



**Hi-res magic**  
**Bargain network player**  
 with high-end sonics

**DAB minitest**  
 Four great portable radios  
 with Bluetooth streaming



# Hi-Fi Choice

**PASSION FOR SOUND** Issue No. **393** January 2015

## Music master

Why this Primare pairing is all the amp you'll ever need

**WIN CHORD COMPANY**  
 cables worth  
**£1,890**

**Record revival**  
 How to keep your valuable  
 collection sounding great

**30**

**PRODUCTS ON TEST:**  
 B&W, Denon,  
 Grado, NAD,  
 Pure & Usher



**BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM**  
 Stunning vinyl setup  
 puts you in the groove



**GROUP TEST**  
**USB DAC pack**  
 Essential converters for hi-res  
 music at home and on the go

**Art of noise**  
 Compact  
 floorstander –  
 big on sound

JANUARY 2015  
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# Rediscover Music

Music moves our hearts and enriches our lives. And with the new-generation Technics Reference Class R1 Series, we have created a class-leading sound system for true music lovers.

Engineered from the finest materials, all exquisitely crafted, it sets a new standard in high-resolution audio – one that takes you back to that place where only the music exists.



Rediscover Music

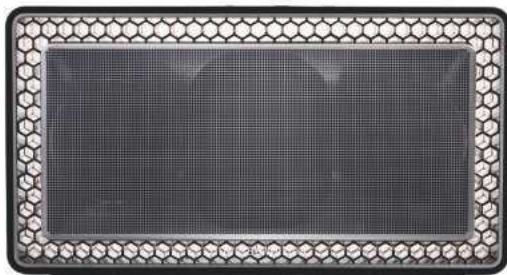
**Technics**

[Technics.com](http://Technics.com)

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www.hifichoice.co.uk Issue No. **393** January 2015

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## Music reviews




**Pink Floyd** *The Endless River*

### BADGES EXPLAINED


**OUR AWARDS**



**EDITOR'S CHOICE:**  
Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance



**RECOMMENDED:**  
Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance



**GROUP TEST WINNER:**  
Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!



It's that time of year again... When we get bombarded with low-cost features and TV programmes recapping the highs and lows in a greatest 'who's hot and what's not' rundown of the last 12 months. Amongst the season's inevitable '100 best of...' moments of 2014 comes the timely and very

welcome news that vinyl sales have reached an 18-year high with more than one million records sold so far this year. It doesn't sound much I know, but when you consider that the last time vinyl achieved this level of sales was back in 1996 you'll understand it marks a significant change in our music buying habits.

The news that vinyl's popularity is on the rise is unlikely to come as much of a surprise to regular *Hi-Fi Choice* readers who, like us, have valiantly supported the format and its sonic virtues throughout its mass market decline. But if the media storm that followed is anything to go by, the news seems to have come as a surprise to the rest of the music-buying public, with many unaware that the format still even existed!

While the increase is undoubtedly good news for the record industry with plans by The Official Record Chart Company to launch a weekly vinyl chart, it's good news for the hi-fi industry too. Christmas is likely to see a further increase in sales and the knock-on effect will mean more record releases and inevitably more new vinyl-related products. 2015 looks to be shaping up nicely for both music and hi-fi fans.

**Lee Dunkley** Editor

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ENTERPRISE HOUSE, ENTERPRISE WAY,  
EDENBRIDGE, KENT TN8 6HF

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**Never miss an issue – turn to p60 for our latest subs offer**

## Special K

Roksan rolls out its new K3 series with integrated amp and CD player

**PRICE:** £1,250 EACH **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 01235 511166 **WEB:** HENLEYDESIGNS.CO.UK

**FOLLOWING THE DESERVED** acclaim for its Kandy K2 series of components alongside a clutch of awards – including winning the Best Stereo Integrated Amplifier category for the K2 BT amp in our very own AVTech Media Awards 2014/15, Roksan has announced the introduction of its K3 series. The London-based company has managed to establish a very strong reputation over recent years with its entry-level Kandy K2 series, and the highly anticipated K3 series offers the next logical step up.

Said to be inspired by the company's more upmarket M2 range of components, distributor Henley Designs tells us that although the new series shares the Kandy name, the K3 products offer a significant

move towards high-end hi-fi, and are designed to challenge performance expectations at the price.

The K3 Integrated Amplifier offers connections for every eventuality to ensure it will remain a vital hub to all your stereo audio sources for years to come. As well as five line-level inputs there's a built-in moving magnet phono stage to appeal to new or reemerging vinyl fans, and aptX

Bluetooth connectivity to enable streamers to listen to tunes wirelessly.

Inside the elegant new chassis of the K3 Integrated Amplifier, its new symmetrical layout offers improved audio circuitry with new op-amps and Roksan claims it delivers a hefty 140W into 8ohms.

Proving that CD players really aren't a thing of the past, the new K3 deck is based on the original K2 design. It



adds new circuitry and high-grade components to improve on performance, alongside a PCM1798 24-bit/192kHz DAC. Digital outputs include AES/EBU XLR, coaxial RCA and optical Toslink. Additionally there's a variety of rarely found but useful features including Shuffle Play, Repeat Play (One and All) and Intro Play that are likely to further enhance the K3's usability and appeal.

Available in three brand new finishes including charcoal, opium and anthracite, both components also come supplied with a newly designed system remote to provide complete control of all the commands on each of the components.

Both models are available to buy from your Roksan dealer now. Read our reviews on the new K3 series in these pages over the coming months.

**The K3s offer a significant move towards high-end hi-fi, and are designed to challenge performance expectations at the price**

## COMMENT

### SPOTIFY VS TAYLOR SWIFT

Spotify has had its detractors over the years, but few can have caused the streaming service quite as much of a headache as pop sensation Taylor Swift.

Though unlikely to be spinning on any *HFC* readers' turntables, Swift is currently the biggest artist anywhere right now, with her latest album, *1989*, selling an astonishing 1.287 million copies in its first week. To put that into perspective, no other artist has had sales as significant as that since Eminem's *The Eminem Show* in 2002. All of which made Swift's decision to withdraw her entire back catalogue from Spotify the week before the release of the record-breaking album all the more frustrating for the streaming service.

The reasons given for the decision vary depending on which particular quotes you believe. Swift has been vocal about her dislike of piracy in the past and implications seem to be that she feels her 'art' is devalued by it being given away for free. She told Yahoo: "I'm not willing to contribute my life's work to an experiment that I don't feel fairly compensates the writers, producers, artists, and creators of this music. And I just don't agree with perpetuating the perception that music has no value and should be free." Meanwhile Scott Borchetta - head of her record label Big Machine Label Group - has suggested that by giving some fans the album for free on Spotify, it's disrespectful to those "superfans" that pay for it. As usual it all appears to be about money, although no one will admit as much.

While Swift's back catalogue is available on rival streaming sites, *1989* is not and has only been available via Youtube, which has just announced plans to launch its own music subscription service (surely no coincidence).

Whatever the reasons for the decision, the ploy has clearly worked and Swift has become the first woman to have three albums sell more than 1 million copies in a single week. Spotify will be hoping other artists don't follow Swift's lead... ▶



# Cabasse MT32 range

A taste of French high-end loudspeaker technology with an entry-level price tag

**PRICE:** £299-£798 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**WEB:** CABASSE.COM/EN/

## FRENCH SPEAKER MAKER

Cabasse has revealed its new MT32 range, which has been developed to bring high-end tech to entry-level products. At the core of the new range sits the DOM 37 tweeter, which is constructed from a single-piece diaphragm unit weighing just 0.1g – originally developed for the TC23 three-way coaxial driver utilised in the flagship La Sphere and LOcean models. Cabasse claims that its lightness alongside its thermal and

mechanical resistance significantly improves the overall performance of the driver and guarantees consistent reproduction over time.

Four models have been developed for use in either two-channel or multi-channel systems: the £798 Jersey MT32 floorstander, £458 Antigua MT32 standmount, £299 Socoa MT32 centre channel and £549 Orion MT32 sub. The range is available in a choice of walnut or ebony finishes.



## IN BRIEF

### PRO-JECT'S RPM1 CARBON IS HERE

● Pro-Ject and Henley Designs have unveiled details of the fourth incarnation of the RPM 1 Genie – a turntable that they believe will stand out from the crowd, thanks to its minimalist styling and radical colour scheme. We talk, of course, of the RPM 1 Carbon. Within its low-resonance chassis sits a newly designed inverted platter bearing with ceramic ball to reduce rumble, while the decoupled 15V AC motor is driven using an ultra-precision AC generator with DC power supply for speed stability and reliability. There's a distinctive S-shaped 8.6in carbon tonearm with a 22mm overhang, counterweight and 2M Red cartridge pre-fitted. Available in black, red and white gloss finishes, the RPM 1 Carbon is on sale now for £325. **HENLEYDESIGNS.CO.UK**

## Marantz debuts HD-DAC1

**PRICE:** £579 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 02890 279923 **WEB:** MARANTZ.CO.UK

Marantz has revealed that for the first time ever it is venturing into the world of headphone amplifier production, and the HD-DAC1 is the result. Featuring an integrated DAC, the company's first ever headphone amp borrows amplification technologies from the high-end Premium 11 Series.

The HD-DAC is claimed to be able to drive audiophile-quality, high-end headphones of up to 600ohms, while its gain control makes it suitable for a variety of

different types of cans. Digital connections include optical and coaxial inputs alongside analogue inputs and a USB B port for hook up to an 'iDevice' or so that users can stream music directly from a PC or Mac. The USB port works in asynchronous mode to support 24-bit/192kHz high-resolution audio as well as DSD 2.8MHz and 5.6MHz (thanks to the CS4398 DAC). The connection also enjoys extended isolation in an effort to eliminate the chance of high-

frequency noise being generated by a PC or Mac entering into the HD-DAC1 when the two are connected. Completing the connection roster, there's a pair of gold-plated fixed level and variable level RCA output terminals.

All information about what resolution music is being played at is displayed on the 'porthole' display and the side cheeks have a wooden retro styling. The HD-DAC1 is available now in a choice of black or silvergold finishes. ▶





THEY DON'T FEEL  
WHAT YOU FEEL  
*THEY DON'T SEE  
WHAT YOU SEE*  
THEY DON'T HEAR  
WHAT YOU HEAR  
THEY DON'T HAVE  
**LEEMA**  
ACOUSTICS



NEW WEBSITE:-[WWW.LEEMA-ACOUSTICS.COM](http://WWW.LEEMA-ACOUSTICS.COM)  
AND NOW, YOU CAN FIND US ON FACEBOOK 

# Tuned Array C-line cables

Chord Co's new affordable interconnect

**PRICE:** £35-£45 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 01908 625700 **WEB:** CHORD.CO.UK

**THE CHORD COMPANY** has unveiled its new C-line analogue interconnect, which boasts array technology that's normally reserved for far more expensive cables, such as its flagship Sarum range. Tuned array's reputation is for producing improved levels of transparency, detail, coherence and musical involvement, and the C-line RCA interconnect has become The Chord Company's most affordable cable to offer the technology yet. Constructed with pseudo-balanced oxygen-free copper conductors with fully floating high-performance shielding, it is claimed to benefit from the company's unique direct gold-plating technology. It also has ultra-reliable over-moulded strain-relief to protect the terminations and is optimised for maximum performance with CD players, DACs, phono stages and streamers.

Like all Chord Company cables, each interconnect is hand tested in the Wiltshire factory. The C-line is available to buy now, costing £35 for a 0.5m length or £45 for 1m.



## IN BRIEF

### MUSAIC UP FOR 2015 CES AWARD



● Though it's not expected to be available to buy until early 2015 (following its launch at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas), MUSAIC's smart hi-fi is already causing a stir in the industry and has been nominated for the CES Innovation Awards 2015. Judged by a panel of independent industrial designers, engineers and members of the trade press, the awards celebrate outstanding design and engineering in consumer electronics products.

MUSAIC is a multi-room audio system that also incorporates home automation features such as lighting. It works with wi-fi and Bluetooth and can play numerous file types, including 24-bit Studio Master. MUSAIC Music Players will be available in two sizes and will be compatible with numerous streaming apps. **MUSAIC.COM**

## Flare Audio's new tech

**PRICE:** £499 **AVAILABLE:** NOW  
**CONTACT:** 01903 761000 **WEB:** FLAREAUDIO.COM

Flare Audio has unveiled what the company claims is the world's first "fully open" headphones. Aimed at the pro audio and audiophile market, the Reference R1 is described as being able to produce distortion-free sound even at high volume, thanks to a series of new advancements. Utilising new patent pending tech called Space and Vortex, it's claimed that Flare's vortex silencing spirals around both sides of the 40mm driver to remove all enclosed residual pressure interference (ERPI). ERPI is done away with without travelling across the driver or reflecting within the enclosure of the headphones, leading to the removal of enclosure-based standing wave interference. Meanwhile, balancing pressure between the front and rear sections enables linear driver movement (LDM) to create total timbre accuracy. According to Flare, it's the combination of the removal of the ERPI and creation of LDM that produces a pure, natural sound with a full frequency response that has been impossible until now.

Creator of the R1 and managing director of Flare Audio, Davies Roberts, told *HFC*: "The Reference R1 is a completely new listening experience and a vital tool for those wanting to hear everything in sound without any listening product distortion. Stereo imaging perfectly mimics nature, allowing full 360° image placement. We

believe it sets a new standard in personal sound listening for both professionals and audiophiles".

The R1 boasts a single 40mm dynamic driver with neodymium magnet and impedance of 32ohms. It weighs 350g (minus the cable) and has a 1.5m studio-grade cable with tangle-protection sleeve and 3.5mm gold mini-jack. ▶

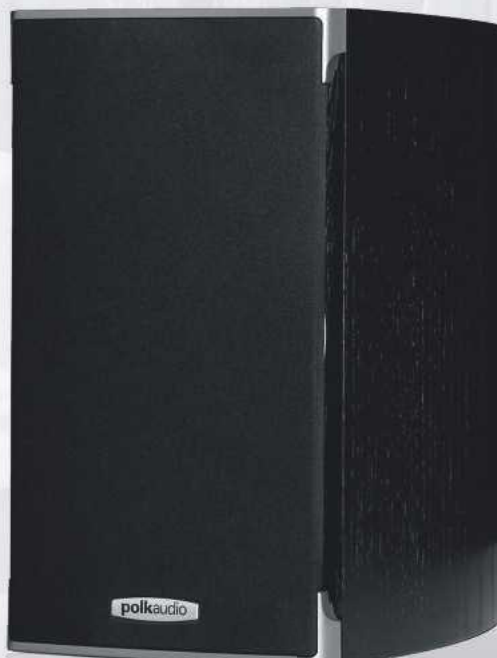




## Polk RTi Series

### A heritage of incredible sound

Polk is an American original, crafting audio experiences that deliver our iconic, engaging, authentic sound since 1972. Our RTiA Series will take you by surprise in more ways than one. They'll fill your home with the majesty of an orchestra, the intimacy of a string quartet, or the drive of your favourite band. You'll experience the big cinema thrills of your favourite movies with gut-checking realism. All in beautifully finished, furniture-grade real wood cabinets that look great in your home.



RTi A1



# Webwatch

**Andrew Simpson** casts an expert eye over his pick of the best hi-fi websites and online content



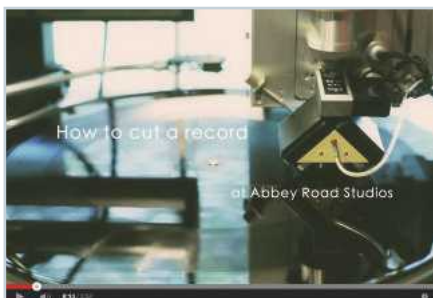
## High tide

Hats off to hi-res streaming subscription site Tidal for putting its services to the test via this simple A/B comparison, which plays you lossy and lossless snippets from five tracks. Guessing which versions are hi-res bags you up to 14 days free access: [test.tidalhifi.com](http://test.tidalhifi.com)



## Style with substance

Visitors to Monitor Audio's website have been greeted with a stunning new look in recent months. The comprehensive revamp combines gorgeous product images with pop-up feature boxes, organised into an easy to navigate site. You can also subscribe to the e-newsletter at [monitoraudio.co.uk](http://monitoraudio.co.uk)



## Cutting edge

Head to Abbey Road Studios via this short Youtube video courtesy of The Vinyl Factory, which shows you how the modern LP is created using traditional methods married to computer tech. Extra points for spotting the high-end speakers lurking in the background: [youtu.be/Ujtpbigh1vs](http://youtu.be/Ujtpbigh1vs)



## November giveaway

Christmas came early on Twitter thanks to @LinnRecords. Each day last month its customers were treated to an exclusive deal of the day. With album discounts, free music and prize draws up for grabs. <http://t.co/uKjq8q4zEr>



## Golden ears challenge

Test your hi-fi ears with this interactive site from Philips, which applies a range of effects to the same track for you to guess what's happening to the signal. From coloration to stereo width, each effect is explained before the challenge begins helping you learn as you go: [goldenears.philips.com](http://goldenears.philips.com)



## Talking VPI

New Jersey-based turntable maker VPI recently launched a forum for owners and vinyl fans alike. And with regular discussion led by head honcho Mat Weisfeld and dad Harry, you're given lots of insight into latest product development. Join in the fun at: [vpiindustries.com/forum/](http://vpiindustries.com/forum/)

## FOLLOW US: @HIFICHOICEMAG

### CHOICE TWEETS

**STONEAUDIO.CO.UK (@STONEAUDIO)**  
Jazz up your Naim Mu-so with these replacement coloured grilles, now available to order. [t.co/aalBMyfeU](http://t.co/aalBMyfeU)

**PROHIFI (@PROHIFIUK)**  
DON'T JUST HEAR MUSIC, FEEL IT: Achieve higher quality audio output with our range of digital to analogue converters [www.pro-hifi.co.uk](http://www.pro-hifi.co.uk)

**VINYL ME, PLEASE (@VINYLMEPLEASE)**  
The best albums always have more to uncover than first meets the ear

**SPOTIFY (@SPOTIFY)**  
"Bohemian Rhapsody" turns 40. Think you know every word? Here's a quiz fit for a Queen: [spoti.fi/11T3hm](http://spoti.fi/11T3hm)

**OXFORD AUDIO (@OXFORDAUDIO)**  
Can't believe how good the Mac through the DCS Vivaldi sounds into the Devialet 250 playing Doors LA Woman @dCSonlythemusic @DEVIALET

**BLUE NOTE RECORDS (@BLUENOTERECORDS)**  
#UncompromisingExpression is the illustrated history of Blue Note & a 5-CD companion boxset [smarturl.it/BlueNoteBook](http://smarturl.it/BlueNoteBook)

**KEF AUDIO UK (@KEFAUDIO)**  
KEF's R Series makes for a great companion on a lazy Sunday afternoon! #KEF #lazyweekend

**EMILY BARKER (@EMILYBARKERHALO)**  
Last chord, last song, last night, last tour... for the time being. Thank U to all who have supported us over the years

**PS AUDIO (@PSAUDIO)**  
Paul's Post : Regaining our balance - [eepurl.com/9aCeJ](http://eepurl.com/9aCeJ)

**HIFIX (@FRANKHARVEYHIFI)**  
We do not sell dish washers or vacuum cleaners or washing machines, just Hi Fi and AV with un-parallel advice

**GREG ASPINALL (@EASTLONDONCHAP)**  
#nowplaying@beck "mutations" 24/192 #HDAudio @HDtracks @HiResAudio #music #MusicSundays @FiIO\_official x5 and wolfson DAC's @HiFiChoiceMag

**VACUUM LAB (@VACUUMLAB)**  
Happened today: 125 years ago the first #jukebox debuted in San Francisco [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jukebox](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jukebox)

**GLOSSOP RECORD CLUB (@GLOSSOPRECORD)**  
Bring a record. Bring yourself... Full details for December's Record Club: LUCKY DIP 2 [wp.me/p3LKju-fA](http://wp.me/p3LKju-fA)



“Get up and drive your funky soul!”

James Brown

# The heart and soul of music

Precision, a luxury and highly regarded loudspeaker range from Tannoy, built to deliver music as it was meant to be heard. With audiophile features such as double-magnet drivers, hand-built crossovers and mass-load cabinet tuning, Precision has music at its heart and soul. Across two stunning floorstanding models, a compact stand-mount and matching centre channel speaker, Precision delivers breath-taking detail and musical dynamics. Built around a brand new 6 inch (150 mm) version of Tannoy's world renowned Dual Concentric™ driver, the contemporary cabinets boast premium fit and finish in a choice of colours. Powerful, passionate and incredibly precise, Precision gets to the heart and soul of music like no other speaker in its class.



[tannoy.com](http://tannoy.com)



October 2013 - Precision 6.2



Precision 6.2



Precision 6.4



Precision 6.2 / 6.1 / 6C /  
TS2.12 system



Precision 6.2 / 6.1 / 6C /  
TS2.12 system



THE  
hi-fi  
SHOW

# Windsor 2014

Were you one of the unlucky ones that didn't make it along to the hi-fi show of the year? Don't worry, we did and here's the highlights of what you missed

**AS THE WEATHER** started to take a turn for the worse and the rest of the country began preparations for the madness that is Christmas shopping, there was only one place to be in the first weekend of November. We talk, of course, of the gorgeous grounds of the Beaumont Estate in Old Windsor and the return of The Hi-fi Show – the only event of importance for any serious audiophile.

The two-day speciality high-end event showcased some of the international hi-fi world's finest audio equipment with over 80 top-flight audio brands and manufacturers in attendance. Significantly bigger than last year's inaugural event, there were a host of products being exclusively unveiled for the first time in the UK, presentations and interactive workshops, and if it all got too much, visitors could always escape to the chill out zone with a coffee or something a little stronger.

Iconic brands including T+A, Mark Levinson, Trilogy, Constellation Audio, Trinnov, Ming Da, Krell, Audio Alchemy, iFi Audio and Wilson Audio all revealed new products that had never been seen or heard in the UK before. Meanwhile, there was standing room only as Alan Sircom, Matthias Bode, John Bamford and *HFC's* sister magazine *Hi-Fi News & Record Review's* Paul Miller presented workshops discussing topics covering the differences between FLAC and WAV files, how loudspeaker time alignment affects imaging and highlighting the difference between Ethernet cables.

But most of all it was all about the music and the beautiful array of equipment that creates it. Whether you had money to spend or just wanted to go for a bit of hi-fi window shopping, this was without doubt the place to be. If you didn't make it along here's what you missed...



1 JBL's Everest DD67000 driven by a Mark Levison N052 preamp teams up with No53 monoblocks to wow visitors to the Harman Luxury Audio Group room, while Mark Levinson's No585 makes its UK debut. [harmanluxuryaudio.com](http://harmanluxuryaudio.com)

2 Harman Consumer UK's Mark Hockey shows off a spectacular range of headphones from brands including AKG, JBL and Harman Kardon. [uk.akg.com](http://uk.akg.com), [uk.jbl.com](http://uk.jbl.com), [harmankardon.co.uk](http://harmankardon.co.uk)

3 Sound Setup shows a digital system played through exaSound's e22 DSD DAC. Teamed up with Janszen zA2.1 hybrid electrostatic speakers and Bryston PowePac 120 amps. [soundsetup.co.uk](http://soundsetup.co.uk)

4 Musical Fidelity's £8,000 Nu Vista 800 integrated hybrid amplifier is fed by the company's M6 series into B&W's 802 Diamond speakers and sounds just incredible. [musicalfidelity.com](http://musicalfidelity.com)

5 Audioquest's Richard Kelly hosts a USB cable comparison. Using a Primare NP-30, Heed electronics and Kudos Super 20 loudspeakers he shows visitors how to get the best possible sound from hi-res downloads. [audioquest.com](http://audioquest.com)

## The Hi-Fi show 2014 had over 80 top flight audio brands in attendance

6 Chord Electronics' Choral Ensemble includes Blu transport, Codex 384kHz/DSD streamer, Symphonic phono stage, Prima preamp and Mezzo 50 stereo amplifier. Plus the new 'satin black' Hugo DAC. [chordelectronics.co.uk](http://chordelectronics.co.uk)

7 WireWorld shows off a selection of Phonar loudspeakers and Micromega components customised in luxury leather by artisans Dubury design. [wireworldcable.co.uk](http://wireworldcable.co.uk)

8 Black Rhodium's cables are put through their paces with Ming Da NC368 valve amplification and partnering CD player and Origin Live Astute suspended loudspeakers. [blackrhodium.co.uk](http://blackrhodium.co.uk)

9 Symmetry gives the Brinkmann Spyder turntable its first European outing. It benefits from the Sinus power supply and can accommodate up to four tonearms. [symmetry-systems.co.uk](http://symmetry-systems.co.uk)

10 Max Townshend's Seismic complete Glastonbury system is connected with F1 Fractal interconnects and fed by the CD2 universal disc player and Rock 7/Excalibur 2 turntable. [townshendaudio.com](http://townshendaudio.com)





IN ADMIRATION OF MUSIC

# PURE, AUTHENTIC SOUND REPRODUCTION

- delivered by the brand new DALI RUBICON series



Producing a wonderfully wide dynamic range and imaging so real, you'll believe that you are right in the middle of the action.

The RUBICON LCR is a wall-mounted speaker in a class of its own and features DALI's hybrid tweeter module and wood-fibre cones.

The LCR boasts an ingenious bass port configuration built into the back panel that uses the wall to extend its acoustic properties - this delivers an unrivalled bass response and eliminates the need to add a subwoofer to your two-channel system.



For more information on the new RUBICON series: [www.dali-rubicon.com](http://www.dali-rubicon.com)



1 T+A gives excited visitors to its stand a preview of its new PDP 3000 HV SACD player/DAC, due for a UK launch in 2015 and a snip at £12,000. [ta-hifi.de](http://ta-hifi.de)

2 Japanese brand Melco makes its UK debut with two digital music storage solutions. The N1Z with a 1TB SDD drive and twin power supplies and the N1A with 4TB of storage. [melco-audio.com](http://melco-audio.com)

3 Atlas Cables runs demos of the brand's S/PDIF optical and coaxial cables including its new Reference Series Mavros multi-stranded glass optical cable, £125/1m. [atlas-cables.com](http://atlas-cables.com)

4 Mains Cables R Us (MCRU) launches its Eclipse P interconnect Slic Innovations cable. Audiophile fuses from Synergistic Research prove to be one of the most popular sellers. [mcrucable.com](http://mcrucable.com)

5 Naim Audio's flagship Statement amp makes a huge statement – that's it in front of Naim's Dave Spiers – thanks to its 746W into 8ohms output. [naimaudio.com](http://naimaudio.com)

6 Kog Audio partners its mighty Avalon Transcendent loudspeakers with the new VTL TL-6.5 Signature Series II preamp and S-200 Signature stereo power amp, £12,700 and £11,500. [kogaudio.com](http://kogaudio.com)

7 AnthemAV Solutions wows listeners with its Geek Out USB DAC/headphone amp through Oppo's PM-1 luxury cans, as well as Anthem M1 amps with Paradigm Prestige speakers. [anthemavs.co.uk](http://anthemavs.co.uk)

8 Trilogy's highlights include the 925 hybrid integrated, ISOL-8 SubStation Integra power conditioner feeding the 925 amp, 907 phono stage and Brinkmann Balance turntable. [trilogyaudio.com](http://trilogyaudio.com)

9 PMC's stunning three-way twenty.26 flagship impresses visitors, driven by Bryston's 4B SST2 power amplifier with matching BDP-2 digital media player and BDA-2DAC. [pmc-speakers.com](http://pmc-speakers.com)



1 Oppo unveils early beta samples of its colourful PM-3 headphones and HA-2 portable headphone amplifier, due to be available early 2015. [oppodigital.co.uk](http://oppodigital.co.uk)

2 Not content with providing the equipment supports for many of the exhibitors, Hi-Fi Racks shows off some stunning hi-fi furniture, including a beautiful coffee table. [hifiracks.co.uk](http://hifiracks.co.uk)

3 Sound Foundations showcases Clearaudio's Master Innovation turntable. Here it sits on the matching Olymp stand, fitted with Clearaudio's Statement TT1i tonearm. [soundfoundations.co.uk](http://soundfoundations.co.uk)

4 NuNu Distribution presents TAD electronics with an Oracle Delphi MK VI turntable and Broadmann Acoustics' JB155 and the diminutive FS1 floorstanders. [nunudistribution.co.uk](http://nunudistribution.co.uk)

5 Unmistakable as horn speakers, these gorgeously constructed Tune Audio Anima loudspeakers from BD Audio sound nearly as amazing as they look. [bd-audio.co.uk](http://bd-audio.co.uk)

6 Primare shows off its new 60 Series pre-power ensemble. The PRE60 preamp and companion A60 stereo power amp partnered with Revel's Performa F208 floorstanding loudspeakers. [primare.net](http://primare.net)

7 Computer Audio Design (CAD) blows the cobwebs out with a demo of its 1543 DAC, CAT CD ripper/storage device and Wilson Audio's Duette Series 2 speakers. [computeraudiodesign.com](http://computeraudiodesign.com)

8 Peter Madnick reintroduces the nineties Audio Alchemy brand with the DDP-1 DAC/preamp and DPA-1 power amp. Both are priced at £1,595 and are on sale now. [symmetry-systems.co.uk](http://symmetry-systems.co.uk)

9 Guy Sergeant shows off an amazing system featuring Pure Sound's M845 mono amps feeding the handcrafted Uccello three-way horn system speakers by Simon Mears Audio. [puresound.info](http://puresound.info)



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# Different class

Pairing a feature-rich preamp with mighty Class D muscle, **Andrew Simpson** asks if this could be all the amp you'll ever need





#### ► DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Primare PRE32/  
A34.2

**ORIGIN**  
Sweden

**TYPE**  
Preamp with media  
board and Class D  
power amplifier

**WEIGHT**  
10.5kg each

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
470 x 109 x 343mm

**FEATURES**

- Preamp with vTuner internet radio, upsampling DAC, network and aptX Bluetooth streaming
- Quoted power: 150W/8ohms
- Balanced inputs/outputs
- Burr-Brown PCM1792 DAC

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Karma-AV Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01423 358846

**WEBSITE**  
karma-av.co.uk  
primare.net



**F**rom the release of its flagship 60 series amps to the ongoing evolution of its DACs and streamers, Primare's engineers have clearly been cracking the whip over the last year and it seems that they're not about to slow down now.

Sitting below the 60 series, the 30 lineup is Primare's most populated range, comprising a standalone streamer, DAC and phono stage alongside a selection of amplifiers. Because of how Primare is designing its kit around clever upgrades via optional plug-in modules with extra functionality, there's a wealth of integrated or separate solutions to suit most system needs.

The PRE32 is the range's dedicated preamp, equipped with plenty of analogue inputs and outputs (including balanced), remote control and an OLED front display. Our test model also comes packing Primare's MM30 media board, which simply slots into a dedicated port on the amp's rear and ups its cost to £3,000. While this may seem like a bit of a price hike, this add-on is great value given the MM30 is lifted directly from Primare's £2,000 NP30 streamer (HFC 387) and comes brimming with

### They're blessed with a sonic finesse that opens up the music to show it at its best

a range of digital inputs, upsampling DAC and app-controlled streaming. Our test model is also the first to get Primare's new aptX Bluetooth module inside its case, which costs £180 fitted, taking the fully-loaded PRE32 up to £3,180. Unlike many Bluetooth-equipped amps, the Primare outputs the Bluetooth receiver's signal directly to its own sample rate converter and DAC for improved sound quality, where it's upsampled to 192kHz.

Sharing the streamer module from the NP30 means the PRE32 gets the same Burr-Brown PCM1792 DAC and SRC4392 24-bit/192kHz upsampling converter for digital duties. On the analogue side of things, all signal paths are kept short and fully balanced with source selection, volume and balance controls all performed in the analogue domain. The PRE32 uses an R-core transformer and is DC coupled from input to output, with no capacitors in the signal path, as Primare has instead opted to employ active servos to compensate for DC present. ►

**CONNECTIONS**



- 1 Bluetooth antenna socket
- 2 MM30 media board with digital inputs
- 3 XLR and RCA analogue inputs
- 4 XLR and RCA analogue outputs
- 5 Loudspeaker binding posts
- 6 Balanced XLR and RCA inputs

have surprising levels of depth and lifelike timbre while the trumpet's edges don't have that sense of being unnaturally curtailed. Compared with other similarly priced streaming devices that I've recently plumbed into my reference system, the Primares certainly sound less boxed in over Bluetooth. Channel separation and, consequentially, stereo imaging is impressively well rendered to the point that you sometimes have to look twice to realise you're not hearing a higher bitrate version. But while Bluetooth makes for a worthwhile inclusion, you really need to serve the Primares a richer diet to properly benefit from what they have to offer.

Exploring a 16-bit/44kHz FLAC rip of Future Islands' *Singles* album streamed over Ethernet, lets you know that these amps relish having more to play with. Percussion on *Like The Moon* is razor sharp, while being so foot-tappingly rhythmical, it's addictive. Bass guitar notes take on a textured, robust quality, and the keyboard's atmospheric go deep and wide within the soundstage as their delayed echoes trail off into the distance for a genuine sense of scale. But it's not just the Primares' timing and musical size that grabs your attention, it's the way these amps

Partnering the PRE32 is Primare's A34.2 power amp that's housed in the same case as the preamp with a simplified logo-embossed face plate. Internally the A34.2 side steps the more traditional Class AB approach of Primare's £3,300 A32 power amp, to employ the same UFPD (Ultra Fast Power Device) Class D technology as the £6,500 A60.

The A34.2 incorporates a preamp stage comprised of Burr-Brown OPA2134 and Analogue Devices AD8512 op-amps, with two discrete UFPD amplifiers giving a substantial 2x 150W into 8ohms (claimed).

**The add-on is great value given it's from Primare's £2,000 NP30 streamer**

If you have the need and wallet for even more power, you also have the option to run two A34.2 amps in bridged mono mode, whereby each amp will give you a massive 550W to play with.

**Feature comforts**

But focussing on what's inside only tells half the story, as befitting products from Primare, their external build, look and feel are pure Scandinavian chic. From its customisable front screen for naming inputs and tweaking screen colour to selecting source and tailoring settings, the PRE32 is utterly intuitive to use. What's more, the onboard streamer also gives you access to Primare's excellent app (for iOS and Android portable devices), which makes the supplied remote control seem so last century. Alongside useful features including random and repeat settings for stored music and with access to bit-depth and sample rate info, the



Costing nearly £5k all in, the Primares have plenty of high-end rivals vying for your cash. If you're after a state of the art streaming amplifier package that goes against the traditional Class AB grain, Devialet's 120 at £4,490 and 200 at £6,390 are one-box solutions boasting app controlled streaming and with phono stages to boot. While the extra cash between them buys you more power and settings, both amps have the same hybrid Class A/digital Class D heart and present a sound that's fluid and beguilingly natural.

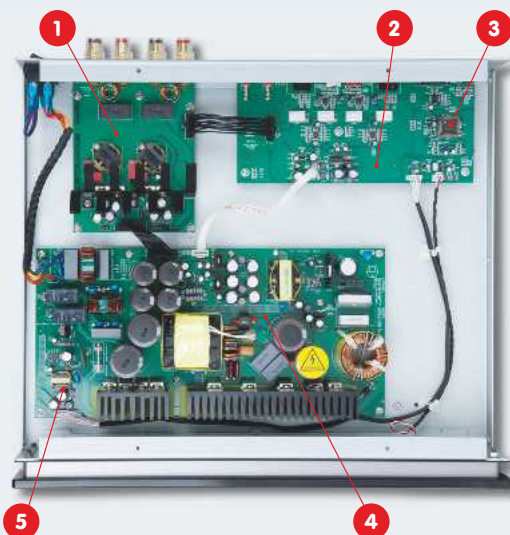
If compact is king then combining Cyrus' Stream XP<sub>2</sub> Qx preamp/streamer and X Power power amp costing £2,009 and £1,070 respectively, offers a wealth of digital inputs via the slick n-remote or a dedicated app. This system marries the latest digital tech to a Class AB power amp for a clear sound with impressive power and bass control.

app also opens the door to internet radio via vTuner, and Mac users can stream directly from Spotify.

