



Mini test
Four-way headphone
amp/DAC face off

All rounders
The Elipson Planet speakers
that are out of this world



Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. 387

August 2014

Solid Silver

A HARD DAY'S NIGHT
50th anniversary
soundtrack
tribute

Monitor Audio's S8 speakers
deliver sterling performance



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Eltax, Korg,
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Pocket rocket
Introducing the ultimate
24/192 portable player



GROUP TEST
System upgrade
Six cable looms
get blind tested

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Are you happy with your hi-fi system's sound, or could it sing a little better? If you think that you have the right blend of components but feel it's not quite giving its very best then this month's cable looms *Group Test* is just for you. Let's face it most of us probably have a

mishmash of interconnects from different brands hooking up the ins and outs of our hi-fi components, partnered with a set of speaker cables that more than likely come from another manufacturer altogether. In terms of getting a system to perform at its very best we all seem to understand the importance of synergy between electronic components and loudspeakers, but many of us don't pay nearly as much attention to the cables connecting the components to one another carrying the all important audio signals.

The merits of cables having an influence on the sound of a hi-fi system is a controversial topic, and one that is regularly debated among hi-fi enthusiasts with eager amounts of scepticism and a degree of mistrust regarding the claimed benefits from cable manufacturers. After all it's just a bit of wire, right? Well, after a day spent blind listening to the cable looms in our *Group Test*, I can safely say that the six sets of interconnect and speaker wires carefully chosen to work together have a far bigger influence on the sound of a system than you might imagine. Turn to page 24 to see how they performed.

Lee Dunkley Editor

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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!



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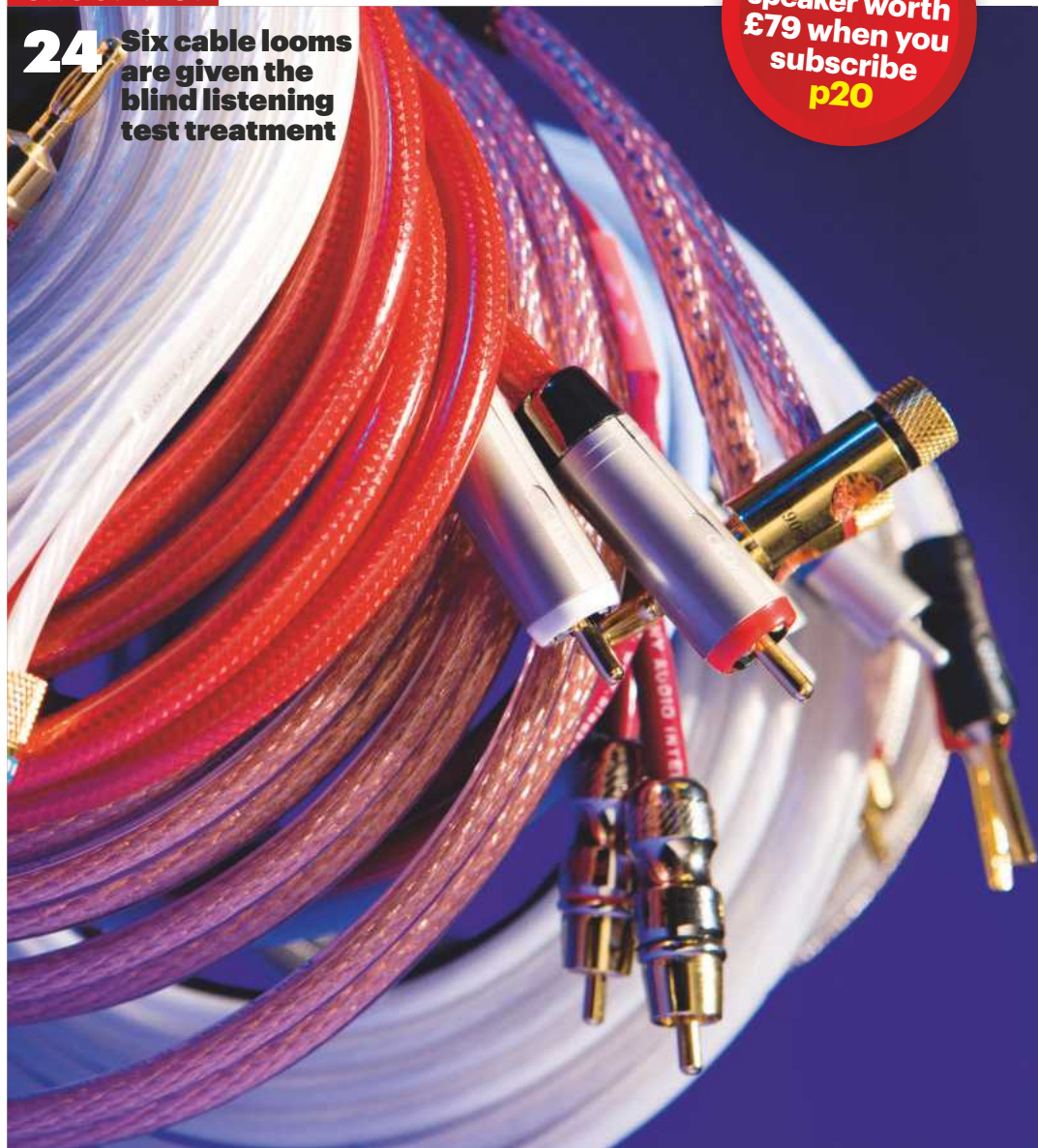
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“The benefits of integrating a subwoofer into your two-channel systems will be truly sublime”

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Never miss an issue – turn to p20 for our latest subs offer

Without wires

Dynaudio introduces two new Xeo tech loudspeakers

PRICE: £1,550-£2,700 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01353 721089 **WEB:** DYNAUDIO.COM



DANISH SPEAKER BRAND

Dynaudio isn't afraid to take its considerable experience to different markets, and has successfully managed to spread itself across domestic, pro and car audio businesses. We first saw Dynaudio's proprietary wireless tech in its Xeo 5 floorstanding models back in *HFC* 376, but a year on and the range has been updated with the two new Xeo models pictured here.

Unveiled at the Munich High End Show in May, the Xeo 4 standmount and Xeo 6 floorstanders are the company's next-generation wireless audio speaker with high-resolution 24-bit/96kHz playback capability. Many of the elements that were successful on the original Xeo models have been carried over to the new models, plus additional refinements to amplification and DSP performance and a new interface control system on top of the cabinets to provide direct control without the need for the remote.

Next-generation wireless speaker with high-resolution playback capability

Styling has also been updated to reflect the company's Excite range of models, with low-profile screws, smooth satin lacquer finishes in both black and white and magnetically attached speaker grilles. The floorstanders come with Dynaudio's trademark plinth and extends the footprint to aid stability.

With the new Xeo Hub (£225), the speaker can accommodate virtually any source component via its optical, coaxial and USB digital inputs – all claiming 24/96 support – as well as one pair of stereo RCAs and a mini-jack for analogue sources. It can transmit the audio signal wirelessly to the Xeo speakers up to a suggested maximum distance of 50m away without using any form of signal compression. An Ethernet connection is included for updates.

Xeo Link (£135) allows for the addition of a subwoofer to the speaker system for example, and Xeo Extender (also priced at £135) increases the wireless transmission range between the Hub and the Xeo loudspeakers. Look out for our exclusive Xeo 6 review next issue.



Dynaudio's plinth extends its footprint for stability and uses four circular feet in place of carpet spikes



COMMENT

APPLE BUYS BEATS

Ever since the day when Steve Jobs shifted off this mortal coil, it's been suggested that Apple has lost some of its magic. Though the US company may not have a charismatic figure at the helm like Jobs any more it's still the same bunch of boffins coming up with the goods behind the scenes, isn't it? Whatever your opinion of what lies ahead for Apple, it's difficult not to find the decision to splash out the not insignificant sum of \$3 billion for hip hop mogul Dr Dre's Beats Music and Beats Electronics companies strange. While the headphones that seem to adorn everyone from teenagers waiting for the bus to celebrity sportsmen, musicians and the achingly hip are undoubtedly popular, are they really worth such a terrifyingly large sum of cash?

While Dr Dre can't quite believe his luck, the rest of the world are left wondering what the Cupertino company's plan is. Commentators have suggested that the headphones are not what interest Apple, that it's the music streaming service Beats Music. As ceo Tim Cook puts it: "Music is such an important part of all of our lives and holds a special place within our hearts at Apple. That's why we have kept investing in music and are bringing together these extraordinary teams so we can continue to create the most innovative music products and services in the world."

Interestingly, Jobs was always against music streaming services, believing that people would always want to own music for themselves - something that many *HFC* readers would agree with - so what's the big idea?

Is it really likely that Apple will start giving music away with its phones, will it loosen rights making it easier for friends to share their music with one another, will it use Beats Music's brains trust to come up with the next big streaming service or will it reveal a way of sharing music that up until now hasn't even been imagined?

Much as we'd like to, we don't have the answers, but considering that Apple could have given away full Spotify subscriptions to a whopping 27 million customers for just short of a year for the same amount of money, you have to hope there is something exciting in the pipeline... ▶

Pioneer's FreeMe speaker

Portable Bluetooth speaker promises to bring style and substance to music everywhere

PRICE: £130-£170 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 0330 1231240 **WEB:** PIONEER.CO.UK

TWO NEW SPEAKERS called FreeMe have been unveiled by Pioneer aimed at music fans looking for a neat wireless portable speaker solution to unleash their tunes from a smartphone or tablet device. The XW-LF3 has a classy, genuine leather finish, and the XW-LF1 is encased in a natural rubber material. Not much bigger than a wallet and easily transportable, the Wide Circle Sound 360° design allows audio to radiate from all sides of the unit, while two 40mm full-range drivers with neodymium magnets aided by a passive radiator make sure the sound quality is up to Pioneer standards, it says. NFC (Near Field Communication) allows compatible devices to be recognised instantly with a simple touch and remember a device for future instant playback, and the built-in, rechargeable lithium-ion battery claims to give approximately seven hours of use. The XW-LF3 is available in black or brown leather, and the XW-LF1 has a choice of black, white or aqua blue rubber-coating finishes.



IN BRIEF

ATLAS CABLES EXTENDS HYPER



● Building on the success of its Element and Equator ranges, Scottish-based Atlas Cables has added a new mid-priced analogue interconnect to its Hyper range. Hand made at the factory in Scotland, the new Hyper Integra cable introduces Atlas' inhouse Integra RCA plugs to the Hyper range for the first time. Available in 0.5m to 3m lengths and priced from £105 to £205, the maker says it consists of a central conductor of 90 individual strands of OCC (Ohno Continuous Casting) copper wire with 99.9997% purity. It's insulated by a low-loss foamed polyethylene dielectric, and the return conductor is a two-layer braid made from a total of 252 strands of Ultra-Pure OFC (Oxygen Free Copper) wrapped over a PVC foil to provide 100 percent RFI rejection. **ATLASCABLES.COM**

KEF's new Reference Series

PRICE: £4,000-£10,500 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
CONTACT: 01622 672261 **WEB:** KEF.COM

Naming a speaker range Reference would suggest that it offers the highest quality engineering, design and performance, and so it proves with KEF's speaker range. The Reference series has been part of the KEF lineup for some 40 years, and has recently been given an overhaul to bring it bang up to date for 2014 with the introduction of five new models to cater for hi-fi and home cinema enthusiasts alike.

