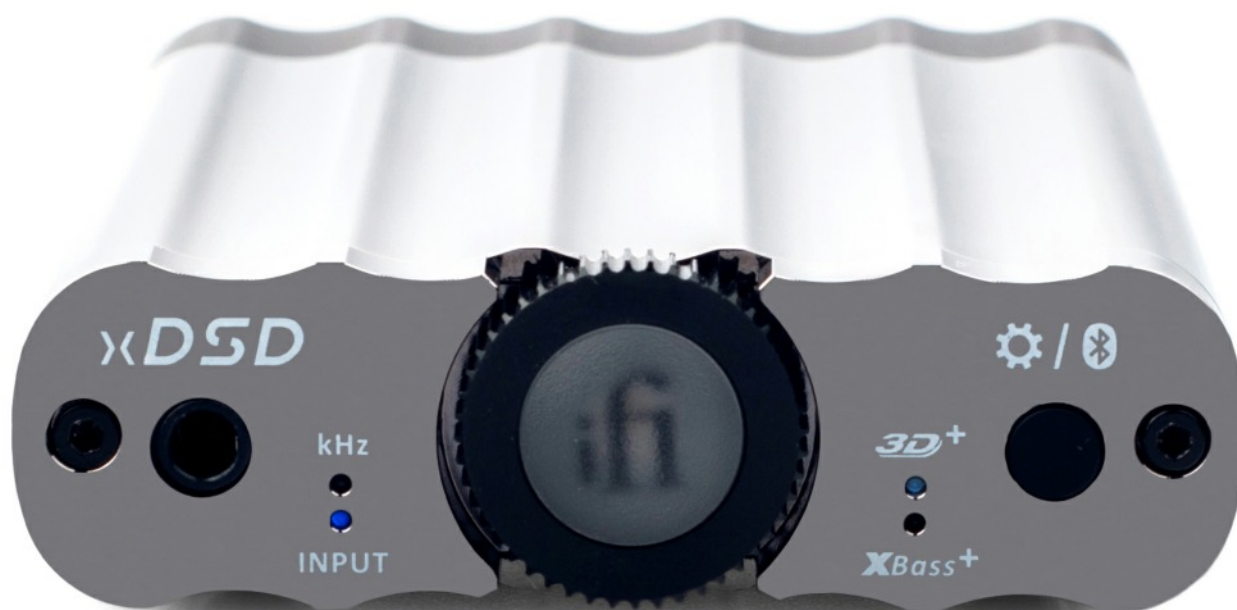
Cons: Mid frequencies can sound obtrusive largely due to the lack of lower bass. Not so flat at louder listening levels.

Price: £7500 (Price correct at time of publication)



REVIEW

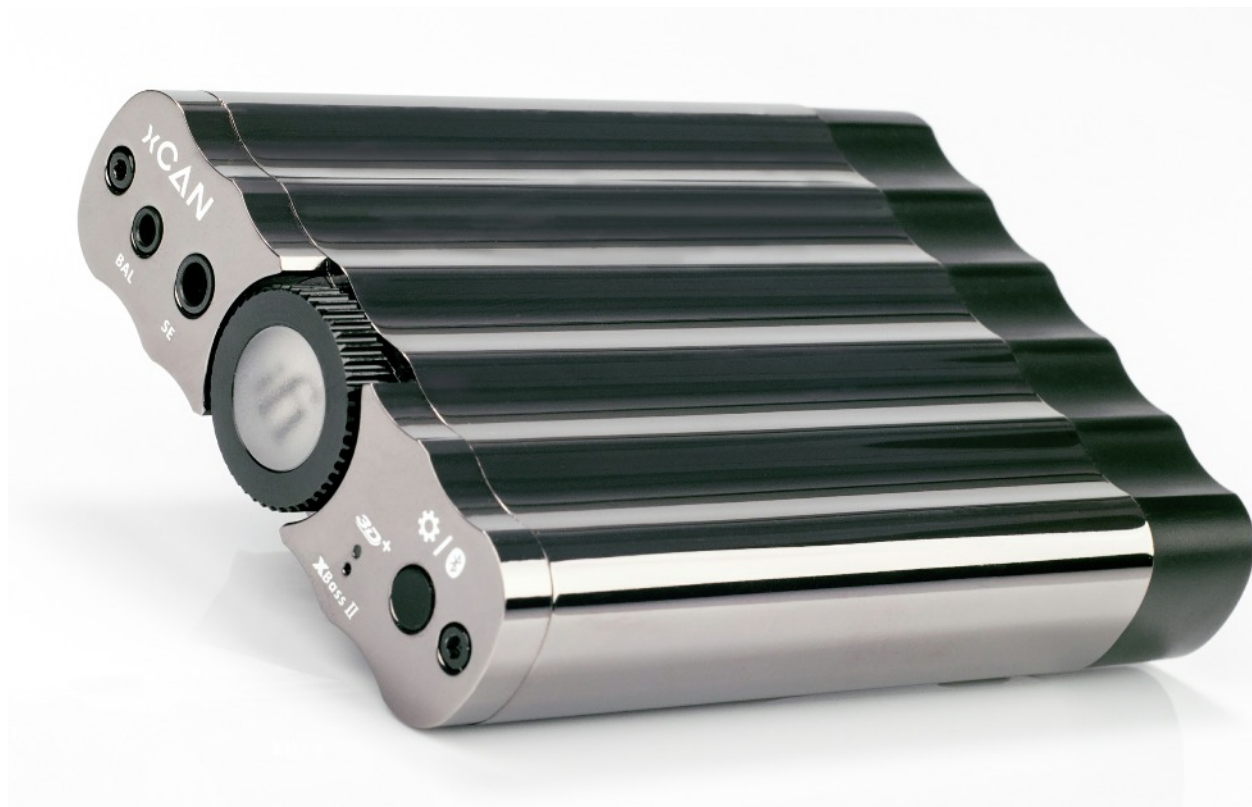
iFi xCAN AND xDSD SHOOTOUT



iFi's xCan at £299 offers a portable headphone amp with Bluetooth connectivity, whereas their £399 xDSD focuses on DAC duties with a headphone amp, Bluetooth and lots of digital inputs. Janine Elliot puts them head to head for this in-depth review.

Hifi Pig
www.hifipig.com

iFi xCAN AND xDSD SHOOTOUT



Do you remember your very first mp3 player, with just a few megabytes of storage and lousy DAC and amplifier? Luckily things have changed considerably since then, though there is still much to be improved on in a large number of today's DAPs, whether that be the DAC or amplification, or indeed both. Whilst 2019 has seen some amazing developments including the Astel and Kern KANN Cube and the valve Cayin N8, it has taken manufacturers such as Chord, FiiO and iFi to name but an increasing few, to bring out portable DACs and headphone amplifiers to significantly improve on a DAP's performance. They do, however, add further size being piggy-backed on the player and somewhat contradicting the idea of "portable". I have been praising Graham Slee's Voyager Class A headphone amplifier for a number of years, so to be sent not one but two headphone amplifiers from iFi to review was going to be a tough call. To make it even more complicated, the remit for this review was to compare both amplifiers to come up with my favourite, which is not easy as you will see they are totally different boxes.

On the test bench, then, are the xDSD and xCan. The xDSD is basically a DAC with BT, USB and coax/optical digital inputs, whereas the xCAN is more of a headphone amplifier having an analogue input as well as BT. Both are almost identical in looks, sharing the same x-series chassis, encased in strong yet lightweight magnesium-aluminium alloy and ion-plated with a dark titanium finish. Both are exceptionally petite (even making the small Chord Mojo look tubby) and gorgeous in appearance with their rippled curvy body. The x-series sits at the smallest end of the iFi scale, with the larger pocket-sized Nano range in the middle and desktop size Micro range at the top. Being the smallest does not demean their performance; the x-series is nothing less than groundbreaking in the sense of specification and facilities.

iFi Audio is not new to producing top-quality personal audio, with a large selection of portable DACs and headphone amps, purifiers and their newly released bamboo Aurora one-box wireless music system, shown for the first time at the 2019 Munich High End show. The UK-

based company iFi was launched in 2012, a sister company to AMR (Abbingdon Music Research) and based in Southport, UK, both companies designing and manufacturing portable and desktop audio products and hi-end HiFi components. iFi prides itself on pouring its heart and soul into creating audio devices that make a difference to how you live your life. The x-series will certainly make a difference to the listener sitting on a train or walking the streets listening to music from phone or DAP.

iFi xDSD

Despite its size, the xDSD is not small on sound with 500mW of power (16 ohm), meaning it suits almost any headphone, or it can partner with active home speakers, if you so wish. Only the micro iDSD model has more oomph (4000mW) though it is not so transportable. Despite its small size it can be set up as a standalone DAC, connected to your HiFi or powered speakers.