**Sound quality**

Whether streaming music over Bluetooth or piping hi-res audio through hard-wired USB and Ethernet connections, these amps have clarity in abundance. Streaming The Handsome Family's *Far From Any Road* at 320kbps via Spotify through my laptop certainly doesn't draw attention to the shortcomings of this compressed format. Male and female vocals

**A34.2 POWER AMP**



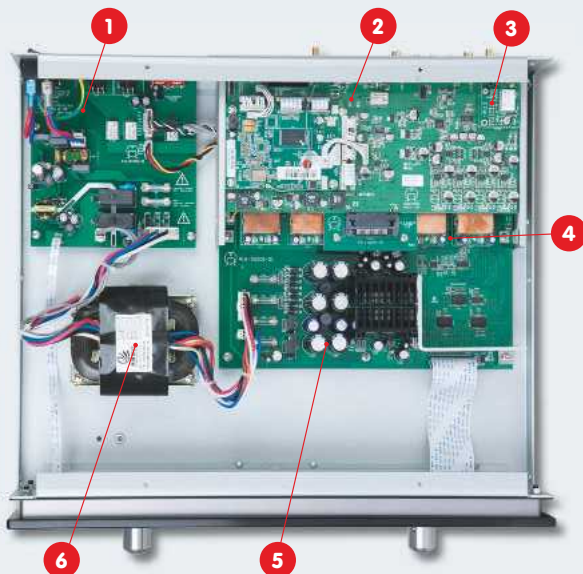
- 1 Output stage
- 2 XLR & RCA input stage with bridged option
- 3 Micro processor with protection circuits and triggers
- 4 Main power supply
- 5 Standby power supply

**ULTRA FAST POWER DEVICE**

Primare's proprietary UFPD modules are based on switch mode, analogue pulse-width modulation (PWM) Class D tech. While this type of amp typically gives great results for power verses eco efficiency, it's criticised in more traditional hi-fi circles for producing a harsher sound. Primare says this is because the output stages of Class D amps can become unstable with variations in speaker impedance and frequency, unless they're controlled by sufficient feedback.

To counteract this, Primare's UFPDs give a consistent feedback loop across the entire audio range that's stable beyond the audio band. The UFPD module then actively adapts the loop gain for stability, compensating for changes to the filter output and adapting the amount of feedback required. In reacting in this way, the UFPDs claim to treat all signals equally regardless of frequency or slew rate and with the ability to suppress filter resonance, resulting in ultra-low distortion.

**PRE32 PREAMP**



- 1 Switch mode PSU for Eco-standby
- 2 DAC/streamer board
- 3 Bluetooth receiver
- 4 Gain stage
- 5 Power supply
- 6 R-Core transformer

**ON TEST**

The PRE32 is a very low distortion, low noise, wideband design. As an 'analogue preamp' it offers just 0.0001-0.0013% THD and a 95dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV) with a response that stretches out to -2.4dB/100kHz. Its digital heart is impressive too - the response(s)

reaching -0.5dB/20kHz (44.1/48kHz media), -3.4dB/45kHz (96kHz files) and -15.9dB/90kHz (192kHz files) with distortion as low as 0.001% at -20dBFs and the A-wtd S/N only fractionally below average at 103.5dB via its balanced outs. Jitter is very low at <10psec at all sample rates from

48kHz-192kHz. The partnering A34.2 power amp beats its 150W spec. at 2x 200W/8ohm and 2x 400W/4ohm though there's little extra dynamic headroom. The 80dB S/N (re. 0dBV) is adequate but, unlike some Class D amps, its response (-0.4dB/20kHz) is unaffected by speaker load. PM

seem to stay true to the purity of the music, without being overly clinical. Despite this album's synthpop origins, the Primares are never artificial sounding. Even at low levels the way the music comes across undiluted nicely portrays all the fervour of the band's performance, while cranking up the volume brings the rawness of Samuel T Herring's vocal even closer. But that's not to suggest that these amps are in any way forward sounding, because they're not. They are very well focussed across every aspect of the audioband, and without any hint of colouration.

While the A34.2 power amp's casework barely gets warm to the touch in use, it certainly sounds ready for anything driving my Dynaudio Focus 260 floorstanding loudspeakers. These speakers typically welcome plenty of muscle to really open them up, and the poweramp shows no hesitation in taking control. My 24/96 FLAC download of Håvard Gimse's *Apreggione Sonata D821*, Adagio from Schubert & Schumann can sometimes sound flat and lacking life with the wrong amp behind the Dynaudios, but the A34.2 shows its character, adding real weight to the piano combined with delicacy when needed. The strings fill the midrange with purpose and poise, highlighting

how much control these amps are able to orchestrate over proceedings.

**Conclusion**

Despite covering all bases from amp to DAC and network streamer, you'll never be found lost in a muddle of menus and button pressing, as the Primares come top of the class for an enjoyable, accessible and rewarding user experience. And it's not just the interface that scores highly, as they're also blessed with a sonic finesse that opens up the music to show it at its best, while being equally forgiving of poorer sources. Treat them to some hi-res material and they'll really show you just what they're capable of ●

**Hi-Fi Choice**

**OUR VERDICT**

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Class build and user interface; great streamer; balanced and clear sound
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Remote is no match for the app
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** This elegant duo has poise and clarity in spades, and makes a refined and dynamic sound
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★

**OVERALL**



**Q&A**

**Lars Pedersen**  
Primare MD



**AS: Why did you opt to move towards Class D instead of traditional Class A or AB designs?**

**LP:** Primare has used Class D since the introduction of the CDI-10 compact system in 2007. We decided to start using our UFPD implementation of Class D because it has the potential for a naturally fast and dynamic sound due to very low distortion and high efficiency.

**Will all of your amplifiers use UFPD technology going forward? Or will you continue to also make Class AB amps as well?**

We'll continue to use UFPD because we think it sounds more life-like. All new Primare amplifiers since 2007, including the EISA award-winning I32, are based on UFPD. We have an open-minded approach, but when it's all about improving the sound UFPD is the best we can do right now.

**Have you considered fitting an internal phono stage to the PRE32?**

No, the very sensitive phono amplifier will perform much better in its own dedicated, isolated housing with its own power supply.

**What were your biggest challenges in developing these amps?**

To make UFPD sound better than our previous AB designs. We knew we had low distortion, detail and dynamics with our Class D implementation. Improving the rhythm, soundstage and the tonal balance from Class D was the most demanding aspect of the development. Our success is down to the active application of feedback and a careful choice of components. We spent many months listening before we were satisfied and we think our UFPD technology marries the best virtues of Class D with those of AB.

**What's next for Primare?**

In the immediate future we'll continue to add functionality to the app. For instance, it now automatically lets users know when firmware updates are available.

# How we test

Hi-Fi Choice employs the most rigorous test and measurement regime in the business. Here's how we do it...

## Unique group tests

Our *Group Tests* are supported by rigorous and exhaustive listening tests carried out by experts

### USB DACS GROUP TEST

**THE PROCESS OF** reliably auditioning six USB DACs isn't as straightforward as doing a single standalone review. Each DAC is connected with its supplied power lead, or if it's hub-powered it's put into a suitable USB port, and powered continuously to make sure it's fully warmed up. Any models with built-in rechargeable batteries are fully charged before listening takes place. This procedure ensures that all models have reasonable use before any listening begins, and they are all kept powered or topped up to maximum capacity throughout the comparative listening test process.

The listening sessions take place over several days, with all the DACs given time to warm up

before each listening session commences. Each DAC is connected via its analogue output to an integrated amplifier driving floorstanding speakers. The source is a MacBook Pro running OS X 10.9.5 and Audirvana Plus media player.

The four albums are chosen to provide a wide variation of music styles, recording quality and sample rates, and each track is played several times until a definitive picture of the DAC's sound quality is obtained. This is then swiftly written up from the copious listening notes taken. Any portable DACs and those with built-in headphone amplifiers also get listened to with a pair Philips Fidelio X2 headphones and a pair of RHA T10i in-earphones.



### BLIND LISTENING TESTS

This crucial process is very carefully controlled so that we get reliable and consistent results in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Our listeners must not feel that they're being tested, despite being unaware of the brand or price of the products they are auditioning.

The session begins by setting the volume level to an agreed point, one that all three panellists feel comfortable with, yet that is

high enough to make differences easily discernible. Then the choice of music is agreed – it needs to be familiar, but also well recorded and of sufficient variety to give meaningful listening comparisons. The chosen selection of music is played, and the panellists are encouraged to discuss their impressions of the sound of the product. This is then repeated, and periodically the panel listens to earlier products for reference purposes. The

consensus, or otherwise then forms the basis of our sound quality section.

At the end of the session, there's a final debrief when panellists discuss their findings. It's an exhaustive process, but carried out in this way is free from prejudices based on brand, price or appearance, while the different sensitivities of the listeners help to round out the analysis in order to make it more widely applicable.

### REFERENCE SYSTEM

**AMPLIFIER**  
Musical Fidelity M6500i

**LOUDSPEAKER**  
Dynaudio Excite X38

**CABLES**  
QED XT40 speaker cables,  
Alpha Design Labs Formula 2 USB

**EQUIPMENT SUPPORT**  
Audiophile Base

### TEST MUSIC

**KATE BUSH**  
*50 Words For Snow*  
24/96 FLAC



**PINK FLOYD**  
*The Division Bell*  
24/96 FLAC



**MADONNA**  
*True Blue*  
24/192 FLAC



**STEVIE WONDER**  
*Innervisions*  
24/96 FLAC







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# Group test

USB DACS £165-£900

## Bit perfection

**Lee Dunkley** unleashes hi-res music from his computer with six USB DACs

**THE WAY WE** listen to music is changing. Just a few short years ago it was the shiny silver disc that was the format of choice for many music fans looking to feed their hi-fi systems with the highest quality audio in either CD or SACD formats. But if the growing number of new digital-to-analogue convertors (DACs) on the market and the increasing popularity for hi-res music download sites are anything to go by, then 2015 most definitely looks set to be the year of the high-quality music download and the USB DAC.

### Conversion factor

As well as offering the latest file format decoding for 24-bit/96kHz or 192kHz music files from audio-grade chipsets, many of the USB DAC models on test here also cater for Direct-Stream Digital (DSD) music files originating from SACD music mastering at 24-bit/385kHz resolution. What's more, adding a DAC between the

USB output of your computer and your hi-fi system goes a lot further than decoding formats, and is an effective upgrade to every bit of audio that comes out of a computer's USB socket.

As many will know, using a computer as your source breaks just about every rule in the high fidelity audio book. There are plenty of ways a computer can degrade and interfere with the quality of the audio signal along its path, and taking the digital-to-analogue conversion out of its hands makes plenty of sense.

With such a diversity of options available, we have chosen to cover three 'portable' models with a built-in headphone amplifier for music fans on the move, as well as three 'home' models designed to be permanently linked between a computer and hi-fi system. It's a far reaching group, but one that should reveal the model best suited to your individual needs. To see how they perform, read on.



ON TEST



**Denon DA-300USB**  
£329 p29

This desktop DAC/headphone amp from respected AV brand Denon comes with a stand so that it can sit upright, and incorporates the company's proprietary Advanced AL32 processing as found on its upmarket disc players.



**ADL X1**  
£395 p31

A portable DAC/headphone amp from newcomer Alpha Design Labs capable of handling inputs up to 24/192, the X1 is just as happy sat between a computer and a hi-fi system or neatly piggybacked to an iDevice. But how does it sound?



**Hegel HD12 DSD**  
£900 p33

Another new brand to the UK, Hegel hails from Norway where it likes to do things a little bit differently. Don't be fooled by the simplistic styling at the price; this home DAC/headphone amp has some impressive capabilities to bring to any music system.



**Henry Audio USB DAC 128 mkII**  
£210 p35

This straightforward USB DAC from Norway supports formats up to 24/192. This latest model is the continuation of an open-source project started by a group of enthusiasts who wanted to make an affordable way to listen to hi-res music.



**iFi Nano iDSD**  
£165 p37

The cheapest by a good way, this portable DAC/headphone amp is housed in gorgeous alloy casework and is designed to give excellent value for money and serious sonics. But how does it fare among such exalted company?



**LH Labs Geek Out M**  
£249 p39

No prizes for style, but the dinky Geek Out M punches way above its weight. It's perhaps better known for the huge crowdfunding support it received, but this mini USB DAC/headphone amp has much to offer and promises to deliver great sound.



# Black velvet.



Vinyl is black. Notes are black. Anodised aluminum is blacker than black. The much-acclaimed Confidence C1 Platinum is the epitome of a point-source loudspeaker in a new black design. Mesmerizing with superb qualities of precision, from an incredibly capable, dramatic, spectacular bass to silky-clear, subtle, velvety highs. It features Dynaudio's innovative DDC technology, the legendary Esotar<sup>2</sup> tweeter and expertly built and elegantly finished cabinets, making it the finest sounding and most distinguished two-way Confidence yet. The new Confidence C1. It's intoxicating.

All there is. **DYNAUDIO**



# Denon DA-300USB £329



Entering the affordable DAC arena comes this good-looking home unit with flexible placement options

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Denon DA-300USB

**ORIGIN**  
China

**TYPE**  
USB and S/PDIF DAC/headphone preamp

**WEIGHT**  
1.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
170 x 57 x 182mm

**FEATURES**

- 32-bit/192kHz DAC
- Format support: PCM 44.1-192kHz; DSD64; DSD128
- Inputs: USB-B port; S/PDIF coaxial; 2x Toslink
- Output: stereo RCA

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
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**TELEPHONE**  
02890 279830

**WEBSITE**  
denon.co.uk

If we gave a prize for the best-looking DAC in this round up, then the Denon would be the clear winner.

Not only is it beautifully styled and well built, but it has the added flexibility of allowing itself to be positioned horizontally or vertically, adding a useful degree of flexibility when placing it beside a desktop computer or hi-fi system. Helpfully, the display auto flips to the correct position depending on its placement too. It's a very nice touch, but of greater interest for hi-res music fans is the 32-bit/192kHz onboard DAC that uses the same 'Advanced AL32 audio processing' as found on the majority of Denon's CD players – see box out – making this one of the neatest and most sophisticated DACs in the group.

On the front there's a 6.35mm headphone socket with volume control, and connectivity around the back runs to asynchronous USB-B, S/PDIF coaxial and optical inputs. Stereo RCA are on hand for connection to a hi-fi amplifier.

The DA-300USB features universal file format support for PCM and DSD (the native file format for SACD) digital audio signals on the USB-B input for bit-transparent, asynchronous playback of digital music. A plug-and-play approach is adopted for Macs, but Windows users are required to download and install Denon's driver software.

## Sound quality

Taking its power from a wall-wart transformer gives the DA-300USB an audio advantage in hi-fi terms over the majority of hub-powered models in this round up. First impressions on playing the test tracks are good, and I am struck by the well balanced performance with no single element sounding out of place or seeking attention over another. It's perhaps not the richest sound in terms of bass performance, and has a touch of leanness when compared with the Geek Out when listening to the 24/96 version of Pink Floyd's *Take It Back*, supplied by highresaudio.com. But it's all of a piece and serves the track up with a lively amount of dynamic energy that rocks out when hooked up to a hi-fi.

Vocals have a delicacy that makes listening feel that bit more intimate, meaning that Kate's piano playing has a fluidity and naturalness to it that is effortlessly conveyed on the *Snowflake* track from the gorgeous 24/96 version of *50 Words For Snow*.

Where the Denon differs from the others in this face off is in its ability to

## THIS WAY UP

Its penchant for both horizontal and vertical placement options is not the only added value feature that the Denon DA-300USB brings to the DAC party. Found in its upmarket CD players, Denon's Advanced AL32 processing and high-precision 32-bit/192kHz digital-to-analogue conversion claims to deliver audio quality far in advance of usual high definition, wide bandwidth conversion techniques. Just as some advanced Blu-ray players can now upscale full HD video from standard definition DVD, Denon says its Advanced AL32 processor up-converts and up-samples all input signals to a 32-bit/192kHz datastream, which is interpolated, using a highly advanced proprietary algorithm to provide a full scale, accurate reproduction of the original sound recording. Matched with a high-precision 32-bit/192kHz DAC circuit to fully exploit the Advanced AL32 high-definition processing, artefacts are moved far beyond the range of human hearing, so as to reproduce the highest quality signal.

open up a recording and allow you to listen right into the mix.

Play a 24/192 version of Madonna's *Live To Tell* for example, and you can hear the decay of the drums far more clearly, and the upper registers of vocals and percussion instruments exhibit greater resolution with a sense of sparkle that never becomes harsh or fatiguing.

Although this group concentrates on music that's played out from a USB computer source, it would be churlish not to check out the performance through the Denon's other digital inputs. And you can bet there's nothing to tell them apart, and the DA-300USB handles all digital sources in an equally musical manner ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**LIKE:** Detailed sound across all sources; versatile connectivity and placement options

**VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★  
**DISLIKE:** Headphone amp sounds restricted

**BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★  
**WE SAY:** A flexible DAC to add to any desktop hi-fi system

**FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL



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oppodigital.co.uk



# ADL X1 £395



No bigger than a smartphone, could this be the perfect choice to boost sound quality on the go and at home?

## DETAILS

- PRODUCT**  
ADL X1
- ORIGIN**  
Japan
- TYPE**  
Hub/battery-powered USB DAC/headphone preamp
- WEIGHT**  
147g
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
68 x 118 x 17mm
- FEATURES**
  - 24-bit/192kHz DAC
  - Format support: PCM 44.1-192kHz
  - Quoted battery life: up to 7.5hours
  - Inputs: 3.5mm jack; USB-A port; mini USB-B port
  - Outputs: 3.5mm analogue/optical; 3.5mm headphone/line level jack
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Sound Fowndations
- TELEPHONE**  
01276 501392
- WEBSITE**  
soundfowndations.co.uk

**L**ike the iFi Nano iDSD reviewed overleaf, this neat ADL X1 battery-powered DAC is designed to be used on the move piggybacked to a portable iDevice, and yet is flexible enough to sit between a computer's USB port and your main hi-fi system giving you the best of both worlds. The 24-bit/192kHz take-anywhere DAC claims to give around 7.5hours of listening from its built-in USB-powered rechargeable battery for life on the road.

Build quality is high – it's easily the most stylish small DAC here – and is available with red, blue or silver anodised aluminium panels as well as the black version pictured. A selection of leads and adaptors are supplied to partner the X1 to your portable device or connect to the USB port of a computer. There's even a robust ADL-branded rubber band to secure it to your portable player.

In addition to the USB input, the X1 accepts line-level analogue sources via a 4-pin 3.5mm jack output and

the multi-input Toslink optical digital output on the underside. The headphone output drives headphones within the 12-600ohm range, and also supports models fitted with an inline microphone.

Six LEDs indicate the incoming sampling frequency, although the font is tiny and rather difficult to decipher. A rotary control operates on/off and volume level, and there's a selector switch for USB or iDevice connectivity alongside a ground TRRS button.

## Sound quality

For its diminutive dimensions the ADL certainly delivers an impressive sound that's very easy on the ear. In some ways the dinky device has the biggest sound of the group, with oodles of bass definition and an open and airiness to treble notes that never gets splashy. Vocals are perfectly rendered and the 24/192 version of Madonna's *True Blue* allows me to hear right into the recording, picking up on subtle details that I've never previously noticed before buried within the recording. What's surprising is that the ADL manages to convey an engaging sense of timing and rhythm when playing this album, it's almost enough to make anyone listening want to move their hips.

A 24/96 version of Kate Bush's *Snowed In At Wheeler Street* has a lovely balance and richness to the piano that is utterly convincing and backed by impressive but not overly extended bass. Vocals have a smoothness and almost analogue



## PERSONAL TOUCH

Alpha Design Labs (ADL to you and I) is a relatively new Japanese brand from cable specialist Furutech. In its short time on the planet, the Tokyo-based firm has specialised in a small range of affordable DAC/headphone amplifiers as well as on-ear and in-ear headphone models.

The main purpose of the X1 is to upgrade the sound quality from a portable music iDevice or a computer. With Furutech's cable background you can bet that good quality cables are provided to take care of the X1's flexible connectivity scenarios. Included in the box is a short (10cm) 3.5mm-to-3.5mm jack and 14-pin dock connector-to-USB cable for connection to older portables. Those with newer iDevices fitted with lightning connectors will need to factor in the additional cost of a suitable cable like the ADL iD8A, priced from £70. For charging and using a computer as your music source a mini USB-B-to-USB-A cable is supplied, but you'll need to purchase a 3.5mm jack-to-stereo RCA to output it to a hi-fi amplifier.

quality to them that makes them easy on the ear and balances Kate Bush's silky vocals with Elton John's more velvety tones to great effect.

Again Pink Floyd's *Take It Back* in 24/96 form has a wonderful sense of airiness around guitar and percussion instruments that shows off this well engineered recording; there's not a moment's splashiness to drums and the track has plenty of drive.

No matter what material you play, the X1 has that rare ability to keep you listening for hours without any fatigue. Everything is smoothly rendered to show off recordings at their best with an impressive sense of scale and rhythm that just makes you want to keep on listening ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Analogue-sounding portable DAC that's effective both inside and out
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Attachment band doesn't feel particularly secure
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Smooth operation and sound make this a great DAC for any pocket
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL





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## NORTHERN LIGHTS

Hegel isn't afraid to take its own path, and its decision to employ some less obvious technology choices underlines its belief that it can deliver better music playback in this way. Choosing the less commonly used adaptive 'non-asynchronous' USB is a perfect example of how Hegel has complete confidence in blazing its own trail. Similarly the 32-bit DAC it employed in the HD12 was chosen for its impressive sound rather than its format compatibility, and currently only offers support for DSD64, meaning it's not quite as futureproof as perhaps the model name suggests. Hegel tells us that the lack of support for DSD128 was a difficult decision to make, but it decided to go with the chip it considered to be the best sounding, but one that does not work with DSD128. It says: "Of course others do, but they don't sound as good in our opinion. Considering the amount of material available in DSD128 we decided to make a DAC that sounds as good as it can with the material that people are most likely to be playing".

# Hegel HD12 DSD £900

This DAC and headphone amplifier combines minimalist style with flexible hi-fi connectivity options

### DETAILS

- PRODUCT**  
Hegel HD12 DSD
- ORIGIN**  
Norway
- TYPE**  
USB and S/PDIF DAC/headphone preamp
- WEIGHT**  
3.5kg
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
210 x 60 x 260mm
- FEATURES**
  - 24-bit/192kHz DAC
  - Format support: PCM 44.1-192kHz; DSD64 (PC only)
  - Inputs: USB-B port; S/PDIF coaxial; 2x Toslink
  - Output: stereo RCAs; XLRs
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Hegel Music Systems
- TELEPHONE**  
0047 22605660
- WEBSITE**  
hegel.com

Offering similarly impressive connectivity choices to Denon's DA-300USB is this rather unassuming home DAC from Hegel. It's easily the most costly model in the group, and around the back you'll find options including a pair of balanced XLR outputs as well as regular RCAs to suitable high-end amplifiers. In fact, the Hegel also has a lot in common with Audiolab's well-regarded M-DAC (HFC 368) for example, making the HD12 much better geared towards full hi-fi setups than any other model here, but it's equally as happy as part of a desktop audio system.

Regular readers will recognise the brand from its first outing with the H80 amplifier/DAC reviewed in HFC 391, but Hegel isn't a household name in the UK just yet. Like the Henry Audio DAC 128 mkII overleaf, the company hails from Norway where it has a sizable reputation with an extensive audio range designed to challenge convention and do things differently – see box out.

Unsatisfied with some of the supposed limitations of digital signal handling and transistor amplification, Hegel has gone back to the drawing board for many of its products, and the HD12 DSD is no exception to the brand's thinking. The nicely constructed casework gives little away to its capabilities. The large and brightly lit LED display shows the selected source input only and there's no sample-rate info, which makes it appear rather outdated compared with the much more sophisticated and informative display found on the keenly priced Denon, its closest rival here. Adorning the matte black front panel there's a 6.35mm headphone socket, and that's it. You do get a mini remote control to enable you to select inputs and make output level adjustment, but misplace it for a moment and you're in serious bother. Connectivity around the back runs to S/PDIF coaxial and optical inputs as well as a non-asynchronous USB-B input and both the aforementioned stereo RCAs and balanced XLR outputs.

### Sound quality

Despite the Hegel's austere looks, the HD12 DSD has no trouble getting to grips with the music, and presents an evenly balanced sound across the frequency range. It's not the warmest or richest performer here, but it gives good insight into Pink Floyd's *What Do You Want From Me*. Okay a bit more depth to the bass would help to give the track greater richness, but

the Hegel's presentation remains detailed without being dry or glassy.

Vocals sound really nice and Kate's voice is handled with a delicacy and clarity that makes it easy to hear into the recording without any hint of edginess to her word endings. Male vocals perhaps lack the gravitas of some of the other DACs here, but the performances don't suffer for their slight lack of body.

Moving on to 24/192 material with the selector on the back moved into its B position, the Hegel pulls off Madonna's *True Blue* with exceptional clarity and has the kind of detail and insight that makes the early nineties recording sound just as fresh as the day it was laid down ●

## HIFIChoice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Detailed sound and good connectivity options to suit all needs
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Austere looks; lack of some format support
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WESAY:** Very capable DAC, but can be bettered by more affordable competition
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL





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# Henry Audio USB DAC 128 mkII £210

This hub-powered DAC is a straightforward way to upgrade computer audio, but how does it sound?

## DETAILS

- PRODUCT**  
Henry Audio  
USB DAC 128 mkII
- ORIGIN**  
Norway
- TYPE**  
Hub-powered  
USB DAC
- WEIGHT**  
310g
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
114 x 33 x 128mm
- FEATURES**  
● 24-bit/192kHz  
upsampling DAC  
● Format support:  
PCM 44.1-192kHz  
● Inputs: mini USB  
port  
● Outputs: stereo  
RCAs
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Henry Audio
- TELEPHONE**  
+47 90639918
- WEBSITE**  
henryaudio.com

**E**asily the simplest looking DAC design in this test is this straightforward Henry Audio USB DAC 128. We first saw its almost identical sibling back in *HFC* 386 under the name QNKTC – see Cool For Cats box out. That was for the more affordable AB-1.2 USB DAC, and since then the company has renamed itself to the less cumbersome and more friendly sounding Henry Audio with the introduction of the DAC 128 mkII.

Like its sibling, the 128 is a sleek, silver aluminium affair that's very nicely screwed together with the logo screen printed on the fascia. Given the £100 price increase from the original, the changes are more than just cosmetic, and the company told me that there are internal circuitry modifications to better performance and achieve a more rounded sound with bass punch and an even more detailed and convincing soundstage than its open-source predecessor.

There's a single LED on the front to tell you that the unit is on, and it

glows green when receiving 24/48 or red for up to 24/192 formats. It has built-in drivers for USB Audio Class 1 mode (UAC1, up to 24/48), but if you want the full 24/192 (UAC2) then you'll need to download drivers if you're a Windows user; Mac and Linux are automatically supported. Two buttons on the back allow you to put the DAC into the correct USB mode. To switch between the modes you simply connect the unit to a USB port, press the Prog button until the front LED changes colour and continue to hold until the LED goes out (it takes between 4-10 seconds). Release the button and click and release the Reset button.

## Sound quality

As with the original unit, this latest version also makes a very nice noise, and you can tell the sound has been tweaked from the original. Bass appears to be full and more rounded than with the previous version, and the Kate Bush track has a good amount of punch and energy to it. In fact, in many ways the DAC 128 mkII has possibly the deepest bass of any of the DACs in this test and seemingly manages to eek out that little bit more energy and drive from the 24/96 version. This is expertly demonstrated by the drums and Stephen Fry's vocal on the album's title track *50 Words For Snow*, giving it an edge in terms of atmosphere and presence.

While its performance is impressive with male voices, Kate's vocals highlight perhaps the greatest

## COOL FOR CATS

Henry Audio was originally under the rather catchily named QNKTC brand name. Standing for 'Quantisation Noise Killed The Cat', its first DAC was the hardware embodiment of an open-source Audio Widget project, started by a group of geeks who wanted to make an excellent but affordable way to play hi-res files. Thankfully, the Norwegian founder Børge Strand-Bergesen assures us that it has nothing to do with eighties pop posters *Curiosity Killed The Cat!*

As with its predecessor, this latest DAC 128 mkII takes its power from the mini USB connected to a computer, and uses the same DAC and clock chip as found in the original QNKTC model made by UK company Golledge. Designer Børge believes that the circuit board layout incorporating short signal paths is among the key factors to achieve the very best performance. Add to this the benefits of using better performing components in its power supply, and the DAC 128 mkII offers a marked improvement on the sonic characteristics of the original sound.

differences in the presentation. Female voices have a more glassy quality and sound a bit more forward in the mix and 'well lit' than on any other in the group. Some will enjoy the added sense of openness and extra detail this brings to many performances, but ultimately it's not quite such an engaging performance long term and has a tendency to make the ending of words sound edgy and highlight sibilances.

This characteristic is easy to hear in brighter recordings, and Madonna's *True Blue* in 24/192 has a hint of splashiness about it in the upper registers that's just that bit too fatiguing long term with these types of recordings ●

## HIFIChoice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Straightforward design; good bass performance
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slight upper brightness might be too much for some
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Well built box with good sound at a great price that will appeal to audio fans and tinkerers
- FEATURES**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL



# Primare NP30

## The luxury link for high resolution streaming



PRIMARE



“ Primare’s NP30 sounded every bit as good when streaming as when used as a standalone DAC... A great all-rounder. ”

“ ...the Primare is blessed with an analogue richness that’s as reminiscent of a top-notch phono stage as it is a DAC... it tells me that what I’m hearing is about as close to the album’s studio sessions as I’m going to get within my listening room. ”



July 2014



August 2014

# karma

audio - visual

karma-av.co.uk

For more information please visit [primare.net](http://primare.net).



# iFi

## Nano iDSD £165

This small USB DAC and headphone amp sets out to be big on hi-res audio, with DSD and DXD support too

### DETAILS

- PRODUCT**  
iFi Nano iDSD
- ORIGIN**  
UK/China
- TYPE**  
Hub/battery-powered USB DAC/headphone preamp
- WEIGHT**  
163g
- DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
68 x 87 x 28mm
- FEATURES**
  - 32-bit/384kHz DAC
  - Format support: PCM 44.1-384; DSD64; DSD128; DSD256; DXD384
  - Quoted battery life: up to 10hours
  - Inputs: Asynchronous USB port
  - Outputs: stereo RCAs; S/PDIF coaxial; 3.5mm headphone
- DISTRIBUTOR**  
Select Audio
- TELEPHONE**  
01900 601954
- WEBSITE**  
ifi-audio.com

**W**ith its extensive line of desktop and portable audio components, iFi has clearly been busy developing components for some time. But if the brand name isn't one that you are familiar with, then you are not alone. Despite receiving some exposure and acclaim across Europe, the Nano iDSD portable DAC is the first iFi model we've been able to get our hands on at *HFC*, and this affordable, portable DAC with built-in headphone amplifier looks like a great model to get to know the brand.

Like the ADL X1, the Nano iDSD is a portable DAC with a built-in battery pack claiming 10 hours of power for use out on the road. It's remarkably affordable and feels very nicely constructed in its brushed metal casing, but it's a little more on the chunky side compared with the sleek dimensions of the X1, and will take up a bit more room in your pocket alongside a portable music device.

Socketry is decent and the front panel has a 3.5mm stereo headphone

socket and a pair of RCA phonos for line output with a rotary volume control that is also the on/off switch. On the back, there's an asynchronous USB-B port, S/PDIF coaxial digital input and a filter switch. But the flexibility doesn't end there, as the little iFi supports hi-res up to 32-bit/384kHz and all the latest DSD and DXD formats to boot, making it easily the most futureproof DAC in the group. A multi-coloured LED gives an indication of the particular format resolution being played at the time, deciphered by the colour key card supplied with the unit.

### Sound quality

Despite the Nano's impressive capabilities there aren't too many music fans with a catalogue of audiophile DSD64, 128 and DXD 24/352.8 material to hand, although I did manage to obtain a sampler from the Norwegian-based 2L music store. For the most part I stuck with readily accessible 24/96 and 24/192 remasterings, with a brief check of the Nano's DSD capabilities.

First off I try the dinky Nano with Kate Bush's *Snowed In At Wheeler Street* and although good to my ears it's not the best performance of the test. The central image seems unable to give you the clearest insight into the sumptuous duet, and lacks that last bit of ultra-fine resolution to completely draw you into the track. Bass depth is in good measure, but unlike the ADL it doesn't quite convey the same sense of rhythm to get your



### MICRO MAGIC

The iFi brand is a subsidiary of Abingdon Music Research, which specialises in a comprehensive line of Micro products ranging from phono stages and headphone amps to DACs and even a power supply. With equipment aimed primarily at the computer audio generation, all products boast Class A analogue circuitry with no DSP and the signal stays 'Bit Perfect' throughout, says the maker.

Things get even smaller with its line of two Nano components, including the iDSD on test here and the matching iCAN battery-powered headphone amplifier, with truly portable designs built to deliver enhanced sound quality from palm-sized devices out and about. At the price, the Nano iDSD doesn't come supplied with appropriate cables to connect it to portable Apple devices, and you'll need to factor in the additional cost for an Apple USB Camera Adaptor, and for connection to Android devices a USB On-The-Go (OTG) cable and appropriate OS support are required.

toes tapping with the 24/192 version of Madonna's *La Isla Bonita*, and feels more like you're experiencing the song's tropical island paradise vibe from afar rather than transporting you there. Matters improve when switching the filter on the rear from Standard to Minimum Phase, and Stevie Wonder's *Higher Ground* at 24/96 is more generous in the level of fun it delivers.

With a DXD 24/352 of Mozart's *Violin Concerto No.4 in D Major*, the Nano captures the performance and the venue's acoustic remarkably well, with a sense of scale and subtlety that makes the effort of downloading the format an extremely rewarding and enjoyable listen. ▶

### HIFIChoice

#### OUR VERDICT

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>SOUND QUALITY</b><br>★★★★★   | <b>LIKE:</b> Great sound and format capabilities at the price                          |
| <b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b><br>★★★★★ | <b>DISLIKE:</b> Slightly chunky case; iDevice connectivity is rather cumbersome        |
| <b>BUILD QUALITY</b><br>★★★★★   | <b>WE SAY:</b> Impressive format handling and sound, but sonics are bettered elsewhere |
| <b>FEATURES</b><br>★★★★★        |  |

#### OVERALL



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**SILVER 8**





# LH Labs Geek Out M £249



Could this pocket-sized USB DAC and headphone amplifier be the miniature maestro of the group?

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
LH Labs Geek Out M

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**TYPE**  
Hub-powered USB DAC/headphone preamp

**WEIGHT**  
25g

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
35 x 64 x 12mm

**FEATURES**  
● 32-bit/384kHz DAC  
● Format support: PCM 44.1-384kHz; DSD64 and 128  
● Output: 2x 3.5mm jack

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Anthem AV Solutions

**TELEPHONE**  
01825 750858

**WEBSITE**  
anthemavs.co.uk

**P**ositioned slap bang in the middle of three miniature USB DACs, the Geek Out M hails from the seriously high-end brand Da Vinci Audio. It has an impressive back story that saw the original Geek Out EM model born from a remarkable swell of support following its crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter – see Follow The Crowd box out. The diamond black M model we have on test here has a claimed 720mW power output suitable for less efficient headphones within the 100-300ohms range. Silver and Red models are also available with power outputs tailored towards different efficiency headphones.