First up are the two imposing three-way Reference 3 and 5 floorstanders, followed by the three-way Reference 1 standmount, plus a three-way centre channel speaker and subwoofer. At the heart of each new Reference speaker is the latest iteration of KEF's Uni-Q 'point source' driver array featuring a state-of-the-art 25mm vented aluminium dome tweeter placed at the exact acoustic centre of a highly sophisticated 125mm midrange driver. Both act as a single source to flood the listening space evenly with a natural soundfield, no matter where you sit, KEF says. The new 165mm bass driver is designed to

perfectly compliment Uni-Q array and the cabinets incorporate flexible port tuning technology.

All models come in either Piano Black, Luxury Gloss Rosewood and

Satin American Walnut finishes. Plus there are two bespoke editions of the 3 and 5 Reference models available in Blue Ice White and Copper Black Aluminium. ▶



“The Truth, nothing more, nothing less...”



“This level of performance,
convenience and style makes for
an award winning product.”

Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio Magazine, January 2013



“Oozes quality in both
construction and sound”

Paul Rigby, Hi Fi World, March 2013



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London Tel: 020 8946 1528

The Audioworks, 14 Stockport Road, Cheadle,
Cheshire, SK8 2AA Tel: 0161 428 7887

www.avidhifi.co.uk

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Yamaha's new soundbar

25 years of soundbar experience in the making

PRICE: £800 **AVAILABLE:** LATE SUMMER
WEB: UK.YAMAHA.COM

AS THE PIONEER of the soundbar concept, Yamaha should know a thing or two about producing speakers to sit under your television, and the latest builds on the success of Yammy's YSP-2200. The YSP-2500 features Yamaha's 'Intellibeam' technology to bounce beams off of your walls to measure your room and configure the soundbar appropriately. It boasts 10 DSP (digital signal processing) modes, which according to Yamaha are based on "real places and real sound fields" and there are RCA line inputs alongside an optical and HDMI inputs, and three HDMI outputs. A subwoofer output is included for extra low-end grunt and Bluetooth connectivity means that you can stream music to the soundbar. Yamaha has also produced a free HT Controller app enabling Android and Apple devices to operate as a remote control.



IN BRIEF

TIVOLI AUDIO MODEL THREE BT



● With its unapologetically retro design, Tivoli Audio's Model Three BT is anything but a relic from the past. As the name suggests, it's equipped with Bluetooth connectivity so that you can stream music wirelessly using a smartphone, MP3 player or PC. There's a 3.5mm input located around the back, enabling you to plug in any audio device that doesn't have Bluetooth, plus an AM/FM tuner.

Tivoli claims to have eschewed a DAB tuner in an effort to keep the price down and instead suggests that users utilise apps (such as its own Radio App) on a smart device instead. Sound is delivered from the top-located, full-range 8cm speaker and a bass port. The clock radio is available to buy now for £249.

TIVOLIAUDIO.CO.UK

Teac's headphone amp

PRICE: £299 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **CONTACT:** 08142 4208141 **WEB:** TEAC-AUDIO.EU/EN

For those occasions when you are away from your home hi-fi setup and still want to listen to music, Teac has unveiled its first ever portable headphone amplifier with built-in USB DAC. The HA-P50 accepts a digital input via USB from both Apple and Android devices, while optical digital/analogue inputs and an optical digital output enable direct connection to other audio components.

It's equipped with a Burr-Brown PCM5102 digital-to-analogue converter capable of processing digital audio signals up to a maximum 24-bit/96kHz resolution. A high/low gain selector enables the output gain to be precisely matched to the impedance of the headphone being used, and Teac claims that the high-output 2x160mW power amplifier successfully drives 600ohm

headphones at full power. The HA-P50 boasts a stylish, yet sturdy aluminium body with a 21.7mm-thick flat-profile design and comes equipped with a lithium-ion battery that's claimed to provide up to eight hours of uninterrupted listening, while an auto power save function makes the most of any remaining power when you're not using the amplifier and it's in standby mode. ▶



oppo

PM-1

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Magnetic Technology

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Quality



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Selvedge denim carry
case



High Sensitivity &
Scalability

Plush Padding &
Reduced Weight for
Exceptional Comfort



oppo-bluray.co.uk

“I’ve got a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore...”

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Having mastered electrostatic technology with the CLS, a skill now embodied in the hybrid Summit X and the full-range CLX Art, MartinLogan has re-imagined speaker technology. MartinLogan speakers address systems from purist two-channel to multi-channel home theatre, with a range including BalancedForce™ Dynamo™ subwoofers, surround-sound and centre channel speakers,

It is no exaggeration to say that MartinLogan speakers are as beautiful as speakers can be and bear aesthetics worthy of the sound they reproduce. They enhance your musical pleasure and your living space.

Because, as Dorothy learned, there’s no place like home.



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MARTIN LOGAN



AKG Y Series

New range of lifestyle headphones unveiled

PRICE: £80-£110 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** EU.AKG.COM/

AKG HAS RELEASED a series of new headphones aimed at a younger, hipper audience that combine the company's audio knowhow with a focus on design and styling.

The Y50 is the flagship model in the Y Series, with an on-ear, closed-cup design to reduce ambient noise for the listener, while ensuring that those around you are not disturbed by your music. A pair of 40mm drivers are claimed to deliver an enhanced, punched up bass response with a frequency range of 16Hz to 24kHz and sensitivity of 115dB. There's a 1.2m detachable cable with inline remote/mic and 3.5mm hard gold-plated jack, while a 6.3mm adaptor is provided. Thanks to AKG's '3D axis folding mechanism', the headphones can be folded up for portability and a pouch is provided for

storage when not in use. They're available in a choice of red, teal, yellow or black finishes.

The Y40 range are on-ear models with 40mm drivers and a claimed frequency range of 16Hz to 22kHz and 120dB sensitivity. They also have a detachable cable with a three-button remote and the same folding mechanism and pouch for storage when not in use. They come in a choice of teal, yellow or black finishes.

The Y45BT series offers Bluetooth and NFC connectivity and claim 8 hours of wire-free listening with a frequency range of 17Hz to 20kHz and 120dB sensitivity. Charging comes via a USB cable and they boast a white and beige or black and grey finish. Prices are expected to be £80 for the Y50, £70 for the Y40 and £110 for the Bluetooth Y45BT.

Electrocompaniet ECG-1

PRICE: £2,890 **AVAILABLE:** SEPTEMBER **WEB:** ELECTROCOMPANIET.COM

Norwegian high-end audio specialist Electrocompaniet has unveiled details of its first ever turntable, the ECG-1. Boasting a sandwich construction consisting of three layers of acrylic and aluminium, the ECG-1 claims to have no resonance problems, due to the vibration dampening characteristics of these materials. The platter is constructed from a form of acrylic that's said to be similar to that used for producing records to ensure a 'strong' coupling between it and whatever LP is placed upon it, removing the need for a record mat and - claims Electrocompaniet - providing additional dampening so it won't 'ring' like a metal platter will.

There's a Jelco SA-750EB tone arm, designed to handle phono cartridges weighing between

4g and 12g and the moving micro cross (MMC) type cartridge bundled has been produced by US specialist SoundSmith. Under the hood, the ECG-1 is fitted with a 24V AC asynchronous motor, which the manufacturer claims is perfectly controlled by a two-phase low

harmonic sine wave controller. The ECP 2 phono stage has also been released to partner the turntable and is claimed to offer the highest quality discrete components throughout the entire signal path. It will cost £1,490 and is also available to buy from September.



IN BRIEF



PURE EVOKE D2

● Pure Audio has teamed up with internationally renowned artist Rob Ryan to create this distinctive digital and FM portable radio. The Evoke D2 boasts Class D amplification, Bluetooth connectivity for wireless streaming and an input for iPods or MP3 players. It features 10 digital and 10 FM presets and an alarm with snooze function. It's exclusively available from John Lewis and the artist's Ryantown store for around £120 and a rechargeable battery pack claiming around 30 hours playback time can be added as an optional extra for £28.

PURE.COM



DENON ENVAYA

● Denon has become the latest manufacturer to jump onto the wireless speaker bandwagon. Billed as being "as easy to carry as a wallet", the Envaya Bluetooth speaker incorporates two proprietary 57mm full-range drivers combined with a 100mm passive radiator for a deep bass response. Connectivity comes in the shape of aptX Bluetooth, NFC and analogue audio inputs and Denon claims up to 10 hours of playback from the batteries. Available in black or white with a choice of interchangeable grille clothes, it's expected to cost £169.

DENON.CO.UK

Webwatch

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



Vote for SAM

Following last month's *HFC* exclusive review, Devialet's vote for SAM site lets you choose the speakers it will develop its SAM tech for. The list of nominations is huge and every model that gets 100 votes gets the SAM treatment. voteforsam.devialet.com



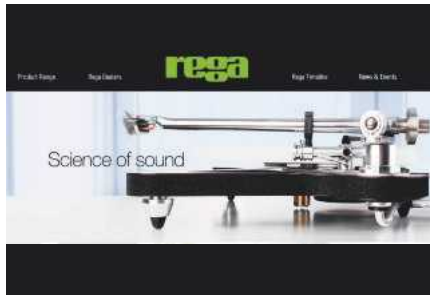
VPI website

US turntable specialist VPI has also revamped its website recently, which is packed full of product reviews, video links, awards and company history. You can also connect to VPI's social media channels or use the live chat feature, which will be opened out soon. vpiindustries.com



Damson Headbones

As revolutionary as the iPod or sliced bread according to its video, Headbones differ from standard cans by using the wearer's temporal bone to amplify audio to the inner ear. And with over half of the £50k Kickstarter target pledged, word is spreading fast [#HearEverything](http://bit.ly/headbones)



Rega refreshed

Rega's new website is dripping with stunning images and details of its latest kit. Particularly impressive is the Rega timeline that charts every milestone in the company's product line since 1973, illustrating why Rega remains a jewel in British hi-fi's crown. rega.co.uk



Classical underdogs

Last month Linn launched a series of video blogs led by Linn Records pianist, Alisdair Hogarth, looking at classical underdogs – lesser known piano pieces by famous composers. In this first post Al explores Mozart's *Piano Sonata in A Minor*. Highly recommended. bit.ly/SA2vJi



Arguing for iTunes

Simple Audio Director Martin Dagleish recently took to Twitter and the company blog for some iTunes mythbusting. With 17 reasons why iTunes makes a good audio engine, it's worth a read if you've yet to realise its audiophile capabilities. See the light at bitly.com/1mqfZk8

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Buy 2 pieces from the award winning Roksan K2 range with up to £500 off with Roksans new Package Deals!... <http://fb.me/3hMo8TmJ8>

THE VINYL FACTORY (@THEVINYLFACTORY)
The 10 best vinyl releases this week ft. @royalblooduk @Soundway @WOLFMusic @KeepersFinders: <http://t.co/HTF5PEJHAU>

STONEAUDIO.CO.UK (@STONEAUDIO)
Unboxing ELAC's BS 403 stand mounters, in this rather beautiful gloss walnut finish... <http://t.co/6tIVDdXfMg> #ELAC

GLASTONBURY FESTIVAL (@GLASTOFEST)
We're very pleased to reveal our full 2014 line-up poster... pic.twitter.com/Gc0Qph1677

CYPHER LABS LLC (@CYPHERLABS)
Submit your #video review and you could be featured on our #blog and #SocialMedia. <http://on.fb.me/1IYSO2t>

MOORGATE ACOUSTICS (@KIPPER248)
This week we had a listen to the new Xeo 4 compact speakers from Dynaudio. <http://t.co/WFk1Wj51hq>

O2 ACADEMY BRITXON (@O2ACADEMYBRIX)
Tix for @Johnny_Marr aka "Guitar Legend" or "Guitar God" (we could go on...) On sale NOW here: <http://bit.ly/JMbrix>

LARRY OGDEN (@THEAUDIOWORKS)
There we go, lovely Rega half width kit suspended in thin air by a 4 tier ReVo mini by MusicWorks <http://bit.ly/1lo8mN2>

CLASSICALBUMSUNDAYS (@CLASSICALBUMSUN)
AIR to release ambient and experimental soundscapes on #vinyl-only limited edition <http://t.co/wK0l1CnaJY>

GLOSSOP RECORD CLUB (@GLOSSOPRECORD)
Just a few days left to vote in THE SOUNDS OF '66 polls. There are two polls - UK and USA - and you can vote for two albums in each poll...