Charged via a micro USB connector the unit will play for 10 hours between charge. The xDSD is full of features including xBass+®, which cleans and restores the bass to give a more pronounced lower end, and 3D+® which works to create an out of the head three-dimensional performance of your music. Both these functions worked much better than I expected them to do so and they are also featured in the xCAN up for review. Indeed, whilst the angled drivers on my Audio Technica ATH-W1000 headphones can provide a more realistic 3-D performance the bass-end is somewhat shy and so the xBass+® gave a more tantalising presentation at the lower-end.

Output is via balanced 2.5mm and 3.5mm (TRRS/TRS) jacks. iFi have used their proprietary "S-Balanced" circuitry on the 3.5 mm jacks should your headphones not be balanced to elevate the sound quality. According to iFi this means lower distortion, less interference, and reduced crosstalk. For the review I also used my balanced Flare Audio Pro IEMs with appropriate cable and Sennheiser HD650's.

iFi xCAN AND xDSD SHOOTOUT



iFi xCAN AND xDSD SHOOTOUT

The xDSD is highly featured. It has three types of digital inputs; coax/optical input, USB and BT. It plays high-quality digital audio file formats up to DSD512 (24.6/22.6MHz), 2xDXD (705/352kHz) via USB and PCM upto 768kHz. Via coax and optical it will play 24bit/192kHz and using Bluetooth it boasts both aptX™ and AAC™. One can listen to Tidal HiFi and Spotify Premium with ease and the xDSD is also MQA ready when connected to your computer or mobile. Controls are very simple and the colours of all the LEDs intuitive. Power up on the xDSD and xCAN is via the iFi labelled and illuminated volume control. Push in to turn on and hold longer to change the input you wish to use. Green is for USB/coax/optical and blue is for Bluetooth. Once selected the volume control even changes through the colours of the rainbow to warn you if you are listening too high, with blue for low, green for mid and red for too high. The volume control is also analogue and works in 1dB increments, with the control 'notched' as you move it. To the left of the volume knob are two small multicoloured LEDs that indicate input and kHz, and to the right are the LEDs to indicate 3D+® Matrix and xBass+® circuits selected by the settings button.

The heart behind the xDSD is the Burr-Brown 'True Native' chipset, the DSD1793 DAC chip that iFi speak so highly of. This clever design offers two independent signal pathways for PCM and DSD. What this means is that one chip offers the 'best of both formats', as the file formats whether PCM or DSD remain unchanged, unlike much of the competition that converts DSD to PCM. The design includes XMOS-based USB circuitry and quad J-FET op amps and the Global Master Timing (GMT) femto-precision clock and intelligent memory buffer that eradicates jitter, provided by sister company Abingdon Music. Two digital filters are provided; 'Listen' with minimal phase (optimised for musicality) and 'Measure' with linear phase, which is optimised for accuracy. The unit comes with a wide selection of accessories, including USB-A to USB-B adaptor and cable, a USB adaptor, 3.5mm optical adaptor, Velcro strips to attach it to your DAP, and a velvet pouch. It doesn't, however, include a short 3.5mm-to-3.5mm lead, which would be very useful.

Setting up for listening was easy, only the BT taking a few attempts to get the machine to recognise my phone. Whenever switching on the iFi button it remembers your last setting unless you hold down the button in which case it changes colour between green and blue to allow you to decide the source you want to hear. Only on a few occasions did I find it hard to change source on the first attempt. An easier solution might perhaps have been by holding in the iFi knob and turning the knob to change the source, but I guess there is a good reason why they chose not to create this function. It does, however, have a very useful feature of allowing the headphone output to become line-level for you to connect it to your HiFi, by simply holding in the settings button on startup. This then becomes a very powerful home DAC.

THE MUSIC

I initially tried Bluetooth, the quality being on par with what I would expect from aptX. My first listening was Genesis 'Selling England by the Pound'. This is a brittle performance on the best HiFi, with distortion on the flute and a few bad edits, but the iFi allowed me to really get involved in the music and relive the excitement I experienced when I first played it at university all those years ago. Switching between "Measure" and "Listen" gave marginal differences, though only noticeable on the digital/synthesiser sounds.

Next, I chose to play via S/PDif connection Steve Howe and Martin Taylor 'Masterpiece Guitars' album. These are two of my favourite guitarists, the former from prog rock band 'Yes'. Listening on my

inefficient Sennheiser HD650's I wanted to see how much welly and how much musicality could be mustered from the digital conversion. I wasn't disappointed. The added bass from xBass+® gave the music more feeling and 3D+® a little more depth to the sound. Switching off the functions gave a more neutral performance, should you wish to do so, but even with the features selected the performance was still highly realistic and enjoyable, especially the tracks "Smile" and "Ginger".

Turning to The Academy of Ancient Music and Handel's Organ Concerto Op4 (Linn 24bit/88.2kHz) the sound lacked some heart and emotion; whilst everything was all there, with great speed and detail, this was a clinical performance from the musicians and the digits told it as it was. However, switching to the xCAN analogue input the music just sounded smoother, more natural and easier to listen to. The xCAN has a further bass switch on top of the xBass+® (see later) and I needed to turn it off as there was now just too much bass, even on the HD650's!

Next to Hotel California (The Eagles 24/192) gave the xDSD a chance to open up with greater detail and passion in "New Kid in Town". Vocal lines were extremely clear and inviting, along with the backing that had good timing. My W1000 headphones benefitted from the added bass from the xBass+®, though the angled drivers in the cans meant the 3D+® facility wasn't so important, though still very effective.

Keeping to the 70's popular theme it was time to turn to Supertramp's collection of the best songs in the album 'Retrospectacle'. It includes tracks from a number of their albums, including their very successful 'Breakfast in America'. To think that Roger Hodgson wrote this when he was in his teens. 'Retrospectacle' also includes some live tracks which the xDSD performed admirably, giving space to the instruments and particularly the reverb provided by the hall. Only that the sound was very slightly too bright, for example in "Another Man's Woman". The 'Listen' and 'Measure' button didn't seem to offer much of a difference, the former position just being very slightly more relaxed. The piano solo was slightly less bright, though the performance was still not as natural as I would like, largely due to it being an electronic piano. The bass end was tight and very accurate, particularly from the drums. Switching over to the xCAN (analogue input) and it really did open up the performance in a more natural and musical way; and with the 3D+® and xBass+® settings it just extended the detail and made clearer the position of the instruments. Playing "Bloody Well Right" the xCAN certainly was. The xCAN also has the addition of a bass/presence 3-way switch to produce even more depth and detail to the sound, though as a perfectionist I did wonder just how much of what I was listening to was actually the original. Some will remember we did away with tone and loudness controls in the 80's. Having said that, listening to Saint-Saëns Organ Concerto (Chicago Symphony Orchestra) I needed all the help I possibly could in order to make the 'exciting' music exciting. Otherwise the performance was a little stale. I guess having these facilities available should you need them is a very good idea.

xCAN

The xCAN is the smallest iFi Bluetooth DAC/amp and comes with provision for balanced headphones, plus instead of a Burr Brown DAC this one is provided by ESS Sabre and with a gigantic 1000mW output (32Ω/Balanced cans) provided by a high-spec, low-noise, dual-mono headphone amplifier. The xCAN similarly comes with a collection of accessories including the all-important balanced 2.5mm and single-ended 3.5mm jack-to-jack leads. Whilst it looks and operates similarly to the xDSD (with its distinctive iFi central knob) it

iFi xCAN AND xDSD SHOOTOUT

has some additional features. As well as the 3D+® and xBass+® settings there is also the three-position xBass II 'bass'/'presence' switch allowing you to select either or both. For the review I chose only the presence option as otherwise there was too much lower bass in my opinion, with the 'presence' option focussing on the lower midrange. Where the xDSD is charged by a micro-USB connector and lasts around 10 hours, the xCAN is charged via a USB-C connector and will last an excellent 18 hours in analogue mode.