Despite its tiny size, the Geek Out packs one heck of a lot into its remarkable dimensions. There are two tiny buttons on the side and a USB plug at the end and two 3.5mm jack sockets labelled 47ohms and 0.47ohms at the other. Despite the cute dimensions, much of the tech is derived from the remarkable Da Vinci DAC including the 32-bit/384kHz and

DSD64/128 decoding and the Class A amplifier – which is the reason why the Geek Out runs a little bit warm to the touch. Not massively so, but at a significantly higher temperature than any other USB DAC on test here – there’s even a warning in the supplied literature about not burning yourself, which seems a little like overstating things to me as my model thankfully never reaches the searingly high temperatures potentially suggested.

The general look and finish is perhaps not up to the highest standards of the rest of the group, and the tiny LED lights showing up the sampling frequency of the material being played can be difficult to decipher as you have to flip the unit over for the key. Pressing the two buttons on the side of the Geek Out activates the ‘3D Awesomifier’, to give an expanded “out of the head” listening experience, but I am more interested in how the tiny device sounds without any gimmickry.

## Sound quality

Plugging the Geek Out into my MacBook Pro and hooking up the 3.5mm line output jack to a hi-fi amp, it sounds far better than any audio product this size has a right to. On selecting the Geek Out as the audio output device on my computer and playing the first few notes of *Snowed In At Wheeler Street* I quickly realise I’ve struck gold. The piano sounds amazingly sumptuous with Kate Bush and Elton John’s vocals sounding remarkably rich and detailed. Music



## FOLLOW THE CROWD

The first Geek Out device came into being following an overwhelming response to a crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter. The now collector’s item original blue-coloured EM release was the first model following the drive that managed to successfully secure its full \$28,000 target in under 11 hours. The campaign went on to raise \$300,000 in the 30 days that it ran and gained 2,146 backers.

Following the introduction of the first model in mid 2014, Geek Out now comes in three versions to cater for specific headphone models. The now red Geek Out EM has 1000mW power output, perfect for low-efficiency headphones with an impedance over 300ohms and costs £299. The middle Geek Out M tested here has a 720mW power output ideally suited to less efficient headphones with an impedance of 100–300ohms. Lastly the silver Geek Out costing £199 offers 450mW power output suitable for efficient headphones with an impedance of less than 100ohms. All come with a USB extension lead.

seems more ‘alive’ somehow and the Stevie Wonder track has faultless timing that expertly balances bass rhythm, smooth vocals and percussion details with the kind of performance standards that are more often associated with full-size, high-end components.

Pink Floyd’s *Take It Back* is a lively track, but again the scale and space surrounding each of the instruments highlights the high quality of the well engineered recording that allows all of the elements in the mix to sit in their own space, giving you a fantastic insight into the recording that means you can pick out and follow particular instruments with amazing ease and accuracy ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Exceptional sound; ultra portable
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Finish could be better at the price; runs a little warm
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> Outstanding sonic performance akin to full-size components; versatile headphone amp too
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★	

### OVERALL



# Group test verdict

He's gathered his thoughts after hours of listening, so before he takes a rest with a well-earned cuppa **Lee Dunkley** sums up what he's heard

**WITH SUCH A** spread of models across both home and portable use this is a particularly tough test to sum up, but the minimalist Hegel is the first to fall. Although in many respects the HD12 DSD has to be admired for its tech choices, specification, superb build and finish (even if its looks are a bit austere), its poor ease of use and price mean it doesn't score quite so highly against the competition here. In no way would you be disappointed by the sound from this DAC, it's just that there are better options for less.

Next is the Henry Audio; a mighty fine bit of kit that looks like it's

lacking flexibility, but in fact its open-source nature will appeal to tinkerers. Ultimately though, it's up against more flexible consumer models here, and its slightly forward sound may not be so appealing to all.

I love the iFi's styling, build, format support and general nature, it's just that sonically it doesn't surpass the ultra cool ADL XL, and its iDevice connectivity is cumbersome.

The slick ADL X1 is quite a cool portable solution with a good, balanced, analogue sort of sound that most people will feel they can live with and enjoy. It's reasonable value

too, with plenty of features and connectivity options and is a versatile device that gives the best of both worlds.

The Geek Out M from LH Labs is the kind of product that comes along every once in a while and breaks the rule book. It sounds far better than it has any right to given its diminutive dimensions, but with tech derived from the high-end Da Vinci DAC it's no wonder that it sounds so great. I wouldn't be surprised if the Geek Out is snapped up just as quickly as it attained its crowdfunding target.



**WINNER**

The Denon DA-300USB has got the looks and functionality of a great home DAC. It produces a great sound across all inputs and offers the flexibility to be placed upright using the supplied stand. Factor in its superb build and finish, and you have a very worthy winner.



Make/model	Denon DA-300USB	ADL X1	Hegel HD12 DSD	Henry Audio USB DAC 128 mkII	iFi Nano iDSD	LH Labs Geek Out M
<b>Price</b>	£329	£395	£900	£210	£165	£249
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Value</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Build</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Features</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
<b>Overall</b>	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
	Great package offering flexibility and style, put quite simply it's got the lot	Ultra sleek portable DAC that sounds just as great at home as it does on the move	Distinctive design makes this DAC the most charismatic of the group	Open-source tech to appeal to tinkerers, this simple USB DAC sounds good too	Great build and hi-res format friendly, but clunky design won't suit all	Mediocre build doesn't detract from the astonishing hi-res sound it makes

## Key features

<b>Coaxial in</b>	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
<b>Optical in</b>	2	Yes	2	No	No	No
<b>24/192 USB</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>iPod</b>	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
<b>XLR out</b>	No	No	Yes	No	No	No

## TRY WITH THESE

### HEADPHONES: Focal Spirit One S £150 HFC 391

Few headphones manage to combine style and performance as successfully as this closed-back design. The smooth sound combines a well-integrated bass with a revealing level of detail, making them perfect for hi-res on the move.



### INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER: Arcam FMJ-A19 £650 HFC 371

A mid-price integrated that's festooned with inputs and a useful amount of power. It wowed us with its rich and engrossing sound and makes listening a great pleasure, whatever type of music you're into.



### STANDMOUNT SPEAKER: Monitor Audio Silver One £500 HFC 390

This super sounding standmount is available in beautiful wood veneer and gloss finishes and offers great performance at the price. You get plenty of bang for your buck with a big sound that's musically honest, detailed and enjoyable to listen to.





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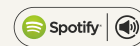
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# Pure bred

B.M.C.'s PureAmp is an integrated that turns into a power amp when hooked up to other PureLine gear. **David Price** tries it for size

**N**ot so long ago I was rather taken by Balanced Music Concept's PureDAC (HFC 385); a £1,300 DAC/preamp that sounded better than it had a right to at the price. It was also strikingly styled and particularly well made for the money, too. Well, here's the other part of the pairing, an integrated amplifier made to work hand-in-glove with the PureDAC. Rather than just doing a predictable design in a bland box, the German company has really risen to the challenge. In many ways this is just as interesting – if not more – than the DAC. Founder Carlos Candéias obviously isn't asleep at the wheel!

The PureAmp is essentially an integrated amplifier, which – when hooked up using the B.M.C. link to the partnering PureDAC or the forthcoming UltraDAC – turns into a dedicated power amplifier. It

normally works as a LEF (Load Effect-Free) amplifier, which Carlos claims is superior to both Class A and Class AB operation. "It has a quite different structure; the low impedance voltage output is made by a single transistor without a push-pull counterpart", he tells me. "Class A puts a transistor into a relatively linear current range by strongly biasing it and disregarding efficiency. LEF keeps the transistor virtually on an ideally linear spot without any current variation."

Carlos claims that, because full biasing isn't needed, linearity and efficiency are much better than Class A, and LEF current sources deliver current independently of phase and voltage level, which makes for superior speaker control. This type of circuit is so linear that a feedback loop isn't required for reducing distortion, he says.

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
B.M.C. PureAmp  
**ORIGIN**  
Germany/China  
**TYPE**  
Integrated amplifier  
**WEIGHT**  
10.3kg  
**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
365 x 103 x 328mm  
**FEATURES**  
• Quoted power:  
100W RMS per  
channel into 8ohms  
• 2x RCA phono;  
2x XLR inputs;  
B.M.C. link for direct  
connection  
to PureLine  
**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Colab Audio Ltd  
**TELEPHONE**  
07702 168000  
**WEBSITE**  
colabaudio.com

When hooked up to the PureDAC by the B.M.C. link, it uses Current Injection technology to process the input current from a signal source through a special XLR-CI input and the amplifier's circuitry until it gets the desired output voltage for the loudspeakers. This is said to increase the purity of the amplified signal by skipping the gain stage; essentially it's a more direct link and so gives the PureDAC/PureAmp the characteristics of a dedicated pre-power amplifier combination.

The styling is distinctive, and the high-quality anodised aluminium extrusions feel silkily luxurious. Like other PureLine components, it lights up like a Christmas tree when you power up; there are even bar-graph power meters should you wish. Some might find it a tad gaudy, so the lighting can be dimmed. The volume control buttons aren't any less fiddly than on the PureDAC, but generally it's a pleasant product to peruse.

Inside you'll find a large 300W toroidal transformer and a power supply with 180,000uF of energy storage at its disposal. It uses an interesting mix of device types.

Carlos explains that: "The voltage source is made of a combination of a tiny vertical DMOS-FET combined with a middle-sized bipolar device. This set is very linear, has extremely low capacitance and no DC load to



the sensitive gain stages. The independent current sources are brand new released large bipolar devices.”

### Sound quality

There’s a curious sweet spot, somewhere in-between average sounding solid-state amplifiers with their slightly misty, grey, opaque but edgy sound and the rotund, fulsome but romantic results you get from tubes. For me, this is the most interesting place to be; I’ve heard excellent tube amps hit it, and I’ve heard superb transistor designs do it too. The BMC PureAmp comes close, and is far, far cheaper than most other

**The PureAmp lights up like a Christmas tree, but can be dimmed**

amplifiers – tube or transistor – that really take you there. In other words, it’s an excellent performer at its price.

The downside is that some might find it just a little too stark. It’s very German sounding, and I mean that in both a good and bad way. Whereas Italian amps can be lyrical but uncontrolled and Japanese ones can be immaculately detailed but emotionally unengaging, the B.M.C. sits close to the middle; the best British amps are a little nearer the Italian sound and in all honesty the PureAmp errs slightly more towards the Japanese, but neither is too far away from one another. Overall it proffers a very good combination of control and musical enjoyment, but some might think it just a tad too ordered and feel it might want to undo its top button just a bit.

This, of course, is the joy of hi-fi; nobody quite has the same taste; when we listen we all want a little more of this or a tad less of that. So my impressions of this amplifier probably says more about my own personal proclivities.

The B.M.C. is powerful, taut, tight, detailed, open, three-dimensional sounding and has good dynamics and a not inconsiderable interest in the rhythmic aspect of whatever music you play. The only thing that I can see some listeners – in the UK at least – objecting to is its slightly chromium plated tonality; a warm and sumptuous tube amplifier it is not.

Take for example Thomas Dolby’s *Airwaves*. It’s a lovely classic slice of early eighties synthesiser pop, which is supposed to be warm and fat. But while the PureAmp gives a brilliant rendition, you would never call it warm or even tonally neutral; it errs ever so slightly on the dry and cool side, taking out just a touch of colour from the recording. Whether this offends or not will come down to your choice of ancillaries; the slightly

soft Cambridge Audio AeroMax 6 floorstanders I use benefit from it. The amp gives them better bite and seems to tame that fractionally tubby upper bass of theirs.

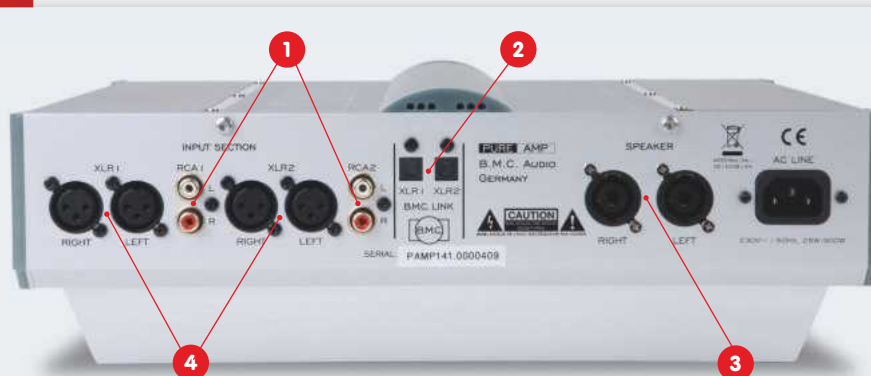
The B.M.C. proves excellent across the midband too; all the elements of the mix are laid out before the listener like an *à la carte* menu; everything is there to behold. It’s extremely detailed, almost forensically so, and this extends to the time domain performance too; there’s the sense that it’s completely on top of all the transients it has to deal with, it is never falling over its feet. This makes Supertramp’s *Child Of Vision* a joy; Rodger Hodgson’s wonderfully percussive piano sound has sharp dynamic accenting. His playing comes over as so fast, so expressive, so lucid. At the same time,

## You have to applaud it for the useful facilities, beautiful case and styling

the amp tells me all about the exact sound of his electric piano, and how it was recorded. His voice too has an icy clarity; it’s a distinctive one to be sure and cuts through the rest of the mix like a knife through butter. Yet there is no harshness and no shrillness; this is interesting because *Breakfast In America* (from where the song is taken) is a rather forward album and can often grate. It shows the PureAmp to be very clear, almost stark in its tonality, but still largely devoid of distortion.

The picture continues with more contemporary electronic music; Kraftwerk’s arrestingly beautiful *Tour de France Etapes 2* is carried in a clear, taut and controlled way. Indeed the B.M.C. seems almost designed to play this type of music; it gets to grips with

### CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA line inputs
- 2 B.M.C. link ports for connection to PureLine kit
- 3 Neutrik speaker outputs
- 4 XLR inputs

## Q&A

**Carlos Candeias**  
B.M.C. President



**DP: What is the idea behind B.M.C.'s Pure range?**

**CC:** It is intended to introduce the young music lover to the world of high fidelity and demonstrate the improvement in performance that can be achieved. It offers a true high end experience in every sense; sound, build and looks. In essence the Pure Range is the bridge between conventional high street consumer products and those of the usually much more expensive high-end audio market.

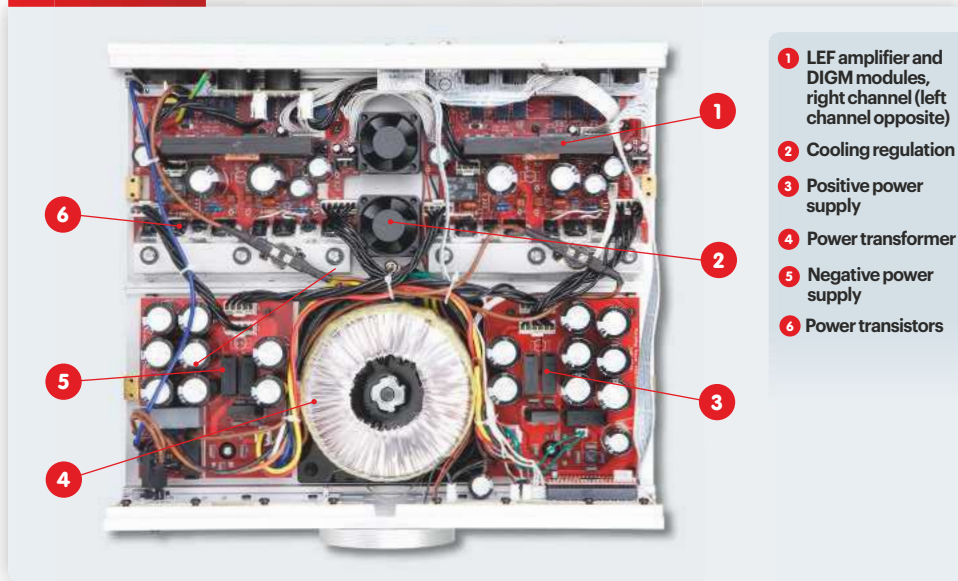
**What would you say the PureAmp sets out to do?**

The Pure Line sets out to exceed expectations, that's always our goal! It must sound real, powerful and always in control of the speakers. It also leaves the door open to even higher levels of performance when combined with other Pure Line DACs, PureDAC and UltraDAC, due to our proprietary LEF (Load Effect Free) technology. I want the listener to travel with the music without imposing any sound signature that might otherwise flatten the complex sonic bouquet of the music itself. Our goal at B.M.C. is not to have our own sound signature.

**Why did you decide to use Neutrik SpeakON connectors?**

The PureAMP is small so there isn't much space to safely use conventional binding posts which are liable to short circuit and loosen over time. The number one cause of amplifier failure in the field is short circuit due to the loosening of conventional binding posts. I believe it is time to embrace a better solution. SpeakON has been the standard connector of choice in the pro audio industry for many years and for good reason. We hope to get support from other brands and encourage them strongly to do the same. In the UK all PureAmps will be supplied with SpeakON connectors to allow dealers and end users to easily adapt their existing cables.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 LEF amplifier and DIGM modules, right channel (left channel opposite)
- 2 Cooling regulation
- 3 Positive power supply
- 4 Power transformer
- 5 Negative power supply
- 6 Power transistors



### HOW IT COMPARES

There are some really good products around like Exposure's 3010S2 and Creek's Destiny 2, plus exciting new models from Roksan and Arcam to be reviewed soon. Compared to the HFC Group Test winning Exposure 3010S2, the B.M.C. has a cleaner, tighter, tauter sound. It seems polished to perfection almost, but is a little bit too shiny; tonally the Exposure is a bit warmer but subtly less finessed. The result is two very different presentations. The Exposure paints in bigger, bolder and less fine brush strokes, but seems very deft and expressive. The B.M.C. is better with detail and etches the sound more intricately, but seems to lack flair and passion as a result of the attention it pays to the detail. For many the Exposure will be thought of as a more musical device, more in tune with the emotion of the performance, but it misses many of the B.M.C.'s tiny nuances.

the sinewy percussion and the swinging bass transients as if it's a regular Monday morning workout. It doesn't break into a sweat, even at high listening levels that have a number of other solid-state amplifiers wheezing like Keith Richards climbing the stairs to the roof of Ronnie Scott's. This is a powerful device that's totally at home pushing out considerable amounts of power and it does it in a clean and disciplined way.

Spatially, it's also really rather good indeed. My favourite Karajan recording of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* on Deutsche Gramophon is a joy, in its way. The stereo images are so solid and stable that they're practically nailed to the wall. The soundstage is decently deep, although not the best I've heard, and everything falls into place convincingly. The result is a large, expansive canvass onto which the amplifier paints its musical picture. But again I get the sense that it doesn't quite have the full palette of tonal colours, and the artist is mixing in a touch too much grey for good measure; the richness of the reds and blues seems a little diluted. The obverse of this, of course, is a good valve amplifier, which if anything brings more colour to the proceedings than is strictly accurate, but loses other things in the process. That's the agony and the ecstasy of hi-fi, I suppose! The PureAmp never fails to deliver a rock-solid bottom end that is usefully tuneful and animated, its midband is glass-clear and this runs right up to a super-detailed, spacious treble. As such, it makes an ideal partner for warmer loudspeakers and/or sources.

## Conclusion

B.M.C.'s PureAmp is an excellent modern integrated amplifier. I find it shines across a wide range of music, and is easily revealing enough to tell you if the recording is any good, and indeed if the source is too. It's a really powerful tool in that sense, yet still some will find it just a touch too clinical, and ever so slightly matter of fact sounding. This is where we enter the realm of personal opinion, and that's why auditioning at a dealer is so important.

In terms of its market position, you have to applaud it for the smattering of useful facilities, its beautifully built case and interesting styling. It's nice to see something that isn't just another black (or silver) box. Factor in the special connectivity to other B.M.C. PureLine products and it makes an awfully strong case for itself. There are many very capable premium integrations around this price and this gives nothing away to them. If you're looking for a sub-£2k one, you should give it a listen ●

## Hi-FiChoice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**



**LIKE:** Super clean, crisp, clear sound; loads of power

**VALUE FOR MONEY**



**DISLIKE:** Non-standard Neutrik speaker outputs

**BUILD QUALITY**



**WE SAY:** Excellent integrated amp at the price, full stop!

**FEATURES**



**OVERALL**



# Xpression Carbon

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March 2014



February 2014



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\* Bordeaux finish shown





# Ushering in real thrills

These distinctive floorstanders from Taiwan take some caning before they deliver, but it's worth it, says **Andrew Everard**

**T**hink major loudspeaker-building nations and, once the Land of Hope and Glory stuff has receded into the distance and you look beyond the UK, most of the other places you're going to come up with are either North American or European. Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the USA and Canada: you've just about got it covered – well, until you remember China, that is.

However, the chances are Taiwan won't feature on most lists of countries famous for making

## Give them a little toe-in and they create a wide and deep soundstage

speakers, yet it is home to Usher, and has been since it was founded in 1972. Since then it's been making a comprehensive range of loudspeakers, subwoofers, electronics and even stands and racks.

Having engineering, development and manufacturing in-house no doubt helps greatly with that aim of mixing value and performance, and Usher also gets by with a little help from its friends; celebrated designer Joseph D'Appolitto is the company's technical consultant, in particular providing input into crossover design.

In a catalogue with models past and present such as the Compass Dancer and Mini Dancer, the presence of a range simply called the N-Series may seem a bit prosaic, but there's nothing 'square box with a couple of drivers slung in' about the N-6311.

It's a fairly standard two-way design, with a 25mm tweeter handing over around 3kHz to an 18cm mid/bass unit: both units are of an in-house design. The tweeter uses a fabric dome treated for a flatter

frequency response, has a copper shorting ring designed to reduce distortion and improve high frequency extension, and is backed with a tuned rear chamber to control rearward dispersion. Meanwhile the woofer has a carbon fibre/paper composite cone for rigidity and self-damping, designed for powerful bass and a sweet midband, and uses Usher's own motor system, engineered for low distortion.

The woofer is again housed in its own enclosure within the speaker, and is tuned with a forward-venting slot port to help ease positioning, while the tweeter sits in its own pod set into the top of the speaker, with the rearward curve of the entire enclosure designed to provide some extra time-alignment between the two drivers.

The 1,060mm tall cabinet is also curved in plan view to enhance rigidity and disperse resonances within the box: no parallel sides means no standing waves within the enclosure, which is a good thing.

The overall effect is aesthetically pleasing in a retro/streamlined/even slightly Art Deco way: the speakers aren't huge, but still have a strong visual presence, and of course the shape and front-venting port makes it possible to tuck them away towards the corner of the room rather more than one might with a conventional rectangular box/rear-ported design. The only question I have is about the walnut finish of the review samples, which can make the speakers look a bit heavy in a room with more contemporary furniture. I know the dark wood look is still popular in some South East Asian countries, many of which are also thankfully still more 'into' hi-fi and high quality music than some of their Western counterparts, but it would be interesting to see how it looks in a lighter wood, or even gloss black.

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Usher Audio N-6311

**ORIGIN**  
Taiwan

**TYPE**  
2-way floorstander

**WEIGHT**  
24kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
260 x 1,060 x  
350mm

**FEATURES**  
• 25mm soft dome tweeter  
• 180mm paper/carbon fibre mid/bass driver  
• Quoted sensitivity: 87dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Decent Audio

**TELEPHONE**  
05602 054669

**WEBSITE**  
decentaudio.co.uk

While the cabinet isn't exactly insubstantial in itself, it bolts to a hefty cast-iron base for stability, with screw-in cones provided for this base. The terminals are arranged in a vertical stack toward the bottom of the speaker's 'spine', with metal jumper bars allowing either single or bi-wired connection, or bi-amping.

### Sound quality

The Ushers are tried in several systems, including my usual Naim NDS/555PS/Supernait2/HiCap setup, and with a Marantz HD-DAC1 as preamp feeding a pair of the same company's much-loved Music Link MA-22 monobloc power amps, now knocking on 25 year old, but still sounding sweet both with the matching SC-22 preamp and the new headphone amp/preamp/DAC. The digital music source for the system is a MacBook Air running Audirvana Plus, and all cabling for both systems is from The Chord Company.

I'd been warned the speakers would need some running in before serious listening was attempted – the manual says there will be improvements after 60 hours' use, and that "the bass and treble will continue to sound more refined up to about 180 hours or so, when the speakers are finally broken in." To which I can only say: "You betcha!": straight from their boxes, they are possibly among the most raucous speakers I've heard for a very long time. ▶

**The walnut finish might not be to everyone's taste**



## Q&A

### Lien Shui-Tsai

Usher founder and engineer-in-chief



**AE: Where do the speakers sit in the Usher lineup?**

**LS:** The N Series sits above the entry-level 'Usher' Series and is the most affordable range to offer both standmount and floorstanding models ranging from £1,250 to £2,000. The N-6311 is the smaller of the two floorstanders, sitting in the middle of the three models with one standmount below it and one larger floorstander above it.

**What's the advantage of the carbon fibre/paper woofer?**

Carbon fibre is, of course, a highly rigid and light material and traditionally paper always produces intricate and palpable detail. Therefore, detail and speed are at the highest level in a highly effective combination and the drive unit – due to its rigidity – is equally effective when driven hard.

**Why did you opt for a slot-loaded reflex port in place of a more conventional front or rear-venting arrangement?**

The slot-loaded reflex port is to achieve a tight bass that is deep, but at the same time reducing bass bloom and increasing speed. The port is carefully tuned to the dimensions of each model's cabinet.

**The company has a very diverse range: do different models appeal more to different markets (such as some are more popular in Europe, US, far East etc.)?**

There are actually no obvious markets that achieve higher results with certain models and ranges than others. Every model produced sells equally across the world. However, overall the most popular range with the highest sales figures is the Dancer Diamond Series.

## IN SIGHT



- 1 25mm soft-dome tweeter
- 2 Stacked terminals allow bi-wiring
- 3 Forward-firing bass reflex slot
- 4 180mm mid/bass driver combines paper and carbon fibre

## HOW IT COMPARES

The Ushers sit in a market sector not exactly short of competition: for the same money you could have B&W's very accomplished new CM8 S2 speakers, which deliver similar power and poise in a slim, beautifully finished (especially in gloss black) package. For a standmount alternative, the little PMC twenty 21 is well worth considering, producing both detail and welly from a small enclosure (but you'll have to budget for stands on top of the near-£1,500 price tag). Keeping things small but floorstanding, the fast and highly expressive Neat Motive 2SX is another design you really should audition at this level.

For those who'd have you believe that running in speakers is an illusion, and all that's happening is the listener acclimatising to the sound, I'm here to tell you that a) I don't think anyone would ever manage to acclimatise to the way the Ushers sound fresh from the box, and b) yes, they do gradually change over an extended period of use, and finally reveal just what they can do.

And what they can do is delight with a sound that combines a striking 'out of the boxes' quality of soundstaging and focus with a powerful, weighty bass that makes rock tracks thrilling and orchestral music full bodied and substantial. Give them a little toe-in and the Ushers create a wide and deep soundstage, making Led Zeppelin's *Houses Of The Holy* in its hi-res remaster sound like much more of a live performance.

There's no tempering of the hard edge of these recordings, the Ushers being true to what they're being given: that means the rawness of the sound is delivered intact, with excellent presence, and underpinned by that big, weighty bass.

Give the Ushers something rather odder to get their drivers round, and the reward is a sound with fine

control even when the mixes are a bit bonkers: The Flaming Lips' deconstructive take on *Sgt Pepper, With A Little Help From My Friends*, benefits from the N-6311s' solid, tight bass and ability to convey even complex layering, Miley Cyrus' voice – yes really! – drowsing trippily through *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds* before the great overdriven distortion-laden chorus slams in.

Close-miked jazz voices of the audiophile kind are predictably delicious through these speakers, which also revel in some lovingly recorded upright bass and brushed skins, but then most rivals will do that very nicely thank you: more impressive is the way they handle the combination of voice and cellos on Clare Martin's *Time And Place* set, a 24-bit/192kHz download from Linn.

Balancing Martin's voice well against the superbly recorded Montpellier Cello Quartet, piano and percussion, they delight in the tango snap and drive of her cover of Bowie's *The Man Who Sold The World*, the Ushers really turn in an involving presentation of the music – and that's what they do across so many genres, even shining with the drama of the San Francisco Symphony's DSD2.8 release of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*. They storm through the last of the five songs, *In diesem Wetter...*, with the orchestra wrapping the tempestuous weather around mezzo Michelle DeYoung's voice in a well-realised live acoustic.

## Conclusion

These are highly entertaining speakers, sounding rather unlike anything else I've encountered for the money in their combination of fresh openness, impact and hefty, deft bass – and all the more intriguing for the way those qualities serve a wide range of musical styles so well. Definitely one for the audition list ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Exciting sound; powerful bass; easy to drive and position
- VALUE FOR MONEY**  
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** The walnut finish is a bit sombre, and won't suit every listening room
- BUILD QUALITY**  
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Involving and highly musical, the Ushers are well worth considering
- EASE OF DRIVE**  
★★★★★

### OVERALL





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# Supersonic

With a raft of updates taking it to V2 status, **Andrew Simpson** gets up to speed with CA's range-topping network music player

**A** quick glance at the *HFC Yearbook 2014* shows just how diverse hi-res network streamers have become. But with technology rapidly evolving, it's often difficult to keep pace when last season's cutting-edge kit gets quickly surpassed by newer models boasting more capability. So you need to choose wisely to guarantee a long-term investment.

When Cambridge Audio launched its Stream Magic 6 back in 2013, it promised more than enough on paper to trouble rivals at twice the price with wi-fi streaming, an intelligent app, 384kHz upsampling and balanced outputs all for £700. Even by today's standards this feature set is impressive, but this hasn't stopped the folks at CA from going in search of a range of improvements to ensure the Stream Magic 6 in V2 guise stays ahead of the curve, while managing to hold its price firm at £700.

Outwardly it looks the same as the V1, with an identical front panel and socketry, but it's what's on the inside that counts. While the older model was able to handle 24-bit/192kHz via

its asynchronous USB and coaxial (S/PDIF) inputs, like many previous generation network players, wireless streaming was limited to 96kHz. The V2 improves on this thanks to its powerful new ARM Cortex-A8 processor with in-built NEON co-processor, which more than doubles the streaming module's clock speed to 600MHz, compared with 266MHz for the V1. With this comes the ability to support files (including AIFF/WAV/FLAC/ALAC) up to 24/192 over wi-fi, Ethernet and across both front and rear USB ports.

And it's not just the streaming hardware that's improved, as the V2 also gets a range of software revisions promising a better user experience. Alongside built-in support for services including BBC iPlayer Radio, Aupeo! and Rhapsody, Spotify Premium customers can now stream directly to the V2 through Spotify Connect within the Spotify app.

For music stored on your network there's the Stream Magic app, which is intuitive to use with a good level of file information for interrogating the music that's playing. Users can also

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Stream Magic 6 V2

**ORIGIN**  
UK/China

**TYPE**  
Network streamer/  
DAC preamp

**WEIGHT**  
4kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
430 x 85 x 305mm

**FEATURES**  
• Dual Wolfson  
WM8740 DACs  
• Wi-fi, Ethernet  
and optional  
aptX Bluetooth  
streaming  
• USB; S/PDIF;  
Toslink; Ethernet;  
Wi-fi inputs  
• S/PDIF; Toslink;  
balanced XLR  
audio outputs

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Richer Sounds  
**TELEPHONE**  
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**WEBSITE**  
cambridgeaudio.  
com

take advantage of Cambridge Audio's new Stream Magic Lite app, available for Android devices, with an iOS version in the pipeline.

As you'd expect, a remote is bundled, but it's likely this will only be called on as backup, as using the app is a much more engaging way of interacting with the V2. As an interface, the CA apps also reign supreme over the Stream Magic's front panel controls, which take a bit more time to familiarise yourself with compared with some rivals.

Elsewhere the V2's dual Wolfson WM8740 24-bit DACs and Anagram Technologies' ATF2 384kHz upsampling digital filter are carried over from the older model. And while the ability to stream a range of files over wi-fi and Ethernet are part of the package, Bluetooth users will need to fork out an extra £70 for CA's BT100 dongle, which plugs into a rear panel USB port and caters for aptX.

The V2 has plenty of features to play with, including a 20-preset internet radio memory, custom naming inputs, balance control and firmware updates. You can also run the V2 in preamp mode to feed a power amp directly with volume level adjusted in the digital domain, although there's no headphone jack.

## Sound quality

Like the previous incarnation of the Stream Magic 6, the V2 presents a fulsome sound that really fills the soundstage. Using the V2 in fixed output mode with its balanced sockets feeding my Musical Fidelity M6PRE/M6PRX amps with a stream



**Functional rather than flamboyant, the screen offers good clarity**

of Grant Lee Buffalo's *Mighty Joe Moon* over Spotify Connect really shakes my system into life. Bass is deep and punchy without having to crank the volume up, while the weight of the midrange gives the guitar strums and vocals a sense of purpose. Overall the Stream Magic makes music sound powerful, but without being too forceful in its delivery, which my Dynaudio Focus 260 speakers seem to revel in, as they get to grips with the richness and depth of the music being served up.

Repeating this track through a pair of Q Acoustics 2020i bookshelf speakers confirms my suspicions that this trait is especially evident in how the Stream Magic can make smaller speakers sound grander than their size would suggest, by providing such a well crafted signal for them to get their teeth into. Lower bass is substantial from the Qs, while the soundstage is surprisingly dense given

the limitations of the modest cabinets and 125mm drive units.

Although the Stream Magic has bags of detail across the frequency range, its sound doesn't have that sense of over polishing each performance until its sheen outshines the emotion of the music, as some hi-res DACs and streamers do. So if your system is already on the bright side, it may help tone down unwelcome glare at the extremes while adding a bit more body into the bargain.

Switching back to the Dynaudios with a 24/96 FLAC of Pink Floyd's *Keep Talking* from highresaudio.com has levels of instrument separation

## You really can have a truly high-end digital performance for under four figures

that's edge of the seat stuff, but there's no unnatural glassy tonality to the music, because the Stream Magic ensures the extra detail comes with added feeling. From the slow build of the intro to Dave Gilmore's under-emphasised vocals, the V2 has a knack for knowing how to present the music with an appropriate blend of drama and detail in equal measure.

Testing the V2 with content from the lower end of the resolution scale via a 320kbps WMA Radio 3 live stream of John Storgardis conducting the BBC Philharmonic in Tchaikovsky's *Hamlet Overture* and *Fifth Symphony*, it's clear that even with compressed music content, the Cambridge Audio doesn't hold back in giving each performance its all. The horns within the slow passages sound exceptionally clean, with a sense of space around them that brings the live venue to life in my listening room. Add to this the convincing intensity the V2 brings to the strings,

and I can sense the anticipation of the audience at the live performance first hand. This may be as good as digital radio gets for now, and thankfully the CA's focus is on getting the best out of it rather than exposing its limitations.

## Conclusion

This kind of sonic maturity makes the Stream Magic 6 V2 something of an audiophile bargain at the price. While the Cambridge Audio is extremely capable, it doesn't try to show off in the sonic stakes and instead gets on with the job of presenting the music with depth and resolve.

Sound wise it's everything the previous version was in terms of strong stereo imaging through a weighty sound that isn't too bright in the treble. The updates, however, take the Stream Magic 6 to the next level by removing the older model's compromises when streaming over wi-fi, ensuring that you get an equal blend of quality and convenience across all of the inputs.