PONOMUSIC (@PONO)
We wanted to thank all of our Kickstarter backers. Without you Pono Music would not be possible.

VDC TRADING (@VDCTRADING)
We are here @RoyalAlbertHall and @jeffbeckmusic sounds amazing with Van Damme Silver Series pic.twitter.com/3fhp56HlpN

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ROKSAN

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* On compliant devices.



▶ **DETAILS**

PRODUCT
Primare NP30

ORIGIN
Sweden

TYPE
Streamer/DAC

WEIGHT
8.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 95 x 370mm

FEATURES

- Burr-Brown 24-bit/192kHz upsampling DAC
- Wi-fi and Ethernet streaming
- USB and S/PDIF inputs
- XLR, RCA and S/PDIF outputs
- WAV/AIFF/FLAC/ALAC/MP3/AAC/WMA/OGG file support

DISTRIBUTOR
Karma-AV

TELEPHONE
01423 358846

WEBSITE
primare.net



Primal stream

Music streaming Swedish style, **Andrew Simpson** hits the download button on Primare's premier league network player

With a reputation for elegant Scandinavian design, Primare's products are instantly recognisable for their minimalist approach to high-end separates. At £6,500 each, the recently launched flagship 60 pre/power amps ooze class from their two-tone titanium and black cases housing the company's latest UFPD (Ultra Fast Power Device) Class D technology. Below these amps sits a selection of more modestly priced amps, CD players, a DAC and a MM/MC phono stage.

The NP30 is based on the MM30 'media board', a £1,300 add on that slots into dedicated ports in Primare's

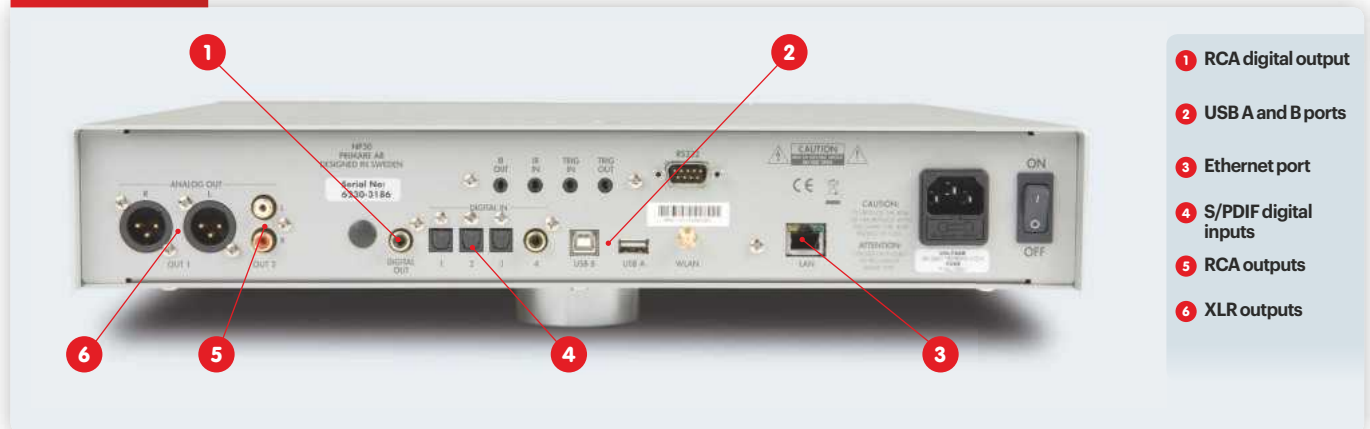
I32 integrated and PRE32 preamp, turning them into fully fledged network players. As well as placing this module into its own isolated case, what the extra cash buys you in the standalone NP30 streamer is a dedicated power supply and output stage with an extra buffer, alongside a wealth of connectivity. Digital inputs include USB type A and B (asynchronous) for hardwiring laptops or iPods directly, alongside S/PDIF inputs shared over three optical (Toslink) and only one coaxial (RCA) socket. Because the latter will accept up to 192kHz compared with the optical sockets' 96kHz limit, I'd happily trade a couple of optical

sockets for another coaxial or USB, but you still have plenty to choose from. Wi-fi is also catered for via a rear-panel stubby antennae, but as this is limited to 16-bit/48kHz, the Ethernet port is my preferred solution to get the best of the NP30. Output-wise alongside a pair of line-level RCAs and an S/PDIF (RCA), you're offered a pair of XLRs, which are fully balanced right from the DAC.

Like its £2,000 standalone DAC30 cousin, the NP30 uses a Burr-Brown SRC4392 24-bit/192kHz upsampling converter, but instead of the DAC30's Crystal CS4398 Delta-Sigma DAC, the NP30 employs a Burr-Brown PCM1792 chip. Inside the NP30's



CONNECTIONS



- 1 RCA digital output
- 2 USB A and B ports
- 3 Ethernet port
- 4 S/PDIF digital inputs
- 5 RCA outputs
- 6 XLR outputs

chunky case the high-spec continues, with six analogue and three digital power supplies, a four-layer PCB and discrete FET output amps.

At a glance you're hard pressed to tell this streamer apart from its DAC sibling, because unlike your average streamer, the NP30 intentionally eschews a front panel screen in favour of a row of LEDs denoting power, chosen source and signal lock (these lights can also be switched off using the supplied remote). What's more, there's no dedicated desktop software for Windows or Apple computers. Instead, the NP30's internal Audivo SeDMP3 'EMAS' (Embedded Module for Audio Streaming) is either controlled via Primare's latest C24 remote or the excellent Primare App (for Android and iOS devices). In practice the app is all you need, not because the remote control is in anyway poor, but because the app is so slick and intuitive to use. By deliberately engineering the NP30 in this way, Primare has played a clever hand, as an app is far easier to refresh than a product's digital hardware, and the NP30 won't aesthetically date as quickly as many streamers released in the last half-decade.

Appy and you know it

Once downloaded, the app automatically finds and connects to Primare devices on your home network. You can then choose your playback source, ranging from the NP30's digital inputs and music stored on your network, which the Primare identifies as 'Audio Server', correlating to its front panel 'Media' input.

Viewing the app via my iPhone 4s and iPad 2 neatly displays album artwork thumbnails, and once an album or track is selected for playback, a quick tap on the info icon reveals the music's format, bitrate and sample rate. There's also a random feature, repeat settings and most importantly, a volume slider to control the Primare's output

(in the digital domain) allowing it to act as a preamp, feeding a power amplifier directly or a pair of active speakers.

Primare has also thoughtfully included the vTuner internet radio platform within its app and Spotify users additionally can stream directly from their PC/Mac or an iOS smartphone via the MusicFlow and Remoteless apps.

Sound quality

From the opening bars of Devon Sproule's *Don't Hurry For Heaven* album streamed via a 16-bit/44kHz FLAC rip over Ethernet and with the NP30 driving my preamp from its balanced outputs, I know I'm in the company of an experienced beast. The Primare isn't like many a streamer or digital front end, which all too often sonically leap straight out of the speakers like an eager puppy, with dazzling zing that may be initially impressive, but quickly becomes tiresome. Instead it is quite the opposite, being more relaxed in character with a refined tone that's a joy to listen to for hours on end. In this respect it reminds me of a top-flight vinyl rig when a given arm, cartridge and turntable are working in perfect harmony to give a sound that's effortlessly balanced.

This sonic trait seems to particularly stem from the NP30's midrange, which remains smooth and lucid without being in any way forward or overly attention grabbing, helping to bring out the best in Sproule's unforced singing. The way the Primare stays true to Devon's relaxed vocal style tells me that it's quite happy to sit back and let the music flow with natural rhythm and pace. With the slow-rolling melody of Sproule's *The Easier Way* track, the streamer gives the melody just the right amount of bluesy ambience, presented in a convincingly proportioned soundstage so that



Two contenders come from Linn's streaming stable via the £1,750 Sneaky DSM (HFC 375) and £1,880 Majik DS. The Sneaky uses a Wolfson DAC for synchronous upsampling to 176 or 192kHz and includes a 33W Class D amp to drive a pair of speakers. You also get Ethernet and HDMI, but no wi-fi. The Majik adds a front panel screen, but doesn't offer S/PDIF inputs or speaker outputs, but it can be used as a preamp. Neither offer USB or balanced outputs, but Linn's Kinsky app is first rate. Both products are blessed with a highly engaging sonic flavour, that's full of emotion. Naim's £2,060 ND5 XS (HFC 352) packs a screen, wi-fi streaming and USB port, but no XLR outs. Expect it to be equally rhythmical with plenty of midrange presence.

No screen, but the 7mm alloy front panel and solid chunky feet make this one cool contender

the percussion and slide guitar have plenty of space to express themselves.