THE MUSIC

In BT mode the unit played from my Sony XA1Ultra phone. The sound was precise, detailed, and as good as I would expect for aptX, whether I was playing wav, FLAC or mp3's. In the latter, my mp3 version of Pat Metheny Group album 'The Way Up' the sound was way higher than I expected from compressed music. But it was really from the analogue input that the iFi shone. Strapped to my FiiO DAP, I didn't mind the added weight and dimensions as it meant I could really now start to enjoy the music. The result was an uncoloured sound that was fast and tidy, with more detail and no distortion present at all. The xCAN was clean and accurate in all that I played, including detailing all the faults in music I played (such as the distorted flute in Genesis's "After the Ordeal"). The process of switching from xDSD to xCAN was like the trick of recoding a CD onto a good reel to reel recorder and playing it back off tape; the sound is improved!

Not being my usual choice of music, I then played Squarepusher "Ufabulum", an electronic music album. I wanted to see if any of the detail I heard on the xDSD was removed in the analogue domain. No need to worry. Everything was still there intact, though I began to get a headache due to the choice of music! The amplifier did not remove any of the excitement, though it does rely on a good line-output on your DAP. Finally turning to Stravinsky 'Symphony of Psalms', a work I studied at university many years ago, there was no degree of sacrifice of oomph, weight and detail in this excellent performance (LSO, Bernstein). That analogue stage was so good.

CONCLUSIONS

I had a great time getting to know these two iFi products; the xDSD a DAC first and amplifier second and the xCAN an amplifier first and BT DAC second. The xDSD has deservedly won numerous awards for its sound quality as well as proving that you can fit a quart into a pint pot; it has such an amazing specification for such a small size! However, I feel sorry for the xCAN, its twin brother that seems to not get so rewarded yet has an even greater personality; where everything matters – the audio quality. For that reason, my choice would be...

xCAN

There were several reasons for my choice, not even considering its £100 net saving. Firstly, it had a damn good amplifier stage. Whilst many DAPs have terrible headphone stages, their line output (if there is one) is usually satisfactory, making the xCAN an ideal choice if you have this facility. This amplifier is also powerful and can drive inefficient headphones and IEMs, and without the inconvenience of hiss at high levels. Whilst both the xDSD and xCAN both offer balanced and SE analogue outputs and deploying the clever S-Balanced circuitry, the xCAN offers fully balanced input as well. The machine's 18 hour battery life (using analogue input) is also very good, with the xDSD at 10 hours. If you wish to keep your DAP in your bag the BT option is very good and able to memorise 8 sources. Finally, the extra function of xBass II (the first iFi product to use it)

offers the user further editing of the sounds. The ESS Sabre DAC was also a wise choice. Both units are very, very good products and I can see why the xDSD has won so many awards over the year, but the lesser-known xCAN is no less a product. If you want the USB and S/PDif/Toslink facilities then the xDSD would be the obvious choice for you. However, if you just need BT and want noise-free and superlative analogue heaven then your choice should be the xCAN.

AT A GLANCE xDSD

Build Quality: Superb build quality. Looks expensive.

Sound Quality: Excellent detail at all frequencies with a very fast presentation. 3D+® and xBass+® facilities. Analogue volume control in 1dB stages.

Value for Money £399 is very good value for a DAC and headphone amplifier in one tiny box. Lots of accessories.

Pros: Very musical performance. Plays native DSDs. Excellent specification. Can be used as a DAC for your HiFi system.

Cons: The amplifier might not quite be powerful enough for some very thirsty Planars. That lovely titanium finish can show up your fingerprints.

Price: £399

AT A GLANCE xCAN

Build Quality: Superb build quality.

Sound Quality: Excellent detail and speed. Excellent amplifier will plenty of welly and very quiet in operation. Analogue volume control in 1dB stages.

Value for Money £299 is exceptionally good value such a good analogue headphone amplifier with BT input. Excellent detail to supplying of accessories.

Pros: Very musical performance. Powerful 1W amplifier. Excellent xBass II added to the 3D+® and xBass+® facilities. Balanced input.

Cons: That lovely titanium finish can show up your fingerprints.

Price: £299



REVIEW

BEYERDYNAMIC LAGOON ANC NOISE-CANCELLING HEADPHONES



Harry Smith, Hifi Pig's very own Millennial Scribbler takes delivery of a pair of Beyerdynamic Lagoon ANC noise-cancelling headphones, shuts the world outside off and gives us his thoughts on this £359 pair of cans.

Hifi Pig
www.hifipig.com

BEYERDYNAMIC LAGOON ANC NOISE-CANCELLING HEADPHONES



When you're thinking of noise-cancelling wireless headphones, two brands come to mind. Sony and Bose have ruled the roost for a while now with their Quietcomfort and WH series of headphones. Beyerdynamic has put itself in direct competition with them with their new Lagoon ANC wireless noise-cancelling headphones at a similar price point.

The Beyerdynamic Lagoon ANC retail for £359 and have many of the same features as Bose and Sony's offerings but can they dethrone the two giants of the wireless noise-cancelling head-fi industry?

DESIGN, CONSTRUCTION AND FEATURES

The Lagoon ANC headphones are very well built overall. High-quality plastics teamed with real leather gives them a premium feel. Plenty of cushioning has been used in the headband and earcups making them comfortable. In fact, wearing these headphones over long periods wasn't a problem as they fit perfectly for me. Weighing in at around 280 grams makes them pretty light considering the large 1100 MAh battery, but they don't feel at all flimsy.

I got the dark grey and brown leather option for my review unit and I was a big fan of the look of the Lagoon ANC. They are professional looking without being boring.

The included hard case is also very well built, providing plenty of protection without being bulky. Unfortunately, the included cables are a little generic and don't reflect the same levels of the build quality of everything else in the box. Some braided USB C and 3.5mm jack cables would have been a nice touch at this price.

Beyerdynamic has opted for a combination of button and touch controls. I feel I'm getting the best of both worlds with this and I found them intuitive to use. Skipping tracks is simply a swipe on the right ear and pausing and playing tracks works with a double-tap. Being able to increase or decrease the volume without having to take my

phone out of my pocket is also quite handy. Cycling through the 2 levels of active noise cancelling is handled by a switch on the same ear. You are also able to adjust the level of sensitivity of the touch controls from within the MIY app which is a great feature.

A light system on the inside of both earcups is used to indicate battery levels and when the headphones are pairing to your device. Personally, I never found myself using this feature as the voice prompts gave plenty of information when cycling through the different levels of ANC and jumping between connected devices. I enjoyed the light show but it feels a little gimmicky and not having the feature could have knocked a bit off the price and maybe slightly improved the battery life. Being able to disable the feature from within the MIY app would be a great addition as some people might find it a tad distracting.

Regardless of the light show, battery life is fantastic. Beyerdynamic boasts up to 45 hours with ANC off and 24.5 hours when using the active noise cancelling. Their claims are pretty accurate and I found myself getting within an hour of the times. If you do happen to run out of battery (which is unlikely), there is a 3.5mm headphone jack that can be used to listen to them passively. Charging is handled over USB-C and takes around 3 hours to fully charge.

They use the older Bluetooth 4.2 standard meaning that only one device can be connected at a time but the inclusion of aptX Low latency support is a welcome one making the Lagoon ANC great for watching videos as well as for music playback. (they also support the AAC and SBC codecs)

SOUND QUALITY

The active noise cancelling on the Lagoon ANC is fantastic and split into two levels, blocking out most unwanted sounds during music playback. You can still hear the odd background noise and I could notice a very faint hiss with no music playing but these are

BEYERDYNAMIC LAGOON ANC NOISE-CANCELLING HEADPHONES



unnoticeable when listening to music at moderate volumes. The lower level of the two ANC modes does what you would expect lowering the volume of the sounds around you rather than blocking them out.

Whether it was with noise-cancelling on or off, the sound quality was very impressive.