As a digital preamp the V2 is extremely versatile, while as a dedicated DAC/streamer feeding a larger system in fixed output mode it just goes to show that you really can have a truly high-end digital performance for under four figures ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

<b>SOUND QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>LIKE:</b> Quality sound; hi-res wi-fi streaming; great app
<b>VALUE FOR MONEY</b> ★★★★★	<b>DISLIKE:</b> Functional rather than glamorous styling. Front panel not as intuitive as some
<b>BUILD QUALITY</b> ★★★★★	<b>WE SAY:</b> Great value hi-res streamer with an exceptional DAC
<b>FEATURES</b> ★★★★★	

### OVERALL



## CONNECTIONS



- 1 Mains input and power switch
- 2 Wi-fi and Ethernet networking inputs
- 3 XLR and RCA outputs
- 4 Asynchronous USB input
- 5 S/PDIF digital inputs and outputs
- 6 USB port for Bluetooth dongle



# Reach for the stars

Here's a compact floorstander with more serious sonic ambitions. **David Vivian** listens in with high expectations

**S**mall speakers with a big sound". If you're going to reduce the capabilities of a hi-fi component to one memorable aphorism, Edwards Audio's snappy description of its SP2 compact floorstander certainly cuts through the flannel. But then Kevin Edwards, possibly better known as the founder and chief designer of Talk Electronics has never been in business to add more hot air to hi-fi's loftier flights of fancy. He'd rather continue to challenge the perceived contradiction between high-end

## A presentation that's beguilingly natural and coherent with a rhythmic foundation

performance and high value and be glad to stick a 'Designed and assembled in the UK' label on it.

Within the broader remit of Talk Electronics, Edwards Audio is positioned at the pointy end of the affordable performance philosophy and can already furnish its customers with (tweaked Rega P2) turntable-based systems at various price points, each devised to punch well above its weight sonically. There are more components in the pipeline.

Costing just shy of £950 when ordered in light oak or £1,100 if you go for gloss black or white, it stands a modest 800mm tall and is pretty slim, too. There's nothing radical about the spec or construction of the SP2s. The braced enclosures are constructed from 19mm-thick MDF and house two 130mm doped paper mid-bass drive units and a 25mm fabric domed tweeter. Relatively unfussy about positioning, the reflex-loaded cabinets feature forward-facing, slot-shaped ports just beneath the lower bass-mid drivers

but comfortably clear of the floor. For the majority of my listening, I pull them about half a metre in from the rear walls, a little more from the side walls, angling a small amount of toe-in towards the listening position.

Driving duties are split between a Musical Fidelity kW250S receiver and Audio Analogue Crescendo integrated fed, variously, by a Pro-Ject Debut Carbon turntable and Pioneer PDS-801 CD player/Teac UD-H01 DAC combo. With claimed sensitivity at 89dB I anticipate no problems driving the SP2s with the 50W Audio Analogue amp, but it never quite gets hold of the speakers, sounding dynamically a little flat. So most of my listening is conducted with the beefier 250W Musical Fidelity.

## Sound quality

In hi-fi terms, the accepted appeal of a well-executed three-driver, two-way floorstander is that it can cover most bases convincingly, combining believable weight and authority with the clarity, agility and imaging capabilities of a decent standmount design. But the beauty of the SP2, which ticks all of those boxes, is that you won't feel inclined to think of it like that.

Here's a speaker design with solid sonic credentials, but what draws you in isn't the urge to analyse them, but the form and structure of the music. It puts the nuts and bolts of the performance before hi-fi histrionics. If you crave instant 'wow factor', you won't find it here. Treble doesn't have a glossy 'because you're worth it' sheen. Vocals assume a proportionate presence in the mix, and the bass, while full, extended and tuneful, won't re-arrange your internal organs just because it can.

Indeed, here's a presentation that's beguilingly natural and coherent with a solid, rhythmic foundation, a keen sense of acoustic space and satisfying

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Edwards Audio SP2

**ORIGIN**  
UK

**TYPE**  
2-way floorstanding  
loudspeaker

**WEIGHT**  
23kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
(WxHxD)  
170 x 800 x 250mm

**FEATURES**  
• 25mm soft dome  
tweeter  
• 2x 130mm doped  
paper mid/bass  
drivers  
• Quoted sensitivity:  
89dB/1W/1m

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Talk Electronics Ltd

**TELEPHONE**  
01344 844204

**WEBSITE**  
talkelectronics.com

image solidity. What's so likeable about the modestly dimensioned Edwards towers is a basic generosity of spirit and musical honesty. You never get the feeling that they're holding back or editorialising to produce a particular effect. Energetic with rock, expansive and organised with big orchestras, intimate and tactile with simpler acoustic material, the SP2s communicate the spirit and emotional power of the music.

The bass performance is particularly good. Thing is, it's all a bit too easy to sound merely impressive. We've probably all heard big, butch floorstanders with huge amounts of bottom end wallop, but a conspicuous absence of shape, timing, texture and definition; oodles of low-frequency energy that's amorphous and undifferentiated – with a kind of subwoofery quality. What's admirable here, though is low-frequency definition, texture and dynamics. The overall bass presentation is quite dry, but satisfyingly nimble and accurate in pitch which, in the long run, is much more rewarding. The Edwards Audio speakers also seem to go louder with less distortion than most £1k floorstanders and make some sound opaque and closed in through the midband by comparison.

The earthy quality of Leonard Cohen's vaguely melodic mumbling on the generally slow-burning *Ten Songs* album is startlingly well

**The SP2s communicate the spirit and emotional power of the music**



## Q&A

**Kevin Edwards**

Edwards Audio managing director



**DV: What are the advantages of the slot-shaped reflex port?**

**KE:** Principally it allows the cabinet to be more rigid. We also think it sounds better. Our standmount speaker, the SP1, has a conventional circular front-facing port and we built a prototype with a slot instead. To our surprise, the slot made quite a difference to the sound and we felt it was better. So we're now building SP1s with slot ports, and the same kind of reflex porting will be used with our next speaker, a £1,500 model with isobaric drivers.

**Talking of drivers, where have you sourced those for the SP2s?**

Everything but the drivers are made and assembled here in the UK. So we didn't want to stray too far afield for the drive units – at least keep it within Europe. So the tweeter is supplied by Monacor and the bass-mid drivers by Visaton.

**I was surprised the speakers don't come with a plinth to make them more stable and easy to level.**

Actually, a plinth can be specified. It's black and puts the spike threads well outside the perimeter of the cabinets. Surprisingly, none of our dealers have asked for plinths to be supplied. On hard floors perhaps it isn't so necessary, but with carpets it's probably a must.

### IN SIGHT



### HOW IT COMPARES

There's no shortage of potent-looking, big-name floorstanders at or around £1k. But perhaps the most intriguing comparison is with Monitor Audio's similarly sized Silver 6, which checks in at £1,000 exactly. Also available with a gloss white finish, the MAs look and feel rather more hi-tech than the SP2s with their magnetically secured grilles, flush-fitting, screwless composite ceramic drivers and immaculately resolved detail flourishes. The Silver 6 is also a true 2.5-way design with different tuning for each of its mid/bass drivers, whereas the SP2s simply work in tandem to mimic the bass response of a larger single drive unit.

portrayed. And when, as occasionally happens with Len, the music picks up pace, so do the speakers, their alacrity, assurance and expressive dynamics allowing the energy and momentum to swell with ease. Their smooth, extended treble has fine inner detail and integrates seamlessly with a midband that's poised, open and articulate. Just as reassuring, the bass register is full, firm and richly textured without ever straying into 'warm and cuddly' territory.

Instruments have a convincing timbral character. Take John Hammond's bluesy mouth organ. It has stinging, tingling presence and tangibility. And Steve Laury's laid back guitar is imbued with beautifully warm and natural tone. It all brings a greater sense of depth and subtlety to the listening experience, overall presentation sounding more rounded and polished yet, at the same time, endowed with greater incisiveness, precision and resolution. Everything is clear: explicit, neck-tingling musicianship shines through. The music makes sense.

On what remains saxophonist David Sanborn's best and purest jazz album, *Up Front*, his tenor sounds

authentically rude and fruity, its seductively warm tone laced with just the right amount of rasp and edge. The speakers' ability to nail a rhythm is right on the money, too. Moreover, they allow music the space and freedom to breathe. These attributes gel and contribute to the high degree of listenability. Just as some speakers can end up sounding stilted by over cranking the will to resolve the finest details, these capture the 'musically necessary' nuances while effortlessly conveying the bigger picture. They never sound as if they're getting fussy and forensic – and never, ever sound forced or strained, grainy or harsh, whatever the disc, and largely irrespective of volume if your amp has the muscle. It doesn't matter how long you spend in the SP2's company, you'll do so without the slightest hint of fatigue. It has nothing to do with what's usually described as "euphonic colouration". Again, it's that talent for proportion, scaling and spatial coherence that marks the SP2s out as something special.

### Conclusion

The bottom line is that a small, well designed floorstander is capable of a very grown-up performance. And the SP2s rank among the very best that I've heard for the money. They won't knock you off your feet in a dealer demo room, but live with them on the end of a commensurately talented system, and they'll deliver great clarity, an even tonal palette and spot-on timing while remaining musically lucid and unflagging.

They punch way above their weight and – so long as they're not required to drive cavernous rooms at party levels – are capable of conjuring up a real sense of scale and power, bringing life, structure, texture, colour and, above all, emotional depth to your music. And you can't ask for much more than that ●

### Hi-FiChoice

#### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY**



**LIKE:** A nose for what matters musically; big physical sound

**VALUE FOR MONEY**



**DISLIKE:** Not the easiest amp load; wobbly without plinth

**BUILD QUALITY**



**WE SAY:** Few compact floorstanders we've heard sound quite as big, muscular and musically astute

**EASE OF DRIVE**



**OVERALL**





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MUSICAL FIDELITY

---

MF-100

SUPERIOR PERFORMANCE HEAD PHONES



Music Is Our Religion

VERY HIGH QUALITY • MUSICAL FIDELITY DESIGNED  
BALANCED ARMATURE • NEODYMIUM DRIVE UNITS



# Asimi Ultra RCA Interconnect

hi-finews  
EDITOR'S  
CHOICE

“ Reflecting the mood of the music, the Asimi Ultra allows the very best hi-fi systems to sing – sing loud, sharp and clear when required or soft, slow and relaxed as the recording demands. It’s a true flagship cable. ”

*HiFi News,  
December 2014*

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# Retro beat

With styling that comes straight out of the fifties, Grado's on-ear cans are given a work out by thoroughly modern man **Ed Selley**

**W**hen it comes to launching new headphone models, the words 'Grado' and 'new' are rarely seen in close proximity to one another. The brand has an almost glacial product churn and so any revision is big news. The latest e Series models represent the largest change to the lineup in some years and the SR125e we reviewed in *HFC* 389 demonstrated an impressive performance boost over its predecessor.

The SR225e is one rung further up the ladder and is the penultimate member of the Prestige Series. This isn't immediately obvious from the appearance, though. Other than there being an extra '2' on either earpiece, it is effectively identical to the 125e. This means that the Grado sits somewhere between 'retro', 'vintage' and 'dated' depending on your taste.

Internally, a considerable amount of revision has been carried out, mainly on the drivers and their relationship to the earpads that enclose them. An area that Grado has seemingly expended considerable effort has been in the symmetry of the drivers within their respective spaces. This sounds peculiar given the inherently symmetrical nature of headphones, but relates to the mounting and

connections made to the drivers to ensure symmetry is achieved. The newly mounted drivers boast revised voicecoils and motors to tune the magnetic field of the whole headphone and so boost performance.

No changes have been made to the physical design of the 225e. The single sliding pin that mounts the earpad to the headband is simple, but allows the earpads to rotate and find a height on the head independently of one another. The unchanged design means that the 225e – for me at least – is still not very comfortable to wear long term. There's not enough padding and the speaker grille is too close to the ear. The cable also contributes to the discomfort as it goes to both earpads and tends to interfere with my face.

## Sound quality

It might not be the most comfortable headphone around, but it is a credit to Grado's revisions that you'll do all you can to keep wearing the 225e. It does nothing to alter the largely positive perception of Grado equipment being refined, honest and impressively neutral. Listening to the 24/96kHz download of Craig Armstrong's *It's Nearly Tomorrow*, demonstrates the impressive ability

## DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Grado SR225e

**ORIGIN**  
USA

**TYPE**  
Open-back, on-ear headphones

**WEIGHT**  
260g

**FEATURES**  
• Pair matched drivers  
• Quoted impedance: 32ohms  
• 3.5mm jack (6.35mm adaptor comes supplied)

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Armour Home Electronics

**TELEPHONE**  
01279 501111

**WEBSITE**  
grado.co.uk

to create a palpable sense of space and scale from drivers that are millimetres away from your ear. Brett Anderson's soaring vocals in *Crash* are packed with fine detail and weight and presence and there is a real sense of positioning, which is a neat trick when the sound is being beamed directly into your ears.

The other standout area of the performance is the bass. Grado has never been poor in this regard, but the SR225e brings a speed and definition to its low end that stands in good stead whether the bass is the swell of an orchestra or some deep electronic rumblings. This would count for very little if this heft didn't fit seamlessly with the rest of the frequency response, but it offers wonderful integration from top to bottom. It is also extremely forgiving. Feed it a diet of beautifully mastered hi-res and it revels in the available quality, but listening to the same pieces on Spotify is far from unpleasant too.

With all material, hi-res or compressed, the only real weakness that the Grado displays is a slight lack of outright excitement with up-tempo material when you really want it to get the head nodding. It is possible that the refinement and accuracy comes at the expense of this last ounce of drive and attack, but for many people these qualities will outweigh any limitations at inducing approving head movements.

## Conclusion

The SR225e is a genuinely impressive headphone for the £200 asking price. Perhaps the highest praise I can give it is that the performance is on a par with the 325is of the preceding generation, which was 50 percent more expensive. If you are looking for an open-backed home headphone, the SR225e is a seriously capable example of the breed and suggests that Grado's e Series models might be its best work yet ●

## Hi-Fi Choice

### OUR VERDICT

**SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Impressive sense of scale, fine detail and weight; bass

**VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slight discomfort; lacks excitement with up-tempo music

**BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** The performance is so good that you forget any discomfort

**FEATURES** ★★★★★

### OVERALL



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# TOPIC: THREE SCORE YEARS AND 15

The oldest independent record label in the world continues to innovate and captivate as it enjoys its 75th birthday. **Simon Berkovitch** raises his glass

**T**opic Records' head David Suff takes us right back to the source. "It started in 1939," he begins, "the same year as Blue Note..."

Mention Topic to any music enthusiast and a fine tapestry of the UK's traditional music unfolds in the mind's eye. It has roots in the Workers Music Association, giving "a voice to the people" – indeed, the first entry in Topic's recorded catalogue is Paddy Ryan's *The Man That Waters The Worker's Beer*. Fifties and sixties releases were often influenced by the work of two key figures in the label's history: Ewan MacColl – the man behind such classic compositions as *Dirty Old Town* – and singer and historian AL Lloyd – responsible for 1963's milestone *The Iron Muse (A Panorama of Industrial Folk Song)*, an important work (featuring Anne Briggs) which was released

during the second British Folk revival that peaked during the decade.

Anne Briggs is just one of many legendary names associated with the label. The list of artists who've recorded for Topic reads like a *Who's Who* of folk music past and present: that Shirley Collins, Nic Jones, Davey Graham, father and daughter Martin and Eliza Carthy, the mighty Watersons, June Tabor and Martin Simpson, to name but a handful, have all recorded for the label speaks volumes.

It's reductive to view the label as simply a celebration of music from these fair isles, however. Early on, it released recordings by Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, as well as blues albums, many for the first time in the UK. Its vast catalogue also includes collections from Bulgaria, Albania, Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey – way ahead of the curve of the eighties embrace of world music.

## Keeping busy

In the 75 years since Topic set up shop, it has racked up an enviable discography – a celebration of fantastic songs and the many brilliant singers who have acted as their conduits. It has also seen vast changes in the way we listen to recorded music, moving from delicate 78s to digital files. Now, as ever, Topic continues to innovate, educate and captivate.

This year's not the first big birthday the label has blown the candles out on. For its momentous 70th anniversary, David compiled the expansive 7CD set *Three Score*

*And Ten* and penned a comprehensive history of the label. Five years later, the celebratory plan was twofold. "One was to make more of the catalogue available," David explains. "Another was to celebrate the fact that Topic is probably the oldest independent record label in the world."

David, also the head of folk label Fledg'ling, is the custodian of the Topic archive, housed at the record label's rural headquarters in Uppingham, Rutland. "Most of the master

## In the fifties and sixties, Topic was closely aligned with the Trade Union movement

tapes were donated to the British Library some time ago," he explains, "but there should be two to three copies of each of our physical releases in the archive." There are gaps, however. "Our 78 archive is not complete. We have a box of broken bits of shellac, which suggests that some accident happened."

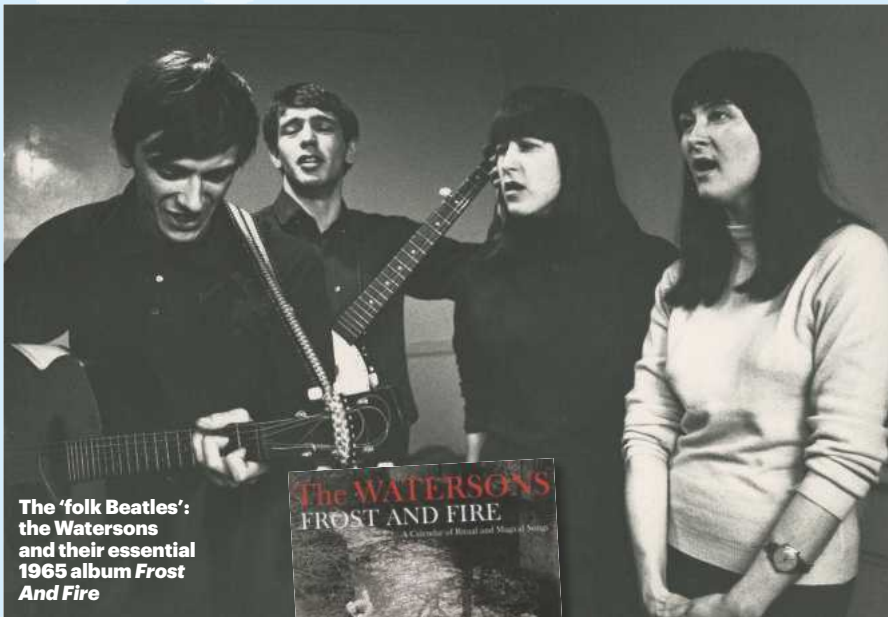
Filling these gaps is an ongoing mission. One resource is ebay, but the generosity of the public is another. "Four or five times in the last year we've gratefully received a parcel of 78s and then made a donation on the family's behalf to whatever their chosen charity is."

Another explanation for the incomplete archive may concern the sleeve art. "In the early sixties, Topic had a habit of changing the



Topic MD David Suff (main) and mastering guru Denis Blackham

Record sleeves courtesy of Topic Records Ltd. David Suff picture courtesy of Simon Ashley, Denis Blackham courtesy of Denis Blackham. Nic Jones pictures courtesy of Dave Peabody. Box-out picture courtesy of David Suff



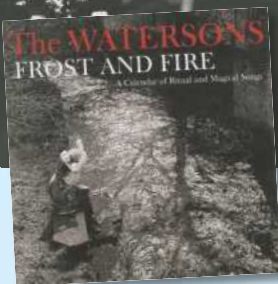
**The 'folk Beatles': the Watsonsons and their essential 1965 album *Frost And Fire***

artwork for releases, so we've got lots of records from that time that came out with two or three different sleeves. I've been trying to buy the missing bits."

It's a relatively obscure record that provided David with a port of entry to the world of Topic: The Fisher Family's 1966 LP *Traditional and New Songs of Scotland*. "My favourite is the first Topic LP I ever owned in 1969. I still think it's wonderful. It's just exuberant singing."

The Watsonsons are hugely important both to Topic and its MD. He compiled the expansive *Mighty Rivers Of Song* boxset ("It took three years. I listened to *everything* and tried to whittle it down to something that was manageable – and even then it was seven generously long CDs"), and the group – memorably tagged the 'Folk Beatles' on their emergence – has had an ongoing relationship with the label since 1965. "The Watsonsons' *Frost And Fire*... that classic album of ceremonial folk songs from 1965... and *Traditional And New Songs Of Scotland* came out within a few months of each other. Those two records probably explain what Topic has been trying to do for at least the last 30 or 40 years, and for most of its 75 years."

When it came to the painstaking digital archive project, David determined that Topic



should reissue as much of its out-of-print catalogue as possible, not only paying great attention to the audio itself, but also to the wealth of information that often accompanied the original releases.

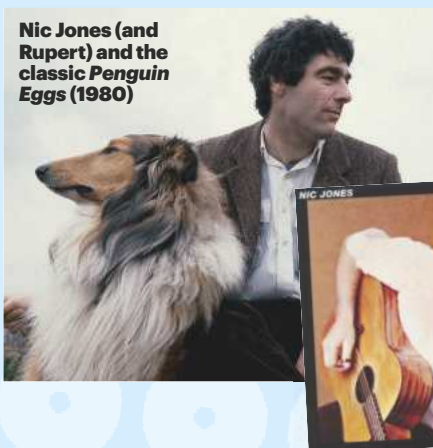
"Folk music requires the packaging that we've had historically with physical records. You have the audio, but then there's the artwork – and, more importantly, the sleeve notes. We decided to create digital booklets along with digital files."

**The digital age**

"If you went to buy a seventies Topic LP from iTunes, say, you would be able to have all of the music and something that approximated the sleeve notes and the artwork that came with the original record. I decided that we wouldn't try to add new notes. It is an enormous enough project anyway – we're talking about more than 300 LPs and EPs. Eventually there's the potential to go back into the 78s of the archive, perhaps to compile digital collections of people such as the Ian Campbell Folk Group. They recorded two singles and EPs for Topic but never made a whole LP. There's a huge body of work. 99 percent of what we've released so far is taken from the original masters. We're archiving all of our catalogue as WAV files."

Occasionally some remastering is involved, and a legendary name provides his sought-after services. "Principally we use Denis Blackham at Skye Mastering – a dear friend of mine. He's pretty much retired now, but he's mastered most of the records that Fledg'ling and Topic have released in the last 20 years.

"From a practical point of view, the biggest problem with digital projects is rebuilding the sleeve notes, which is very time consuming. We scan all the original parts. We run them



**Nic Jones (and Rupert) and the classic *Penguin Eggs* (1980)**

**STATE OF INDEPENDENCE**

Topic's involvement in this summer's Independent Label Market was a coup for the event's organisers. Since its 2011 launch on London's bustling Berwick Street in Soho, an area still teeming with new and second-hand record shops, the Independent Label Market has brought together the best indies from the UK and beyond to get back to basics – in the shape of old-fashioned market stalls with the emphasis on vinyl and community.

The Summer 2014 event took place in Old Spitalfields Market, traditionally a popular venue for record fairs. Over 36,000 music fans flicked through the wares of regular traders such as 4AD, Acid Jazz, Bella Union, Domino and Rough Trade, to name but a few alumni. The addition of Topic – "the granddaddy" of independents, as David describes the label – was the highlight of the event.

Exclusives on the stall included a repro vinyl reissue of Shirley Collins' *Heroes in Love* EP and a natty button badge set featuring some famous names associated with the label.

The event returned to Spitalfields on 29 November for London's fourth annual Christmas market. New faces included Ignition Records and associated labels Big Brother and Sour Mash, a vinyl cleaning service courtesy of Original Rocker's Vinyl and an appearance from Southsea's Pie & Vinyl store and café.

Glorious vinyl, craft beer courtesy of a partnership with London Brewers Market and now mouth-watering food as well? What's not to like?

[independentlabelmarket.com](http://independentlabelmarket.com)



through OCR [Optical Character Reading] software to get a sensible piece of text. And then we have to proofread it all. And that takes forever. Then our designer creates a nice digital booklet and we proofread it all over again."

David and his team have set themselves taxing but rewarding targets for this valuable project. "We have slowed down a bit this year because the other 75th anniversary projects have hovered up most of the time. We were trying to publish between seven and 10 titles a month. We had a really good rate in 2013 and the beginning of 2014, and then we've had a four or five month hiatus. Last month [August], we managed about seven again, so hopefully we're about to pick that up as a regular monthly delivery of more archive titles. And they're across all the digital retailers you can imagine – from iTunes to Amazon, and Tesco to Napster."

Topic's overall digital sales – including popular recent releases from Martin Simpson

**The Waterson/Carthy dynasty (clockwise): daughter Eliza; Martin Carthy, Norma Waterson and Eliza live at the Towersey festival; 1994's debut album; Martin's 1976 solo LP – one of many**



and Full English – are now in line with most of the recorded music industry: around 20 percent. “At the beginning, Topic had a motto: to inform and educate and publish the music of the people. And I see that this ambition to publish goes through every different change in format or distribution that’s happened over the decades. Just making the music files available felt like not doing the job properly somehow.”

## Voice and Vision

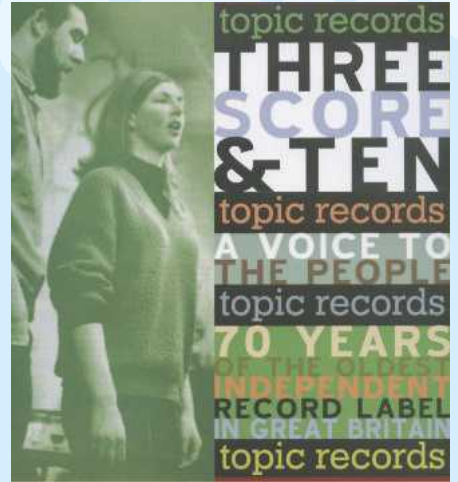
In the short-term at least, David can’t see the ongoing digitisation of the Topic catalogue putting CD into retirement – in no small way evidenced by the *Voice and Vision* project.

*Voice and Vision* is a CD and download-only release that was presented at the TUC conference in Blackpool at the beginning of September. “Part of Topic’s catalogue at least will try to support independent record stores and offer them things that they could sell that some of the larger online retailers wouldn’t have [to sell],” David explains. “In the fifties and sixties, Topic had been quite closely aligned with the Union movement in the UK. Topic would often have a stall at TUC and teaching union conferences, because the music is the music of the people, the working people

of the British Isles, and quite often the records were presented in a way that they could be used for educational purposes. So I thought that trying to rebuild that link with the union movement was another important thing that we should do in our anniversary year.”

“The General Federation of Trade Unions [GFTU], an umbrella organisation for lots of smaller unions such as the MU [Musicians’ Union], were excited, and wanted to be involved in a project that documented political songs. So, *Voice and Vision* is a 2CD set compiled by Topic and the GFTU largely from our archives... historical recordings of Pete Seeger, Paul Robeson, Martin Carthy, Shirley Collins and Dick Gaughan. But we also wanted to take the opportunity to commission new recordings from younger singers and musicians who were working in that area with songs of political comment.”

David’s pursuit of “doing the job properly” and delivering an authentic experience for the listener also extends to some fantastic vinyl reissues of some of Topic’s most famous artists. “We’d already decided that we were going to make anniversary editions of some early EPs that came out 50 years ago. In 2013, we did Davy Graham’s *3/4 A.D.* for a



## Seven fabulous CDs in a lavish hardback book marked Topic’s 70th birthday

Record Store Day release, and this year we did Anne Briggs’ *The Hazards Of Love* EP, and that got me thinking... Shirley Collins.”

As part of the anniversary celebrations, Shirley Collins’ classic EP *Heroes in Love* was re-released as part of Topic’s participation in the Independent Label Market in Spitalfields, East London (see overleaf). Topic’s stall also had an array of cool merchandise – just like any contemporary independent would – such as button badges of alumni such as Anne Briggs, Shirley Collins, Davey Graham and Nic Jones. “The 75th anniversary of Topic got me thinking about what independent record labels do. We have to raise our own capital to fund things and we have to use whatever resources we have to market and try to behave in a commercial way like any other label, otherwise we don’t exist. And that got me thinking about vinyl and T-shirts and mugs and badges. That put us in touch with the Independent Label Market organisers who were excited to have Topic at the summer fair. It feels a little odd when you have the likes of Bella Union and other successful modern labels surrounding you, but we’re the granddaddy.

“One of the consequences of reissuing these early recordings of Shirley’s on 7in EPs is that it looks like we’ll make a brand new vinyl EP with her next year. There are five songs that we’re ready to record and see what we get. She’ll be working with some dearly loved neighbours in Sussex.”

## Vinyl revival

David believes that “vinyl is still probably the best way to listen to recorded music... the best sound carrier that we have”, but when posed the question of whether it’s his preferred format, his answer is satisfyingly multi-layered. “The cool answer is to just say yes. But the truthful answer is to say compact disc is way more convenient for most of the listening I do. But I have just recently got a [Rega] turntable, and I have been buying back records that I used to own on vinyl. Jeff Buckley’s *Grace*, John Martyn’s *Solid Air*. There are little details I’ve forgotten that were part of the recordings...

Eliza Carthy picture courtesy of Tom Howard. Towersey photo courtesy of Phil Carter



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**Prolific Topic mainstay Martin Simpson and his most recent work *Vagrant Stanzas* (2013)**

the quality of the air moving in the room. You can hear that on a record. You don't hear that when it's been transferred to digital.

"There is a niche business to be had in a vinyl edition with a download code card in the package. You have the convenience of a digital file on your laptop or mobile, but there's also this physical object, and there's the ritual of taking it out of its sleeve, putting it on the deck and lowering the needle – all of that stuff that, in a funny way, increases your concentrations on listening."

When pressed to recommend just a handful of classic Topic recordings for those uninitiated to the label, he chuckles: "It's an impossible

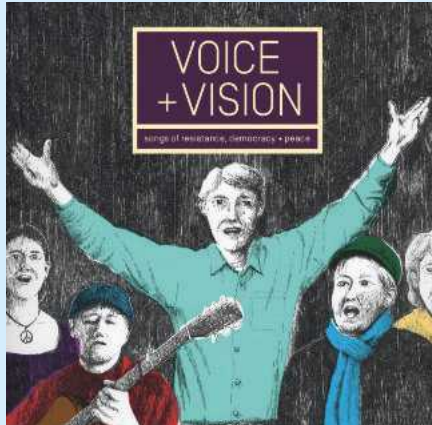
## In the 75 years since Topic set up shop, it has racked up an enviable discography

task, isn't it?" He still rises to the challenge, making excellent suggestions that span the decades, running the gamut of the legendary and those deserving a wider audience. Straight out of the traps are the "acknowledged classics" of Anne Briggs' and Davey Graham's EPs, as well as Nic Jones' *Penguin Eggs* LP

"I think that the first Waterson Carthy LP (1994) hasn't found that broad an audience yet, but it's just great music. The label 'folk' seems irrelevant for so much of this music. There's a huge body of traditional field recordings, too... wonderful singers such as Harry Cox. And people like Peter Bellamy. I think his *Both Sides Then* is still a fantastic, ambitious, wonderful record" – see Shopping List.

### Voice of the People

On the subject of field recordings, *Voice Of The People* is another important project. "We've reached 28 volumes now. Some of the volumes have been two or three CD sets. There are at least two more to come along in



**The Voice and Vision project takes Topic back to its trade union roots**

2015, both of them triples. I think Topic's core purpose is to make as much of the music that was created by unlettered working people throughout history available as we possibly can. That's our real job... to say: "This is great; this is what people can create given their background, knowledge, skill and interests." Traditional songs tell such fantastic stories."

The historically significant series feeds the repertoires of younger, upcoming performers. "Half of Bellowhead are regular *Voice Of The People* customers. Every time we release new ones they're shoving their credit cards in our direction. Last night I went to see Martin Simpson with his new band, and partway through the evening he said: 'I want to sing this song now that I learned from a recording by Jean Elvin; a recording that Topic released a couple of years ago.' That's a very important part of publishing this stuff – the current generation can't take it on and reinterpret it if they don't know it exists.

"Fundamentally, a good interpreter of traditional songs sings without ego. They let the song come through them. Topic's like that, too: it's the conduit that tries to keep these recordings available. We want to say: 'Hey, look at this fabulous music we've got here. Come and listen to this. See if you can do something with this if it moves you and touches you.' That's just like any other record label, isn't it?"

### The future is calling

The question of what David plans to do for the 150th anniversary of Topic is met with a hearty chuckle, but his hopes for the label's longevity will surely be shared by anyone who has ever been moved by the power of song written by and for ordinary people. "It would be wonderful to think that Topic could become an institution that rumbled on and was always there doing something similar to what it has done for the last 75 years, and that there will always be enough of an audience for somebody who's in charge in another 75 years' time," David says. "Goodness knows how music will be distributed to people then" ●

### SHOPPING LIST

**Ben Phillipson** – member of psych-folk-rock group The Trimdon Grange Explosion – delves deep into the Topic archive and selects eight of his favourite cuts



#### Hedy West

**Old Times, Hard Times**  
"Blessed with a wonderful alto and a killer banjo technique, Hedy West brought the Appalachian variants of the Child Ballads back to the UK when she recorded this."



#### Shirley Collins

**The Sweet Primroses**  
"Nicely balanced, this 1967 classic contains a number of Shirley Collins' finest recordings. The duets with sister Dolly on flute organ, however, opened up new possibilities."



#### Frankie Armstrong

**Lovely On The Water**  
"Among the most righteous of all the folk revivalists, Frankie Armstrong's powerful, yet versatile singing is shown to fine effect in this highly recommended 1972 album."



#### Peter Bellamy

**Both Sides Then**  
"A stunning interpreter and arranger of traditional song; it's impossible to hear Bellamy's intense performances and forget the tragedy of his suicide back in 1991."



#### Martin Carthy and Dave Swarbrick

**Prince Heathen**  
"This has been part of the Topic catalogue since the mid-seventies. Carthy's brave rearranging skills on traditional sources bring new life to the material."



#### Dick Gaughan

**Handful Of Earth**  
"A mix of Scottish ballads and political comment that are strongly evocative of the environment from whence they came. *The Workers Song* is thought provoking and beautifully indignant."



#### Brass Monkey

**Brass Monkey**  
"This 1983 LP is an attempt to marry traditional English music with a brass section, succeeding where most electric folk-rock fails by letting the songs breathe and swing."



#### June Tabor

**Abyssinians**  
"The fourth and best June Tabor recording; her voice is beautifully restrained, the songs are brilliantly chosen and the sparseness of the arrangements are moody and often chilling."



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## THIS MONTH



**ED SELLEY**

**EXPERTISE: REVIEWER**

For the best part of 10 years, Ed was developing and supporting products from some of the biggest names in audio. He enjoys blogging about his favourite tunes, too.



**NIGEL WILLIAMSON**

**EXPERTISE: REVIEWER**

As one of HFC's chief music reviewers Nigel certainly knows a decent tune when he hears one, which is why he's the perfect choice for any music matter queries.



**CHRIS WARD**

**EXPERTISE: REVIEWER**

When Chris isn't advising businesses on strategy, he's trying to squeeze more musical qualities out of exotic combinations of cutting-edge tech and vintage hi-fi classics.



**DAVID PRICE**

**EXPERTISE: REVIEWER**

DP has spent much longer than he'd care to admit buying and upgrading his own hi-fi system, not to mention reviewing thousands of separates over the years.



### More ways to get in touch:

You can also send your questions to us via social media: [twitter.com/HiFiChoiceMag](https://twitter.com/HiFiChoiceMag) [facebook.com/hifichoice.co.uk](https://facebook.com/hifichoice.co.uk)

Email us at [letters@hifichoice.co.uk](mailto:letters@hifichoice.co.uk) or write to: *Hi-Fi Choice* Letters, AVTech Media Ltd, Enterprise House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF **Your letters** may be edited before publication and we cannot enter into personal correspondence

### ➤ **Wired for sound**

I wonder if you can offer any advice on a choice of speaker cable for my system please: Leema Acoustics Tucana II, Leema Acoustics Antilla IIs, Leema Acoustics Hydra, PMC twenty.24s, ARC LP1 phono stage, Michell Orbe SE/ Technoarm/Lyra Delos, various chord interconnect cables and lots of Russ Andrews bits and pieces. I listen to all music, but mainly prog rock.