Moving on to more zesty musical matter via a 16/44 ALAC rip of Dennis Wilson's *Pacific Ocean Blue* highlights the NP30's ability to stay on its toes, anticipating grand dynamic swings, which it delivers with ease while ensuring the music maintains consistent levels of energy and momentum without any overhang. The funky and more complex grooves of this track really lets the Primare show just how effortlessly natural sounding it is. The soundstage is again notably expansive and accessible and as you'd expect of a streamer in this

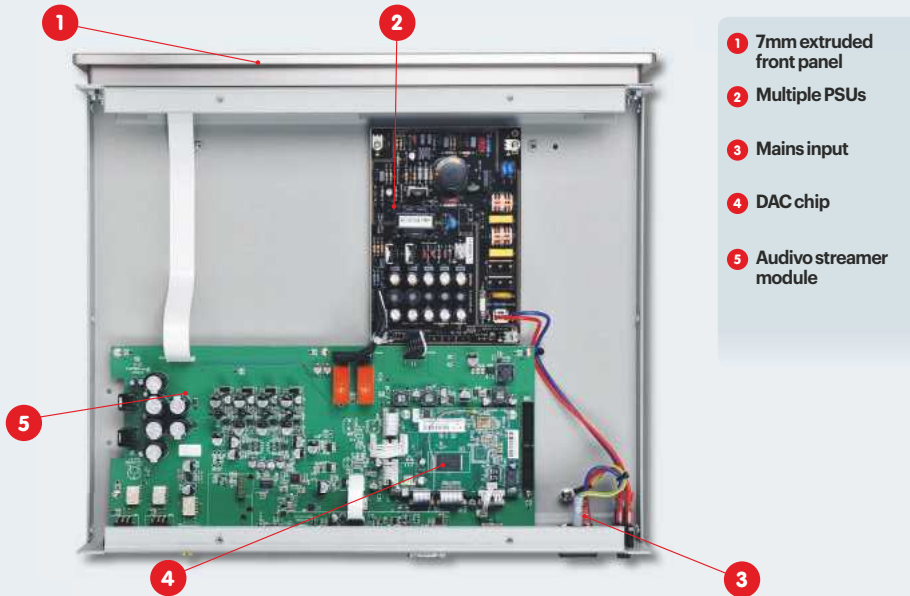
It's happy to sit back and let the music flow with natural rhythm and pace

price bracket, instruments are well separated with each one sounding convincingly three-dimensional. But what's more telling of the Primare's quality is how I can hear each instrument's unique characteristics when pinpointing them within the soundstage. The track's bass guitar sounds tight with slightly rolled-off EQ, while the rhythm guitar rings with more echo and the cymbals sound crisply defined, which when all combined has me reaching for the app's repeat icon so I can continue to explore all the sonic detail that lies just under the song's surface.

As with the Sproule album, the Dennis Wilson material again highlights that the Primare is blessed with an analogue richness that's as reminiscent of a top-notch phono stage as it is a DAC. Wilson's gravelly vocals flow with a languid ease that 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. The music is full of atmosphere that seems to bring to



INSIGHT



- 1 7mm extruded front panel
- 2 Multiple PSUs
- 3 Mains input
- 4 DAC chip
- 5 Audio streamer module

ON TEST

Unrelated to Primare's DAC30 outboard converter, the NP30 uses a Burr-Brown PCM1792 DAC to feed a phase-positive balanced output of just 2.07V (the DAC30 offers 4.3V). The NP30's 137ohm output impedance and 108dB A-wtd S/N are perfectly acceptable although distortion climbs over the top 30dB of

its dynamic range from 0.0005% to 0.005% at 1kHz and 0.0008% to 0.0028% at 20kHz.

Because this is determined by the DAC/analogue stage, there is precious little difference in THD between any of the S/PDIF, USB or network audio inputs. The same is true of digital jitter, even via the wired Ethernet

connection, thanks to the proven performance of the Audio SeDMP3 embedded network solution (<20psec at all sample rates). The frequency responses are more obviously tailored by sample rate than through the DAC30, reaching -0.39dB/20kHz (44.1/48kHz), -2.7dB/45kHz (96kHz) and -13.7dB/90kHz (192kHz). **PM**

life the energy of the recording, which really gets my pulse racing.

Piping internet radio via a Radio 3 live performance of Christian Blackshaw playing Schubert's *Sonata in C Minor* at the 2014 Aldeburgh Festival, I'm immediately transported into the audience, a stone's throw from the stage. The elegant piano work is edge of the seat stuff as the Primare lets the notes climb and fall with deliberate softness or palpable punch as Blackshaw dictates. The piano keys ring with convincing realism, while its bass notes carry impressive weight that's of a quality well beyond your average internet radio experience.

Equally impressive is how the NP30 gives little if anything away when streaming via Ethernet, compared to feeding it directly from my laptop via USB cable. Back to back comparisons using a 24/192 FLAC of Claire Martin and John Martyn's *Man In The Station* reveals that both inputs sound exceptionally smooth and layered with detail. Bass is well rounded with plenty of texture across both inputs, and enough power to give my Dynaudio floorstanders' bass drivers a thorough workout. The guitar work is blessed with exceptional delicacy, illustrating how the Primare fully

appreciates and understands how to present such a quality recording to do it justice.

Conclusion

With its top-quality minimalist aesthetic, the NP30 exudes class without visually showing off. But behind its understated casework lies a deceptively smart product. Its dedicated app is one of easiest and most intuitive, making the Primare a breeze to get to grips with. Its internal DAC is also seriously good, giving the music a sophisticated mellow tone that both digital and analogue fans will enjoy in equal measure ●

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Articulate and effortlessly musical; Great app; XLR outputs

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Just one coaxial S/PDIF input (but three optical)

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Combines a well executed streamer with a superb sounding DAC and with preamp functionality to boot

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL
★★★★★

Q&A

Lars Pedersen
Primare MD



AS: Why haven't you fitted a screen or included desktop software?

LP: We feel that neither is necessary as the NP30 is carefully designed for the way music lovers use and interact with online and stored media today. The Primare App is far superior in functionality than anything a traditional integrated screen can provide. To meet consumer expectations, we've developed our app as a portable hi-res interface that works with widely used software like JRiver, Asset and Twonky and looks just as good on iPads as it does on smartphones.

Why have you used an Audio EMAS streaming module?

We have a long working relationship with Audio and greatly admire its streaming solutions. This arrangement has allowed us to collaborate on the NP30 project to fine-tune the technology specifically to meet our own requirements and expectations for a Primare 30 series product.

How does the NP30 improve on the MM30 media board?

While the MM30 is a great streaming upgrade option for I32 and PRE32 owners, the NP30 is a more capable audio solution because it has a dedicated bespoke output stage with its own power supply. It's a complete streaming solution, which includes great internet radio options and because it has an integrated volume control, the NP30 is a very discreet standalone audiophile system when hooked up to active speakers, especially when using the balanced connections.

Are there other updates planned?

Yes, we're constantly evolving the firmware for our streaming product line, which includes the MM30 and NP30 as well as our new 60 series PRE60 model. Recently we've introduced auto upgrade functionality to the app, which notifies users of new firmware and provides the option to install, so the user is always assured that they're using the latest firmware, without having to search for it.

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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

Hi-Fi Choice is the only mag to offer Blind-Listening Group Tests backed up with objective lab testing

CABLE LOOMS GROUP TEST

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 then the panellists are encouraged

to discuss their impressions of the sound of the product. This is then repeated, and periodically the panel goes back to audition earlier products, for reference purposes. Regular breaks keep the listeners refreshed. The consensus, or otherwise then forms the basis of our reported 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 done this way evaluation that is free from prejudices based on brand, price or appearance is made, while the different sensitivities of the listeners help to round out the analysis in order to make it more widely applicable.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Resistance

+40

Capacitance

+30

Inductance

+20

Power loss

-20

KEY: ■ Group average

■ % below average ■ % above average

RESISTANCE/POWER LOSS (1M LOOP)

Specified in mohm (thousandths of an ohm) this is a measure of how a cable 'resists' the flow of direct current. High resistance in a speaker cable may impair loudspeaker damping and contributes to a (typically small) power loss.

PARALLEL CAPACITANCE (1M LENGTH)

Measured in pF (UK billionths of a Farad), parallel capacitance is a measure of the impedance between signal and return conductors at very high frequencies. Higher capacitance cables often exhibit poorer leakage.

SERIES INDUCTANCE (1M LOOP)

Series inductance is measured in μH (thousandths of a Henry). This contributes to a cable's high frequency impedance and, with high capacitance, can make it more sensitive to any circulating RF noise.

POWER LOSS/LEAKAGE

Leakage is measured as the DC resistance between unterminated signal and return conductors. Expressed in Mohm (millions of ohms), a low leakage figure either means a tight signal/return geometry or poor insulation.

THIS MONTH'S LISTENING PANEL



ISABEL WHITLEY (LEFT)

COMPUTER AUDIO DESIGN has a talented designer in Scott Berry, but his wife is the real brains of the operation, at least that's what she says!

CHRIS WARD (MIDDLE)

WHEN NOT ADVISING businesses on policy matters, dyed-in-the-grain audiophile Chris contributes reviews to Hi-Fi Choice.

LEE DUNKLEY (RIGHT)

HI-FI CHOICE HEAD honcho Lee loves a chance to get out of the editor's chair and on to the official listening panel sofa.

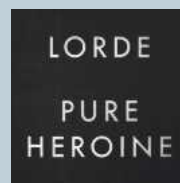
CD TEST MUSIC



DUKE ELLINGTON
Back To Back,
Wabash Blues



JULIAN LLOYD WEBBER
Evening Songs,
Frederick Delius,
Sunset



LORDE
Pure Heroine,
Royals



REM
Document,
Welcome To
The Occupation



OUR GROUP TESTS and In-depth Reviews are subject to exhaustive lab testing by **Paul Miller** using the **QC Suite Functional Testing Station** (left). Paul has tested more hi-fi equipment than any reviewer in the world, so you know you're in safe hands. We don't publish pages of graphs, but we do understand the importance of transparency. So, readers may view full QC Suite test reports for our key reviews by clicking on the red download button on our website. www.hifichoice.co.uk

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Group test

CABLE LOOMS £128-£406

Cable ties

Six interconnect and loudspeaker cable combinations go before *Hi-Fi Choice's* Blind Listening panel; **David Price** is your host

THERE'S STILL A sizeable body of opinion that says 'wires are wires', they all sound the same, and that's the end of it. If you're one of those who believe this, then the following *Group Test* may help to change your mind because we have the findings of three Blind Listening Test panellists who all heard quite pronounced differences across six combinations of loudspeaker cable and partnering interconnect, with each set being from the same manufacturer.

Wild claims

While it's not too wild an assertion to claim differences in sound between cables of one brand and another, something that's perhaps more controversial is that made by manufacturers, that repeatedly restate that for best results people should use a single make of cable

across the system. Following this logic, the speaker cable, interconnect and mains cable should all come from the same brand. It's a nice idea commercially if you're in the cable making business, but it does make some sense too. Different companies voice their cables to have particular sounds (although all would claim complete transparency, of course), and this 'house sound' is more apparent when you're listening to a cable 'loom', as we have done here.

Last year we aimed towards the £500 price point for two 3m runs of mono-wire speaker cable and a 1m interconnect, whereas this year the cable looms come in closer to £300. Despite the drop in price, there was no real sign of the looms sounding any more similar – as our panel found. To find out the results of these six looms, read on...

ON TEST




Black Rhodium Symphony Chrome/Twirl £341 p27

This well-established British brand makes no-nonsense products giving high value for money, especially at the budget end. This loom is one of its cheaper combinations



Ecosse NuDiva 2.0 DCT/CS 2.3 IV £294 p29

Ecosse makes fine, fun-sounding cables across a range of prices. It's famous for its peppy, propulsive sound and has an avid fan base, so how do they perform?



In-akustik Reference NF-102/LS-502 £406 p31

It's a brave move for a foreign cable maker to set foot in the UK's hi-fi market. This German loom is the most expensive here, but is it good enough to beat its British rivals?