Clear highs with punchy bass and rich mids. They perform well with all genres of music.

Considering they have a closed-back design, they are quite immersive offering great separation.

"Weird Fishes/Arpeggi" by Radiohead sounded fantastic on these cans. The layered guitar parts played well off the fast drum beat and I was able to tell every instrument apart as the track grew in complexity.

On "Bad Guy" by Billie Eilish the funky bassline and thumping kick drum sounded very deep which is a testament to the bass performance of the Lagoon ANC. Eilish's spooky echoey vocals giving the illusion that someone is whispering in your ear.

On more acoustic tracks like "Kooks" by David Bowie. The Acoustic 12 string guitar sounded bright and natural. The strings and trumpet in the background didn't sound artificial at all.

The bottom line is that the balanced nature of the Lagoon ANC headphones lends itself to all types of music.

Beyerdynamic recommended that I download the MIY companion app (Available on IOS and Android) to use along with the headphones. After going through a series of hearing tests the app makes your very own custom profile. I was quite apprehensive of this feature but it did improve the overall listening experience boosting the mids and overall volume. It's not a necessity to install the app, but it did offer a slight improvement from the out of the box listening experience.

CONCLUSION

The Beyerdynamic Lagoon ANC are a great pair of wireless headphones. They are stylish, well-built and offer great noise cancelling without sacrificing sound quality. If you don't mind the £359 price tag, they are definitely a good option for audiophiles on the go and a great alternative to both Sony's and Bose's offerings.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: High quality plastics and leather, great overall build quality. The included carrying case is also of very high quality.

Sound Quality: Well balanced with great noise cancelling

Value For Money: Slightly more expensive than the competition but the price is definitely justified.

Pros: Intuitive controls, great sound quality and impressive noise-cancelling what's not to like?

Cons: The use of the older Bluetooth 4.2 frequency means that you can only connect one device at a time.

Price: £349



REVIEW
CYRUS
SOUNDBUDS WIRELESS IEMS



Hifi Pig's resident Millennial Scribbler Harry Smith takes a listen to legendary brand Cyrus' Soundbuds Wireless In Ear Monitors costing £99.99.

Hifi Pig
www.hifipig.com

CYRUS SOUNDBUDS WIRELESS IEMS



We live in an age where everything is going wireless. Although Bluetooth earphones have existed for years, “truly wireless” earphones are the latest trend with companies from the likes of Apple, Sennheiser, and even Samsung bringing out their take on cable-free listening.

Cyrus is a very well-known British Hifi manufacturer and has been going since the early 80s. They've never made a pair of wireless IEMs, as a matter of fact, they've never made any kind of earphones before.

I've also had the chance to also use a pair of Apple AirPods for an extended period which was a good opportunity to compare the Soundbuds to the current most popular wireless earbuds on the market.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

The Soundbuds and their included charging case are built out of glossy plastic. Although I'm not a big fan of this material the earphones themselves are well-built. They are deliberately lightweight (4.5g per ear) and are also water-resistant with a rating of IPX5 meaning that I was confident in taking them out in the rain. They are available in any colour you would like as long as that colour is black. Although there isn't any choice in regards to the colour, they look classy and understated in black.

The packaging is compact and professional. Included in the box are a range of different sized ear tips to accommodate most ear sizes. They use a rather unique inner hook design that ensures that they stay snug and aren't prone to falling out. Each Soundbud has a capacity of 55mAh and the battery life is decent for the size (two and a half to three hours per charge). I wouldn't recommend them for a long journey but they lasted plenty long enough for runs and commutes to work.

The charging case has a capacity of 400mAh and is able to fully charge the Soundbuds 3 times. It opens with a press of the button on the front which releases the hinge that unfortunately feels a little flimsy, but it is perfectly functional. It charges over micro-USB which feels a little outdated nowadays considering that all my devices now use the newer USB-C standard. The case itself is tiny and very pocketable.

Connecting your device is very easy (I was mainly using my Sony XZ1 smartphone). The Soundbuds turn on by pressing down on the multi-function button for a couple of seconds and then they both connect via Bluetooth as one headset to your preferred device. They also have an inbuilt microphone that was a slight improvement over my phone's one in terms of call quality.

The controls of the Soundbuds are straightforward and easy to get used to. You pause/play a track by simply pressing on the top of either earbud and skipping tracks is as simple as double pressing on the right-hand one for skipping forward and on the left-hand one to return to the previous track. The button on the top of each of the Soundbuds is clicky and is easy to use. I did, however, feel a bit of unwanted pressure on my ears when pausing and skipping tracks, something that wasn't a problem when using Apple's offering that has a more modern capacitive touchpad on each of the earbuds. This is a minor gripe and probably wouldn't affect everybody in the same way. I did eventually get used to the Soundbud's controls and got used to the mild discomfort when skipping tracks.

The range is fantastic and Cyrus claim up to 10m. This was very true as I was able to leave my phone in my room while walking around the house listening to music and answering phone calls, very impressive.

SOUND QUALITY

CYRUS SOUNDBUDS WIRELESS IEMS

Cyrus has definitely taken sound quality very seriously and they are impressive. Although they don't have any sort of active noise cancelling, they do a great job at blocking out any unwanted sounds. They get surprisingly loud considering their size and have great punchy bass at higher volumes.

The Heritage Orchestra's take on "Ibiza Classics" featuring Pete Tong was a great chance to showcase the earphones strengths in delivering a great energetic sound on the dance music parts all while performing on the more classical breaks and letting the strings and brasses shine. The highlight of the album was the Heritage Orchestra's live version of "Out Of Space" by the Prodigy.

Acoustic guitars sounded fantastic, especially on the recently remastered version of "Cast No Shadow" from Oasis' masterpiece "(What's The Story) Morning Glory?". Liam Gallagher's signature raw voice played well off the softer higher pitch backing vocals of his brother.

Jumping to something a bit heavier. "On Sight" and "Black Skinhead" by Kanye West featuring Gastafelstein and Daft Punk showed that the Soundbuds are able to stand up to more distorted sounds. Crashing hi-hats and shouting voices sounded shockingly good. Many earphones struggle to deliver on the whole album "Yeezus" but not the Cyrus Soundbuds.

Queens of the Stone Ages' album "Rated R" brought detuned electric guitars and rumbling basses to the table. They came together to create a wall of sound and blew me away at higher volumes especially on the track "The Lost Art Of Keeping A Secret" They are a very well balanced pair of earphones, the bass doesn't overwhelm the mids or top-end. They offer some quite easy listening at lower volumes and although you lose a bit of bass they still sound great.

When comparing the Soundbuds to a wired set, there is a slight loss in clarity and detail overall, but this is true of most Bluetooth earphones and the difference was hard to notice in day to day use.

CONCLUSION

The Soundbuds trounce Apple's offering in terms of sound quality and comfort and are a good deal less expensive, but they lack a few of Apple's touches for usability and controls that I got used to when using AirPods. That said, they are a great and much cheaper alternative.

The Cyrus Soundbuds are not a replacement for your wired IEMs but they are definitely a great option for people with an active lifestyle who don't want the hassle of cables when exercising or just want to listen to music on their commute to work.

I have to remind myself that this is Cyrus' first attempt at a wireless IEM, costing only £99.99, and it does succeed at a great number of things, in particular, sound quality. I would love to see them come out with a second-generation Soundbud with USB-C, capacitive touch controls and maybe some different colour options. (I also wouldn't mind paying over £100 if these features were added).

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Overall good but the hinge on the case feels a little flimsy.

Sound Quality: Very impressive considering the price.

Value For Money: They cost a lot less than most other "true wireless" earbuds and deliver better sound quality.

Pros: Easy to use, working straight out of the box, sound good and are incredibly comfortable.

Cons: Lack of options when it comes to personalisation and the two and a half to three-hour battery life might be a dealbreaker for some people.

Price: £99.99



REVIEW

MEZE AUDIO 99 HEADPHONES



In his first review for Hifi Pig Paul Hoskin takes a listen to the Meze Audio 99 Neo over-ear, closed-back headphones costing £199 and distributed by SCV Distribution in the UK.