I can't seem to get an honest answer from anybody that I've bought the aforementioned equipment from as to what speaker cables to use. They all lean to their 'own' cables, which is all too convenient an answer. My current cable is Nordost Blue Ribbon speaker cable, which although I believe is no slouch, doesn't convince me that it's bringing out the best of the system. I've upgraded the cables over the years but without any real advice as to what is best.

**Townshend Isolda speaker cable has been recommended by several people, but buying two 4m bi-wire runs would be a very expensive mistake! So any advice from the experts will be gratefully received.**

*Paul Moxey, by email*

**DP:** Hello Paul. Cables are rather like 21st century tone controls, the problem being that instead of twiddling them up and down effortlessly until you get your preferred sound balance, you have to suck it and see, so to speak – which is far less easy. As you'll appreciate it's difficult to come up with a definitive answer for your plight, not least because you haven't indicated the sort of sound you go for, and what you think is wrong, precisely, with the Nordost. So, I shall have to take an educated guess, given that I am fairly well acquainted with everything in your system – except your room acoustics of course!

You've obviously given your system some real thought and likely done a lot of auditioning to get where you are now, as it's a

well balanced setup and should work well with prog rock. The Leema electronics are fast, clean and neutral like good solid-state should be; the Michell Orbe is powerful and the Lyra cartridge polished and delicate; your PMC speakers are punchy and detailed. In other words, not a lot wrong. So I would be looking at a smooth, musical cable that's just a little more involving and subtle than your current wires. I

### No one can give me any decent advice on cables. Can you help?

would opt for Black Rhodium Twirl (£131 for a 3m pair, terminated). This has a smooth, musically engaging sound that flows really well. It isn't as detailed as Townshend Isolda, but gives away nothing in terms of rhythmic flow and has a slightly sweeter tonality that will suit your PMCs better. You'll find it a good deal less 'well lit' than the Nordost, but somehow more organic and natural sounding. Good luck.

**ES:** Part of the problem here Paul is that as reviewers, we often keep our cabling in situ as much as 'normal' people do. If I review a speaker with my 'normal' electronics the chances are it will be with runs of Chord Epic Bi-Wire if the speaker supports bi-wire and with Audioquest CV6 if it doesn't. You don't state what

you are striving to achieve with a change of cabling, but for a system of this nature I would suggest looking towards Furutech and Audio Note as two brands for me that produce complete cable solutions that might move the system forward. Both are fairly well represented dealer wise.

### ➤ **Gardener's question time**

I've had a pair of AKG K-105 headphones for over 15 years. I use them for listening to my music while sat outside in my garden 10 yards away from the house, sometimes in my shed. They work great, but are getting worn out now.

I thought I'd upgrade when I saw the five star rating for Sennheiser's RS180 in *What HiFi*, so bought a set. They have fantastic clarity close to my hi-fi, but as soon as I step outside, zilch, nothing, useless. I tried another set of 180s, but they were the same. So I took them back, got my money refunded and went back to my trusty old AKGs.

Do AKG do an up-to-date version? I feel I don't want to trust Sennheiser models again. Both my shed and garage are about 10m from my house. The hi-fi is actually upstairs and the AKGs seem to have no problem whatsoever with these distances. So I need a modern version with this kind of range and performance.

What HiFi does not do any garden test and was really



**DP recommends Black Rhodium's Twirl cables for Paul's system**



DP used the Cyrus CD Xt Signature and Chord Hugo to test Monitor Audio's Silver 8

quite unhelpful – it actually took me six requests to get any response!

P Webberley

**Mark Hockey (AKG):** RE the K 105s, these are the old FM-based wireless headphones and had a massive working range – up to and beyond 25m in most cases (but they did hiss a bit!). The current product is the K 935 (last year's EISA winner) but this uses 2.4g wireless so sound wise is perfect and uncompressed (and no hiss), but only have a rated working range of 12m – so out in the garden may be an issue.

My advice here is keep the K 105s for the garden and look for something more modern and hi-fi based for in-home use.

### COMPETITION WINNERS

Back in the November issue we ran a competition offering one very lucky reader the opportunity to win Chord Electronics' astonishingly good Hugo DAC/headphone amplifier. The first correct answer pulled from the lucky HFC hat was: Mr D Dallard, from Morpeth, Northumberland. Congratulations, your prize should be on its way to you very soon. Check out this month's competition on page 120.



### Testing times

I regularly buy HFC, and wonder if you could tell me where I can find the test equipment that is used to conduct the reviews not in the group test. For example, in the Monitor Audio Silver 8 reviewed in the August issue by David Price. There appears to be no reference to the equipment that is used to review them.

Andy, by email

**DP:** Hi Andy, we tend to avoid long lists of review equipment unless the kit used is particularly pertinent to the review, as these can be tedious to read and often don't enlighten the reader in any meaningful way. You need only



Debussy digital converter. Cables were Black Rhodium Twirl, a nice fuss-free, even-sounding wire.

### How can I get modifications for my Shanling CD-T1000?

to look at some of the vast reference systems listed on internet reviews, which tell you no more than that reviewer needs to get out more! Anyway, in the case of the Monitor Audio Silver 8, because it's a relatively easy to drive floorstander it was partnered with a pretty straight down the line Exposure 3010S2 integrated, one of my favourite sub-£2,000 designs. The source was a Cyrus CD Xt Signature transport driving both a Chord Hugo DAC and a high-end dCS

### Time to upgrade

Reading your Letters pages in the November issue I noticed that Chris Ward mentioned that he had had his Shanling CD-T100 modified. I have a CD-T100, which still sounds pretty good, and it is so gorgeous to look at that I think it is worth keeping in service if possible. If the reconditioning brings about some sound quality improvements as well as the longevity of the unit, then so much the better.

Could Chris tell me where I could get such modifications carried out and, of course, how much this would cost?

Shanling's CD-T2000 is said to be a better sounding replacement for the CD-T100, but it is nowhere near as nice looking as the older model. Many thanks

David Drynan

**CW:** Hi David, I'd thoroughly recommend keeping your

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**Tony Mansfield**  
@wowbaggerish 17h  
@HiFiChoiceMag looking to replace my separates with a compact streamer/amp, but keep my @KEF Audio speakers - what would you recommend?

**Hi-Fi Choice**  
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**Tony Mansfield**  
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@HiFiChoiceMag  
@CambridgeAudio @NADElectronics @simpleaud Great - do they all have AirPlay?

**Hi-Fi Choice**  
@HiFiChoiceMag 16h  
@wowbaggerish  
@NADElectronics does, @CambridgeAudio no, but has #wifi & #bluetooth. @simpleaud lets you stream over Ethernet and/or mains

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**Hi-Fi Choice**

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Shanling CD-T100 on song. It is a thing of beauty, highly collectable and eminently upgradeable.

I've known some owners send their beloved Shanling products all the way to Parts Connexion in Ontario, Canada for upgrades, but my own Shanling CD-T100 was heavily modified far closer to home by Colin Toogood of CPT Acoustics in Ludlow, 01584 878221, www.cptacoustics.com.

Colin can talk you through modification options around reclocking, power supplies and swapping out key components. While the bonnet was up I also chose to have the laser replaced.

Expect modifications to cost between around £200 and £850 depending on your aspirations. Colin weaves his magic on any audio components, but has extensive experience of this player and how to balance technical performance and musical qualities. I hope your CD-T100 goes on to give you many more years of joy.

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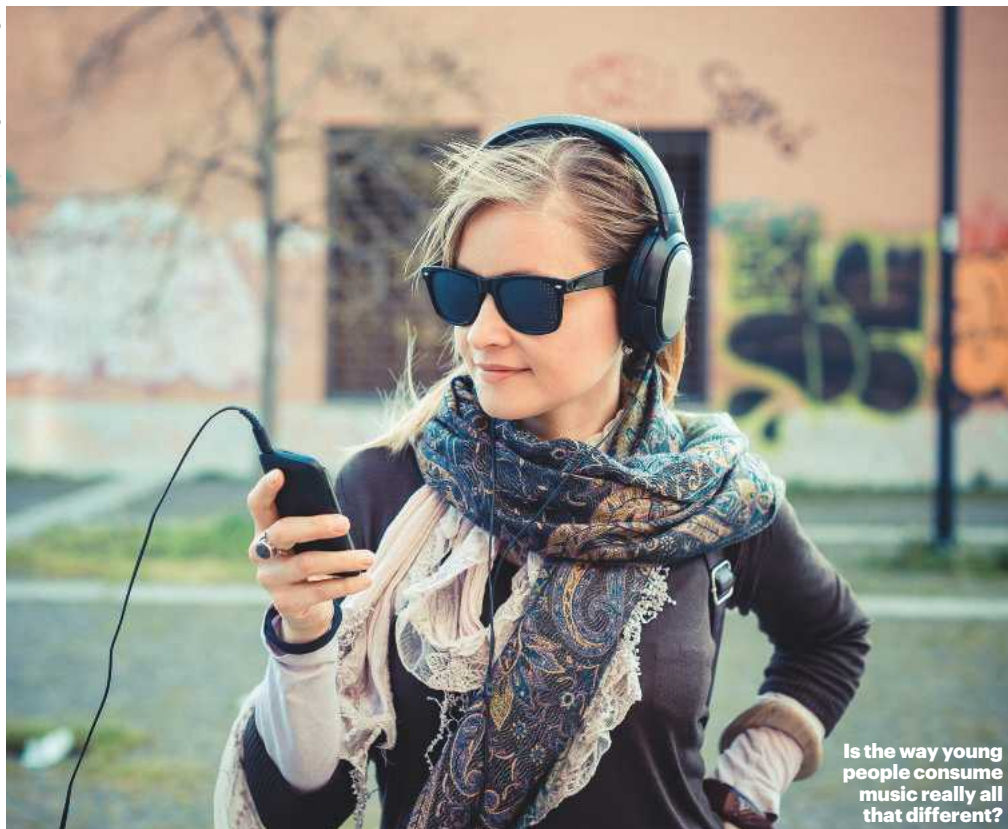
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AC/HFN/83



Is the way young people consume music really all that different?

### ➤ Is this the end?

In response to the 'RIP Albums' article in the November 2014 issue (*Comment*). There is undoubtedly a move toward people picking and choosing certain tracks, or even just the famous one off an album, to listen to. Most of these choices are, I believe, down to the fact that younger folks are listening to music in more casual and less committed ways than previously. I also believe, and you will find this controversial, that not all is as it seems with your new so-called music fan. With the advent of devices that allow you to walk around the streets, taking thousands of tracks on to the bus or train, taking tracks from streaming services and playing them offline, you end up with too much choice for too little commitment. Would these so-called music fans have paid good money for the many thousands of tracks they have at their disposal? Of course not. In the same way that you see people taking items from skips in the street, that they would

never dream of paying for and almost certainly do not really require. People, and lots of them, do things just because they can and not because they really care about the subject. A colleague at my work, has 5,000 tracks on his device but has not listened to any in about two years. He now has moved on to other things. It was just a phase.

### Some people see music as just another fashion accessory...

As for the suggestion that streamed music is not of the highest quality, well why would it need to be? It is listened to by part-time music lovers listening with average headphones while trying not to get run over when crossing the road.

On a brighter note, the album could well be a thing of the past, what with all of this picking and choosing certain tracks at the expense of all of the others. It seems to me that artists moan quite

a lot about the money they make with each stream of an album, and the whole album may never get really listened to. Well, ditch the album, divide it up in to six parts, release it over the course of one year to 18 months. More separate releases, more revenue per stream, overall and a more regular release pattern for genuine fans of genuine bands. It may, because of its fractured nature, actually appeal more to the people who seem to have very little attention span and see music as just another fashion accessory.

*Neil Porter, by email*

**ES:** Hi Neil, I feel compelled to stick up for the 'younger folks' here, not because I am one alas but having talked to a steady stream of them that pass through the house for music lessons, they have some clear views on the consumption of music that aren't 'wrong' so much as different and in some cases actually hark back to an earlier time.

For starters, yes, the album as it now exists in 2014 is on the endangered species list. What I notice that is far more common among artists of the moment is

## HINTS & TIPS

### CLEANING TAPE DECKS

Both cassette and reel-to-reel tape decks require regular cleaning to ensure that they perform at their best. Apart from the need to remove tape oxide from the heads, it can also get caked over the rubber pinch roller.

Dirty tape heads will cause a poor frequency response on both record and playback. The former results in permanent degradation of your recordings, while poor playback can be cured by cleaning, so it is particularly important to clean your tape heads before recording. A dirty erase head can result in incomplete erasure of an old recording, which will still be audible in the background of any new recording – not good! A clean with a tape head cleaner will solve the problem for routine maintenance. However, more stubborn dirt will require gentle massage with a cotton bud soaked in isopropyl alcohol or tape head cleaning fluid.

Dirty pinch rollers will cause wow and flutter. Again this will have a permanent detrimental effect on any recording made. The only real way of cleaning pinch rollers is with the use of a cotton bud soaked in cleaner as the covering over the rubber pinch roller can cause a shiny glaze that is difficult to remove with rubbing.



### CHECKING THE PHASE OF LOUSPEAKERS

It is so easy to get the phasing of the signal to your speakers wrong, especially with cable that has no identifying marks. On one occasion, a record deck cartridge had been connected up incorrectly, so one channel was reversed, but the problem had been corrected by the reversal of a loudspeaker connection! The result was that records sounded fine, but CDs and the radio was bass-light and muffled with poor focus.

The easiest way to check the phasing of the loudspeakers is with pink noise. This noise is a random signal in which each octave has an equal amount of energy. The result is a hiss that sounds more bassy than white noise (which has a constant amplitude across the audio spectrum). If you don't have access to a test recording, a ready source of pink noise can be obtained by tuning an analogue radio between stations, making sure that the inter-station muting is switched off. Now position yourself centrally between the loudspeakers so you are equidistant from each and forming an equilateral triangle with them. The hiss should sound as if it is coming from a single centre point between the speakers if they are in phase. If out of phase, the sound will appear to come from an area outside the speakers.





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the 'EP' of between four to seven tracks. This partly matches your suggestion of how music might be released in the future, but from my perspective these EPs are closer in a length and spirit to albums from the LP era. With no CD that they 'have' to fill, the releases get shorter, but they frequently get better too. There is also a shift in how artists earn, which feeds back to how music is consumed. The 'money' (such as it is) is in live performance. The recorded material is a means of convincing punters to go. The band is unlikely to play the album live so they tend to focus on the killer not the filler.

The other point I'd make is that it has forever been thus. For as long as the most convenient option was also the highest quality, it gave rise to the notion that more people were serious consumers of music than was actually the case. This present generation is maligned for the most part because people who regard music as a means of blocking out commuters now have more compact and convenient means of doing so.

I can assure you that there is another generation of music lovers in the pipeline, though. Their ideas may be different but their passion is the same.

LETTER  
OF THE  
MONTH

### Get no satisfaction

Nigel Williamson makes the point, in his *Opinion* piece, in the November 2014

issue that the Rolling Stones have not recorded one memorable song since 1981 and yet their live shows sell out around the world.

This is not unique to the Stones or indeed other well know faces. Take if you will Steve Davis. He was prolific and popular for a short time and then quite quickly became a player that no-one really wanted to see too much, because he won all of the time and became, as a result, quite predictable and maybe even 'boring'. Time goes by and middle life



Mick Jagger, the thinking woman's Steve Davis

Picture courtesy of Northfoto

passes without anyone taking too much notice. In the case of the Stones, they could not sell out shows a lot of the time in the eighties.

Then later life rears its head. Steve Davis is now reborn as an older player, but mostly as a television personality. The Stones find themselves in a similar reborn situation, regardless of what they have achieved in recent years. People feel

### People that see The Stones are more interested in the 'event'

more comfortable supporting artists once they become so well known and a lot older, simply because they become a lot less rough and intimidating to so many more people, people who didn't even have an interest in them and find themselves being dragged into the whole business by the simple fact that they have a profile much

more to do with celebrity than music. Many people attending the sold out shows in 2014, will not be die hard fans or even fans necessarily, but simply people who resemble the folks who watch football matches from boxes. More interested in attending the event than actually being at the show.

A good example of this, is a friend of mine who would not have dared listen to the Sex Pistols in the seventies, but now feels safe enough to wax lyrical about them from the safety of time passed. Love the mag, keep it coming!

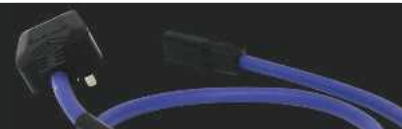
Laura Knight

**NW:** Some excellent points there, Laura. Although I'm not sure Mick Jagger will appreciate being called the Steve Davis of rock 'n' roll! I remember interviewing him in 2004, at which point the Stones had not made a new album in seven years, and I put it to him that they had become solely a touring act, content to play their old hits for the nostalgia market. It wasn't intended as a criticism, but he

indignantly rejected the suggestion and insisted there was still a "strong creativity" in the group. I'm not for one moment suggesting that it was my words that stung him into action, but the following year they released *A Bigger Bang*, their first studio album since 1997's *Bridges To Babylon*. The reaction was underwhelming and, of course, none of them has replaced the old favourites in the live set list. Since then another nine years has passed and it is hard to imagine that the Stones will ever make another studio album. And the sad reality is that if they did, I think we all accept that the odds on it being any good would be around a million to one. In many ways your Steve Davis analogy is very apt: great painters, sculptors, novelists and the like often realise their finest work in ripe maturity; but rock bands are more like sportsmen – they are at their best when they are at their youthful, virile peak. That said, the Stones still put on a great show and those that attend more for the 'celebrity event' than the music invariably come away mightily impressed.

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# Listen without prejudice

We all like to take time out to sit and enjoy music on our hi-fi, but how many of us are really listening and are we listening in the right way? Confused? **Chris Ward** explains all

**H**ow to listen? Is this a joke? Surely we all have an innate ability to listen properly, right? I'm not so sure. As we know, hi-fi stands for high fidelity and this means that all any system is trying to do is reproduce a sonic performance as accurately as possible. Looked at with some physics, an artist or ensemble of musicians playing acoustic instruments make strings or vocal chords vibrate, drums displace large volumes of air and cymbals and other percussions instruments vibrate at critical frequencies when struck. These vibrations then create longitudinal sound waves that propagate via air molecules towards us, where we can feel the longest wavelengths and our eardrums vibrate in response to the more subtle changes in sonic energy. Tiny impulses between our senses, nerves and brain then somehow perceive these vibrations as sound, and we hear music.

Understood like this, vibrating a couple of smallish speaker cones in wooden boxes to simulate an array of instruments all playing at once in three dimensions is an extraordinary act or faith, and one that's highly unlikely to succeed! And yet we are all happy with our hi-fi's rendition of music.

So, are we being critical enough in liking our setup? Put a real life soprano in your living room and you'd probably be left in no doubt that your hi-fi was getting nowhere near those levels of sound pressure, timbre detail, imaging and emotional expression. It would be at this point that we might appreciate that there are 'true' musical qualities and there are slightly separate 'hi-fi' sound qualities. And are many audiophiles unconsciously seeking extra hi-fi sound qualities as much as true musical qualities?

## Listen with mother

So when we talk about hi-fi qualities of fast, taut bass, lush midbands and highly extended sweet treble, are we starting to want these hi-fi virtues in their own right or as a means to an end in reproducing real musical qualities more accurately? Historically, I suspect that I have made some hi-fi upgrades with hi-fi outcomes in mind. Maybe loudspeakers are in fact musical instruments that we are just fine tuning because we've learnt what a great hi-fi system sounds like.

Returning to our musicians, what are they really trying to do? They aren't propagating sound waves, they are trying to communicate. Through carefully layered harmonic intervals and choice timbres they are trying to convey emotions, and through lyrics they may hope to communicate

ideas and very specific emotional responses.

With this in mind, let's walk through some potential musical qualities that we should be listening for when we evaluate our audio systems.

First, surely there are some emotional virtues to explore. Does the music truly

connect with you? Is a musician or singer saying something that you understand? I'm not talking diction – are they connecting with you personally? Is the music coherent and your mind doesn't wander too easily? Does the music take you on an emotional journey? And does this effect extend to music you don't know? Favourite tracks will always appeal, but what happens when you listen to a track you don't like?

Secondly, music should ideally make sense in three dimensions. Is the sonic picture clear? In real life, sounds arrive simultaneously yet we can still differentiate them as close or far, left or right, in front or behind, high or low. Can you hear these qualities? Is this sonic image tall, wide, deep and stable? Can you hear tiny reflected sounds from the recording room that make you aware where the instruments and walls are? When a triangle is struck, can you hear it continue to ring, despite more dominant instruments? When singers harmonise can you hear their individual voices?

Lastly, music should feel dynamic. Do you gain energy from the music you listen to? When drums and rhythmic bass instruments in particular drive a piece of music forward, can you feel your body respond physically? When was the last time you HAD to tap your feet or you wanted to get up and dance? Furthermore, bass registers are arguably the foundations of any musical performance. All other musical elements, frequencies and harmonics need to build on and be coherent with this bass. Does your system create realistic, accurate, energising bass or something altogether more hi-fi?

If you recognise some or all of these qualities, then I suspect you are yielding great musical results from your audio system. If you're yearning for tighter bass or sweeter treble, is it possible that you're just wanting your hi-fi to sound more like a great 'hi-fi' system?

As Plato said, "Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination and life to everything." Is your audio system getting you closer to these benefits? ●



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# Direct action

**Jason Kennedy** can't help but get excited about the timely revival of direct to disc recording that has been spurred on by the rise of the ultimate audio format

**T**he renaissance of vinyl, the format that we here at *HFC* tirelessly championed in the dark days of the nineties, has brought with it some surprising bonuses. Not only are vast amounts of music now available on vinyl, but people have started to record directly onto it as well. This direct to disc (D2D) approach was last seen in the mid seventies when Thelma Houston and Pressure Cooker made *I've Got The Music In Me* for Sheffield Lab. Although forgotten today it was a high profile release in audiophile terms and featured many highly regarded session musicians.

The revival of this challenging approach to recording appeared to start when Nitin Sawhney made *OneZero* last year. This was a tenth anniversary celebration of his work to date that featured Joss Stone on one track and was spread over five slabs of 45rpm vinyl. It was recorded live in front of an audience at Metropolis Studios, and that is the deal with D2D, it has to be live. There are no chances to overdub or remix, what is played is what goes into the groove. That is the appeal to the music lover, it's a far more honest and direct sound. You can put limiters and effects between microphones and cutting lathe and this is usually the case with non-classical cuts, but you get the tension and focus that playing live brings out. And you get it directly recorded into the vinyl master, with no

## The life and energy on this pressing is nothing short of miraculous

idea of doing it direct to vinyl hadn't been done for 35 years so I thought it was a great challenge. The band is so tight, it's a confident and exciting band, so I thought it would be good to get it down properly and show what they sound like in a room rather than trying to recreate something through all kinds of tricks in the studio."

### Getting it right

He also mentioned that the element of risk and the cost of the process, "It's £50 if you screw up!", means the pressure is on to get it right first time. This is a far cry from the infinite opportunities to tweak offered by ProTools and much closer to the situation prior to multi-track studios when bands always recorded live. An era that arguably produced better recorded music than has been achieved with ever more powerful studio technology.

The most stunning example of this that I've encountered is Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* played by Interpreti Veneziani and

recorded by Mike Valentine. Mike is an obsessive when it comes to making transparent recordings and prior to this had produced the remarkable *Chasing The Dragon* (reviewed *HFC* 391), a compilation of pieces recorded using valve microphones in a Decca Tree arrangement. He used the same approach with *The Four Seasons*, but this time sent the signal to a Neumann vinyl cutting lathe instead of a Nagra D digital recorder. By eliminating everything but the totally essential from the recording chain, Mike produced what is probably the best sounding commercial release I've heard. The life and energy on this pressing is nothing short of miraculous. The fact that the playing is excellent and the music of the finest pedigree doesn't hurt of course. Interestingly Mike recorded the same chamber orchestra playing live in front of an audience, but did it to tape/disc and the result was not the same. It lacked the energy and spark of the D2D and showed that it was not just the kit he used that made the difference.

This approach is catching on in Germany as well, the Emil Berliner Studios has been making a series of albums called Meister Schallplatten, which are described as 100 percent authentic and 100 percent analogue. The latest is *Honest Song* by soul singer and pianist Jocelyn B Smith and her band, this is a remarkable recording primarily for the transparency it delivers. No matter how high a bit and sample rate you use with digital recording there is always a slight sense of disconnect, a subtle softening of detail. This becomes apparent when you play this record, the connection with the performance is breathtaking and the immediacy so lifelike it's uncanny. It's not all plain sailing, however, like all recording mediums vinyl has limited usable dynamic range, and because this recording is so good you can hear it rather more obviously. Given that the engineers behind it were going for maximum resolution, one has to assume that this limiting is unavoidable – it was not done for commercial reasons. But overall *Honest Song* is the best sounding D2D of mixed acoustic and amplified instruments. It shows that such things are no reason for not getting a stunning result with a format that keeps going from strength to strength ●



**Jocelyn B Smith is just one of many artists recording direct to disc**



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Totem Mani Signature, boxed near mint used	2999
Totem Mite in black dem	449
Totem Rakk in mahogany, excellent used	249
Totem Staf dem	999
Usher BE718, vgc boxed dem	799
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Velodyne DD15 sub in black dem	1499
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# Good vibrations

How well would you say your hi-fi setup behaves? **Jimmy Hughes** has some decoupling solutions to make your music more pleasurable to listen to and give your hi-fi some help

**T**here are many ways to describe how an ideal system should behave. Yet in essence it boils down to dealing with extremes – of high and low, loud and quiet, soft and sharp – especially when the extremes are present at one and the same time.

Nearly everyone knows the Lou Reed track *Walk On The Wild Side* from *Transformer*. You've probably heard it often, but have you ever heard it played on a hi-fi system? What do you think of the recording? Technically speaking, is it good, bad, average? Had you asked me that 20 or 30 years ago, I'd probably have said the recording wasn't terribly good in hi-fi terms. It's the sort of track that sounds fine in your car, but disappointing on a proper hi-fi.

Just recently I played it on my hi-fi, and was surprised by how good it sounded. It's a simple track, yet not easy to reproduce. The opening bass line is very strong. It's played by an acoustic double bass with a big fruity sound. The mix is quite layered. There's a rhythm guitar playing quietly in the background, plus some drums and a group of girls on backing vocals. Lou Reed's vocal is quite forwardly balanced. But can you hear the slight reverb behind his voice?

Even just the opening of the track can tell you a lot. The double bass should sound strong, deep and resonant, while the rhythm guitar overtones should be soft and delicate,

**Although rigidly coupling everything brings benefits, it can come at a price**

yet crisp. The drummer enters with brushes played fairly quietly; these should 'swish' nicely. Okay, let's see if you can follow the

rhythm guitar and drum parts without the double bass dominating. Most two-way speakers trying to reproduce that bass line will struggle. Once Lou's vocal enters, the quiet inner guitar and drum parts may be difficult to hear.

Even if you can still hear the drums and guitar, you'll probably find their sonic character is compromised – that's to say the timbres of each will be eroded. This always occurs when loud sounds start to blot out the quieter ones.

Notice too, when the backing vocalists sing their 'do do-do do-do' part, how the voices are initially reverberant and set back at a distance, only to get closer and louder. Many hi-fi systems completely fail to reveal this – it's often easier to hear this detail in mono on the radio!

The whole of *Transformer* is actually quite a hi-fi test piece – albeit, not in the usual sense. The basic sounds are quite simple and unglamorous. The recording does not flatter the music, or impress the ear. Yet it's this simplicity that makes the album so difficult to reproduce well.



**A decoupling platform like this Townshend Audio one can make a world of difference to your music**

Going back to what I said at the start, hi-fi success boils down to coping with extremes of high and low, loud and quiet, sharp and soft when they are present at the same time. A heavy bass line causes serious vibrations that effectively mess up the midrange and treble.

Sadly, there's no quick simple fix, but you can claim a series of small victories that will eventually win the war. The solution lies in careful decoupling at strategic points. Are your speakers rigidly mounted on stands with spikes? Try them on a decoupled platform like Townshend Audio's Seismic Sink or one of the Voodoo isolation platforms. By not having your speakers rigidly coupled to the floor, the sound becomes more comfortable and easier to listen to. If you do a before-and-after comparison of stands, don't just listen to how 'tight' things sound. Listen to the whole sonic picture. Pay attention to those quiet inner parts – and see if all the individual strands can be heard simultaneously.

To tackle vibration, I mounted my speaker drive units on Deflex polymer gaskets to decouple them from the enclosure. More recently, I added some Pro Audio Bono (PAB) suspended support stands for amp and CD player.

## The difference is clear

The PAB stand has a suspended shelf supported by an adjustable thread, one at each corner. I found these stands made a significant difference to the listenability of the music. Clarity was noticeably enhanced, while everything seemed clearer and more transparent. The music became cleaner and more refined, as well as seeming more effortless. Not only was the sound a lot better, it was also nicer and more relaxing to listen to. I didn't have to concentrate so hard – everything seemed easier to unravel. But, the biggest surprise came when I put the laptop I use as a USB source on to a PAB stand, and heard a remarkably big difference. Once again, there was an improvement in clarity and transparency. Who'd have thought a laptop could be affected by vibration?

Although rigidly coupling everything with spikes brings certain superficial benefits, it often comes at a price, making the music less listenable and less enjoyable. An album like *Transformer* is something of a litmus test for system listenability. Try it and see for yourself ●



**JIMMY HUGHES**  
Hi-Fi Choice writer

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# Fight the power

Once ubiquitous with folk music and the sixties, the protest song appears to have become a thing of the past. **Nigel Williamson** reckons it's time to make a change

**H**as anyone heard any good protest songs lately? The question is prompted by the arrival on my desk of a compilation CD from Topic Records titled *Voice & Vision: Songs Of Resistance, Democracy and Peace* (see page 62), an archival, to-the-barricades collection of songs that chronicles the history of folk music as a vehicle for protest, dissent and the struggle for social justice.

Listening to songs such as *Joe Hill* by Paul Robeson, Norma Waterson singing *Coal Not Dole*, Chumbawamba's *The Diggers' Song* and two dozen more spread across two discs of righteous resistance, I couldn't help wondering why nobody seems to write songs like that anymore. Is it that there is nothing left to protest about – or simply that nobody cares any more?

Bob Dylan used to call them “finger-pointin’ songs” and there was a time when they played their part in changing the world. “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” Shelley wrote almost two centuries ago. In 20th century popular culture the role was taken over by musicians. It wasn't just the obvious protest anthems sung by Dylan, Phil Ochs, Joan Baez and the folk marching crowd; every genre of popular music was stuffed with them, from Edwin Starr's Motown classic *War* to Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young's *Ohio*. Elsewhere the likes of Bob

## We're living in a post-protest world in which dissent has been stifled

they possessed with which to fight prejudice and injustice.

Hopefully someone will tell me that protest songs are alive and well and they are still out there in the tangled outgrowth of sub-culture, in hip-hop and heavy metal, being sung in Palestinian refugee camps and eco-warrior yurts. But if so, they're not getting heard in the mainstream – which is where they need to be if they are going to achieve anything more than preaching to the converted.

One of the last protest songs by a mainstream artist I can recall was Neil Young's 2006 anti-Bush tirade *Let's Impeach The President*. It was greeted with the kind of embarrassment that ensues when someone passes wind loudly in a crowded lift. In truth, it wasn't the greatest example of the protest genre, and was unsubtle to the point of crudity. But how come it took a rich baby-boomer in his sixties to raise his voice while younger generations remained silent?

We seem to be living in a post-protest world in which dissent has been stifled with the promise that every home

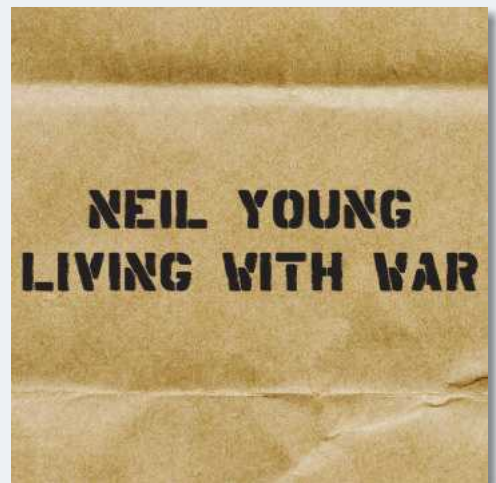
shall have of a 42in TV screen with a 5:1 surround sound and an endless diet of on-demand movies as a substitute for real life. Somewhere between *The Times They Are A-Changin'* and the era of Bush and Blair, the idea that pop stars should sing about things that really mattered became very uncool. It's now more than a quarter of a century since Bruce Springsteen, Peter Gabriel, Sting and Tracy Chapman appeared on the Amnesty International 'Human Rights Now!' tour. And once Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1992, most seemed to conclude that the battles had all been won and if pop and politics had to mix, we could leave it to Bono in his cosy *tête-à-têtes* with pontiffs and presidents.

Sure, the 21st century has produced a few flickering protests that have reached the real world. The war in Iraq provoked outbursts from Radiohead and Green Day among others and Kanye West won a Grammy for a rap about blood diamonds from Sierra Leone. But such examples stand out because of their scarcity.

### Soft rock?

Perhaps one of the problems is incorporation; has rock music just become too respectable to serve as a potent vehicle for dissent? Ronald Reagan began the process when he misappropriated the work of Bruce Springsteen to support his re-election campaign by ignoring or misunderstanding the message of *Born In The USA*. A decade and a half later, Jack Straw, one of the most belligerent supporters of the war in Iraq, cited Bob Marley as an inspiration, perhaps the most insurrectionary of all musical icons. Then David Cameron claimed to like The Smiths, blithely overlooking the fact that Morrissey wrote a song titled *Margaret On The Guillotine*, which imagined the execution of Mrs Thatcher. Meanwhile, a competition for music videos by young artists and bands around the world to protest against corruption is sponsored by that well-known revolutionary organisation, The World Bank.

Somehow popular music needs to rediscover the beat of its radical, anti-establishment heart. Otherwise it's nothing more than light entertainment and wall-to-wall Simon Cowell and *The X Factor* ●



Protest records like *Living With War* (which featured *Let's Impeach The President*) are few and far between now



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# To have and to hold?

A year ago **Ed Selley** decided to see if he could go an entire 12 months without buying a CD. Now, he wonders if he'll invest in another shiny silver disc ever again

**A**s I write this, I'm listening to a lossless stream of Kasabian's *48.13*. This is significant because I devoted a chunk of my last column to my unsuccessful efforts to secure this album in lossless or hi-res digital. So what's changed? The album remains entirely unavailable to buy legally in the UK, but neither have I broken any laws to get it.

The difference is that I'm using Tidal – the new lossless streaming service. As well as the entire Kasabian back catalogue, I now have 25 million tracks on demand. After a few weeks of playing about with the service, I find myself wondering if I'm not only going to reach the end of my experimental year without CDs, but never have to actually buy one ever again. Tidal hasn't delivered all the answers, but it comes closer than I thought it might.

Firstly, the sound quality. I honestly couldn't tell the difference between a Tidal stream on my Naim and the same albums on my NAS drive. The service is fast and while coming up short compared with Spotify in terms of some content, it is nonetheless a 25-million track shot in the arm to my lossless audio collection.