QED Reference Audio 40/Signature Revelation £242 p33

In the UK at least, it all started with QED's 79-strand speaker cable around 40 years ago. Since then it has built a name for fine products at affordable prices



Van Damme LC-OFC Twin/6.00mm £128 p35

This company has been around two decades and supplies to a range of markets. It's one of the lesser known hi-fi brands, but that could all change if this loom impresses



Van den Hul The River/Clearwater £255 p37

Founded by Dutch audiophile AJ van den Hul in 1980, it has since established a fine reputation for middle to high-end cables. So what of this budget cable loom?



ortofon

accuracy in sound



Q uintet

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.

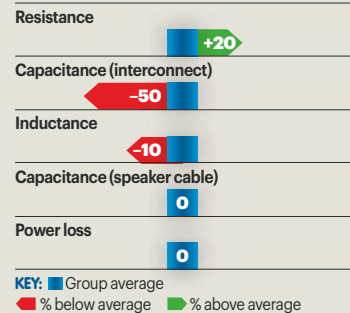


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ON TEST

Graham Nalty's cables were popularised by their use of ferromagnetic materials (hence the name 'Rhodium'), but this Symphony is more conventional. It's a symmetrical design with matching signal/return cores employing silver-plated strands and a superior PTFE dielectric, although the 215pF capacitance is a little above the norm. The braided screen is terminated at the destination-end of the cable only, the Symphony's 'directionality' indicated by a pair of red heatshrink bands that also retain the gentle twist of the left and right hands. Rhodium does rear its head, however, in the 4mm banana plugs fitted to our sample of the Twirl speaker cable. This ferromagnetic metal may contribute to the higher-than-average 0.8µH/m inductance but capacitance is usefully low at 30pF/m while the thick cross-section of the multi-stranded conductors helps push overall resistance down to 14mohm/m. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

The treble smoothness and the lack of stridency across the midband, allied to a generally lyrical feel and an open nature appear to really flatter more mellow music. On more densely recorded rock tracks such as REM, the Black Rhodium sounds nicely rhythmic and detailed, but the slightly 'grey' midband seems to make the track sound slightly opaque. And, "while it digs deeper into the recording," notes one panellist, "it can't hold on to it".

Overall then, this is a very fine performer by the standards of the group, and in value for money terms. It gives a very fine, enjoyable sound considering its modest price ● ▶

HIFIChoice**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Clear, powerful and musical sound yet smooth too
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Midband is not as sweet as some others here
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Highly convincing performer at the price
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL

Black Rhodium Symphony Chrome/Twirl **£341**

A well-established interconnect/speaker cable combo, how does it stand up to the latest and greatest?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Black Rhodium
Symphony
Chrome/Twirl

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES
● Interconnect:
silver-plated copper
conductors,
PTFE dielectric
● Speaker cable:
copper conductor
with silicon
rubber dielectric
● Prices:
interconnect
£160/1m, speaker
cable £13.50/1m
unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR
Black Rhodium

TELEPHONE
01332 342233

WEBSITE
blackrhodium.co.uk

This British brand has been around for many years now, and has proved popular for its fine, honest sound quality and strong value for money. The Symphony is a well known mid-price cable that uses a double core, screened design. As with many cables at its price point, silver-plated copper conductors are used, and they're set inside low-loss PTFE insulation and a silver-plated copper braided screen. The Symphony is then terminated with good quality chrome RCA plugs.

Twirl loudspeaker cable completes the Black Rhodium loom in this month's *Group Test*. It's a fairly recent design, again a twin core affair but with a total outer diameter of 6.4mm (3.2mm per core). Silicone rubber insulation is used, and the wire is carefully checked for directionality, then twisted along the length of the cable – the manufacturer says this prevents any loop aerial effect. Double thickness insulation is fitted, and our Twirl has rhodium-plated Z plugs (£100) – gold-plated Z plugs are an option at £50.

Sound quality

This loom is well received by the panel. It presents a generally powerful sound that is large in scale. It proves quite distinctive tonally, with the bass being a major facet of what makes its sound so good – its power, roundness and timbre is remarked upon by the panellists. With the Lorde track the Black Rhodium loom is very well balanced – whereas some other cables here manage to deliver either a light bass, or an overblown one that is plodding and/or semi-detached from the rest of the frequency range. "Unlike many others, the bass is three dimensional," one panellist puts it, by which they mean it has a good timbre and integrates well with the music. Across the midband, the song's female vocals are clean, although a little less warm and inviting than some other cables in the roundup.

This is picked up on in the Julian Lloyd Weber piece by one panellist, who notes that there isn't quite enough tonal colour in the midband – it's described as "a bit samey". This contrasts with the Ecosse, for example, which proves richer and more sumptuous in the midband, if not the bass. Still, the Black Rhodium has a good deal of detail, as you can really hear the bow work, which is described as "really convincing". Indeed, this panellist considers its bass warmth, midband detail and clean treble to be "the best combination of everything"; this loom is certainly a very good all rounder.

One thing the panel does agree on is that while this loom has a nice, snappy sound to it with good rhythmic pace, it seems to work better on the jazz and classical tracks.





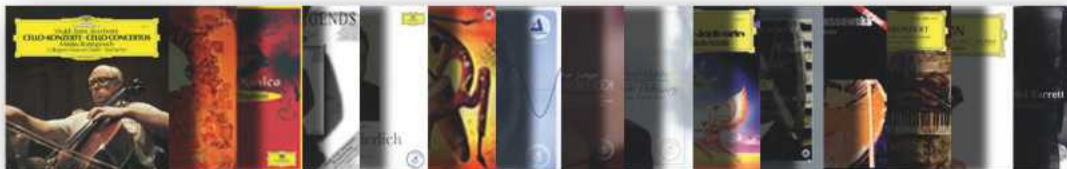
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Ecosse NuDiva2.0 DCT/CS2.3 IV **£294**

Does this Scottish brand's latest mid-price interconnect gel with one of its affordable speaker cables?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Ecosse NuDiva2.0
DCT/CS2.3 IV

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES

- Interconnect: silver-plated copper conductors with polyethylene dielectric
- Speaker cable: copper conductors with polypropylene dielectric
- Prices: interconnect £199/1m, speaker cable £6/1m unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR
Ecosse Cables

TELEPHONE
01563 551758

WEBSITE
ecossecables.co.uk

Although Ecosse hasn't quite taken the world by storm yet, it's fair to say that it is gathering respect as every year passes. It makes classy-sounding cables that seem a little more fun than its rivals, and so it proves here. The latest NuDiva is based on the company's higher-end interconnects, and uses silver-plated copper for its send and return conductors. It's put together in a special twisted pair topology, and uses an air-foamed polyethylene dielectric. The dual screen is a conductive polymer tube surrounded by dense silver braid, and there's cotton fibre filler to damp the cable and the soft PVC outer jacket. As per a number of more expensive cables, it is then deep-cryogenically treated, hence the 'DCT' appellation.

The CS2.3 speaker cable is a popular design that has been around for many years and has a strong reputation. It uses twisted copper conductors, low dielectric loss polypropylene insulation, cotton damping and soft PVC sheathing. There's a choice of terminations and you can choose from either Ecosse's hollow beryllium copper banana plugs or its OFC spades.

Sound quality

A distinctive cable loom, the Ecosse is very well liked by the panel, and indeed is one panellist's favourite overall. It has its own special sound – which in some ways is one of the best here, but in others it falls rather behind. The headline feature of this loom is its midband, which is very expansive in soundstaging terms, highly detailed and musically engaging. Whatever music is played, it is like the Ecosse is shining a big, bright light onto it. And this isn't a harsh, bluey-white light, it's quite yellowy – giving a relatively warm sound that is nevertheless very well defined. "Voices come out of the murk," notes one panellist when talking about the REM track. It gives life to recordings that are otherwise a bit flat, yet doesn't do this through tonal brightness. Rather, the Ecosse's midband has a good grip on musical timing, one that really animates whatever it plays.

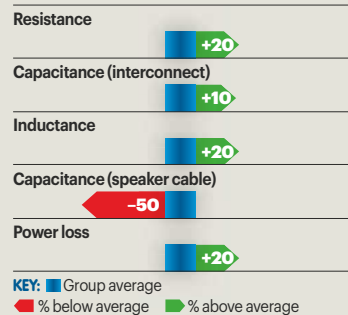
So, it's warmish yet musical – what's not to like? Well the bass isn't quite as animated or as tight as many of the cables on test here. On the Lorde track – which has heavy tracts of electronic bass – the Ecosse sounds a little light, leaden and rather plodding. The low frequencies just don't seem able to replicate the rhythmic 'snap' of the midband and treble. This makes the cable loom a little more sensitive to the type of music you play; it wafts along very nicely to the Delius and the Duke Ellington, for example. On the former, the piano sounds very poignant and expressive, remarks one listener. It has delicacy and real subtlety, giving a very nuanced presentation, but fire

ON TEST

Like the original NuDiva interconnect this 'cryogenically-cooled' version still employs a coaxial geometry with a multi-stranded silver-plated copper signal core surrounded by a dense braid acting as both screen and return. This is reflected in its capacitance (68pF/m), inductance (0.3µH/m) and loop resistance (58mohm) which are all perfectly 'average' for this familiar geometry. The latter is now reduced by about 10% over the mk1 – a function of the treated copper perhaps?

Now in mkIV guise, Ecosse's CS2.3 speaker cable achieves its low 12mohm/m resistance by bundling no fewer than 260 fine 5N-copper strands into each signal and return conductor, amounting to a 3mm² cross-section for each. Capacitance is not high but still a little higher than expected at 67pF/m, some mild dielectric stress also indicated by the weakest leakage of our group at 4.9Mohm. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



up the Lorde and suddenly it doesn't really manage to convince quite as much as we'd expect.

The Ecosse images very well, pulling the REM track out of its shell. Sometimes, on some equipment, it can sound like the track was recorded in a bathroom, but suddenly it begins to expand wide stage left and right, and acquire some depth, too. Treble is smoother than many cables here, and there is a better sense of layering too. "Smoother treble, amazing midband, but no bass," says one listener. Overall though, this loom does an awful lot considering its lowish price, so it's a fine result when put into context ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Lovely open and expressive midband

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** A little detached at the frequency extremes

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WESAY:** Charismatic cable that many users will love

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



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In-akustik Reference NF-102/LS-502 **£406**

A relatively new name to the British hi-fi world, how will this well-presented German cable fare against its rivals?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
In-akustik
Reference
NF-102/LS-502

ORIGIN
Germany

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES
• Interconnect:
copper conductor
with DUO-PE II
dielectric
• Speaker cable:
copper conductor
with DUO-PE II
dielectric
• Prices:
interconnect
£128/1.2m, speaker
cable £278/3m
unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR
Hi-Fi Network

TELEPHONE
01285 643088

WEBSITE
hifi-network.com
in-akustik.com

It's a brave company that attempts to join the already over crowded and competitive UK cable market, and In-akustik is just such a thing. The Reference NF-102 interconnect uses a high-quality coaxial OFC solid copper conductor that is covered in 'duo polyethylene' insulation, filled with air to damp the natural resonances of the material and cut down vibration transmission.