Hifi Pig
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MEZE AUDIO 99 HEADPHONES



UNBOXING, CONSTRUCTION AND APPEARANCE

The parcel arrived and with no oversized boxes and without excessive amounts of unnecessary packaging materials. Yes Amazon, Take note! Just the required packaging to protect the product during shipping. I hate waste and I hate it when a product arrives with tons of excessive packaging. Get the product packaging right at the design stage and it's just not needed. Well done Meze

Unboxing the 99NEO's I noticed the quality of packaging and use of magnets in the box. I say this as the 99 NEO are at the lower end of Meze's collection of headphones, so if the packaging is this good on the lower end, I can't wait to experience their higher-end products. I know Lin and Stuart go on about the Christmas morning effect a lot in their reviews and it is important and good to see in a product at this price.

Inside the main box is a well made black hard case and opening this up reveals the headphones themselves and another case that is smaller and made from a softer material. This case houses the cable and accessories.

It's nice to see these finer details adhered to on the lower end as it gives I the "customer" the feeling of being thought of and looked after. This goes a long way in my book and gets a thumbs up!

Clamping force is just right in my opinion, well for my oversized bonce anyway. They're in that "Goldie Locks" zone, not too tight, but not too loose either. Just right. I wore these for three hours solid for this review and I didn't experience any fatigue or discomfort from a comfort perspective. The cups enveloped my ears comfortably and created a decent enough seal as to subdue external noise, though not completely cancel it. The earpads hold the drivers at a comfortable distance from my ears.

The included Kevlar cable is well made and has an inline mic for use with a mobile phone which is a nice touch and means that the appeal of the 99NEOS will be wider than just the music lover. Microphonics from the cable are very minimal with no audio playing and inaudible when audio is playing.

The headphones themselves are very well made with form and function both being taken care of equally.

SET UP

Setup is as easy as it gets. Plug them into your chosen device and off you go.

SOUND QUALITY

Well, for an entry-level headphone they perform surprisingly well. What I am presented with is a wider than expected sound stage with good imaging and an impressively solid low end. Mids are more extended than I am used to, but not in an uncomfortable or invasive manner. However, vocals benefit from this and I think maybe add to the good imaging I mentioned earlier, giving vocals a very forward sound and bringing them front and centre stage. Highs are slightly subdued but clear leading to a softer high-end presentation.

Personally, I would suggest they perform particularly well with electronic music and metal. What makes me suggest this is that very impressive, solid low-end I mentioned. When it comes to bass the 99NEO manage to outperform all of my on-ear cans including my Sennheiser HD25 I.II's, Momentum's and V-Moda V-80's.

As for my over-ears, they trounce the Beyerdynamic T70p's, all of my Grado's and utterly destroy the Sony MDR-SA5000's. (that last one is to be expected, mind.) The only headphone they are on a par with for hard-hitting bass that sweeps low without breaking a sweat is my

MEZE AUDIO 99 HEADPHONES



MEZE AUDIO 99 HEADPHONES

Hifiman HE400's. That's an impressive achievement for a sub £200 entry-level headphone.

The underlying bonus here is the detail and cleanliness of the bass - it's not murky and doesn't wallow. It's tight, precise, hard-hitting bass and that is what sets it apart from other headphones at this price range that I have previously tried out. Listening to Autechre's Incunabula was an absolute vintage industrial proto-techno pleasure and revitalized by that brilliant low-end. Mastodon's Crack The Skye was a surprising but welcome refresh from the last time I listened to it. I genuinely enjoyed these cans more and more the more I listened to them!

CONCLUSION

It's fair to say the 99NEO are a welcome addition to my growing headphone collection and will certainly be an ongoing "Go-To" pair of cans in the future. I also see these becoming a strong contender in my quest for the perfect portable headphone.

Do I recommend them and if so, who to? I think it goes without saying, that I certainly recommend them and give them a Highly Recommended award. Who to? Anyone who wants an affordable pair of headphones that offer an edge in performance over other offerings in that price range. If you want something blingy and "cool" these are not the cans for you. If you want classy, subtle yet hard-hitting headphones without hurting your wallet, then you need look no further.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Very well made. Subtle but stylish appearance

Sound Quality: Low end is hard-hitting & precise, mids and highs are well rounded, delivering a solid and decent sound.

Value for Money: At £199 you really can't complain.

Pros: Packaging, accessories, solid hard-hitting bass.

Cons: Highs could be a little more present.

Price: £199



REVIEW

TELLURIUM Q ULTRA BLACK II

XLR INTERCONNECTS



Tellurium Q launched their very first cables ten years ago this month and so what better time for Janine Elliot to test out the second iteration of this UK based company's Ultra Black interconnects, the Ultra Black II costing £558 a pair in XLR format.

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TELLURIUM Q ULTRA BLACK II XLR INTERCONNECTS



Geoff Merrigan of Tellurium Q is very protective over the content of his cables at Tellurium Q. Their design and components remain a mystery to everyone except him and his UK based team. Geoff believes you should just listen to them and judge them for yourself without being inundated with blurb about their inner workings. All he will say is that his cables are unique; "The things we look at in developing a cable are not what people would expect". Even the excellent XLR plugs on the model for review here are made to Tellurium Q's own specification with three levels of plating, and solder chosen for its acoustic transparency. When making new products they are put into studios and then friends to audition before they ever go to market, and every component is chosen because it is the very best for the particular quality bracket (more on that later). Similarly, Geoff doesn't take reviews for granted and is always nervous about the outcome, though he needn't have worried about this one.

On asking Geoff what was better about the Ultra Black II interconnect over its predecessor the Ultra Black he simply sent me both cables so that I could listen to the two and hear the difference for myself. That was a great opportunity for me to experience some great chemistry from this ex-industrial chemistry student. Training in material science, Geoff turned to cable manufacturing exactly 10 years ago. Certainly, Geoff puts a lot of magic into his cables as they have been raved about by reviewers and the company achieved the Queen's Award for Enterprise in 2018. This second version of the cable, the Ultra Black II, is nothing like its predecessor, indeed, the only reason it carries the name to the next level is because it fits in the same quality bracket, the Ultra Black being mid-range with the Silver range tops and Blue the starter range and with each range designed for matching with particular levels of products. The Ultra Black range prides itself on being a natural and transparent series "that allows an incredible life-like reproduction for use in a well-balanced system to simply unlock what the system can do". The loudspeaker cable bearing the same name looks nothing like the interconnect, their big link being, as Geoff says "The minimizing of phase distortion, inherent in all cables. This is because all cables act as filters and add their own amplitude and

phase characteristics". Tellurium Q aims to remove this; "We are primarily focused on removing the smearing of frequencies through a timing shift and by doing this you get better clarity and transparency".

Reducing the filtering effect is not an easy task, and when making cables Geoff needs to consider everything going into construction including multiple stranded conductors of slightly differing materials and various dielectric materials and geometries. Attention to detail also includes the solder, plating thicknesses and even consideration as to specifying what chemicals should or should not be included in a plating bath. The process of soldering (temperature etc) also varies depending on which cable is being made. He, like many others including myself, doesn't like silver solder, but he has found an ideal solder that doesn't contain silver or lead. Geoff has discovered that the shininess of the silver used in the connectors varies, commenting "A shiny finish is less conductive because of the additives used in order to make it shiny" and so the silver used in the cables appears matt. Tellurium Q wants to engineer as clear and phase-neutral a path for the signal as possible and to preserve the original signal phase relations as much as is possible.

The loudspeaker version of the Ultra Black is indeed an exceptional cable, so just how good would the XLR interconnect version be...I wanted to find out. My main system comprises two XLR cable paths; one between my Krell KPS 20i CD and Music First Audio pre, and the other cable between the pre and the Krell KAV250a power amp, the cables consisting of top Nordost and Ecosse cables respectively. They work a treat, so the Tellurium Q would need to be pretty damn good to get my vote. Whilst both Ultra Black and Ultra Black II look totally different (apart from the plugery) I would be in for a surprise just how different the two cables would sound. To do that I would need to spend several hours listening to the earlier model followed by the new. This all became a very enjoyable few weeks for me listening to Saint-Saëns, Tanguito, Holst, and Pink Floyd amongst others.