Against this, the downsides are comparatively modest. Editor Lee and I have both found the iPad app to be slow and clunky – making AirPlay as a means of transmission slower than it needs to be and the comparatively young

## Good quality digital downloads remain the exception rather than the rule

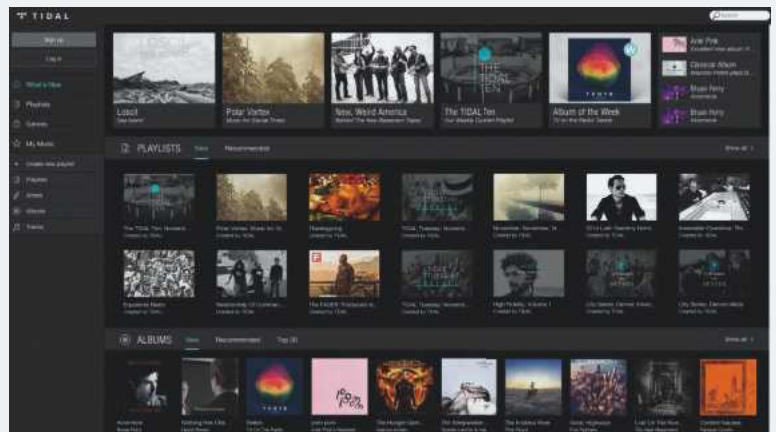
competition can offer. These are minor details, though, and nothing I can't put up with while the situation improves – and I have no doubt that it will.

## Let's get physical

In theory, given my antipathy towards CDs, I should be a near evangelical convert to the idea of lossless streaming. I find myself wondering if renting access to my future music collection is going to be completely plain sailing. While I have no problem with any loss of physicality – not once this year have I felt a second of nostalgia for plastic discs lying around – there are elements of Tidal that leave me wondering if I'm quite ready to entrust all my digital music to on demand.

The biggest issue is that I am not constantly online. I have excellent broadband and a significant mobile data allowance, but there are sustained periods where I am dependent on stored and downloaded music. To be

Tidal service simply can't compete with the level of integration with other brands and platforms that its compressed



completely clear, Tidal has the means to store albums offline but only on mobile devices and their storage is only going to offer limited amounts of material to be held at any time. The cavernous storage my NAS drives offer is completely off limits. I can't store material for use anywhere but on the most expensive and contested memory I have. Tidal presumably has limits on the availability of files placed upon it – which I fully understand – but to have the same flexibility of use I currently have with it, I'm going to need unlimited 4G and blanket coverage – both pipe dreams at this point. For this reason, downloads – and even the odd CD – will continue to feature.

The CD-free year has been easier than I expected, but still slightly frustrating. The experiment has been much more successful at demonstrating that the vinyl resurgence has been tremendously influential than it has at showing that lossless and hi-res music is sufficiently available. Vinyl has now reached the stage where new released coverage is almost total – provided you don't hang around in the case of some limited production runs. Good quality digital downloads remain the exception rather than the rule, though, and maddening regional restrictions apply. Of course, it is all there by illegitimate means, suggesting that these restrictions are a stable door that has been closed after the horse has bolted and assumed a new identity. The tail end of the year has shown a bit of a pickup with excellent hi-res releases from Aphex Twin, Craig Armstrong and Imogen Heap, but my dream of banishing CDs completely is still to be fully realised.

Tidal is a useful way of filling in for things I can't buy legitimately and represents another means of listening to good quality audio and I'm sure I'm going to end a five year relationship with Spotify to go lossless. I might over time go completely on-demand – just not quite yet ●

**Tidal has made Ed's CD-free year a whole lot easier than expected**



**ED SELLEY**  
Hi-Fi Choice writer

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## DESTINATION:

# HARROGATE

In a gallery reimagined as a record store, artist Pete McKee invites you to look through new works as you would dig through the racks. By **Simon Berkovitch**

**T**he record racks occupy the centre of the bright, white room, brimming with familiar classic albums, from Pistols to Beatles, and sections with uniform-looking new releases. A groovy soundtrack slinks out of the speakers. A free music paper is piled at foot level by the door. Band posters brighten a retro-styled listening booth in an adjacent room, also home to a box of die-cut 7in singles, tempting merch and a couple of turntables for checking out the store's wax.

So far, it's a typical modern record shop. But cast your eyes above the decks and you'll

find an unexpected sign: "We do not buy or sell records!" screams the framed poster. So, what exactly is going on here? Welcome to RedHouse Originals, the Harrogate leg of artist Pete McKee's UK tour of Thud, Crackle, Pop – a veritable love letter to record shops and vinyl culture.

After having a mug of tea thrust into my hand by RedHouse Originals' friendly co-owners Richard McTague and John Kendall, I receive a guided tour of

Pete's passionate audio-visual universe. "This will be an immensely popular show," John predicts, and looking around the gallery it's not difficult to see why. Thud, Crackle, Pop is only in town for two days, before heading over to Kosmonaut in Manchester and then Pete's own gallery in Sheffield, A Month of Sundays, where there'll just be enough time for you to catch the show before Christmas.

What Pete has done for Thud, Crackle, Pop is create a record shop with a difference. Each location on the tour is transformed into

**"This is a fanfare to the independent record retailer who puts his passion on the line"**

a shop with new, original pieces and one-offs available, making each exhibition unique. The London show was held for two days in May. Extremely popular, almost all Pete's work had sold out by the time the show closed its doors on the Saturday evening.

As research for the London show, Pete and manager Chris visited the excellent Flashback Records on Essex Road, Islington. An interview with owner Mark Burgess is featured in the bespoke free mock music newspaper, printed especially for the shows: *The Vinyl Press*. The paper also includes The Charlatans' frontman Tim Burgess reviewing art; an interview with *This Is England's* Vicky

McClure; Noel Gallagher's favourite albums; and something special for real ale fans: free beer. Pete teamed up with London's Partizan Brewery to create a special ale, given out with every purchase at the shows.

In addition to the original, hand-painted artwork on the walls and on the shelves, you'll find Pete's prints in the racks. Pull out one of the specially designed Thud, Crackle, Pop sleeves and you'll discover a limited edition print tucked away inside the inner sleeve. All the records in the racks are from Pete and Chris' personal collections.

### Give it a spin

The music in the gallery is from a playlist taken from the records that form part of the installation. You may not be able to buy the vinyl from this unique record shop, but you're certainly encouraged to play around with it – not something you're encouraged to do at many art exhibitions. Gallery visitors can take a record they fancy into the other room and spin it on one of the two turntables provided. "There's a real emphasis on interaction with this show," John says.

A box of interesting-looking 7in singles can be found above one of the decks. Inside is a great mix of indie, mod, soul and classic rock, again from Pete's personal collection: Roxy Music's *Pyjamarama* nestles next to The Jam's *Precious*. Orange Juice's *Felicity* and Sly and the Family Stone's *Family Affair*. These eclectic singles are unified, however: Pete's handwriting adorns each die-cut,



Artist Pete McKee at work

thud  
crackle  
pop

## THUD, CRACKLE, POP



**Pete's artwork is inspired by vinyl culture, and he boasts the likes of Sir Paul Smith and Noel Gallagher among his fans**

elevating these mass-produced records to functional art objects with the flourish of a pen. "Each single has the relevance and importance of the song written on by the artist," John explains.

Above the sevens are Pete's sculptural works: *Vinyl Krispies*, a nod to the exhibition's title and a limited edition of 300, referencing the smaller, exclusive, desirable runs that many contemporary records enjoy.

### Play away

Another listening booth urges: Press Play. Slip the headphones on and you'll hear a specially commissioned work by Ralph Dartford: *45RPM At 33 And A Third*, a collaboration with The Housekeeping Society; "a poem about record players, my late father, love and second chances", the poet says.

"I first discovered Ralph's poetry after reading his book of poems *Cigarettes, Beer And Love*," Pete explains. "He wrote of a world I understood; a world of music, love and drinking. I commissioned Ralph to write a piece of poetry for my show as I wanted to see if vinyl affected us all in the same way or if there was another story to tell."

Popular music clearly fires the engine of RedHouse Originals. On the first floor, artworks by The Specials' Horace Panter (see opposite) sit alongside work from Libertine Pete Doherty and shots from legendary Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix snapper Gered Mankowitz and cool jazz photographer Terry Cryer.

Pete's exuberant celebration of vinyl culture spills out of the gallery space and on to the streets. On the exterior wall of interior designers Steven Neil Group, visible from all outbound trains from Leeds to Harrogate, is a massive McKee commission, an adaptation of sections of Pete's artwork *My Favourite Record Shop*, a collaboration with celebrity record shop enthusiasts Pauls Smith and Weller and Irvine Welsh amongst others. Reproduced in eight larger than life panels, you couldn't ask for a bigger advertisement for supporting your local record store.

"When I was offered the opportunity to produce a large piece in Harrogate, I jumped at the chance," Pete explains. "I'm a great believer in making art for the people, and one of the best ways of doing this is street art."

"*My Favourite Record Shop* is a celebration of music – another art form for the masses – and is also a fanfare for the independent retailer who puts his passion on the line and dares to make a living out of something they love" ●



**A giant McKee mural can be seen from passing trains**



**Everything's for sale in the room – except the neon sign**

### SPECIAL DELIVERY

**The Specials' bassist Horace Panter is also an accomplished visual artist, with a solo exhibition expected in the Harrogate gallery next Spring...**

"We are delighted to be showing new work by Horace Panter, having admired his work for some time," enthuses RedHouse Originals' co-owner Richard McTague. "We are showing a small group of paintings from his 'Americana' series over the holiday season and are currently working on plans for a solo exhibition in Spring 2015."

Horace graduated with a degree in Fine Art from Coventry's Lanchester Polytechnic in 1975. It was there that he met Jerry Dammers, and together they formed 2-Tone legends The Specials.

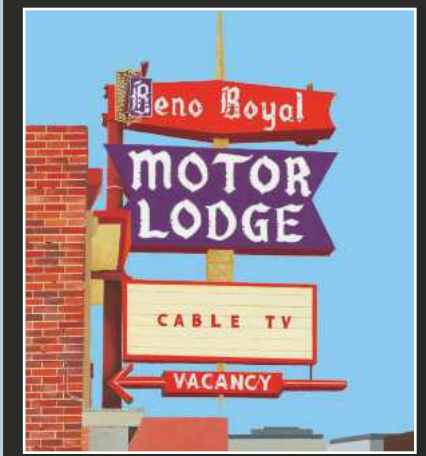
In 2008, when the group reformed, Panter found that he again had the time to explore his own art practice, after having spent a decade as head of art at a secondary school.

"Coming of age in the sixties meant that, artistically, I was attracted to the Pop Art movement both in the UK and the US and was influenced by artists such as Peter Blake, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns... and Allen Jones," Panter says. "It was art I could relate to, alongside my other predilection for the 12in vinyl record... for an impressionable youth, this collision of art and music was magical!"

RedHouse Originals' current group exhibition includes a small selection of Panter's work. These new paintings – with their echoes of David Hockney and Ed Ruscha – are the latest instalments in the artist's 'Americana' series, documenting moments captured on the road while touring the US with The Specials. Visitors can also enjoy a selection of printed works on paper, including *Enjoy Yourself* from the 'Cassettes' series and The Specials portrait – a silkscreen print with hand finishing.

Panter's work (below) is being exhibited alongside a selection of RedHouse Originals' recent acquisitions by some of Britain's most legendary Pop artists. These include rare works from the sixties and seventies by Sir Peter Blake, David Hockney and Gerald Laing.

"Horace is currently on tour with The Specials," Richard says, "and it's exciting to think he is currently splitting his time between painting pictures in the studio and playing on stage to thousands in one of the country's most beloved bands. What a life!"



Thud, Crackle, Pop runs until 23 December at A Month of Sundays, 356 Sharrow Vale Road, Sheffield  
petemckee.com

redhouseoriginals.com

thehousekeepingsociety.bandcamp.com/  
track/45rpm-at-thirty-three-and-a-third-with-ralph-dartford

# A for effort

**David Price** sets the time machine for the eighties as he tells the story of Musical Fidelity's classic Class A integrated amplifier, the A1

**I**t was a felicitous combination", says Antony Michaelson of his A1 integrated. With a circuit by the highly gifted electronics engineer Tim de Paravicini and the industrial design by the legendary Kenneth Grange, this was a very special product. Rather than just another good amp, it is a scaled-down slice of high-end exotica – not just because it looks the part, or is built that way – but because it boasts a provenance that few amplifiers can.

Tim de Paravicini remembers that the A1 began life as "a breadboard that I designed for myself, to replicate in transistors the same properties and sound as valves. I discussed the thing with AM and he decided to go ahead. I laid down basic dimensions and heatsink methods, hence the waffle toaster form." And toasting is what the amplifier did – as any A1 owner

knows, it runs hot. Being a full Class A design, with a constant power consumption of 80W, there's a lot of heat to dissipate in a small space.

Sinking all this heat was down to Kenneth Grange at Pentagram, the industrial design company that Antony chose. "He paid them a fortune but got a very interesting visual impact to the basic design", adds Tim. The Musical Fidelity A1 was biased in full Class A at the suggestion of de Paravicini. It used self-biasing and complimentary output devices in symmetrical, push pull configuration from the front end to loudspeaker terminals. The biasing was arranged to make sure the output could only operate at constant power consumption. The line and phono amp circuitry were discrete op-amp designs. Low-cost 2N3055 and 2N2955 transistors were used "to prove a point".

The innards are a tight fit in that distinctive case. A generous 160VA toroidal transformer provides the juice for four 10,000uF reservoir capacitors. An ALPS volume potentiometer is used, along with a source selector, power switch, tape monitor button and rear panel-mounted MM/MC selector. What you wonder when you look inside, is why the original version of the amplifier's casing wasn't vented.

The whole point about the A1 was that it was budget esoterica – which is to say that Tim de Paravicini set out to design something that sounded special, but didn't require exotic and expensive components. It was initially designed to hit the price-point of £200 by clever yet simple thinking that was distinctly different. The striking aluminium casework added a sense of visual exoticism to the already special insides. Beautiful then

## History of the A1

1984

**The A1 launches. Lionel Richie's *Can't Slow Down* is the biggest selling album**



1990

**Mk II version is released. ...But *Seriously* by Phil Collins tops the album charts**



1991

**Collector's Edition and Final Edition unveiled (limited to just 200 models). Simply Red's *Stars* is the number one album**



2008

**The A1 is relaunched for a more modern audience. Duffy's *Rockferry* rules the album charts**





as it is now, although distinctively an eighties amplifier, it looks far less dated than its contemporaries.

The Musical Fidelity A1 is, in my view, the very best sounding mid-price integrated of its time. For a £200 amplifier in 1984, it is a startling achievement; even against a modern, top-class mid-price integrated such as the Exposure 3010S2 (£1,500) it shows its audacious quality.

This isn't to say the A1 is beyond criticism, because it is not. It's a hard amplifier to use, and certainly very difficult to really get right, whereas most of its rivals are far less fussy. You keep coming back to two things – heat and power, too much of one and too little of the other. The amp needs efficient speakers – of around 90dB or more at least. Anything lower and you begin to hear the sound of it wheezing and groaning under the strain of moving the wretched box's

## If music is the food of love, then the Musical Fidelity A1 is an aphrodisiac!

drive units, something the isn't a core competency of the A1. I found Cambridge Audio's £800 AeroMax 6 (HFC 391) a brilliant partner for this amplifier; it was almost as if they had been made for one another.

When properly matched and positioned in a well ventilated area with absolutely nothing on top except a good carpet of cool air (anything else is likely to melt), you get a sublimely sweet sound. It's not the sort of Class A that's very bright and searching tonally, it's more – dare I say it – like a really good valve amplifier. Bad valve amplifiers are syrupy and gloopy, heavily coloured and opaque, whereas the A1 isn't like this at all. It's sophisticated, slick and sparkling tonally, but doesn't cloud the music or reduce it all to one particular sort of romantic sound. You're always aware of a slight, subtle sepia tint, but it is never invasive and adds rather than detracts from the proceedings.

Still, the A1 isn't all about being merely a sweet sounding, nice, inoffensive product. There are plenty of those and a great many are terminally boring – the opposite of the little Musical Fidelity. Instead, this is wonderfully fast and fleet of foot, amazingly expressive and lucid. It

has all the charm and lyricism of beautifully spoken Italian, in a world where so many amps sound like accountants conversing in German. It really does have a kind of 'magic dust' of its very own; whatever music you play suddenly seems to have an emotional point to be driven home, rather than an assemblage of sounds to be picked apart. If music is the food of love, then the A1 is an aphrodisiac!

It's brilliant on micro dynamics, but doesn't do quite as well in all-out thunderous crescendos. Bass is warm and sumptuous, but doesn't have the breathtaking attack transients of a really good solid-state Class AB design. Imaging is good, but again isn't exceptional. Instead, however, the listener's attention is drawn back to the emotion embedded in that complex collection of musical notes. It is exceptionally good in this respect, and merely 'solid' in many others – its frequency extremes are vague, but everywhere else is this most alluring and enchanting sweet spot.

### Life begins at 30

Living with a Musical Fidelity A1 today is perfectly possible, but you have to make sure it is working correctly and to spec. Of all the 30-year-old British amplifiers, this is the one most likely to need a service. Musical Fidelity no longer does this, but there are some specialists willing to help, like [amprepairservices.co.uk](http://amprepairservices.co.uk). The main problem is that the amp is effectively a slow cooker for all the electronics inside; the electrolytic capacitors are the first to suffer so should all be replaced if they haven't been already. Heat issues have given the amplifier a bad reputation for reliability, and here Tim de Paravicini says that cost cutting played a part. "I had laid out thermal requirements and reliability of the circuit was good. The product was let down by some cheap parts causing problems."

There's quite an A1 scene on the internet, with various forums discussing the merits of tweaking it, but Tim de Paravicini is not impressed. "Tweakers will always do what they like because of their lack of true knowledge. They just follow what the internet says. I get angry with people who all think they know more than me. If I had spent all this money on parts

### MYSTERIES OF THE UNIVERSE

The first version of the amp, released in 1984 for £200, is identified by the two-part top cover and the lack of ventilation holes in the side panels. Inside, axial power supply capacitors sat flat across the circuit board. By 1990 the price had risen to £300, and the amp had got minor component changes, a one-piece top cover and ventilation. The third revision shortly afterwards saw a small power increase to 25W RMS per channel. In 1991 there was a 'Collectors Edition', of which just 24 were sold and these command a price premium on the second-hand market now. The later 'Final Edition' had 200 pieces made, and like the 'Collectors Edition' had an external power supply; the latter had a quoted 40W RMS a side. This actually owes little to the original A1 design though, being closer to the MOSFET-based B200.

In 2008 there was a 'new A1', which in truth owed very little to the original, aside from the basic styling. Even this was changed though due to the need, as Antony Michaelson saw it, to offer a digital display, remote control and 'up/down' buttons on the front panel. Electrically it's totally dissimilar and has a basic USB DAC, and 30W RMS per channel.

In truth, the best investment is most likely to be an early original, although any A1 in excellent condition is something you'd be mad to overlook. Providing you don't mind a warm listening room, that is!

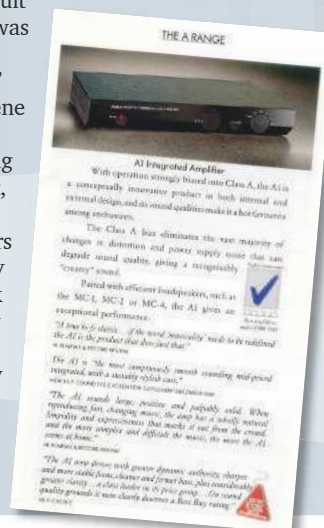
for the A1, and it had ended up costing £1,000, then no one would have bought it! I do the best I can at the time and stand by what I have achieved. Smart is doing it better than anyone else, not by how fancy a component is".

### Big seller

The A1 sold incredibly well over its lifespan. Musical Fidelity says it shifted nearly 50,000 units before it got the chop in the early nineties. It went through a few minor incremental changes to improve reliability, with slightly different components being used here and there. The later cases were vented to aid cooling, and the biasing was turned down slightly to cool things after the initial production run. Nowadays it has become a cult amplifier in Japan, with audiophiles often buying two and cannibalising one for parts to keep the other going! In the UK, expect to pay between £150 and £300 depending on condition; this is an amazing audiophile bargain.

Tim de Paravicini says: "It still stands the test of time; I would be happy to put it on the market now with very little change." Antony Michaelson adds: "It's a typical Musical Fidelity product. You invest heavily in tooling, you make it in considerable quantities and excellent value for money is the result" ●

### The instruction manual with the Mk II version



# SOCIAL climbers

They might not be young upstarts any more, but as **Ed Selley** discovers Pro-Ject and Acoustic Energy still have what it takes



One durable concept in the annals of political and sociological theory is that of The Establishment; a dominant group of individuals, organisations or companies that serve as the recognised order in a particular area. The reason for the longevity of the concept is disarmingly simple. The Establishment exists quite independently of the individuals or organisations that it comprises. If you successfully challenge the accepted order, you don't destroy The Establishment – you become part of it. In audio, this means that companies that were once upstarts

and challengers to the accepted order of hi-fi now find themselves on the inside looking out. The system you see here is a pairing of two brands that originally shook up their respective categories, combined to produce something that is at once part of the hi-fi establishment, but with just a touch of iconoclasm to it.

In the case of Pro-Ject, the move from arriviste turntable manufacturer to analogue powerhouse is only half the story. In recent years it has become one of the very few manufacturers to supply you a complete system from the tip of the stylus to the cone of a speaker. This ▶

**COMPONENTS**

**PRO-JECT XTENSION 9  
SUPER PACK £2,200**

The Xtension 9 is a (slightly) smaller version of the Xtension 10 and features the same alloy platter and comes as a complete turntable with 9CC Evolution arm and Ortofon Quintet Black MC.

**PRO-JECT  
PHONO BOX RS £649**

A genuine fully balanced phono stage with endless load and gain options, adjustable tone curves and exceptional sound for under a grand, the Phono Box RS is an established favourite.

**PRO-JECT  
PRE BOX RS £749**

A six-input preamp with two balanced inputs and a balanced out, it operates in Class A and is fully remote controlled. Further performance can be unlocked with an optional external power supply.

**PRO-JECT  
AMP BOX RS £749**

An unusual combination of a dual mono Class D amplifier stage with a valve buffer input, this amp claims 110W with the supplied PSU and an impressive 180W with the Power Box RS.

**PRO-JECT POWER  
BOX RS AMP £450**

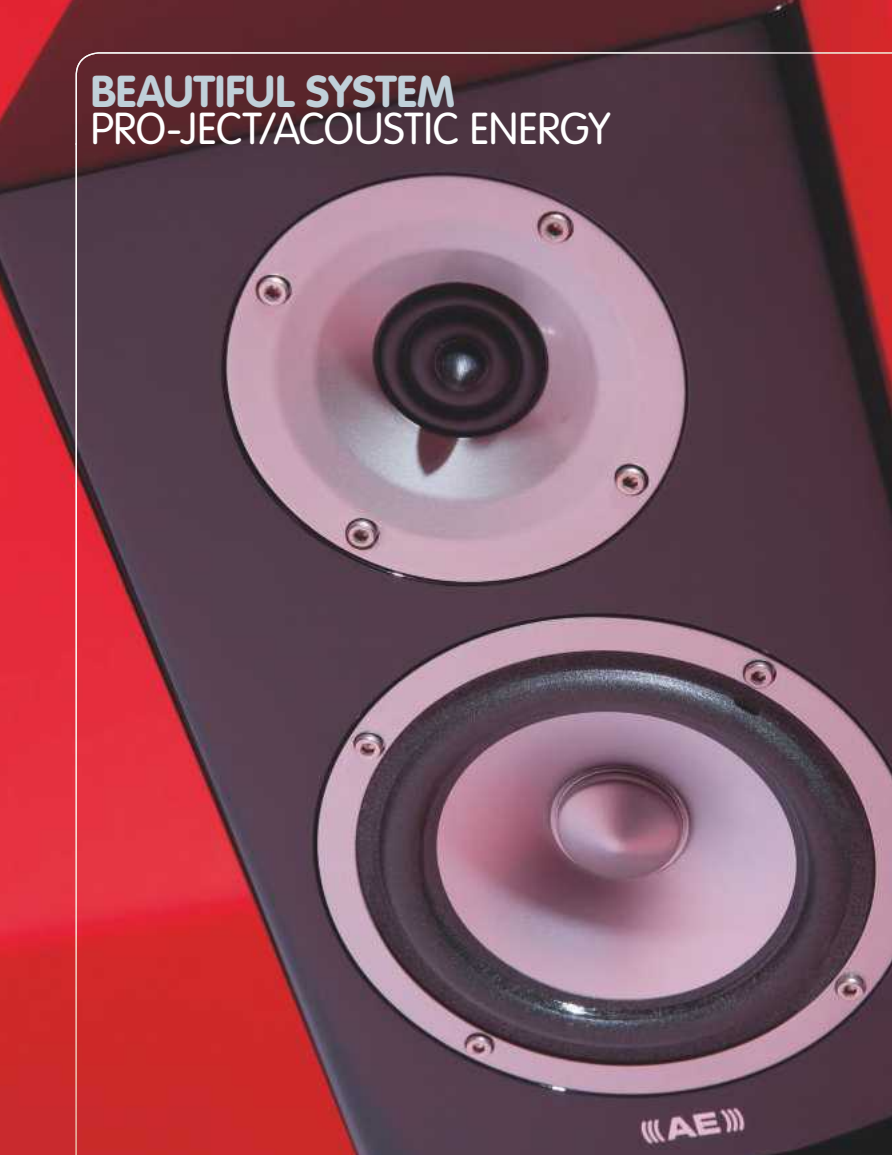
Comprising a large toroidal transformer with extensive regulation and smoothing, the Power Box RS is capable of increasing the power of the amplifiers it is connected to.

**ACOUSTIC ENERGY  
REFERENCE 1 £1,550**

The Reference 1 features the trademark constrained layer damped cabinet and aluminium mid bass driver with oversized magnet, all wrapped in gorgeous wood or lacquer.



## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM PRO-JECT/ACOUSTIC ENERGY



hasn't been at the expense of vinyl, however, as the Xtension 9 Evolution Super Pack eloquently demonstrates. This beautifully assembled and extremely hefty turntable is the smallest of three Xtension models and comes as a complete deck, arm and cartridge in a rather impressive shipping crate.

The Xtension is a clever piece of industrial design that looks every inch the asking price and takes style to new places, though it remains unmistakably Pro-Ject. Installation is wonderfully straightforward and entirely logical. When there is any scope for confusion, everything is clearly marked, but it is a testament to the Xtension's design that very little labelling is required. It is no challenge at all to go from opening up the packing crate to spinning a record in around 15 minutes.

### Half measures

The RS line of electronics that Pro-Ject has developed to partner its turntables shares some aspects of design with them. These half-width units are immensely substantial and built in a way that very little else anywhere near the price is. Then there is the functionality. The Phono Box RS supports moving magnet and moving coil cartridges with multiple

gain and loading settings – good, but far from unusual in terms of phono stage specification. It then goes on to add balanced inputs and outputs and the choice of standard RIAA and non-standard Decca equalisation curves. There are phono stages at 10 times the cost that can't match that. The spec of the matching Pre and Power Box units and supporting Power Box supply is less exotic, but still combines to produce a capable

## This is a monument to how good vinyl is when given the right supporting elements

and extremely powerful three-box amplifier for less than £1,950.

If Pro-Ject has moved into the turntable establishment and then diversified to boot, Acoustic Energy has stuck to its guns and remained a speaker manufacturer. What it has done is arguably more significant, though. When the AE1 went against the establishment of the time, it wasn't simply a new brand taking on the competition, but a new product altogether. The AE1 can lay claim to being the original high-end standmount and one that created a

**Above left: Small but exquisitely finished, the Reference 1 packs a seriously hefty punch**

**Above centre: The RS components might be small, but their spec is impressive**

**Above right: Pro-Ject has managed to keep its design aesthetic alive while moving into new areas**

category that almost every speaker manufacturer wants to be a part of.

This means that the Reference 1 you see here has some seriously influential DNA in it, and this compact two-way manages the decidedly clever trick of being beautifully finished and as room friendly as any of the competition, but at the same time still exuding some of the professional heritage that the AE1 has in spades. The construction is a pleasing combination of immensely solid overall build that is then finished with some lovely and extremely high quality flourishes like the elegant speaker terminals and flawless piano lacquer that complements the equally wonderful job done by Pro-Ject on the Xtension. Indeed, the system that results from combining these units is an exceptionally well finished but pleasingly compact affair that offers plenty of additional inputs if you don't want to be exclusively analogue.

### Open all hours

You won't be rushing out to bolster the digital aspect of this system, though, because as an analogue ensemble, this is a piano lacquered monument to how good vinyl is when given the right supporting elements. With the self-titled debut album from Royal Blood, the system manages to

## BEAUTIFUL SYSTEM PRO-JECT/ACOUSTIC ENERGY



unpick the dense layers of sound and open them out to reveal the brilliance of the album itself. Quite how far the performance is opened out is endlessly surprising and rather wonderful. Acoustic Energy has a long and distinguished history of subverting the laws of physics and the Reference 1 knows all the tricks. These little speakers hit harder, go deeper and sound bigger than they have any right to and when fed by the effortlessly big sound of the Pro-Ject, the result is scale that simply shouldn't be possible considering its size.

### All grown up

This scale is then filled with a sound that is grown up without ever being boring. The RS components all sit slightly on the warm side of neutral, but this translates into a sweetness with vocals and instruments rather than an overt and dull-sounding presentation. When combined with the Acoustic Energy that sits equally narrowly on the other side of the divide, the performance is pleasingly neutral but not without the character that each component brings to the system. Voices are still possessed of that richness and presence that the RS components excel at while the Reference 1 adds a rhythmic



**CONTACT  
DETAILS**

**WEBSITES:**  
[acoustic-energy.co.uk](http://acoustic-energy.co.uk)  
[project-audio.com](http://project-audio.com)  
[henleydesigns.co.uk](http://henleydesigns.co.uk)

assurance that is never overbearing, but helps everything from the paired-back guitar of John Martyn to the ballistics of The Prodigy sound effortlessly agile.

Trying to put the Xtension's character into context is difficult as has built an almost viceless and transparent deck. Pretty much all the traits you can ascribe to are minor and largely attributable to Ortofon's lovely Quintet that comes fitted. This may sound anticlimactic, but it means the big white Pro-Ject is an impressively neutral platform to let the partnering electronics impart whatever character you want. Once the speed control LED has gone blue – signifying that the speed is set – the Xtension is an utterly stable, silent and exactly competent method of digging every last shred of detail off a record. There are undoubtedly rivals that might edge the Xtension with a particular genre of music, but the ones that can rival its astonishing ability across the board are rather harder to find and when you consider how easy the Pro-Ject is to get going in the first place, that shortlist of rivals starts to look very short indeed.

In reality, this translates to a system that you find yourself feeding record after record to and revelling in the power, effortless drive and attack and

complete absence of harshness or aggression. There is all the headroom for all but the most determined volume junkie and there isn't the slightest sign of the hardening up that can affect some systems when really pushed. Little positive traits – the Xtension's impressive resistance to surface noise, the Reference 1's fairly unfussy placement needs and the wonderfully linear volume control – combine to help make this system as easy to live with as a digital rival and a damn site prettier to look at.

### The vinyl solution

This is one of the smallest and sanely priced systems I've spent significant time with that has the ability to allow a 'normal' human being (or at least one outside of our hi-fi bubble) to sit down and truly hear why vinyl continues to thrive. That it does this without placing any significant demands on space or needing the sort of setup attention and maintenance you might normally associate with a piece of delicate scientific equipment is what moves it from the good to the great. If these two former upstart brands have made the transition to become the new establishment, the next set of challengers are going to have to be truly sensational to repeat the feat. Welcome to the new order ●

LABELLED WITH LOVE



# Transatlantic Records



This eclectic label deserves re-evaluating in order to align it with its progressive siblings, and who better than **Simon Berkovitch** to take on the task?

**W**ith a discography that spans virtuoso folk, avant-garde classical, proto-punk, hard and progressive rock, comedy and even sex education records, Transatlantic Records is one of the more eclectic sixties and seventies labels, arguably unfairly in the shadow of its UK contemporaries such as Harvest and Vertigo.

Bur Transatlantic deserves recognition alone for services to popular music in signing two of the greatest guitarists of the sixties folk revival: Bert Jansch and John Renbourn. These stellar players recorded a clutch of diverse, soaring solo LPs for

the label, collaborated on an LP of influential recordings and kicked down genre barriers in folk-jazz quintet Pentangle.

Other key additions to the label plugged into both the counterculture and the maverick fringe of modern classical music.

The independent Transatlantic was founded by entrepreneur Nat Joseph in the early sixties, beginning as an importer of American jazz, blues and folk – in turn influencing many of the artists it would eventually sign.

As psychedelia blossomed, the label scored a hit with The Purple Gang's underground classic *Granny Takes A Trip* (1967). More commercial

success came with the budget *Listen Here!* (1968) sampler album in the vein of CBS' classic *The Rock Machine Turns You On*.

Transatlantic's late-sixties and early-seventies roster is a good snapshot of the adventurous musical landscape of the times: Mike and Sally Oldfield's psych-folk outfit The Sallyangie rubs shoulders with tape collagist Ron Geesin (later to collaborate with Pink Floyd on *Atom Heart Mother*), the Watersons-influenced The Young Tradition, hard rock power trio Stray, and progressive rockers Skin Alley.

Some Transatlantic artists enjoyed more mainstream

appeal and helped swell the label's coffers. These included singer-songwriter Ralph McTell and comedian Billy Connolly, originally signed to the label in the folkier guise of his former group The Humblebums, also boasting Gerry (*Baker Street*) Rafferty in its ranks.

Transatlantic Records became part of the Granada Group in the mid-seventies and two years later the company had morphed into Logo Records and was soon history. Thankfully, much of its often superb back catalogue is currently available courtesy of Sanctuary Records, with many releases enjoying the deluxe reissue treatment.

## Bert Jansch and John Renbourn

Two of the most important guitarists of the sixties' folk boom for the price of one

**T**hanks to their involvement in the stunning folk-fusion quintet Pentangle, the names of gloriously talented acoustic guitarists Bert Jansch and John Renbourn are destined to be forever entwined, despite their long and diverse solo careers.

*Bert and John* (1966), Jansch's fourth solo album for Transatlantic, is a great introduction to their genre-splicing collaborative work in Pentangle. Largely dextrous instrumental co-compositions for acoustic guitar, this beautiful album is also important for the inclusion of Anne Briggs' restless *The Time Has Come* and Charles Mingus' *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat*, later revisited on Pentangle's ambitious *Sweet Child* (1968).

There's simply not the space here to delve deeply into both guitarists' bulging discographies. But a whistle-stop tour of Jansch's contributions to the Transatlantic catalogue must include his 1965 debut album – featuring the

seminal *Needle of Death* and his killer version of Davey Graham's *Angi* (1962) – *Jack Orion* (1966) his first full-length foray into traditional music, and the sublime *Rosemary Lane* (1971).

Similarly, Renbourn's finest solo recordings for Transatlantic are suitably eclectic, running the gamut of folk-blues on his eponymous debut (1965);

### Recorded together and in folk-fusion quintet Pentangle

medieval music on *Sir John Alot Of Merrie Englandes Musyk Thyng And Ye Grene Kryghte* (1968); and loose, sitar-heavy folk rock on *Faro Annie* (1971), also featuring Dorris Henderson's soaring vocals.

The ever-prolific Renbourn still plays (often with another folk legend: Wizz Jones) and records. Sadly, Bert Jansch passed away as recently as 2011.

An expanded US version was released in 1969



## Pentangle

Transatlantic's fab five – a fantastic melting pot of folk, jazz, blues and beyond

**P**entangle burned a bright trail through its brief late-sixties and early-seventies existence, adding delicious jazz, blues and even early music ingredients to the folk-rock stew.

The band sprang from various collaborations. Guitarists (and vocalists) Bert Jansch and John Renbourn had previously played together; singer Jacqui McShee guested on Renbourn's *Another Monday* (1967); and bassist Danny Thompson and drummer Terry Cox had been the rhythm section in Alexis Korner's band.