Like the interconnect the Reference LS-502 loudspeaker cable is an unusually styled design, and this provokes comment from our panel after the listening session is over. Its sheath is distinctly retro and reminiscent of woven kettle leads from the sixties! It's certainly highly robust, but it's not discreet. Almost every other cable is white and of far smaller diameter, for a good reason. Still, inside the cable features two symmetrically arranged strands with 37 concentrically stranded wires each. 'Duo polyethylene' insulation is used around each conductor.

Sound quality

This is one of several looms that doesn't show any remarkable qualities on audition, but proves pleasant and never really upsets anyone. Its basic tonal balance is quite light and bright, but never especially so. What it doesn't do is sugar bad recordings or make already good ones sound great. Rather, the In-akustik has a matter-of-fact sort of sound, one that doesn't meddle with the music. It has lots of detail and a fine sense of rhythm that makes listening enjoyable, whatever the source.

One panellist goes as far as congratulating the loom for making the Duke Ellington track "spring to life"; another adds that, "it clips along". This jazz track certainly bounces along in a pleasing way, and it throws out a lot of detail too. "This is the first time I've heard the piano pedals on the Delius," says the third panellist. Indeed, it seems to work better with slightly lighter, sparser music, where its intrinsic neutrality and cleanliness is most apparent. On the Lorde track, however, the panel finds it "a bit wearing"; it has plenty of bass, but it doesn't seem to connect especially well with everything else further up the frequency band. The female singers sound great in isolation, it's just that they don't seem to quite gel with the bass track going on underneath – unlike some of the other cable looms.

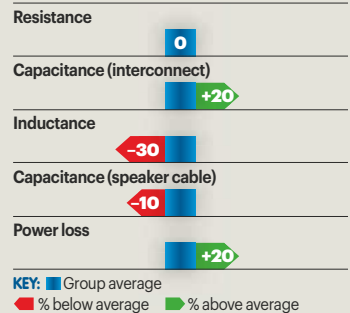
The soundstage is applauded for being very wide, and this is most apparent on the Duke Ellington track, although it is thought that depth perspective isn't as good as the van den Hul, which is

ON TEST

With a range that puts all but the very largest cable companies to shame with its sheer scope, In-akustik is one of Germany's best-kept 'hi-fi secrets'. Many of its cables are 'solid-core' designs and this includes the coaxial NF-102 which offers a very low 38pF/m parallel capacitance. Despite the low resistance of the foil and drain wire screen/return, the limited cross-section of the centre signal conductor increases the overall loop resistance to a high 340mohm/m. The van den Hul River interconnect has higher resistance still, of course.

In-akustik's LS-502 speaker cable has a far thicker 3mm² conductor cross-section and offers a suitably low 12mohm/m resistance, making it much more suitable for long runs in partnership with low output impedance (solid state) amplifiers. Capacitance (33pF/m) and inductance (0.63µH/m) are also well balanced here. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



particularly good in this respect. The REM track sounds decently spacious too, and with plenty of fine detail, but tonally this slightly forward recording does begin to grate a little according to one listener. This means the In-akustik is best used with slightly smoother sounding sources, amplifiers and speakers; tonally it's less sumptuous than either the Black Rhodium or Ecosse offerings, for example.

Overall, this cable kit is a good general performer that many will like. With the speaker cables' unusual and rather quaint woven outer sheath, it looks distinctive and sounds more than decent enough. ▶

HIFIChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Clean, tidy sound; robust build
DISLIKE: Lacks passion and power
WESAY: Decent, well made and pleasant sounding cable loom

OVERALL

★★★★★



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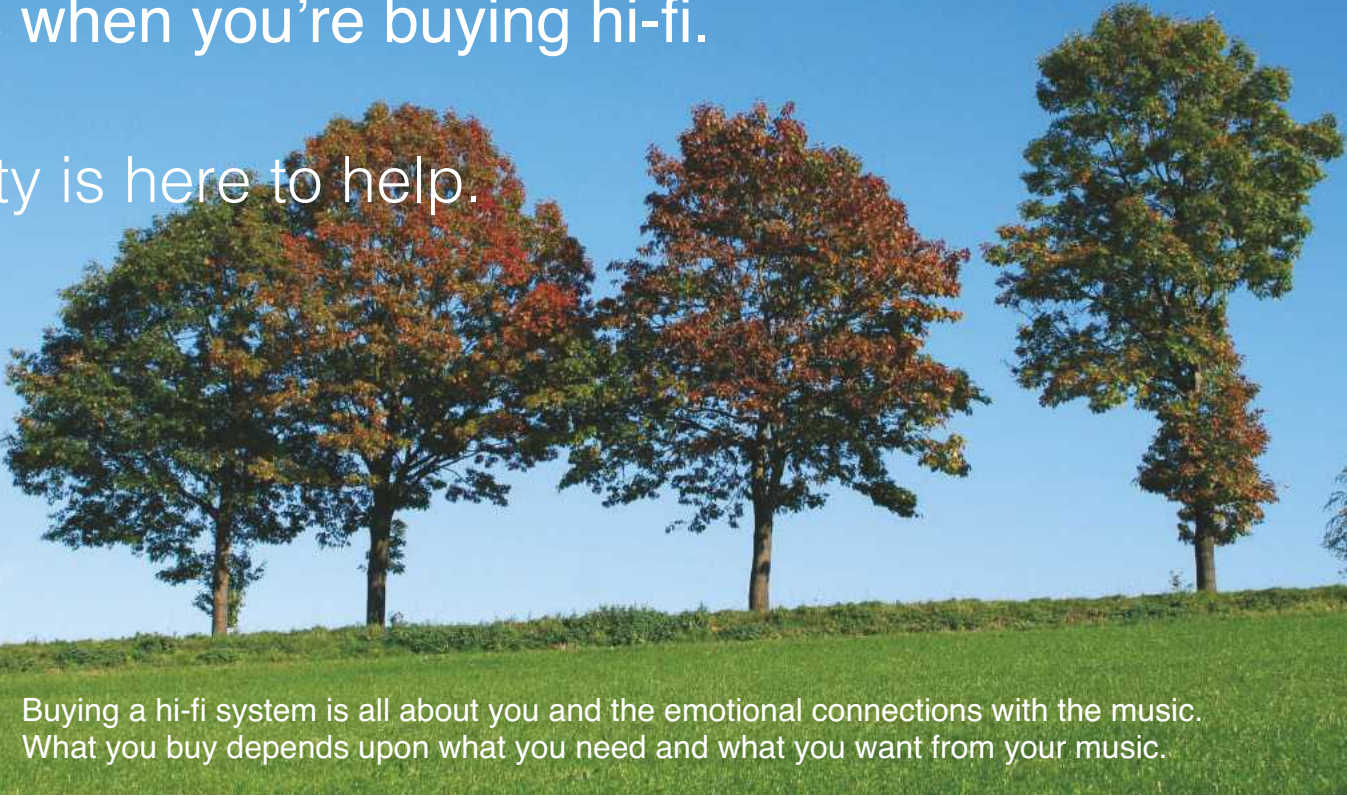
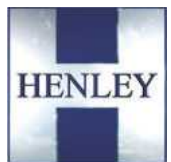
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QED Reference Audio 40/ Signature Revelation **£242**

An affordable cable loom from one of the UK's longest established cable companies. How does it compare?

DETAILS

PRODUCT
QED Reference
Audio 40/Signature
Revelation

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES
● Interconnect:
silver-plated copper
with foamed
polyethylene
dielectric
● Speaker cable:
silver-plated copper
conductor with
Teflon dielectric
● Prices:
interconnect
£100/1m, speaker
cable £17/1m
unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR
Armour Home
Electronics

TELEPHONE
01279 501111

WEBSITE
qed.co.uk

Like most interconnects here, the Reference Audio 40 is a silver-plated copper affair, arranged in a special complementary way – the two conductors have different diameters, and this is said to give an alternative path for high-frequency audio signals to avoid time smear. The foamed polyethylene dielectric is claimed to reduce the amount of signal lost to cable capacitance. QED's Analoc plugs are fitted, said to be a low eddy current design with copper instead of brass used. They feature an outer locking cylinder that needs to be screwed forward before the plug's 'blades' can be locked onto the RCA phono socket, then the locking cylinder needs to be tightened back up for a (very) secure fit.

The Signature Revelation speaker cable uses 10 silver-plated oxygen-free copper central conductors, which are claimed to provide very low resistance alongside high levels of detail. These cores are separately insulated and arranged around a hollow core of polyethylene; QED calls this its Aircore technology and it's claimed to reduce inductance.

Sound quality

Before the QED loom, the panellists have taken a mixed view of the various wires played to them. They've found positives and negatives, liked some and been lukewarm about others. But two out of the three listeners express a strong preference for this set of cables, applauding it for its clean, open, even sound that doesn't try to do anything too clever. Instead it is very accomplished at almost every facet of the music, and makes things look rather easy.

"Everything is joined up," says one panellist, and so it proves. The Lorde track plays better than it has through most others here. Although not necessarily the warmest or most expansive, it just seems to gel the bass with the rest of the music – which is something several others fail to do. It doesn't sound too steely in the midband, giving a nice smooth sound to female vocals, and treble is crisp and finessed. Musically the loom works very well, the beat bouncing along in an enjoyable way. The result is a surprisingly easy listen, when previously the track hasn't quite made sense.

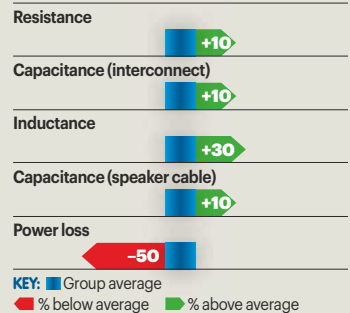
The REM tune is described as sounding, "head and shoulders better" by one panellist. There is a fine sense of depth to what can sound a pretty close and claustrophobic mix. One can hear lots of detail too, with the keyboard backing track coming through from the second verse, where previously it had been submerged. Tonally the QED isn't the warmest or most sumptuous here, but it is very even and transparent and doesn't seem to be trying to add or subtract anything

ON TEST

Superbly finished, QED's Reference Audio 40 interconnect is essentially a coaxial design albeit with two independently insulated multi-stranded signal conductors with one core thicker than the other. There's also a two-layer screen and return path comprising an outer braid and zinc/manganese jacket, affording a combination of low-ish 75mohm/m resistance and 79pF/m capacitance with a very low 0.18µH inductance.

The partnering Signature Revelation speaker cable, itself inspired by QED's 'Silver Spiral', has a standard figure-of-eight geometry but its inductance is lower than expected at 0.48µH/m thanks to the construction of the signal and return legs. These comprise 10 PTFE-insulated bundles of 19x0.1mm silver-plated copper strands, also pushing its loop resistance down to a respectable 20mohm/m with a low 27pF capacitance. It's the best of all worlds! **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



much. This means that it's likely to work well with a wide range of systems. Moving to the Duke Ellington piece and the pattern continues. One adoring panellist describes it as, "good bass rhythm and control, nice, cohesive, great sound, head and shoulders better".