TELLURIUM Q ULTRA BLACK II XLR INTERCONNECTS



SOUND QUALITY

Don't tell me CD is dead. Using my brilliant Krell KPS20i gives some astounding results. I still believe this to be one of the best and musical performers out there. This not only uses the excellent Philips CDM9 Pro transport but has no less than four power supplies and 12 regulators for digital and analogue sections, with the important digits up-sampled to 24bit and featuring 56-bit internal precision. No wonder the thing gets so hot. I wasn't shy to use this machine as the first part of my testing, initially with the older Ultra Black. The first piece of music was my Saint-Saëns Symphony no 3, better known as the Organ Symphony, though it also employs a brilliant rippling pianoforte part. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra do the best version out there in my opinion; a performance of great musicality with excellent placing of instruments and attention to detail of dynamics marked in the score. As expected, the Ultra Black gave a compelling performance with great bass, punchy treble and good detail of position of each instrument. It was good, but nothing on the scale of the Ultra Black II. I could now not only hear exquisite detail of each instrument, including the Organ sounding slightly out of tune on a few top pipes but in the second movement could hear the individual weight of the bow falling on the violin strings on their reprieve of the main theme. Everything was up a large notch on its predecessor; a more extended and clearer bass-end and improved speed and detail at all frequencies. This is quite unusual; usually one end of the frequency scale benefits at the expense of the other, but here nothing was lost. More importantly, it sounded like the orchestra was in the room with me.

Turning to Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition (Orchestre National de Lyon) the music was precise with a greater bass extension and energy than I remember it having. "Walking on the Moon", Yur Honig Trio, had me flying high with excitement with the level of detail of the music, particularly the powerful and close drumming with echoes from the snare drum so very clear. "Children Go Where I Send Them" (The Fairfield Four) was open, exact, tight and with an extended bass that my Torus sub welled in.

Thelonius Monk was a brilliant jazz pianist, and Devialet with Fondamenda has created a series of rare or forgotten albums of jazz treats including Monk's concert at Rotterdam in 1967. 'Ruby, Dear Ruby' is one of his best-known works. The Tellurium Q gave an open and spacious performance, especially front and back. Despite this recording's lack of stereo depth, the cable made mono wholly acceptable even to my stereo ears. Monk's style might be somewhat dissonant, aggressive and with modern harmonies, but the cable eked out every ounce of musicality with panache. Music was controlled and highly addictive. The excellent percussion mic'ing allowed the music to sound alive; it might be forceful, but it was in control. The extended bass solo in track "Hackensack" had equally high potency, control and detail. This cable picked up everything.

Staying with jazz I turned to "Jump St(u)art" from Jim Gallioreto's Split 'Decision'. Again, it was the detail and pace in the bass that caught my attention. This track is recorded with just two AKG 414EB microphones recorded on to a Nagra IV S tape recorder, something I am in favour of to give a very natural spread and phase correct sound across the sound stage. With the acoustic bass on the left and Rhodes piano on the right and with tenor sax and drums in between this was a very natural sound covering all frequencies with detail and musicality, and no phase issues at all from this cable. Next, I chose "Poetspeak" with Fred Simon on keyboard. This had great control and depth with top ends clearer than from my resident cables. This was pure magic at work. Listening to "Tubby" (Ted Sirota's Rebel Souls) I was even able to pick out sympathetic vibrations from the bass on the

'snare' of the snare drums at the start. Everything was given space and respect from this cable; nothing out of place or exaggerated, nothing filtered out. This was as clean a sound as it gets.

Turning to Mozart's Horn concerto in Eb K-447 suddenly the soundstage was wide and spacious. Indeed, something the Ultra Black II excelled in was in getting the maximum out of the soundstage. I was now in a big hall rather than it being a 'pair of AKG microphones'. The Ultra Black gave a greater depth to the soundstage than the more forward sound from my resident cables. Whilst the Mozart horn concertos don't perhaps get such a good reception as his piano concertos, in reality, the horn has an even wider expressive range than the keyboard and is none the less exciting. Indeed the horn is thought to be closely related to the human voice; its range being close to that of a baritone. The TQ cable gave an extremely emotional and human performance, so much so that I was compelled to listen to the other three Horn concertos on this album from Philips (Hermann Baumann and St Paul Chamber Orchestra). So much for doing a quick review. Whatever I played I wanted to hear more and more. Not bad for TQ's mid-range cable. I just wondered how good their top-end Silver cable would sound like.

Placing the Ultra Black II between the pre and power amplifier gave equally good results. Listening to Lee Jones's distinctive voice in "Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most", her almost "yawning" voice was so detailed accompanied by the equally relaxed bass and guitar I was far from yawning as I hadn't heard such a controlled bass end for ages.

The "world's first Binaural Direct Cut Recording" from Chasing the Dragon and Pachelbel's Canon was next on the listening list. This record really needs to have a pair of headphones at the end of it as it doesn't work so well on speakers, but the TQ cable made every ounce of reverb count. Whilst other cables might smear the sound, the Black II was pure black and white. Nothing added and nothing taken away. I was there amongst the musicians.

STS from The Netherlands make some amazing recordings, largely using the iconic Philips EL3501 reel to reel, though their collection of other machines from around the world will set any reel-to-reel lover drooling at the mouth. I am pleased to have several recordings from this company. Their "On the Way to the 30th Analog Forum Anniversary" is perhaps not the easiest title to remember but the music is very memorable and easy to listen to, with close-mic'd guitar and beautiful saxophone playing. Fritz de With's recordings have excellent space and timing as well as great sound quality and track 2 "They Can't Take that Away from Me" from George Gershwin certainly had nothing missing. Again, the TQ gave a clear rendition with complete focus on making good music. I could understand exactly what Geoff meant about focusing on eradicating phase distortion. Interestingly Fritz de With ensures in his recordings that there is phase purity, both by the choice of cables/connections and also acoustic phase that is acquired through proper placement of the microphones, something I was OTT about as a sound engineer at the BBC. The TQ cable extended that further in my system. The music was so pure. "It Might As Well Be Spring" allowed me to pin-point in 4K detail every breath from the beautiful tenor saxophone. This was fun and I really didn't want to have to unplug these cables but alas I would need to do so, well, maybe after a few more records and reel to reel tapes, and perhaps a glass of wine...

CONCLUSION

For precision from lowest to highest frequencies and with all types of music these cables are a no brainer. Having run in these cables over

TELLURIUM Q ULTRA BLACK II XLR INTERCONNECTS



the few weeks that I had them I could see exactly what Geoff was trying to do, even if he is rather secretive about what magic is inside them. And boy did the cable work in my system; the music was controlled, and with an open and natural transmission of the music with no colouration. There was a great sense of spatial and phase awareness in the music, and this meant not just between speakers but all around them, giving for a more exciting and compelling listen. I just hope I get asked to review the Ultra Silver.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Excellent quality control. Excellent XLR connectors.

Sound Quality: Excellent clarity and transparency to the music at all frequencies with excellent speed of operation.

Value for Money: £558 might sound a lot but boy does this sound worth every penny.

Pros: Clarity and transparency. Excellent soundstage allowing music to sound exactly as it is intended.

Cons: Nothing other than I wish I knew what was inside...

Price: £558



REVIEW

WYWIRES BLUE INTERCONNECTS AND SPEAKER CABLES



WyWires Blue Interconnects and Speaker Cables reviewed by Alan McIntosh.

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WYWIRES BLUE INTERCONNECTS AND SPEAKER CABLES



Maybe, like me, you have built up your system by investing in bits here and there when budget allows and as a result perhaps you haven't yet matched all your interconnects and speaker cables to a one brand loom, or perhaps you have chosen not too. For me, it took some time to decide on interconnects from one manufacturer and that was based on a sound I liked and that balanced well with my components and ears, but even then I still had another brand on my speakers and at times a third or fourth on phono stages as I sought the best I could (or afford). I'm a big believer in synergy and balance in a system so having the chance to test a full loom (analogue interconnects and speaker cable) from the US company WyWires, the brainchild of Founder and President Alex Sventitsky and manufactured by hand in Los Angeles was one too good to pass up.

CONSTRUCTION

WyWires' Alex tells me that their cables are "bespoke, based on clients' needs and goals for their systems" which sounds good to me. They also offer a 30-day money-back guarantee when you buy direct and suggest that you have a consultation by phone or email prior to buying so you can be confident you are picking the best options for your setup and playback preferences (and budget of course).