All the albums that Pentangle recorded with Transatlantic deserve to be on your wish list. Their eponymous debut album (1968) was a distinctive sounding – produced by Shel Talmy (The Who; The Kinks) – all-acoustic affair; a statement of intent in the era in which the Fender Stratocaster was king.

On a roll, the group's most commercially successful album,

double LP *Sweet Child* followed the same year, comprising one live set and one studio set, showcasing the group at their most stylistically eclectic.

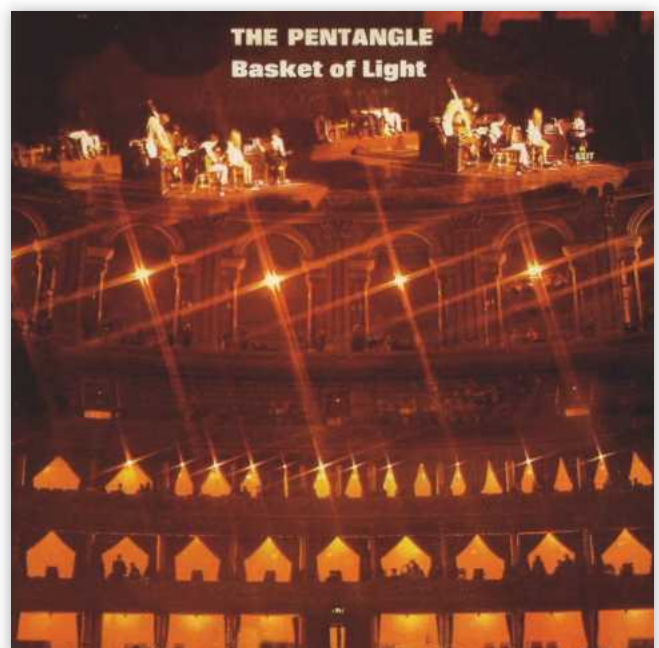
*Basket of Light* (1969) is perhaps Pentangle's commercial apex. It contains their best-known song – the propulsive hit

### Sweet Child was the group's most successful album

single *Light Flight*, the theme music from BBC TV drama *Take Three Girls*.

Fourth album *Cruel Sister* (1970) may have been the quintet's most ambitious – an album of traditional folk music, with a side-long reworking of *Jack Orion* – but it sold relatively poorly. The group recorded one more album for Transatlantic, the underrated *Reflection* (1971) before going to Warner/Reprise.

The band split in 1973 but reformed for a 12-date tour in 2008



## Mick Farren and The Deviants

Inspired proto-punk mayhem from a countercultural mover and shaker

**T**he list of the late Mick Farren's countercultural credentials – doorman at the legendary UFO club, co-founder of the Pink Fairies, *International Times* writer, William Burroughs-influenced sci-fi author – is lengthy, but it's his moves as a rock 'n' roll frontman that interest us most.

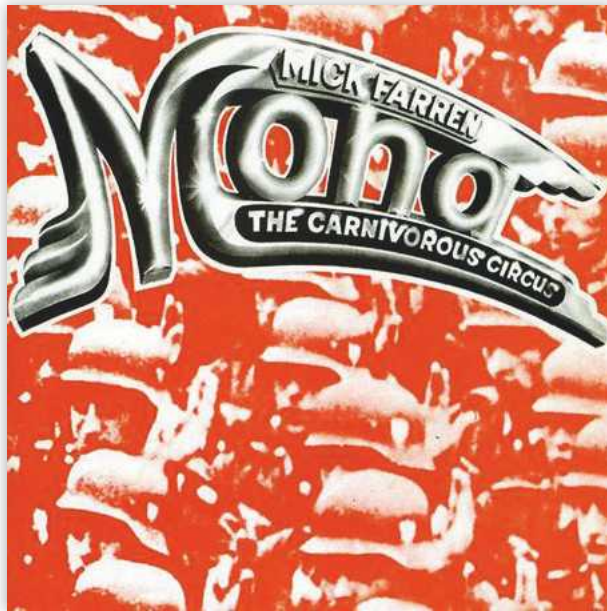
Like their American allies The Stooges, The Godz and The Fugs, Farren's group The Deviants lay claim to the proto-punk crown: the ramshackle garage rock and avant-garde experimentation of the group's first two albums – the independently produced *Ptoof!!* (1967) and *Disposable* (1968) certainly make them strong contenders.

The wheels were coming off The Deviants cart by the time of third album *The Deviants' #3* (1969), their first for Transatlantic. It's clear that too many hands were grasping the wheel, with more conventional

guitar solos diluting Farren's Beefheartian muse.

His 1970 solo album, *Mona* – *The Carnivorous Circus* is a melting pot in which fifties

rock and roll standards cross-pollinate with field recordings of Hell's Angels, Bartók-influenced classical and barely restrained psychedelia.



## Portsmouth Sinfonia

The self-proclaimed “world's worst orchestra”

**C**o-founded by composer Gavin Bryars at the Portsmouth School of Art, the Sinfonia had a radical approach to membership: anybody could join, regardless of technical ability.

This unique proposition saw non-musicians joining forces with trained classical musicians – albeit trained classical musicians playing instruments that were wholly alien to them. Turning the notion of musical competency on its head, the Sinfonia was Bryars' attempt to send the ivory towers of classical music crashing down, and putting performance within everybody's reach. It certainly piqued the interest of Roxy Music's “non-musician” Brian Eno, who decided to join the group on clarinet.

This academic exercise soon became a performance group, playing such standards as *The*

*Blue Danube*, and eventually a recording act, cutting two LPs for Transatlantic.

Regarded by some as desecration, others as a joyful

noise, whatever side of the fence you sit, there's no arguing that the Portsmouth Sinfonia provokes stimulating debate about classical music.



### ► SHOPPING LIST

Here are eight more diverse cuts from Transatlantic Records' discography to fill your basket and add to your record collection



**Private Eye**  
*Private Eye's Blue Record*  
Satire from Peter Cook, Dudley Moore and more including Beatles parody Spiggy Topes & the Turds.



**The Purple Gang**  
*Granny Takes A Trip*  
This single got the label's progressive era rolling – both figuratively and literally. A Summer of Love-vintage earworm.



**Ron Geesin**  
*A Raise Of Eyebrow*  
Anything goes, pre-Floyd musical mayhem brought to you by the master of the reel-to-reel and the razor blade.



**The Sallyangie**  
*Children Of The Sun*  
Sole outing from a pre-*Tubular Bells* Mike Oldfield (and sister Sally) under this hippie-folk guise.



**Mr Fox**  
*Mr Fox*  
An excellent northern take on electric folk rock from 1970. Second album *Gypsy* – released in 1971 – is also great.



**Stray**  
*Saturday Morning Pictures*  
The hard rock trio, boasting Iron Maiden as fans, recorded five albums for Transatlantic.



**Jan Dukes de Grey**  
*Mice And Rats In The Loft*  
File next to Comus under: brilliant, intense, unhinged prog-folk. Probably not one to play in the dark, mind.



**Tim Souster**  
*Swit Drimz*  
One of the last hurrahs for Transatlantic: challenging synth experimentation from this avant-garde composer.



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Since 1948 Ortofon have introduced nearly 100 different moving coil pick-up cartridges to the hi-fi market. Their latest models in this long and proud heritage are the Quintet Series.

All Quintet cartridges use the same ABS thermoplastic bodies and neodymium magnets, but each model in the range has its own sonic expression that reflects its status. From the well-rounded **Quintet Red**, through the smooth **Quintet Blue** and spacious yet dynamic **Quintet Bronze** up to the pure audio excellence of the **Quintet Black**, this series offers something for every discerning listener at a very attractive price.

The Quintet Series also includes a true-mono cartridge, for accurate reproduction of older mono recordings.



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100 Leonard Cohen  
Popular Problems



100 Freddie Hubbard  
Straight Life



101 Alice Sara Ott &  
Francesco Tristano  
Scandale

# Musicreviews



## Pink Floyd The Endless River

ALBUM  
OF THE  
MONTH

★★★★★

CD Parlophone

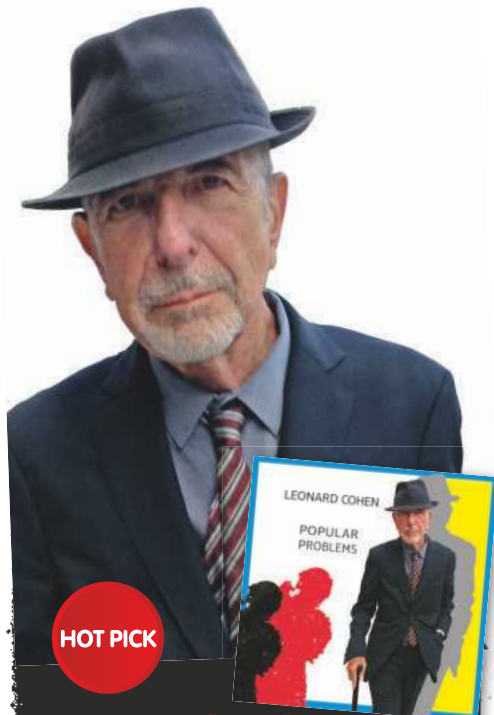
**AFTER 20 YEARS** of silence following 1994's *The Division Bell*, most of us had assumed that Pink Floyd's tide had ebbed for the final time and would not flow again. Now to our considerable surprise comes *The Endless River*. The death six years ago of keyboardist Rick Wright left only guitarist David Gilmour and drummer Nick Mason as surviving members (Roger Waters having departed in 1985) – but in many ways it is the ghost of Wright that dominates this 'new' recording. The source of *The Endless River* lies in the material recorded in sessions for *The Division Bell* by Wright, Gilmour and Mason. It transpires that more than 20 hours of music was recorded and that the original intention was that *The Division Bell* was to be a double album, with one disc of songs and the second consisting of ambient instrumental jams. In the event, the second disc was shelved, but around a year ago amid considerable secrecy, Gilmour and

Mason began reworking the unused material. The result is far more than simply the second part of *The Division Bell*, delivered two decades later as the original 1994 pieces have been radically retooled via a complex process of mixing, overdubbing and adding new material to create what co-producer Phil Manzanera calls "a Pink Floyd album for the 21st century".

Divided into four distinct parts – described on the record itself as "sides" and each between 12 and 15 minutes long – *The Endless River* will delight long-term fans of the Floyd's classic, spacey ambience. Essentially an instrumental album, most of the traditional Floyd trademarks are here in excelsis – ethereal synths, experimental loops and snippets of conversation (including the synthesised voice of Stephen Hawking borrowed from his appearance in a 1994 BT commercial), soaring melodic guitar solos from Gilmour, gently pastoral

acoustic passages and swelling organ arpeggios – the latter sampled from a recording of Wright playing the mighty Albert Hall organ during the soundcheck for a 1969 performance. In fact, much of the architecture of the music is deliberately built around Wright's keyboards as a tribute to the Floyd's fallen colleague. Despite the cut-and-paste construction that required the attention of four producers at different stages of the process – Manzanera, Martin Glover (aka Youth), the group's long-serving engineer Andy Jackson and Gilmour himself – there's a surprisingly cohesive quality and the album concludes triumphantly with the only conventional 'song', Gilmour's *Louder Than Words* on which he sings: "We bitch and we fight, but this thing that we do it's louder than words, the sum of our parts, the beat of our hearts." As a requiem for one of the most iconic bands of all time, it's damn near perfect. **NW**

Picture credit: Andy Earl



HOT PICK

## Leonard Cohen

Popular Problems

★★★★★

CD

Sony

**OCTOGENARIAN POP STARS** really shouldn't still be making records, but Cohen is exempt from such strictures, as he was always more poet than rocker. His last album, 2012's *Old Ideas*, was an elegant and resigned meditation on age and mortality. Here he turns his sharp observations in a more outward-looking direction to comment on a world torn asunder by war, tyranny and murder.

His voice is cracked and in places positively menacing, making it the

**Octogenarian pop stars shouldn't still be making records, but he's exempt from such strictures**

perfect dramatic vehicle for his apocalyptic subject matter. One-time Madonna producer Patrick Leonard juxtaposes Cohen's singular growl against diaphanous female backing voices, swirling violins, synths and moody organ and there's an almost impossible poignancy as he closes the album by crooning: "You've got me singing even though the world is gone/ You got me thinking I'd like to carry on." Let's hope he does. **NW**



## Béla Fleck & Abigail Washburn

★★★★★

CD

Rounder

**AS THE WORLD'S** premier banjo player, Fleck has expanded the instrument's repertoire and reputation and won a record-breaking 15 Grammy awards as he's ranged across jazz, classical and world music. Here he returns thrillingly to the instrument's folk/country/bluegrass roots on a set that includes trad Appalachian ballads and original compositions. Sung in deathless, keening fashion by his wife, the only accompaniment comes from the couple's two banjos, but they produce such a rich palette of sounds that you'd swear a full band was at work. Another Grammy surely looms for Americana album of the year. **NW**



## Laetitia Sadier

Something Shines

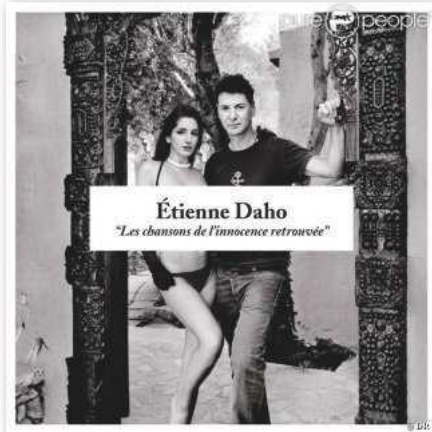
★★★★★

CD

Mutante

**WITH STEREO LAB STILL** on hold, the band's chanteuse continues to plough a very similar furrow. So we have retro synths, jangling guitars, Krautrock rhythms and ye-ye vocals in various configurations. While it's unlikely to win over many new fans, connoisseurs of the distinctive Stereolab sound will find plenty to delight their aural palette.

Sadier's tender yet distracted voice is as usual the centrepiece, adding warmth to the metronomic rhythms. Occasionally the songs get pulled apart and reimagined so that when they come together again they sound all the more determined, but without disturbing the status quo too much. **DO**



## Étienne Daho

Les Chansons de l'Innocence Retrouvée

★★★★★

CD

Polydor

**BIG IN FRANCE**, and with a small following in the UK that includes Neil Tennant, Daho's mellifluous baritone has graced a huge array of collaborations over the years and his sophisticated take on rock chanson probably puts him closer to a Gallic Brian Ferry than Leonard Cohen, though his lyrics are often compared to the latter.

First released in France last year, his latest leans on lush string arrangements, counterpointed with snatches of surf guitar and his trademark eighties synths in a captivating collection of songs. It includes Debbie Harry and Nile Rogers, each adding their own touch to the work of a man that has no real need for collaborateurs. **DO**



Do you agree with our reviewers? Decide for yourself and listen to some of this month's tunes at [www.hifichoice.co.uk](http://www.hifichoice.co.uk)

## AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

HOT PICK

### Freddie Hubbard

Straight Life

180g vinyl

CTI/Pure Pleasure



**IN 1970 FREDDIE** Hubbard, Joe Henderson, Herbie Hancock, George Benson, Ron Carter, Jack DeJohnette, Richard Landrum and Weldon Irvine went into

Rudy van Gelder's studio and brewed up a groove so audacious it may never be equalled. It's one hell of a lineup, old-school horn players meet new generation guitar, piano and drums, so the music they make reflects the crossover. Powerful funk rhythms underpinning vibrant solos from trumpet, sax, conga, keys and guitar.

*Straight Life* captures the vibe found on Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew*, it's rhythmically stronger and less challenging, and more of a collaboration. It may be Hubbard's name on the cover, but this is very much an ensemble creation. Only the final track, *Here's That Rainy Day*, a duet with Benson, puts him in the lead for any duration. This short album has just three tracks, but they contain more insight, intensity, tone and vibe than most. Heavy but light, multi-layered yet intrinsically legible, this is the distilled essence of a finely honed groove. It is also a great recording with more inner detail and low end welly than most of its era. Van Gelder plus CTI equals the dope and Pure Pleasure is the icing on a rich sonic cake. **JK**

## HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS



### Phantasm Four Temperaments



ALAC & FLAC 16-bit/44.1kHz

Linn Records



### Polen Mar De Leva



FLAC 24-bit/44.1kHz

B&W Society of Sound

**THIS VIOL QUARTET** specialises in music from Elizabethan England and the four temperaments of this reissue are four very different composers of the era: the dissonant Robert Parsons, the cool Ferrabosco the Elder, the warm and sanguine Thomas Tallis, as well as the extremes of William Byrd's ecstasy and melancholy. The playing is clear and expressive throughout on a warm and inclusive recording that retains a high level of aural integrity. **DO**

**COLOMBIA'S POLEN LABEL** has been releasing alternative music with a Latin flavour since 2006 and this compilation pulls together some of the best. There's rich variety here, from the indie pop of Bomba Estéreo – which sounds like a more mellow version of Brazil's CSS – to the pumping electro of Mitú. It's unlikely that every track will appeal, but it hangs together as a whole and is a great place to explore a genre that's barely recognised outside Brazil. **DO**



## Phase 4 Stereo

Stereo Concert Series

HOT PICK



41 CDs

Decca

With 41 CDs, there's plenty here to delight and amaze

**PHASE FOUR WAS** launched by Decca in 1962 to offer listeners vivid exaggerated stereo to make the most of their hi-fi. It was loud, brash, and fun! You either loved it or hated it. The sixties PFS recordings have a bright vivid sound that's immediate and exciting, but lacking in refinement and finesse. By the mid seventies, things had moved on. Much of what's included here has been issued before, and it doesn't sound like it's been remastered. The original LP sleeves are reproduced 'as was', but extra (unlisted) works have been added. It's a bit of a mixed bag, and not for the purist audiophile. But there's plenty here to delight and amaze – Phase Four was gaudy and vulgar, but never dull!! **JH**



### Alice Sara Ott & Francesco Tristano Scandale

HOT PICK



4 CDs

DG

**THE MAIN WORK** here is *Rite of Spring*, in Stravinsky's version for two pianos. It receives a barnstorming interpretation from Ott and Tristano, who play with great fervour and passion. The performance is full of fire, yet extremely precise and together – two musicians playing as one. The added 'bass drum' effect towards the close of part one sounds effective too – though would Stravinsky have approved? DG's recording is sonorous and weighty, with good dynamic range and excellent clarity. Two pianos produce a big sound and the effect is strong and powerful, with bright ringing top notes and powerful bass. **JH**

## BLU-RAY DVD



### Peter Gabriel Back to Front Live in London

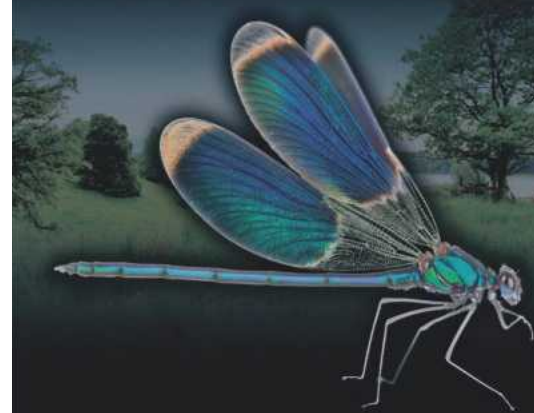
Blu-ray

Eagle Vision



Part of the tour to celebrate the 25th anniversary of *So* this finds Gabriel alongside key musicians from the original album playing live at the O2 in October 2013. It starts with a largely acoustic entrée that sounds superb followed by an electric main course, both of which mix old and new songs. The desert is a rendition of the full album with great arrangements that reveal the real strength of his song writing. Gabriel's voice has never been the greatest, but his showmanship is up with the best, both visuals and sound are top notch. **JK**

## Nature's Dragonfly



## Our DRAGONFLY



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audioquest

audioquest.com/DragonFly

# Minitest

BLUETOOTH DAB RADIOS £150-£200

## Rhapsody in Blue

As **Adrian Justins** discovers, Bluetooth brings additional functionality to a DAB radio for the kitchen or bedroom

**N**o longer dismissed as a flaky communications protocol, Bluetooth now adds real value to the DAB radio market, making it easy for listeners to stream their music from a suitably equipped smartphone or tablet. You no longer need to sacrifice audio quality or the convenience of wirelessness to enjoy listening to your favourite playlists in a room where once a docking speaker would have been needed.

Although CD-quality streaming with aptX is now common and has helped give Bluetooth its newfound credibility, aptX is less relevant with these (largely) mono models. However, priced between £150 and £200, these are premium models (especially when compared with FM radios of yesteryear), and we should expect them to offer high quality design, build and performance.

For the purpose of this test I checked out their features and ease of use

before assessing them for sound quality, first with DAB, then Bluetooth with a selection of tunes that included the *Prologue* from *West Side Story*, Talking Heads' *Burning Down The House* and Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean*, all of which were remastered hi-res downloads converted to standard-resolution AAC files. My killer bass test, however, is Diana Krall's *My Love Is*, which has a double bass at the start that goes lower than the Mariana Trench.

## Ruark R1 Mk III

PRICE: £200 TELEPHONE: 01702 601410 WEBSITE: ruarkaudio.com

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Ruark R1 Mk III

**ORIGIN**  
China

**WEIGHT**  
1.8kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
130 x 170 x 135mm  
(WxHxD)

**SOCKETS**  
USB charge port;  
3.5mm aux in;  
headphone jack

**FEATURES**  
9W quoted power output; 3.5in driver; bass port; DAB, DAB+, FM tuners; Bluetooth; dual alarm; 5 presets per mode; adjustable bass and treble; loudness

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Ruark Audio Ltd

**THIS IS THE** third incarnation of the R1, a radio that rightly garnered much acclaim for its stylish looks and exquisite sound. The cosmetic differences between this model and its predecessors are subtle, but further inspection reveals a new rotary dial control on the top where curiously (and annoyingly) Ruark has ditched the handy preset buttons.

Fashioned from solid walnut wood, the R1 now comes in soft white, soft black or wooden finishes, each of which looks classy and reassuringly sturdy. Where a light sensor once sat on the fascia a Bluetooth logo sits, misleadingly looking like a button that needs pressing. It's a minor blot on an otherwise impeccable landscape.

Unfortunately, there's no remote control, but the segmented top dial works well in conjunction with the lovely new OLED display (with adjustable brightness) and an excellent instruction manual to make operation a painless experience. The

display always shows the time, plus smooth-ish scrolling text with DAB stations and (uniquely in this group) artist and track information with Bluetooth sources. Audio adjustment options comprise treble, bass and loudness and you can skip Bluetooth tracks using the top buttons.

### Special delivery

Like its predecessors, the R1's 3.5in speaker driver delivers crisp audio in conjunction with its bass reflex port on the underside. This enables it to produce a rich, lustrous soundfield especially at mid-to-high volume levels. The sonic signature is the most neutral of all the models tested here. *Billie Jean* has a balanced and natural sound, with Michael Jackson's vocals perfectly handled in the mix of instruments. The strings, trumpets and clarinets in the *West*



*Side Story Prologue* have a lovely airiness to them, and the timing of the drum demonstrates the brand's hi-fi roots ●

### VERDICT

The R1 Mk III's fine looks are matched by its peerless performance across all genres



## Pure Evoke D4 Mio Bluetooth

PRICE: £150 TELEPHONE: 0845 1489001 WEBSITE: pure.com

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Evoke D4 Mio Bluetooth

**ORIGIN**  
China

**WEIGHT**  
1.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
215 x 180 x 115mm (WxHxD)

**SOCKETS**  
USB port (software update only); 3.5mm aux in; headphone jack

**FEATURES**  
7W quoted power output; 3in driver; bass port; DAB, DAB+, FM tuners; Bluetooth; dual alarm; kitchen timer; 15 presets per mode; optional ChargePAK F1 battery; optional interchangeable trim panels

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Pure

WITH PURE'S ALMOST trademark contemporary take on the portable kitchen radio, the Evoke D4 Mio Bluetooth has a carry handle that acts as a snooze button should you decide to use it as an alarm in a bedroom. Design and build quality are both good, but if you get easily bored by the appearance of the radio, you can always remove the coloured trim panels using a screwdriver and swap them with new ones from Pure. A 3.5in driver is clearly visible through the fine metal mesh cover, with a bass port on the back alongside the headphone jack and aux socket.

The fascia is home to all of its controls including buttons for accessing its lineup of presets (15 per tuner), dual alarms and source. There's also a menu button, which has all handy options for varying the OLED screen's brightness or choosing what type of information it displays. A practically sized remote control is also provided.



Scrolling text is by far the smoothest of this group and uniquely here you can pause the scroll. Handily, when using Bluetooth you can connect to the Evoke D4 Mio even when it's in standby, press play and the speaker switches on automatically.

### Crank it up

Less impressive is the absence of EQ adjustment and lack of track information with Bluetooth – all you get is the clock or battery charge status (if using the optional ChargePak battery). Sonically, the news is a bit better. This is a decent

little radio, but it does have a small sound compared with its rivals that leads to slight distortion at higher frequencies. Vocals can sound thick and *Burning Down The House* feels dynamically compressed as if something's covering the speaker. That's not to say it's an unpleasant sound, *West Side Story's Prologue* glides along with decent bass ●

### VERDICT

The Evoke comes up short in terms of impact and at higher volumes it can be a tiring listen



## Revo SuperSignal

PRICE: £180 TELEPHONE: 01555 666161 WEBSITE: revo.co.uk

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Revo SuperSignal

**ORIGIN**  
China

**WEIGHT**  
2.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
135 x 210 x 140mm (WxHxD)

**SOCKETS**  
USB port (software update only); stereo RCA phono; 3.5mm aux in; headphone jack

**FEATURES**  
10W quoted power output; 3.5in driver; bass port; DAB, DAB+, FM tuners; Bluetooth; aptX; dual alarm; 8 presets per mode; adjustable bass and treble; DRC

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Revo

TAKING ITS DESIGN cues from a number of different influences, the SuperSignal's grille is reminiscent of an old radiogram's ventilation cover. The flush OLED display is cutting edge while the wraparound wooden body is a copy of Ruark's R1. Also like the R1 there's a downward-firing bass port and a volume dial on top, but the similarities end there.

The fascia is festooned with tiny retro-looking buttons and there's an unusual joystick for menu navigation. Positioning just the power button and volume dial (which requires the deftest of touches to operate) on top is ideal for reaching out to a bedside table without having to sit up and look at the radio. There's also the option of using the ridiculously heavy and brick-like remote control. More positively, there is a stereo phono output, which effectively makes the SuperSignal a Bluetooth/DAB streamer for an existing hi-fi. Menu options include DRC and bass/treble

EQ adjustment. The OLED display is one of the best I've seen on any device in terms of its font choice and clarity, and is a delight to look at, it's a shame it doesn't show track info during Bluetooth playback – just displaying 'Device Connected'.

### Bass in your face

In terms of performance, its 3.5in driver delivers a really full and meaty sound. *West Side Story's Prologue* is almost on a par with the Ruark R1's performance in terms of clarity and detail, just falling short in terms of overall polish, but it's dynamic and assured. The percussion in particular is beautifully timed, although you do need to temper the bass a touch. This sensitivity is most evident with *My Love Is*, which causes reverberation and some cabinet rattle until the bass is adjusted. Set it just right, however,



and *Billie Jean* is a terrific ride – Michael Jackson's vocals sounding clear and engaging with a wonderfully vibrant beat ●

### VERDICT

Not the most elegant-looking radio, but it's capable of some highly impressive sonics



## Philips Original Radio

PRICE: £200 TELEPHONE: 0800 3316016 WEBSITE: philips.co.uk

### DETAILS

**PRODUCT**  
Philips Original Radio

**ORIGIN**  
China

**WEIGHT**  
3.5kg

**DIMENSIONS**  
325 x 175 x 167mm (WxHxD)

**SOCKETS**  
20W quoted power output; 3.5m aux in; USB smartphone charge port; USB port (software upgrade)

**FEATURES**  
2x 3in drivers; 2x 10W power output; DAB, DAB+, FM tuners; Bluetooth; 15 presets per mode

**DISTRIBUTOR**  
Philips UK

**WITH A RETRO LOOK** based on the Philetta – a classic Philips 1955 radio – this model is more suitable for use in a kitchen or dining room than a bedroom. Made from a robust plastic, build quality is good although the material protective ‘grille’ will be hard to clean if it ever gets dirty. Socketry is decent, including a USB charge output for smartphones. The low contrast LCD display is a poor relation to the OLED ones elsewhere, especially as text blinks on and off as it scrolls.

You operate the radio using four rotary dials and the odd ‘push to select’ button, which would work well enough apart from the way Philips has been so keen to stay faithful to the retro look that it’s used tiny fonts that are barely legible even in good ambient light. The result is that you have to keep referring to the poor Ikea-style user guide. Alternatively, there’s an app that uses Bluetooth,

although the controls are rudimentary, with no radio presets, despite the Original having 30 preset options. Philips has not found room for any EQ adjustment, but at least the Original has DRC and stereo speakers with a relatively hefty output.

### Don’t push it

At low-to-medium volumes the Original has a well defined sound. *Billie Jean* is energetic, with a decent bass underpinning the higher frequencies of the guitar, keyboards and Michael’s vocals. There’s

noticeably more power, making it tempting to turn up the volume, but this reveals a brightness with treble sounds that becomes tiring. At lower volumes the bass in *Burning Down The House* is impressive and blends nicely with David Byrne’s vocals, although the double bass in *My Love Is* causes some cabinet rattle ●

### VERDICT

Performs best at lower volumes, and ease of use is sacrificed to stay true to its retro style



## Mini test verdict

**ALTHOUGH THEY ALL** look distinctly different, the four models here vary only slightly in terms of features. In fourth place is the Philips Original Radio, which adopts the retro look of a 60-year-old design classic without unfortunately updating some of the original’s weaknesses. It may look pleasingly characterful, but its operating system remains too retrograde with hard to read labels and a dated LCD display. Even its app is frustratingly rudimentary. Sound-wise it has decent grunt, but lacks finesse with more testing material.

Third spot goes to the Pure Evoke D4 Mio Bluetooth, which is a very pleasing model to look at and is by no

means difficult to operate, thanks to external preset buttons and a handy remote control. Its display is visually impressive and its sonic performance is generally pretty decent, but it’s rather lacking in power and higher frequencies distort as the volume goes up.

In second place is the Revo SuperSignal, which is arguably an ugly duckling with a busy, throwback fascia that won’t please everyone and a unnecessarily large remote control. But that lovely OLED display sets the benchmark for design excellence and it’s a fairly easy model to operate. Its



bass does need calibrating, but luckily it offers EQ adjustment, and with aptX onboard it delivers an impressively powerful and beefy sound for its size.



Ruark’s refresh of the R1 has a super slick display that – uniquely in present company at least – includes scrolling track information with Bluetooth playback. There’s no remote control and the radio preset buttons have been removed, but otherwise the changes are for the better and performance is reliably first rate with all types of sources.



When choosing a DAB radio it’s vital to consider how you’ll use it. Do you require easy access to certain basic features such as volume, power and preset buttons from the comfort of your bed? Would a remote be of benefit? Are external buttons a deal breaker over menu-based control? Maybe a compromise could be made for a model that offers superior aesthetics or class-leading sonics. For kitchen use, consider how easy it will be to clean

and what angle of view the display offers. You’d be mad not to visit a dealer and hear for yourself what a radio sounds like, and with Bluetooth models you should have a couple of favourite tracks lined up on your phone that the salesperson can let you try. Listening also gives you the chance to play with the menu system, ask if you can alter the EQ and see how easy it is. Is portability important and if so, think about the possibility of battery use.



# NO YELLOW POLKA DOTS



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# Bowers & Wilkins

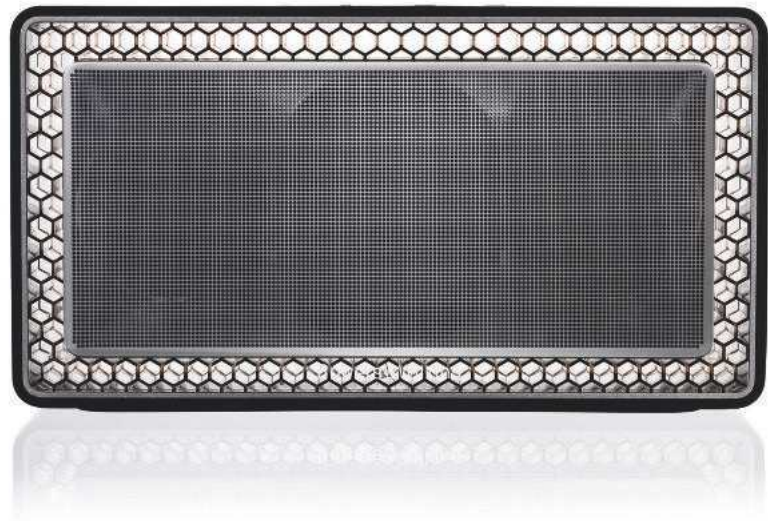
## T7 Bluetooth loudspeaker

**UP UNTIL RECENTLY** B&W's speakers for portable media players have been aimed exclusively at owners of Apple's products. Meaning that the vast swathes of the population that don't use an iPhone or iPod have had to look elsewhere to find a way to get music off of their phone or music player. But then aptX came along and changed the hi-fi landscape, making Bluetooth a viable way to transmit music without cables. The new T7 represents the company's first foray into the world of Bluetooth, meaning that Android users can finally join in the fun.

Given that the loudspeaker specialist is well-regarded for its seriously impressive range of hi-fi and home cinema speakers, you'd never expect the T7 to be like the cheap and cheerful Bluetooth speakers that are ten a penny, and sure enough it looks a little different to the norm. The cabinet design is a bit boxy but feels pleasingly robust, weighing in at 950g. There's a matte black rubber trim around the outside – the sort that looks like it will be a magnet to dust and greasy fingerprints, but thankfully isn't – into which the controls are recessed. They aren't particularly easy to see and I find that they need to be given quite a substantial prod to work, although this might become easier with familiarisation over time.

### Hexagon in 60 seconds

The gun-metal grille appears to float inside the chassis, thanks to a clear plastic hexagonal surround derived from the Matrix internal bracing used in B&W's reference 800 Series Diamond speakers. Originally designed for use in a concept car for Jaguar that didn't make it to market, it provides substantial stiffening to keep resonance to a minimum. The honeycomb structure is an interesting design feature that is best described as an acquired taste. I like the way that it lets light through, stopping it from being just another black box, but you'll really need to see it in the flesh to decide for yourself.



Under the hood there's a pair of full-range 50mm drivers, driven by two Class D amplifiers, while a high-output bass radiator is placed around the back. The T7 utilises the same DAC and DSP as B&W's Z2 Apple wireless speakers.

Socketry is limited to a 3.5mm headphone out, an input for charging (it takes four hours to fully top up and lasts 18 hours) and a service port, but no USB for charging additional devices.

Pairing is ridiculously simple. Hold down the standby button on the side, turn the Bluetooth on your portable device on, and then wait for the two to discover one another. It all happens in a matter of seconds and is the sort of process that even Luddites will struggle to get wrong. The T7 can remember up to eight devices and produces an electronic chirp to let you know that it's worked.

Interestingly, B&W commissioned electronica artiste Mira Calix to 'write' the audio cues the T7 produces. In truth, I can't help wondering if it was worth the effort and just how much time Calix put into composing them, but it's a nice touch nonetheless. I manage to pair my MacBook Pro, iPod and Samsung Galaxy Ace Plus with the minimum of fuss.

Left nonplussed by Mira Calix's audio cues, I opt instead to give the

T7 a workout by streaming a lossless FLAC file of *Sparrow*, a rather sparse electronic piece from her album *One On One*. The first thing that strikes me is the impressive depth of the bass. Positioned about 30cm away from the wall the T7 has the sort of tight, meaty lower frequencies that are missing from most rival Bluetooth speakers, with very little sense of overhang. The sharp, crunchy midband is also impressive, starting and stopping with precision and alacrity, while giving the track a powerful pulsating feel.