Another of the panellists isn't quite so enamoured; they appear to yearn for the expansive yet sumptuous midband of the Ecosse, and find the QED a little too anodyne and bland when playing Julian Lloyd Webber's cello work. All of which just goes to show how much taste plays a part, but still this remains a superb result considering its low price ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Wonderfully easy yet open and engaging sound
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Nothing at the price
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: A superb cable loom; nothing to criticise at the price
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL



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* Bordeaux finish shown



Van Damme LC-OFC Twin/ 2x6.00mm **£128**

Little-known in the UK, this company supplies a range of cables for many other applications beyond hi-fi

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Van Damme LC-OFC
Twin/2x6.00mm

ORIGIN
EU

TYPE
Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES
• Interconnect:
copper conductor
with polyethylene
dielectric
• Speaker cable:
copper conductor
with polyethylene
dielectric
• Prices:
interconnect
£32/1m, speaker
cable £9/1m
unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR
VDC Trading Ltd

TELEPHONE
020 7700 2777

WEBSITE
vdctrading.com

In the British hi-fi market at least, Van Damme appears more like an OEM supplier rather than something with a very powerful and well-known brand. That's not to say the company is a new kid on the block, however – it has a vast range of products and can be seen in custom install, broadcast studio and even marine applications. This is reflected in the lack of chintzy packaging and names; it comes over as a no-nonsense brand.

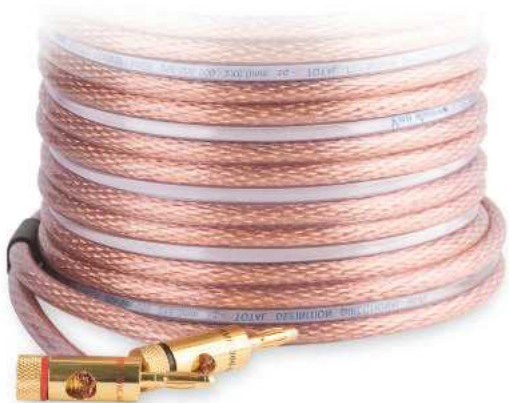
The LC-OFC Twin, catalogue number 268-500-000, is what the company calls a “shotgun-style” interconnect, which it says “can be found in many professional environments”. It is said to be “ultra pure” LC-OFC copper with a foam skin polyethylene outer. It seems a very sturdy product, although wins no prizes for looks! The speaker cable supplied comes in 4mm and 6mm varieties, with the thicker one being reviewed here. Van Damme says that this is used for “critical near-field monitoring in many world-class recording and mastering studios”. It sports 0.1mm conductors with 7-way plaits to minimise skin effect, and has

clear PVC insulation. Basic gold-plated banana plugs are fitted.

Sound quality

One eagle-eared panellist announces, “this is a copper cable”, and is right. Different metals have different sounds and pure copper (as opposed to plated or hybrid) has a warmish, fulsome and quite fruity sound that is immediately apparent on audition, compared to the more pristine, crystalline sound of the silver-plated copper looms on test. The REM track shows it to have a rich sound to the Rickenbacker guitars, and a fine sense of musical flow; you'd never call it cerebral. One panellist remarks on the Delius piece having a “lovely expressive, passionate cello” and the Lorde track manages to stay together surprisingly well compared with some of the others here, which can sound a tad disjointed. The “low noise floor” is applauded on this track, too. Another listener notes that “the piano has two hands, and fills out”.

Bass is nicely joined up on the Duke Ellington, the loom managing to string things together well. However, this track also shows the other side to the cable, which is its rather “rolled off” treble. The panellists enjoy the bass, which one says “has edges to it”, but the treble doesn't sparkle in the way it should do. This gives a slightly muffled sense to the music, and this rolls down into the midband where the music is a little opaque. Although it is big, bold and well defined, it seems to be slightly fuzzy and indistinct – in direct contrast to cable looms like the QED and Black Rhodium, which really throw a lot of information out at the listener.

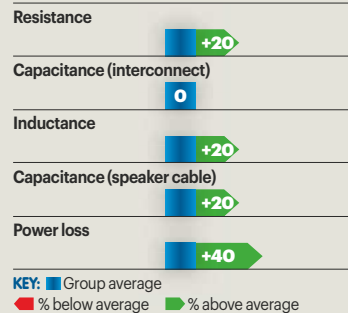


ON TEST

Fancily-painted RCAs notwithstanding, Van Damme's LC-OFC Twin looks to be a fairly conventional coaxial cable with sufficient copper in its central signal core and peripheral return braid to keep its loop resistance down to 60mohm/m while both inductance (0.22µH) and capacitance (87pF) are also kept impressively in check. Judged by the numbers alone, it looks to be a consistent performer over long lengths.

Much the same could be said for the partnering speaker cable which, courtesy of its massive 6mm² multi-stranded copper conductors, offers the lowest resistance of the group at just 8mohm/m. This is a power loss of just 0.0087dB/m. Capacitance is low too at 22pF/m but the spaced, figure-of-eight geometry raises inductance. Inter-strand conduction (across potentially less pure surfaces) is high because of the numbers of fine, woven threads of copper. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



So although the Van Damme is initially very impressive and pleasing, it seems to be a bit more music-dependent than some of the others here. Some types of music seem to benefit from it – especially the big, crunching, Lorde song – whereas more subtle and gentle programme material tends to come over as more bland and homogenous. “It's certainly a copper sound,” concludes another panellist.

It's a great loom for the asking price, but it simply doesn't do well enough across the range of music that is used to justify being praised universally. Some will love it, and you can't fault the value for money ●

HifiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★ **LIKE:** Musical and smooth sound; strong imaging

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Slightly veiled treble; cloudy midband; lacks detail

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Well made no-nonsense cable, but it's just too music-dependent

FEATURES
★★★★★

OVERALL



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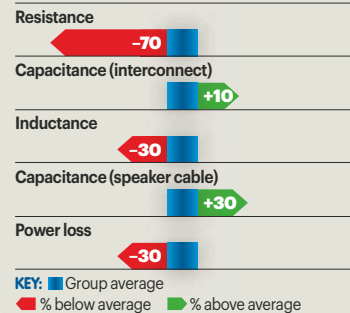
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ON TEST

The entry-level member of AJ van den Hul's 3T range (True Transmission Technology) 'The River' is also an evolution of the brand's hybrid cable philosophy. Here the conductors are a mix of silver-plated copper and LSC (Linear Structured Carbon), the latter all individually-insulated 5.5 micron carbon fibres. At their launch 20 years ago, vdH's initial 'hybrid' cables employed carbon conductors but incurred a high -40ohm loop resistance. The River, by contrast, has this down to 2.8ohm which is about 50x higher than typical but still usable in relatively short lengths. Good system earthing is essential if hum loops are to be avoided, a problem not shared by vdH's Clearwater speaker cable with its thick conductors offering a low 17mohm/m resistance and mere 0.018dB/m power loss. The figure-of-eight geometry offers a low 11pF capacitance but moderate 1.05µH/m inductance. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

detail doesn't fit in so well with the big picture. This makes for a sound that is more 'hi-fi' than music.

Spatially this loom seems a little compressed. The Julian Lloyd Weber track shows it to be a tad too 'in-between the speakers' for some of the panellists' tastes. Certainly it doesn't have that big, expansive sound of the Black Rhodium, Ecosse or QED. Everything is well placed in the recorded acoustic, but the stage itself seems a little smaller and flatter than we'd have liked. Overall then, this is a decent loom, but it doesn't shine in this system, and despite its low price it is outperformed elsewhere in this test ● ▶

HIFIChoice**OUR VERDICT**

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Clean, controlled sound; coherent and detailed

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Lacks some involvement on a musical level

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Beautifully made and presented, but missing charm

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

Van den Hul

The River/Clearwater **£255**

An illustrious cable brand alright, but can it do as well in the affordable arena as it does in the high end?

DETAILS**PRODUCT**

Van den Hul
3T The River/
Clearwater

ORIGIN

Netherlands

TYPE

Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES

- Interconnect: silver-plated copper and carbon hybrid with Hulliflex jacket
- Speaker cable: silver-plated copper with Hulliflex jacket

- Prices: interconnect £195/1m, speaker cable £10/1m unterminated

- Distributor: Flamingo Audio

- Telephone: 0121 212 9288

- Website: vanden Hul.com

There's something a little different about van den Hul. Whether it's the eccentricity of AJ van den Hul or the company's amazingly wide range of cables, one cannot say. Then there's the fact that it makes some stunning high-end moving coil phono cartridges, too.

The River is vdH's entry-level interconnect, but it's still built and presented to very high standards indeed – you'd never know by looking. It's a coaxial cable with both centre core and shielding made of 3T conductors, van den Hul's special hybrid of linear structured carbon. This is then triple screened with silver-plated copper, and is claimed to give a higher resolution than any conventional metal cable. The jacket comes in a very pleasant hue of powder blue, unlike some more garish rivals, and is made from vdH's halogen-free Hulliflex material, which feels like a silky rubber and isn't as microphonic as many. Plugs are finely finished and rhodium coated.

The Clearwater speaker cable shares this halogen-free design, and is a silver-plated copper cable with two lots of 98-strand conductors, twisted

in opposite directions. Again, it looks and feels like a very classy product, despite the relatively modest retail price, for van den Hul, at least.

Sound quality

This loom is thought to give an impressively detailed, open sound that is never unpleasant to listen to. Conversely though, it isn't the most riveting cable loom here in terms of its ability – or not – to convey the emotional intensity of the musical performance. In short, the panel isn't as enthusiastic as it has been with the QED loom. Proceedings kick off badly with a rather perfunctory and superficial reading of the REM track. Whereas the Black Rhodium and Ecosse all really get into the groove, the vdH loom seems rather detached and dispassionate. It doesn't sound as bright as some here, but nor is it especially warm and sumptuous either. Instead, the tonality sounds neutral enough – a bit like the In-akustik – but the loom just doesn't seem to get into the rhythm of things especially well. "Thin with no size, it sounds like it was recorded in a lift," says one of the panellists, perhaps a little harshly.

The Lorde track works a bit better, as the vdH is able to demonstrate its good control over proceedings. Although it may not be the greatest communicator, it's still very together and you never once get the sense of an overblown bass coming detached from the rest of the mix. In this respect, it does rather better than the Ecosse, for example. Like all modern van den Hul wires, this combo is detailed and revealing, seemingly able to scavenge good amounts of low level information out and push it all around. But unlike more expensive products from this company, this



Group test verdict

Opinions have been discussed and the final verdicts are in from our listening panel, and now it's down to **David Price** to unravel the final results

THE IN-AKUSTIK COMES sixth. It's a decent sounding loom, but doesn't strongly appeal to the panellists. Generally it is felt to be a little matter of fact sounding and not particularly engaging, although it is tidy and has a pleasant light and bright sort of nature. It is really its cost that pushes it down the overall rankings rather than sonics alone.

The Van Damme comes fifth. This is a good performance considering the very low price, and its generally very decent sound. It is never unpleasant to listen to, has a good bit of energy and life to it, and it's only a slightly


curtailed treble and a general lack of delicacy that stops it from doing much better.

In fourth place is the van den Hul. Its products normally put in a very strong showing, but the panel feels that this loom is a little too clinical sounding, which isn't ideal considering it is designed to be used with more budget products.