The WyWires analogue range includes Red Series Personal Audio, Blue, Silver, Platinum, and Diamond for traditional HiFi. Their Blue Series, on test here, is the "entry point" and WyWires suggest it offers an economical product line with a commitment to great value, with Alex saying they offer much of the performance attributes of the Silver, albeit in a simplified and less luxurious offering.

Decked out in a royal blue label and black sheathing, the Interconnects come as a US standard 4ft (around 1.20m for us Metric heads) - which happens to be the size I tend to use - and can be terminated with either RCA or XLR (at the same price point). Length and termination can be selected at the point of purchase online.

Cotton-wrapped copper Litz wire in construction they are designed in-house manufactured to Alex's specification and then hand-assembled back in Los Angeles to have a rated Capacitance of 5.9 pF (per foot at a frequency of 10 kHz). Connectors are sourced from the EU and Japan. Terminations are screwed and not soldered which I prefer as I feel it retains the integrity of the join with the conductor.

Pricing is tailored to the order based on length, cable type and connectors selected (all part of the order process). Alex says the company mission is to guarantee great value at any price. A nice touch is that all their products come with a Certificate of Authenticity, hand-written and signed Alex himself and offer extra peace of mind with a 5-year warranty (the only exception being their Red series headphone cable)

On the speaker cable, terminations can also be selected easily - Spade or Banana (with the option of each per end for those that like spade at binding posts but banana for your amp) – I am a fan of banana so that's what I was using for the test. Very minor point here was that at times when pulling the speaker cable out of my amp/binding posts the termination sheath occasionally slipped, easy to rectify but maybe worth a look at.

SOUND QUALITY

Due to Work and vacation travel, I have been sitting on these cables for a few months, allowing me to really get to know them and allowing for swap in/out testing over time. They have also been present through some other upgrades (such as power cables) so it was interesting to see what they could do long term and whether I found I became fatigued, discovered any "niggles" or found anything wanting. It also meant I could listen without the pressure of time, coming back to them at different times, with different music as well as my go-to test pieces. It feels like a long courtship but as cables can be very personal with one mans "clarity" is another mans "clinical", it was great to have the luxury of listening at length.

WYWIRES BLUE INTERCONNECTS AND SPEAKER CABLES

My main go-to test pieces revolve around 3 main genre's – electronica for bass response and smoothness through mid's and highs, prog Rock (think Floyd and Alan Parsons) to hear timbre and decay as well use of staging and details and finally Jazz to test realism in sound.

With this in mind I kicked off with a one-step all analogue Speakers Corner pressing of Alan Parson's Eye in the Sky (cat no. AL9599). The iconic bright intro to the instrumental Sirius, used by so many sports events now to usher on sport-stars is reproduced wonderfully before that sublime bassline rises under it. Parsons production shines through wonderfully. Not overly clinical or sickly bright, the decay is just enough to dig into the tail of the notes giving a great sense of the electronics used in its production. As its slides into Eye in the Sky that detail and depth just continue and it feels like you're getting a few rows nearer in that imagined live event we all seek through our HiFi.

Now onto OMD's Architecture & Morality and then Organisation (Abbey Road half Speed master) to get an opportunity to test out the high and high mid's of the system. What can come across as jarring in some synth sections of The New Stone Age or The Misunderstanding is instead reproduced with wonderful, airy energy and with all the rawness you'd want from these pioneers of electronica but none of the unwanted harsh sonic aftertaste that brighter cables can leave you with.

Over the weeks I've listened both actively (at volumes allowing me to hear detail and variance from my standard rig) and passively just enjoying my music, delving into all genres I enjoy, at times re-discovering some old skool 90's house, Blue Note and Mo-fi Jazz classics and, as always, wearing out my Floyd collection.

Streaming hi-res offerings both from NAS and online sources via the wonderful Auralic Aries G1 only re-enforced my opinions of quality.

There comes a point where audiophile hyperbole ceases to have any real meaning and instead settle back into simpler language – I've had fun. I've lost myself in great music, I've found some extra goodness in old favourites and not once have I had any quarrel with the WyWires, never fatiguing or harsh and not overly sweet, but smooth through mid's and highs. Bass is well reproduced, full but under control. There have been points where the quality has made me sit up and say wow – and it's why they haven't left my setup... and won't for a long time I think.

I upgraded my cartridge recently to the new Hana ML (from Denon DL013r) and am feeding my amp via a Vincent Pho700 hybrid valve stage. The WyWires have really allowed them to get closer to that edge of resolution I think we all seek and at a comparatively budget price point.

I am at the rare point today where I'm just listening very contentedly enjoying my system and don't necessarily have "the next upgrade" already on the wish list, although I would like to hear what the WyWires could allow a more premium or larger speaker than my already excellent Fyne 500's to deliver as I think it would be nothing but positive.

CONCLUSION

I added these to my system a couple of months ago and therefore have had a lot of time to listen to them. With time, the detail increased and more and more I just found recordings becoming lighter, better resolved and simply enjoyable. I forgot about "listening" and just enjoyed them, comparing to my Ecosse 2.3 speaker cables there is

no loss of that smooth sound I liked but there is more detail and refinement, with the full loom across my system, replacing a set of Chord Clearway, that sense just extended and the synergy with my components and the sound I enjoy is clear. Open, clean and airy without being harsh or bright. Musical and detailed but not overly clinical, a great balance with my Hana ML pickup.

AT A GLANCE

Build Quality: Overall very good, slim and flexible which makes for easy runs and with good quality copper Litz and synthetic cotton insulation. Good choice of configuration of terminations. Rubber shrink wrap hoods over banana plugs on the speaker cables can slip at times when pulled but this is a minor point, easily resolved in the factory.

Sound Quality: Cables, it has been said, shouldn't have a sound and instead should "get out the way" and for me the WyWires do a great job of opening the music doors further, uncovering details and allowing an extra edge of musicality and top to shine but without being shrill or harsh. Detailed and defined without being bright. They are staying in my primary system.

Value for Money: While these may not seem budget they are at a relatively low price point for premium offerings. Pre-terminated and with copper Litz and synthetic cotton construction, plus braided sheath these are, for me, a quality cable at a keen price point for those looking to step up from budget/cheap cables. Add a 30-day money back guarantee (when ordered direct) and 5 year warranty you really can't go wrong!

Pros: Price point is relatively low, revealing and open sound, excellent quality materials, cable flexibility. Guarantee/Warranty.

Cons: At this price nothing really apart from need to import from US (not a big deal and not an issue for me).

Price: Blue Series Interconnects \$299 (roughly £235 at time of press) per 4ft (RCA or XLR), Blue Series Speaker cable \$499 / 4ft (approx. £394 / 4ft at time of press).



South West

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One of the most trusted independent Hi-Fi and AV specialists in the UK. Our focus is providing excellent products, service & value to our customers.

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Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Bristol

92b Whiteladies Road, Clifton, Bristol, BS8 2QN

One of the most trusted independent Hi-Fi and AV specialists in the UK. Our focus is providing excellent products, service & value to our customers.

Telephone: 0117 974 3727

[Website](#)

South East

Danish Audio Company

40 Chaffinch Drive, Kingsnorth, Ashford, Kent, TN23 3QD

Steinway Lyngdorf Audio Consultant with 15yrs experience designing & installing these truly breathtaking systems. Brands supplied include - Steinway Lyngdorf - Lyngdorf Audio - Clic Furniture - Innuos - M&K Sound - AudioQuest Cable.

Telephone: 07733 332229

[Website](#)

The Audio Barn

2 The Threshing Barn, Feltham Park, Chalk Lane, Harlow, Essex, CM17 0PF

Set in the rolling countryside of the Hertfordshire Essex borders, The Audiobarn have an exceptional reputation for customer service, and putting together systems that just make music, whatever your budget.

Telephone: 01279 454 860

[Website](#)

Hifi Lounge

4 The Granary Buildings, Millow Hall Farm, Dunton, Bedfordshire, SG18 8RH

We like to think that we are a little different from the average HiFi dealerships. We are located away from the busy high street in the beautiful Bedfordshire countryside in a converted Granary. Staying as long as you need resulting in no rushed decisions.