### It might get loud

Switching to something a bit more upbeat, The Heavy's *How You Like Me Now* has a full sound that even when cranked up loud doesn't distort like so many portable rivals can, while that hexagon bracing appears to be doing the business as there's no sign of resonance. The sound fires out into the room coherently painting big, bold three-dimensional images that are comfortably among the best I've heard from a wireless portable.

Sure, it isn't cheap, but if you're serious about a way to enjoy music from your phone or media player without wires, the T7 has to be near the very top of your list. **JDW**

#### DETAILS

PRICE  
£300

TELEPHONE  
0800 2321513

WEBSITE  
bowers-wilkins.co.uk

#### OUR VERDICT



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“A marked benefit for dynamic range, a consequence of lowering the noise floor, as well as a refinement and a general opening up of the soundstage”

IsoTek EV03 Premier, Hi-Fi Choice, March 2013

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IsoTek EV03 Polaris, Hi-Fi Choice, March 2013



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## Kate Koepfel

### Record dividers

**ONE OF THE** best things about having a big record collection – apart from listening to it – is listening to it while reorganising how you have it filed on your shelf. So how do you organise yours? Do you go for genre, alphabetically by artist or album, chronologically or even colour? If the many record collections of friends and colleagues I've seen over the years highlight one thing, it's that how you categorise your records is a very personal thing that makes perfect sense to you, and you alone. But what if you want to find a way of neatly organising your records like they are in record stores? This was a problem that American designer Kate Koepfel faced a few years ago, only to discover that the solutions that existed were plasticky and not particularly stylish. So Kate went away and decided to come up with

her own. The result is the rather beautiful set of wooden dividers you see before you here.

Available with the tab positioned on the side for shelving or on top (for record boxes), the hand-made wooden dividers come with the letters laser cut out or engraved into the wood.

#### The look of love

From the second you unpackage the beautifully designed box the dividers come in, you very quickly realise that this is a product of complete and utter beauty. Sure, the best part of £500 is a sizeable chunk of change to blow on a way to alphabetise your vinyl, but if you're as passionate about your collection as I think you are, you'll be delighted with your investment.

The wood has been beautifully crafted by Koepfel and her team of carpenters, and the dividers are truly exquisite things to behold. The only downside is

that each one is 6mm thick, meaning that you'll need a spare 17cm of space on your shelf to squeeze all 26 dividers on!

Obviously, they won't reveal previously undiscovered subtleties in your vinyl and they certainly won't change the way that you listen, but as far as ways of organising your record collection go, they're just about the most beautiful answer to the problem that I've seen. A great addition to any collection. **JDW**



#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
Stenciled: £395  
Engraved: £450

**TELEPHONE**  
0118 9814238

**WEBSITE**  
soundfoundations.co.uk

#### OUR VERDICT



## ISOkinetik

### Silver Melody 1.1 interconnect cables

**PERSONALLY, I LOVE** silver interconnects, but having cables made from solid silver comes at a price. I was, therefore, delighted to have the opportunity to try out some 'budget' offerings from ISOkinetik.

The Silver Melody 1.1 interconnects may be a low-cost range, but there is nothing cheap in their construction. The conductors are made from 99.99% pure silver. Four solid silver wires are used for each cable – two for the signal and two for the earth return. The cables are terminated with the splendid KLE (aka Keith Louis Eichmann) Silver Harmony RCA phono plugs. These plugs feature KLE's proprietary high-purity copper conductors with a dense, high-purity silver plating. The plugs also have a single-point earth connection that



works in a similar way to star earthing to eliminate the effects of eddy current turbulence, capacitive reactance and micro-arcng. The earthing pin is housed in a plastic ring that fits over the standard phono socket in the normal way. The cables are fully screened and finished off in a fancy purple sleeving.

#### Get to the point

I have no concerns with connecting the KLE Silver Harmonys as they push on very snugly, but without the need to apply any undue force. Unlike some other single-point earth RCA plugs, the KLE earth pin is fully

supported in the plastic ring and there is no danger of it breaking off during insertion.

Following a good stint of the essential process of running in the cables, I am rewarded with a sound that does not disappoint and that lives up to my expectations for a set of silver interconnects. The overall sound they deliver is highly detailed and at the same time full bodied and smooth. Performances are transparent and open with excellent imaging, while the transients are fresh and sparkling. These are great value interconnects with a performance that is far from being 'budget'. **NR**

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£180 for 1m cables  
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extra 0.5m

**TELEPHONE**  
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**WEBSITE**  
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#### OUR VERDICT



# NAD

## PP 4 phono/USB preamp



**IF YOU WANT** to enjoy the delights of vinyl, but your amplifier does not have a phono input, you will need to invest in an external phono amplifier that can make use of a spare line input on your amp. The PP 4 digital phono USB preamplifier is one such solution and offers the additional benefit of a USB interface to allow a direct connection to your PC for making high-quality digital copies of your records. The USB output utilises the PP 4's internal analogue-to-digital convertor, thus bypassing the computer's inferior sound card.

The PP 4 comes with a shielded USB cable and features a recording level control. Additionally there's a 24V DC wall-wart power supply, while an auto power-down feature saves energy by automatically switching it off when it's not in use. VinylStudio Lite software is also supplied for ripping LPs and burning audio CDs.

### Connect four

The PP 4 features inputs for both MM (moving magnet) and low noise MC (moving coil) types to suit a wide variety of phono cartridges. There is also a line input to allow for the digitising of cassette or open reel tapes or any other analogue source, such as an FM radio. The DAC produces 16-bit/48kHz sampling and the RIAA phono stage incorporates a sub-sonic filter to reduce the effect of warped records.

In addition to a MM/MC cartridge switch on the rear panel, the PP 4

has separate phono socket inputs for each type of cartridge. This will be of particular interest to anyone that wants to use it with two record decks fitted with different types of cartridge. They can both be left plugged in and the switch used to select between them. An additional button on the rear panel selects between the phono inputs and the line input. An earth binding post is also included on the rear for earthing the record deck.

The supplied VinylStudio Lite software is specifically designed for the job of digitising records and cassettes and features a number of simple built-in tools to make this incredibly easy.

The software works with both Windows and Macintosh computers and is intended to be simpler to use than a conventional audio editor, to make the job of transferring albums to your computer straightforward. For example, it includes a 'wait for needle down' feature that will automatically start the recording when it detects the stylus dropping into the groove and will stop recording when the arm is lifted at the end of the side. Another excellent feature is that even if you play a record at the wrong speed, VinylStudio will convert the audio to the correct speed digitally. For example, you can play a 45rpm record on a deck that only has 33rpm speed and VinylStudio will fix it for you – clever indeed!

The supplied 'Lite' version of the software includes some basic filters that do all the work for you, such as a

setting for '78s and badly worn vinyl', 'cassette tapes' and 'reel-to-reel tapes', as well as built-in RIAA and reverse RIAA equalisation (although the PP 4 provides the equalisation necessary for records). If you are a more advanced user, you may wish to purchase the full version of the software for an additional cost that includes a full set of sound cleaning filters and user-configurable FFT (Fast Fourier Transform) filters.

### Plug and play

I first connect the PP 4 to my hi-fi via the line out to see how it performs with my record deck, which has a moving coil cartridge fitted. I find that this little budget box does a very respectable job of delivering good quality audio to my system. My Sheffield Labs Direct to Disc LP recording of *I've Got The Music In Me* by Thelma Houston produces a very exciting performance that is very clear and melodic. There is no tendency for the loud passages to sound cramped, which often happens with this disc on less capable phono stages.

I then connect the PP 4 to my PC via the USB connector to make a digital copy of the record. The VinylStudio Lite software is very straightforward to use and the WAV file recording sounds just as superb. The partnership of the VinylStudio Lite software with the NAD PP 4 is certainly very successful and makes the package an excellent value and highly versatile product. **NR**

#### DETAILS

PRICE  
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# Black Rhodium

## Samba VS-1 loudspeaker cable



**BASED ON BLACK** Rhodium's existing Samba loudspeaker cable, the Samba VS-1 has a few enhancements. The cable's core geometry remains the same – 19 strands of 13-gauge silver-plated copper conductors insulated in thick silicone rubber terminated with Graham Nalty's Legacy GN-1 rhodium-plated banana plugs. The VS-1 added to the name denotes the addition of 'vibration stabilisation'. This is achieved through a hefty, machined weight that is positioned half way along each gently twisted cable length.

The cable is reassuringly heavy and the quality of finishing and terminations is excellent. Black Rhodium claims the cables have relatively low impedance, which could be useful if you need to use longer runs. Positive and negative signal flows are also said to be connected in opposite directions for a lower noise floor.

### Good connection

Purists will appreciate that the 'straight line' connector plugs are joined to the cable without solder and the combination of engineered crimping with an additional screw clamp should mean terminations last a lifetime. The use of rhodium plating is claimed by Black Rhodium to provide a superior connection between your components.

The design of the rhodium-plated banana plugs feel a little less snug than more traditional designs, but they make a reassuring connection and are pleasantly simple to swap in

and out, without the wrestle other designs can sometimes give. After running the cables in for an extended period, the immediate impression from playing Stevie Wonder's *Master Blaster* on CD is of a very open, clean and expansive image. The cable comes across as very neutral with a hint of extra treble extension, especially when compared with the entry-level Twist and Twirl ranges. Bass control is excellent and highly tuneful – potentially due to the claimed low impedance of this cable – enabling amplifiers to maintain a firm grip on bass drivers. But it's the 'see through' quality of the stereo image that feels most special here. Stevie's lush organ notes, rich vocals, funky bass riffs and explosive rim shots are all beautifully layered in a highly transparent and very wide sound stage. This cable uses a whole host of different technologies to reduce the impact of radio frequency interference as well as the distortion that can be caused by electromagnetic fields and physical vibrations. And this near forensic attention to detail appears to have paid off, with few places left for signal problems to reside between amplifier and speakers. Loosening the screw clamp that holds the vibration stabilising weight in place, I reposition the weight far closer to the amp outputs. I feel this is where it provides the maximum benefit in reducing the vibrational energy likely to be generated by the amplifier, but do experiment in your own system.

Playing a lossless rip of The Cult's *Naturally High*, the Samba easily

makes sense of the pile-driving bass riff, thunderous drums, searing electric buzz-sawing guitars and intense vocals, enabling previously unappreciated acoustic guitar and congas to come through cleanly.

As well as richly complex music, it works brilliantly with stripped out material. It almost seems to gently aid the 'contrast' of your music, enabling midband detail and vocals in particular to press slightly forward out of the mix, while deeper bass and the gaps between notes take a step backwards. Silences subjectively feel a little darker, but no detail is lost. If anything, this added level of contrast enables fine detail around the decay of notes to ebb away much more convincingly.

### Heart of glass

The cable performs even stronger with valve amplification. The quality of the midband communication comes into its own and the extended treble detail and bass control lend support where most needed with valves. The Samba VS-1 is ideally suited to orchestral music and classical fans will appreciate its ability to tease out complex layers of rich instrumentation. But it is equally at home with more intimate music where the perceived low distortion enables subtle voices and acoustic instruments to communicate their full emotional content.

These feature-packed cables are a sensibly priced upgrade that will bring positive virtues to many musical styles and systems. Thoroughly recommended. **CW**

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£599 for 3m pair

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WHAT HI-FI?

# Miyajima

## Kotetu Mono MC Cartridge

**THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT** mono recordings that can provide a really special listening experience that has to be heard to be believed. When we talk about monophonic, we mean a true mono recording not a mono mix of a stereo master tape, which is no different from hitting the mono button on your receiver. Also, beware of "electronically re-processed for stereo" mixes, which are made from the mono recording and have been through a process to give a stereo effect – they sound awful! What we're talking about here are real monophonic recordings that have unique mixes that are separate from any stereo counterparts that may exist. These are generally what the music team has spent more time producing and, therefore, offer a truer representation of what the album should sound like.

### The one and only

To enjoy such recordings you'll need a dedicated mono cartridge. Why not simply use a stereo one, we hear you ask. It will work, but the quality is inferior to a mono model. Although the signal on the left and right channels should in theory be identical, that is never going to be the case in practice. Any differences between the channels will be distortions and surface noise from the playing process and these will be faithfully reproduced by the two halves of the stereo amplifying process. A mono cartridge produces a single signal from the record and many of the distortions from the left and right groove walls are cancelled out at the source.

The Miyajima Kotetu Mono moving coil cartridge is a true audiophile-quality cartridge for mono aficionados. Every cartridge is handcrafted in-house by a team of six full-time staff that's based in Fukuoka, Japan. The company has been making phono cartridges for more than three decades, but these have only recently found their way into the American and European markets. With several patents under his belt, founder Noriyuki Miyajima



is a passionate music lover who started off making only mono cartridges. He now also makes high-end stereo cartridges.

The Kotetu is the entry-level mono offering from the range of high-end Miyajima mono and stereo cartridges. Two versions are available – the monaural cartridge for LPs reviewed here that is fitted with a 0.7mm conical diamond stylus and requires a tracking force of 3.0-4.5g and a version for 78rpm records fitted with a 3mm conical diamond stylus. Both provide an output of 0.5mV and have an impedance of 40hms.

The cartridge makes use of the Miyajima vertical axis concentration, which ensures that it responds accurately to the horizontal modulation of a mono signal. It should be noted that the cartridge is intended for mono records only and should not be used to play a stereo record as the internal structure of the cantilever support is different and may damage your LP.

After installing the cartridge and setting up my tonearm, I put on a mono recording of Miles Davis' *Kind Of Blue*. My stereo copy is clearly a separate derivative from the master as it is very much 'sax on the left, trumpet in the middle and drums on the right'! This mono recording, however, is a totally different experience, with all the instruments

totally blended together and I get the feeling that all the performers are working as a team. The trumpet has a staggering clarity that somehow seems positioned more forward than the other instruments.

Next up is a great Parlophone mono record of instrumental versions of The Beatles' hits entitled *Off The Beatle Track*, performed by George Martin and his orchestra. The first track – *All My Loving* – demonstrates the classic evocative strings sound, typical of recordings of the sixties. George Harrison's *Don't Bother Me* has the melody played on a harmonica which, as with the Miles Davis track, seems to be situated in front of the orchestra.

### The difference is clear

Finally, I try a selection from a set of mono library music LPs from the publisher Mozart Edition. These contain light orchestral music that was popular in the sixties and seventies. Once again, I am struck by the amazing clarity combined with an apparent openness to the sound where the music feels in no way constrained.

If you have a collection of mono records and can easily swap cartridges, or better still, if you have two arms fitted to your turntable, this is without doubt the best way to listen to your recordings. **NR**

#### DETAILS

**PRICE**  
£295  
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#### OUR VERDICT



# Looking after your record collection

Taking care of your precious vinyl is just as important as the correct maintenance of the equipment you play it on, here's why

**B**eing a physical medium for the storage of audio, records are more prone than other media to degradation from neglect. Any imperfection of the playing surface is likely to find its way into the audio chain and result in all manner of unwanted effects to the signal.

Your collection of vinyl is valuable. This value is likely to be more than the original financial outlay you made in assembling it all. In addition, many of your records are irreplaceable and are of a quality that is far superior to that obtainable from modern digital media, such as MP3s.

So, to continually get the best sound from your vinyl, each record needs to be kept clean and stored in an appropriate manner.

## Clean up your act

When you get your newly purchased record home, the first thing to do is to give it a good clean. This is important for both new and second-hand vinyl. Surface dirt shows up as an increase in background noise, a reduction in instrument focus and the presence of clicks and pops while playing. Quite apart from the huge improvement in sound quality, cleaning will also help reduce the wear of your precious stylus and records.

Second-hand records will need to be cleaned properly to remove dust, dirt and debris that will have accumulated in the groove from the previous owner. Even if the record has been cleaned before selling, it is still worth cleaning it yourself. This is for two reasons – firstly, you don't know how thorough the previous cleaning was

and, secondly, more dirt may have found its way onto the record from a contaminated sleeve or album cover.

It may come as quite a surprise to many to read that we also strongly recommend cleaning brand new records. People have recalled that during the heyday of vinyl in the seventies and eighties many audiophiles used to routinely return new records due to what they considered to be noisy pressings. In fact, it was quite likely that the surface noise was just the effect of mould-release agent in the groove. Few people thought about cleaning new records in those days and several commented at the time that the noise reduced if the record was played a few times. This was doubtless the result of the stylus cleaning out some of the aforementioned mould-release agent.

Now that we have established the need to clean any record, what is the best way to do it? Well, there is no substitute for a wet clean of the





playing surface using a proprietary record cleaning fluid. There are many excellent options available on the market and the choice will largely depend on how deep your pockets are. Firstly, there are the semi-automatic record cleaning machines (RCMs) that can apply the fluid, brush it into the groove and vacuum it out, leaving you with a record in pristine condition. The dust and dirt are held in suspension in the cleaning fluid, which ends up in a reservoir contained within the machine and is emptied away at the end of cleaning a batch of LPs. At the very top end of the range, there are cleaning machines that also clean the record ultrasonically, like the KLAudio at around £2,800 and the Audio Desk model at about £2,000. Then there is the well-known Keith Monks range starting from £1,300, which has a superb reputation, as well as the

## No matter how clean your records are, they will always attract airborne dust

excellent Moth RCMs for around the £500 mark. At the budget end of market is the extremely good Okki Nokki machine that retails for £399 (HFC 383). In the latter case, the cleaning process involves mixing the bottle of concentrated cleaner supplied with the device with a litre of purified water and applying the fluid to the record surface, being careful to avoid the record label area. A special brush is used to spread and scrub the playing surface in both directions for three revolutions each way. Finally, a powerful vacuum then cleans off the entire surface in one further revolution and a final spin leaves the grooves bone dry. The process is then repeated for the second side and the job is done.

All these machines are ideal if you have a large collection of records to be cleaned as you can rattle through them quite quickly. However, if your budget doesn't stretch that far, fear not. There are several manual wet

**An HFC award winner, the Okki Nokki is an excellent way to clean lots of discs**

cleaning machines on the market that will do a first-rate job, although it will be a much slower process. These are great for individual purchases and small batches. Examples of such machines are the Spin Clean record washer at £80 and the Knosti Disco Antistat at £50. In the case of the Knosti, a bath is filled with the supplied re-usable cleaning fluid and the LP is clamped in a spindle that also protects the label. This assembly is then inserted between two brushes housed within a bath containing the cleaning fluid. The disc is rotated several times in both directions in the bath before being removed and placed in the rack to dry. The clamp can then be removed ready to clean the next disc.

## Keeping it clean

Whatever method you use, your lovely clean LP is now ready to be inserted into its sleeve. However, if the record was purchased second-hand, the last thing you want to do is insert your clean LP into the old sleeve as it will be instantly contaminated with the dirt left in there! Instead, use a brand new polyethylene sleeve and insert that into the cover. If the old record sleeve is a collector's item, it can be stored inside the album cover, but should never be used to hold the vinyl. Incidentally, when inserting any sleeve into the album cover, always rotate it through 90° to the cover so the open edge is uppermost inside the sleeve when it is stored vertically. This will prevent dust from entering through the opening.

Another advantage of using a new polyethylene sleeve is that they are usually anti-static. Static charge is another enemy of good sound reproduction and this can be induced by the act of sliding a record in or out of a sleeve if it does not have anti-static properties. Charges can also be built up during playing and when they discharge they result in an audible click. If static is a problem in

**Priced at £80 the Spin Clean is an affordable way to clean records**



**Knosti's Disco-Antistat is a simple cleaning solution that won't break the bank**



## SPECIFIC DISASTERS

Alas, the odd scratch is going to happen sometime, even to the most careful of audiophiles, and the only way of eliminating this is by digitally recording the record on your computer and using software to remove the offending click. This procedure has been covered by a previous guide in this series – *Digitising LPs and Cassettes* in the July 2014 Issue.

The list of other unwanted items that we have come across that can get deposited on a record includes candle wax! Should this happen do not attempt to use heat to remove the wax by melting it off. Quite apart from the risk of melting the surface of the LP, you are more likely to cause the wax to run further into the groove. A better course of action is to put the LP in a refrigerator to make the wax solid and brittle. Paraffin wax (the wax used to make domestic candles) contracts on cooling and becomes quite brittle. Solid paraffin wax has a density of about 0.9g/mL whereas in liquid form it has a density around 0.8g/mL. This means that when it is cooled, it should contract and pull itself off the groove wall and you may then find that the now brittle wax will lift off in one piece. Any residue should be cleaned carefully by using a lint-free cloth soaked in a mixture of isopropyl alcohol and distilled water, rubbing gently along the groove. Finally, clean the record in a cleaning machine.

A second-hand record that has come from a house with smokers is easy to detect as the album will have the unmistakable smell of stale tobacco smoke. Inevitably, sticky nicotine deposits will have contaminated the playing surface and this can act as a trap for dust and dirt, as well as potentially damaging your precious stylus. Obviously, a good clean using a wet cleaner and replacing the inner sleeve is essential before attempting to play your new acquisition for the first time.

your environment and setup, it can be effectively neutralised by the use of an anti-static gun. A manual device like the Milty Zerostat at around £50 or a more sophisticated electronic device like the Orb Sakura DeStat Handheld Static Charge Eliminator for £290 will do an excellent job.

No matter how clean your records are in their sleeves, they will always attract airborne dust when they are out in the open, so they should be given a quick wipe with a suitable anti-static dust remover before dropping the stylus into the groove. Either a felt pad record cleaning



**Milty's anti-static gun is a steal at £50**

**Orb's more sophisticated £290 option**

**Milty's £23 Pro Super Exstatic Carbon Fibre**

**Polyethylene LP sleeves are vital and inexpensive**

brush or a carbon fibre brush is perfect for the job. The Milty Pro Super Exstatic Carbon Fibre, for example, has both and can be purchased for about £23.

## Rack 'em up

Under no circumstances should records be piled up on top of one other. This is one of the primary causes of warping, which manifests itself in a whooshing sound or, in extreme circumstances, makes the stylus leap out of the groove. Always store your records vertically, side by side and not too tightly packed.

Keeping the temperature relatively stable is probably one of the more important considerations, rather than the actual temperature. Rapid temperature excursions can cause warping due to the change that this causes throughout the vinyl. Having said that, a normal room temperature of 18–21°C is considered to be ideal. Records that are in long-term storage should also be stored vertically and at a stable temperature of around 7–10°C.

Humidity is not really a major concern for vinyl, although the cardboard album sleeves are more likely to be adversely affected by a damp atmosphere. Very damp conditions will also encourage mould growth, which is not good news. Try and aim for a relative humidity of a nominal 45-50 percent.

## Accident repair

That tell-tale, repetitive click when you play a record tells you that a scratch has appeared. Of course, that

time when you accidentally knocked your tonearm and sent the stylus skating across the record had nothing to do with it! Scratches can also occur when dirt finds its way into the inner sleeve, hence the recommendation to replace them in the case of second-hand records.

## There's no substitute for a wet clean using a proprietary record cleaning fluid

Obviously, drink spills like tea, coffee and juice can be cleaned off using one of the cleaning machines previously mentioned. Oils should be wiped away and the record then cleaned with a lint-free cloth soaked in a mixture of isopropyl alcohol and distilled water. Finally clean the record using a good wet cleaner. However, should you be unlucky enough to spill a solvent on the record – which dissolves the playing surface – there is little to be done to rescue the situation.



**Orb's Vinyl LP Record Flattener is ideal for warped vinyl**

## 7IN SINGLES

Many collectable recordings from the fifties and sixties are likely to be in the form of 7in singles recorded at 45rpm. These records may have their own issues, such as a worn centre hole from regular playing on autochangers, or having the large 1.5in diameter centre hole that was required if the record was to be played in a juke box. Most of these singles have a removable centre section that can be popped out to convert the record for juke box use. If the small centre hole is worn, the best solution is to pop out the centre section and either use a 45rpm adapter when playing the record, or better still fit a 45rpm spindle adapter in each record, which will ensure it is perfectly aligned without having to bother with a turntable adapter.

Singles were usually sold with a flimsy paper sleeve and this will be a problem for those special 45s in your collection. As there is no cardboard cover, an outer plastic sheath should be used to contain both the record and the collectable paper sleeve. As with LPs, a new 7in polyethylene sleeve should be used to protect the record inside from getting dirt on it.



A warped record does pose a problem. The DIY approach is a bit risky to say the least. If you want to give it a try, clamp the record between two pieces of glass and place in a warm oven heated to 80–90°C for about 2 minutes. After this time, remove the assembly and allow it to cool down at room temperature with a few books placed on the top piece of glass. Repeat the procedure if the LP is not flattened satisfactorily – a gradual approach is preferable to trying to do it in one go as this is less likely to damage the playing surface. A safer solution is to use a proprietary record flattener, such as the Orb Vinyl LP Record Flattener as this carefully controls the heating zones and the warming and cooling cycles. However, such a clever machine has a high price tag of around £1,080.

With a little care and common sense, your records should last you a lifetime – and beyond. Undoubtedly, cleanliness is a key factor for perfect reproduction and following the simple steps outlined here will enable you to get the best from what many people will argue is still the highest quality music format ●

**NEXT MONTH: Staying on the subject of records, check out our unmissable first part to the history of recorded music!**

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**WIN:**

# Chord Company cable loom

Three cable looms to be won – give your hi-fi system the upgrade it deserves

**W**ires are wires and they all sound the same, don't they? This outdated thinking might have held some sway 10 or 15 years ago, but nowadays it's widely agreed that investing a fortune on your hi-fi setup and not bothering to give the cables that partner it the same careful consideration is pretty daft. It's like treating yourself to a shiny new Ferrari and then sticking the wheels from a shopping trolley onto it.

Thankfully, The Chord Company is here to help out. Assembled and tested by hand in its facility in the heart of Wiltshire, The Chord Company has been leading the way with its cables for over 25 years and is widely recognised as a leader and innovator in its field. And now you can benefit from its expertise as we've got a very special prize to breath new life into three very lucky winners' hi-fi setup.

The chosen ones can expect to receive a Cadenza interconnect worth £250, a C-power mains lead worth £50 and a pair of Odyssey speaker cables (you can specify the perfect length up to 5m per side) worth up to £330. That's a £630 total prize value of matching cables to upgrade any system.

The Chord Company describe the Cadenza as: "the perfect cable with which to revitalise an older system, or an ideal partner for the latest generation of technologically advanced USB-equipped CD players and DACs" and it's easy to see why. It perfectly highlights just how much influence the choice of RCA plugs can have on the quality of sound and its new silver-plated Chord VEE 3 RCA connectors bring a new level of refinement and coherence to music.

The perfect upgrade for any component with an IEC input socket, the 1.5m C-power shielded power lead follows the same design

principles as every other Chord Company cable, meaning attention has been paid to shielding, conductors and termination. It's ideal for giving all the IEC-enabled components in your system the best mains quality for the best possible sound.

Last, but by no means least comes the Odyssey speaker cable, which The Chord Company describes as being: "the most popular and the most compatible speaker cable we produce, Odyssey lives happily in budget, mid and reference systems alike". The conductors are heavier than most and are made up of 19 strands of silver-plated oxygen-free copper surrounded by PTFE insulation. It's these that give everything (voices, drums, guitars and acoustic instruments) in the musical performance a weight and rightness. But don't take our word for it, enter the competition and you might be able to find out for yourself.



Three chances to win a cable loom worth £630 to upgrade your hi-fi system



**TO BE IN WITH A CHANCE OF WINNING, ANSWER THIS SIMPLE QUESTION:**  
 How many strands of OFC copper make up the Odyssey cable?  
 A) 25  
 B) 3  
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# Hi-Fi Choice Reader Classified

Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice* Reader Classified, a free private ads service for buying and selling second-hand hi-fi components.

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**TELLURIUM Q** Black cable loom. 1m RCA interconnect, 2x 3.5m speaker cables and jumper links. Approx 3 months old with original packaging. £550: **07933109234 or email: adamlee.ah47@gmail.com**

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**LINN** Sondek LP12. Mounted in a heavy mahogany plinth with oak cone feet and new lid. SME series IIIs pick-up and non-resonant platter mat. Serviced and set up by retired mechanical engineer as a labour of love. £750: **01277 219639 (Brentwood, Essex).**

serial no: 017871. Good condition from new. Nice open sound. Can demo. Collection only £100: **01285 860967 (South Gloucestershire).**

**BEOLAB** 9 loudspeakers in blue. 700W per speaker plus cable if required. Pick up and demo. £3,000: **01923 829354 or email: michaelhardy10@btinternet.com (Middlesex).**

**CASTLE** Howard S2 speakers. Yew cabinets. Lovely sound. £550 ono: **07976031413 (Hampshire).**

**YAMAHA** B2 & C2 Pre & Power amplifier (160W p/c) £100 ono, buyer to collect due to weight: **07768 273 946 (Kendal, Cumbria).**

**CHORD** Signature Digital Tuned ARAY 1m long digital interconnect, not fully burnt in yet. Lovely cable and excellent reviews, but no longer required. £245 (£410 new): **01202 515474 or email johnlangley17@talktalk.net (Bournemouth, Dorset).**

**ARCAM** A18 integrated amplifier, boxed and remote control for £300, plus Monitor Audio Bronze BX2 speakers in natural oak £125 – both in excellent condition – collection only: **07793 725356 or email: ieanisaac@hotmail.com (Kent).**

**EPOS** M12.2 speakers plus Epos dedicated stands, can demo. Buyer to collect. £150 ono: **01352 753069 or email**

**jillmuller@hotmail.co.uk (Flintshire).**

**MICHELL** Tecnoarm A-11. Black, brand new, unused £420. Supplied with Michell Orbe. I use SME series IV-D tonearm: **01505 346791 (Renfrewshire).**

**RODGERS** Cadet 3 stereo integrated valve amplifier. Working order, offers. *Hi-Fi News* magazine first four and a half years June 1956 to January 1961, excellent condition £95: **0114 2378731 (Sheffield).**

**RUSS ANDREWS** ultra purifier block (£740) with additional mains zapperator (£94) plus 8 clarity mains modules (£800) installed internally. Mint condition £900 collected. Pictures upon request: **01902 884694 or email: (jukey39@yahoo.co.uk West Midlands).**

**ROKSAN** Kandy K2 int. amplifier, black, 19 months old, as new and boxed. Balance of five year warranty remaining. Happy to demo or post. £470 excluding postage: **0113 2188797 (Leeds).**

**ACOUSTIC ENERGY** Radiance One speaker, ash, boxed. Cost £599 new. £320 with three year warranty: **01475 529216.**

**NEAT** Momentum 3i speakers in birch finish, superb condition, complete with Neat stands. Buyer collects £949: **07944 594705 (Halifax).**

**YAMAHA** KRX-A2020



**PRO-JECT** RPM 5.1 turntable half hour's use. Ortofon Red cartridge. £200 ono: **07734 505626 (Devon).**

**BUYING TIPS** **BUYING SECOND-HAND** can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY** speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!



**VIENNA ACOUSTICS** Haydn Grand SE speakers. Walnut, as new, few hours use, boxed. £650. Bowers & Wilkins P7 headphones, as new, few months old, unwanted present. £220 boxed: **07843 746026 (Dorset)**.

AV receiver, 9.2 channels, black £400: **01625 433996 (Cheshire)**.

**REGA** RP3 turntable plus RB 303 arm with Elys 2 cartridge £350: **01782 785734 (Staffordshire)**.

**MONITOR AUDIO** Audio Apex speakers. 4x A10 and 1x A40 £1,100. REL B3 subwoofer, black £450. Marantz CD6000KI CD player, black £50, or £1,500 for the lot: **01341 423028 or email: chrisandkev@btinternet.com (Gwynedd)**.

**LEEMA** Antila MRI CD player, superb sound and condition, original packing (£2,500) £750: **07531 835575 (Cirencester)**.

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**KIMBER** 8TC speaker cable, 3.5m, banana terminated, excellent condition £200: **01432 850184 (Hereford)**.

**CLEARER AUDIO** Digital Silverline RCA-RCA 1m @ £75, 3m @ £125, great reviews: **01235 762171 (Oxon)**.

**LINN** Sondek LP12, Origin Live electronics, on base with levelling feet, Rega arm, Origin Live modifications, nearest

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**ARCAM** Solo 5.1 movie AV SACD, Arcam serviced in July, boxed accessories (£2,000 new) £475. Marantz CD 63 player £50. Nakamichi BX2 cassette deck £65: **01708 457 691 (Essex)**.

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**MUSICAL FIDELITY** M1 HPA headphone amplifier mint condition boxed £200. Pro-Ject phono SE MM/MC excellent condition £45. 2x 3m QED Anniversary XT cable terminated QED Airloc plugs unused £35: **01371 850665 or email: garyrobinson20@btinternet.com (Essex)**.

**VPI** Scout2/JPM9 arm/Linn Klyde. £1,400 onno: **0208 4649055 billmilla@virginmedia.com (Bromley)**.

**DYNAUDIO** DM2/7 stand-mount speakers, 12 months old, black ash, boxed as new, £350: **07956 959032 or email: waynebtully@gmail.com (Redhill, Surrey)**.

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Published by MyTimeMedia Ltd  
Enterprise House, Enterprise Way,  
Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF

**Phone:** 0844 4122262  
**From outside the UK:** +44 (0)1689 869840  
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Hi-Fi Choice, ISSN 0955-1115, is published monthly with an additional issue in July by AVTech Media Ltd, a division of MYTIMEMEDIA Ltd, Enterprise House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF, UK. The US annual subscription price is \$50SP (equivalent to approximately £30USD). Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named Air Business Ltd, c/o Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Jamaica NY 11431, US Postmaster: Send address changes to Hi-Fi Choice, Worldnet Shipping Inc., 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Subscription records are maintained at CBS GLOBE Ltd, Tower House, Sovereign Park, Market Harborough, Leicestershire, LE16 9EF. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.



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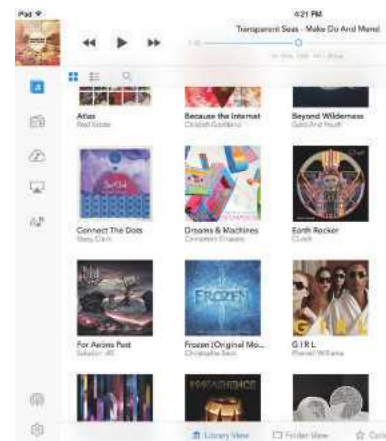
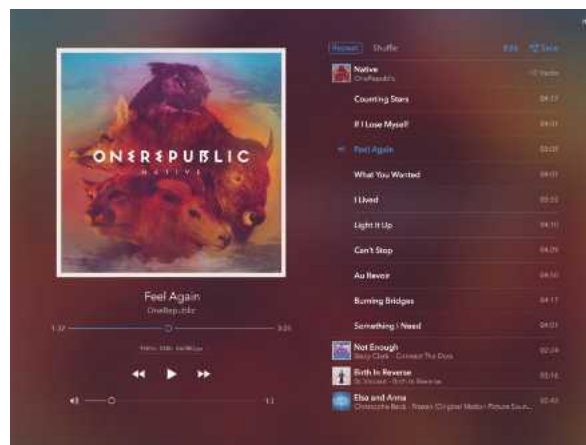
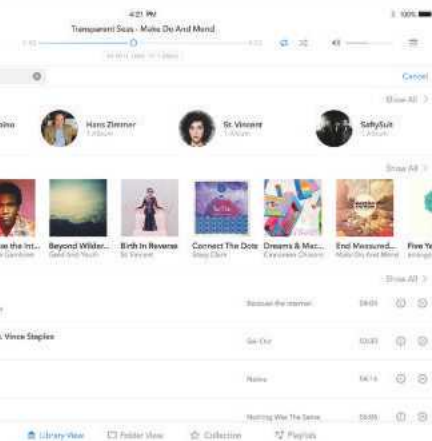
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