Telephone: 01767 448121

[Website](#)

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Telephone: 01892 531543

[Website](#)

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Caversham House 15-17 Church Road, Caversham, Reading, RG4 7AA

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7 Prama House, 267 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 7HT

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Telephone: 01865 241773

[Website](#)

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Maidstone

96 Week Street, Maidstone, ME14 1RL

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Telephone: 01622 686366

[Website](#)

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Guildford

73b North Street, Guildford, GU1 4AW

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Telephone: 01483 536666

[Website](#)

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Chalfont St Peter

1 High Street, Chalfont St Peter, SL9 9QE

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Telephone: 01753 255110

[Website](#)

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Cambridge

18C - 18D Chesterton Road, Cambridge, CB4 3AX

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Telephone: 01223 304770

[Website](#)

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Brighton & Hove

57 Western Road, Hove, BN3 1JD

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Telephone: 01273 733338

[Website](#)

Nintronics Ltd.

11 Bridgegate Centre, Welwyn Garden City, Herts. AL7 1JG

Telephone: 01707 320788

[Website](#)

Criterion Audio

Oakington Road, Girton, Cambridge, CB3 0QH

Criterion Audio operates a premium hi-fi showroom on the outskirts of Cambridge. Our priority is to cater for music enthusiasts, and our staff's 50+ combined years of industry experience ensure we can give our customers the most accurate and relevant advice possible.

Telephone: 01223 233730

[Website](#)

Guildford Audio Ltd

180 Epsom Road, Guildford, Surrey, GU12RR

Telephone: 01483 537577

[Website](#)

Audio Venue Maidenhead

36 Queen St., Maidenhead. SL6 1HZ

Audio Venue, Bespoke Audio Visual Consultants | Home Cinema Experts

Audio Venue are specialists in bespoke home cinema and home audio systems. We have years of expertise in designing and installing the very best home cinema, multi-room and audio systems available for customers around the globe.

Telephone: 01628 633 995

[Website:](#)

Choice Hifi

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Telephone: +44 (0) 208 392 1959

[Website](#)

Greater London

Soundstage

8 Heddon Court Parade, Cockfosters Rd, Barnet, EN4 0DB

Telephone: 020 8440 9509

[Website](#)

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Swiss Cottage

15 Northways Parade, London, NW3 5EN

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Telephone: 020 7722 9560

[Website](#)

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7-9 Goldings Hill, Loughton, IG10 2RW

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[Website](#)

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[Website](#)

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144-146 Gray's Inn Road, Holborn, WC1X 8AX

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Telephone: 020 7837 7540

[Website](#)

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Epsom

12 Upper High Street, Epsom, KT17 4QJ

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Telephone: 01372 720720

[Website](#)

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Chelsea

403 Kings Road, Chelsea, London, SW10 0LR

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Telephone: 020 7352 9466

[Website](#)

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39a East Street, Bromley, BR1 1QQ

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Telephone: 020 8290 1988

[Website](#)

Oranges and Lemons

61-63 Webbs Road, London, SW11 6RX

The unique Oranges & Lemons in SW London near Clapham Junction has over the last 25+ years built a solid reputation as one of the UK's finest Hi-Fi, Home Cinema and Custom Installation specialists; where quality of sound, and quality of service are second to none.

Telephone: 0207 924 2040

[Website](#)

O'Brien Hi-Fi

60 Durham Road, Wimbledon, London, SW20 0TW

Established in 1966, O'Brien Hi-Fi continue to provide the very best in home entertainment systems. Since the 1990s our approach has expanded to include Home Cinema and Smart Home Technology. Our collective passion for music, movies and technology drives us to find the best equipment possible.

Telephone: 02089461528

[Website](#)

Harrow Audio

27 Springfield Road, Harrow, Middlesex, HA1 1QF

We are an independent Hifi shop offering unbiased advice in a friendly environment. ATC, Acoustic Energy, Arcam, Audiolab, A&K, Audeze, Auralic, Dali, Denon, Devialet, Fyne Audio, Graham Slee, KEF, Marantz, Monitor Audio, Musical Fidelity, Naim, Ortofon, PMC, Quad, Rega, REL, Roksan, and Sendor.

Telephone: 0208 930 9933

[Website](#)

Audio Venue Ealing

27 Bond Street, Ealing, London W5 5AS

Audio Venue, Bespoke Audio Visual Consultants | Home Cinema Experts

Audio Venue are specialists in bespoke home cinema and home audio systems. We have years of expertise in designing and installing the very best home cinema, multi-room and audio systems available for customers around the globe.

Telephone: 02085678703

[Website](#)

East Anglia

Basically Sound

Unit 2 Calveley Court, Southburgh Road, Reymerston, Norwich, NR9 4QD

Located in the midst of rural Norfolk, just 15 miles west of Norwich, Basically Sound offers a great place for choosing the best in hi-fi audio systems from the likes of Naim, Linn, Rega & PMC amongst others. Free parking, fresh coffee and a relaxed atmosphere are all provided to help make your visit enjoyable.

Telephone: 01362 820800

[Website](#)

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Witham

1 The Grove Centre, Witham, CM8 2YT

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Telephone: 01376 501733

[Website](#)

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Norwich

29-29a St. Giles Street, Norwich, NR2 1JN

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Telephone: 01603 767605

[Website](#)

Ammonite Audio

97 Knowsley Road, Norwich, NR3 4PT

Retailers specialising in vinyl playback and their own brand of tonearm mounts for Technics and

collars for Jelco armboards. Also stockists of Ortofon, Phasemation cartridges, plus turntables, arms and accessories. **Callers by appointment only, please.**

Telephone: 01603 619098 / 07970 807526

[Website](#)

West Midlands

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Solihull

54 Drury Lane, Mell Square, Solihull, B91 3BH

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Telephone: 0121 709 0606

[Website](#)

Midland Audio X-Change

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MAX have arguably the widest selection of 2 Channel Hi End Audio in the UK today and we are without a doubt THE specialists in analogue/vinyl playback outside of London. Headed by John Roberts, who adds the strength and depth of 38 years audio industry experience to a truly outstanding product portfolio.

Telephone: 01562 731100

[Website](#)

East Midlands

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Unit 13, Flying Horse Walk, Nottingham, NG1 2HN

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Telephone: 0115 988 1703

[Website](#)

Yorkshire and The Humber

Sevenoaks Sound & Vision Leeds

15 The Horsefair Centre, Horsefair, Wetherby, LS22 6JG

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Telephone: 01937 586886

[Website](#)

The Audio Room

The Audio Room, Savile Street, Hull, HU1 3EF

Authorised agents for: ATC, Audio Note, Bowers & Wilkins, Dynaudio, Dynavector, Focal, Linn, Melco, Michell Engineering, Moon, Naim, Nordost, ProAc, Rega, Rotel, Tellurium Q, Vitus Audio. Two dedicated demonstration rooms with large open plan showroom. Part exchange available.

Telephone: 01482 891375

[Website](#)

North West

Brian And Trevors

199 Bury New Road, Manchester, M45 6GE

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Telephone: +(0)161 766 4837

[Website](#)

Tower Audio Ltd

81 Whitegate Drive, Blackpool, Lancashire, FY3 9DA

Here is a list of some of our key brands - Denon Marantz Pro-ject Technics Roksan Audiolab Pioneer Onkyo Teac Audio-Technica B&W Monitor Audio Dali Q-Acoustics Ruark Tivoli Yamaha Arcam QED Chord Elipson Cyrus Amphion Hegel Primare Sennheiser Grado + Many More

Telephone: 01253 300599

[Website](#)

North East

Audio Therapy

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If you are looking to get the very best from your music please get in touch.
By appointment only, please.

Telephone: 07976 496218

[Website](#)

Scotland

Audio Emotion

2 Banbeath Court, Leven, Fife, KY8 5GY

Music is our passion, and we welcome you to share our carefully selected range of the most beautifully conceived, crafted and sonically stunning products for your complete listening pleasure.

Telephone: 01333 425999

[Website](#)

Northern Ireland and Ireland

If you would like to see your company represented here and on our interactive online dealer finder, then please get in touch.

Click here and we'll be in touch with details

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www.hifipig.com