Next up is the Ecosse loom; this is when the sound really starts to get good – and this loom impresses with a wonderfully lucid and engaging midband. Indeed, in this respect it is among the best here, it's just that it

isn't able to repeat this feat across the board – there are others that are better all rounders.

This month's runner up is the Black Rhodium loom, which has an excellent sound that is particularly strong at the frequency extremes. Bass is solid and tuneful, treble crisp and clear and atmospheric. Its midband is very strong too, but it loses out to the winner for not being quite warm and sweet in this region, but it will still make a great match for softer sounding amplifiers or speakers as a result.



WINNER

The QED is the best sounding loom here, thanks to its very even and all-of-a-piece sound. It's an extremely well balanced performer with a natural musical gait and yet there's loads of detail and dynamics too, meaning it comes highly recommended.



Make/model

Black Rhodium
Symphony
Chrome/Twirl

Ecosse
NuDiva 2.0
DCT/CS2.3 IV

In-akustik
Reference NF-102/
LS-502

QED
Reference Audio 40/
Signature Revelation

Van Damme
LC-OFC Twin/
2x6.00mm

Van den Hul
The River/
Clearwater

	Black Rhodium	Ecosse	In-akustik	QED	Van Damme	Van den Hul
Price	£341	£294	£406	£242	£128	£255
Sound	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Key features	Powerful bass and treble combine with bundles of pace and dynamics	Wonderful midband that's highly expressive and detailed	Smooth, even, measured sound, albeit with an expensive price tag	The best all rounder here, with good balance, power and musicality	Rich, warm, sumptuous sound, although slightly dull treble	Clean, open, delicate sound and detailed sound that ultimately lacks pace

Key features



Copper	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Silver/copper	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Silver	No	No	No	No	No	No
Cop/sil/carbon	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Multi core	No	No	No	No	No	No

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LOUDSPEAKER:
Q Acoustics 2050i **£460**

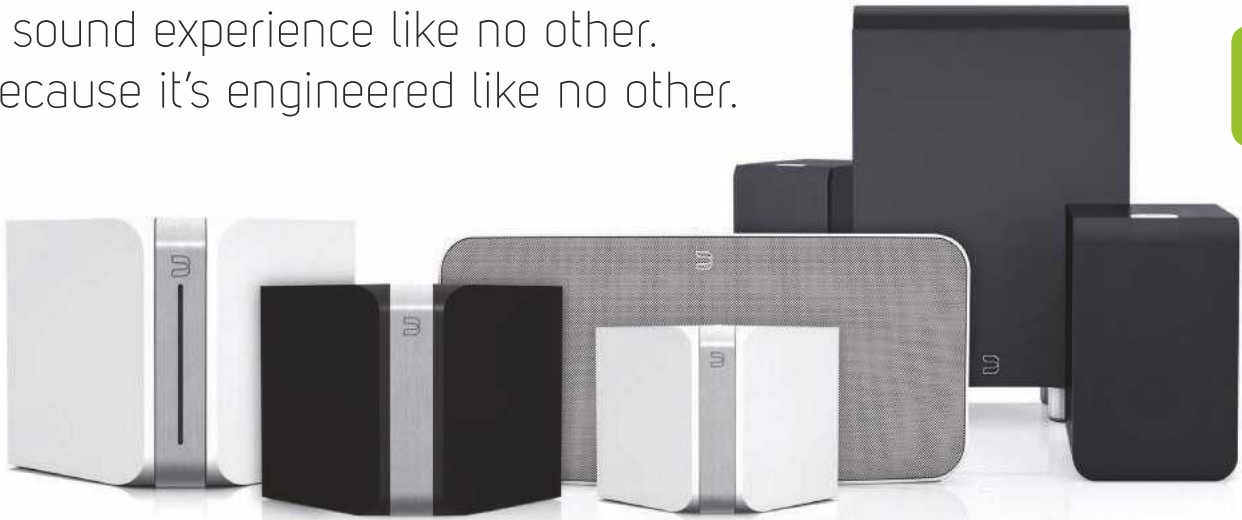
We're recommending these *ad nauseum* – sorry if it's boring, but they're great budget boxes! They have a big, powerful sound and are nicely tuneful, but can seem a little too warm for some tastes – which is why a clean and open cable loom will suit best, such as the van den Hul, Ecosse or Black Rhodium. **HFC 365**



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Hang loose

Spending some time with these radical loudspeakers, **Chris Ward** finds they sound as revolutionary as they look

Every once in a while someone does something remarkable that seems bizarre and contradictory to the received wisdom, yet sometimes they stick to their guns, resist ridicule and peer pressure and eventually turn out to be right. When Dick Fosbury jumped backwards over a high jump bar at the 1968 Olympics, many in the crowd thought he was mad. But this madness won him a gold medal as well as setting a new Olympic record.

Origin Live may be better known for its highly engineered tonearms and turntables, but with the launch of its Astute speakers it's bending over backwards to declare that there may be alternative ways to reproduce high fidelity music. In the new Astute loudspeaker Origin Live has created a relatively dead barrel from a

Their combination of efficiency and kind load yield equally good results

multi-laminated tube capped with solid bamboo ply front and back. Nothing wants to resonate, and asymmetrically offset dual concentric drivers set within the front baffle ensure that standing waves have little chance of forming.

Okay, there are curved speakers, but how many are designed to hover in space? It's claimed that Origin Live conducted a blind listening test for speaker stands and the unsighted listeners signalled delight each time a roadie lifted the speakers between the competing stand designs. These speakers are hanging from elegant Heron stands (£770), but Origin Live offers a number of engineered wall and ceiling fixings if you want to lift your speakers aesthetically or above prying hands, starting at £350.

Designed to be used with a quality active subwoofer, the Astutes cover the frequency range from 85Hz to

20kHz with a pronounced roll off from 100Hz. Deeper bass duties are then picked up by your subwoofer of choice. Origin Live believes that many traditional speakers with bass drivers a few metres apart are compromised as the wavelength of twin bass frequencies must surely be interfering with each other, disrupting that bass message and smearing vital midband and treble detail above. By adding a single quality subwoofer, it suggests there is no interference.

The Astute's custom-made drivers are shrouded in some secrecy, but Origin Live claims their ultra high efficiency promises an extremely fast and dynamic sound that should project well in to any sized listening room. Taking any one of these departures from the well-beaten audio path would be challenging enough, but taking them all at once is radical and a statement of self-confidence that the end will justify the means. I for one applaud this level of disruptive innovation, but how do they perform?

Setting up the Astutes is easier than they may appear. I place the Heron stands roughly in place and lift the speakers into position. The near invisible 'Dyneema' suspension cord is said to be 15 times stronger than steel and will support up to 480kg, so no need for concern. The single set of screw binding posts are cleverly engineered, creating an extremely effective connection between cable and speaker. Carefully programming the MJ Acoustic Reference 400 Mk1 subwoofer I'm using here, I can seamlessly join the bass register with the Astute's frequency range. Furthermore, I can perfectly balance the bass energy in my listening room, saturating the space, but stopping well short of overdriving the room.

I am then able to twist the stands for a slight toe-in that seems to maximise the width of the soundstage. I also gently angle the Astutes up until the balance of treble energy seems right for my listening position. If you chose

will be able to angle the Astute speakers downwards.

Sound quality

Spinning *More Money* from Barry Reynolds' *I Scare Myself* LP on vinyl, my immediate impression of the Astute's is somewhat startling. Treble, mid and bass energy just seem more dynamic. It's as though I'm hearing my favourite music, source and amplification with a secret veil lifted. Frequency response, however, feels extremely even and without over emphasis, but it's the cleanliness of the sound and the sheer dynamism of the frequencies arriving at your ears that is so very refreshing to me. It's hard to put sound dynamics into words, but the quality and timbre created by the Astutes delivers an energy that is very potent, yet unflagging and convincingly accurate. And rather than merely reproducing laboratory standards of frequency and amplitude, the speakers dive straight into communicating your music. Given Origin Live has clearly paid so much attention to engineering and physics I was ready for a slightly clinical or constructed presentation of music, but the opposite is true. Drums really kick, fretted basslines start and stop with different finger pressures and I'm able to appreciate a rapport between backing singers and musicians that I hadn't felt before.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Origin Live Astute

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Two-way suspended
loudspeaker

WEIGHT
12.9kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
340 x 340 x 350mm

FEATURES

- Dual concentric drivers
- 1x 1in compression tweeter
- 1x 8in paper midrange driver
- Quoted sensitivity: 91dB
- Quoted impedance: 8ohms

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Q&A

Mark Baker

Origin Live, managing director



CW: What insights have you brought from your turntables and tonearms to your speaker designs?

MB: Turntable and tonearm design focuses on creating efficient energy paths to dump vibrations and resonances whilst maintaining a rock-steady platform to function fully. Loudspeakers are not that different, as massive vibrations created by speaker drivers need to be dumped whilst maintaining a rock-steady grip on the drive unit. Years of experimentation with different materials and structures have yielded a wealth of ideas that we have applied to the Astute speakers and their supports.

What makes the crossover design so different?

Using very steep roll offs enables the drivers to cross over close to ideal frequencies without break up. Unusually, the mid driver has a very steep low-end roll off, which enables it to blend cleanly with subwoofers. The Astute also avoids joining mid and treble information within the critical 2kHz-5kHz band where so much musical information is conveyed and human hearing is most sensitive to phase issues.

What can you share about why your custom drivers are so dynamic?

Having been involved in driver design over the years it was natural to build a custom design. A large magnet assembly for the woofer and a horn-loaded compression driver on the tweeter yield fantastic dynamics. Other factors include a stiff cone and large diameter voice coil for minimal thermal compression.

What type of person would you say the Astutes are designed for?

Initially audiophiles, but these speakers are really designed for anyone who loves style and music. Commonly in speaker design, poor styling and visual space consumption are often issues that turn off many women in particular, before any sound is made. We have worked long and hard on aesthetics, build and sound quality to come up with the Astutes. Anyone should love them.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Dual concentric drivers
- 2 2mm Dyneema wire support
- 3 Binding posts
- 4 Heron stands
- 5 Bamboo ply baffle

Turning to James Taylor's *Machine Gun Kelly* on vinyl and the informal, live acoustic soundstage floods the room. Suspending these quality drivers projects a compelling holographic image that is tall, wide and utterly stable. I believe hanging these highly dynamic drivers also unlocks an extra presence and realism to voices, releasing them from other midband detail and deepening the stereo image front to back.

Playing Donna Summer's *I Feel Love* on CD, I start to wind the volume up. This is a classic side effect of high quality and an intuitive response to a lack of distortion. These speakers are happy to reproduce convincing dynamics at very low volume levels or party hard, and the disco anthem is soon projected into every corner of my room... and then my ground floor! The powerful dynamics within Giorgio Moroder's mesmerising synth lines loop around Donna's sultry vocals, tempting others in the house to come and enjoy the music with me. It is at this moment that I realise that the Astutes are probably tapping into some tried and trusted 'public address' philosophies where highly dynamic hanging speakers regularly bring live stage concerts to life.

Conclusion

The Astutes are a beguiling combination of engineering decisions and unique technical features that add up to a highly coherent and very musical whole. The separation of single-minded bass duties from highly dynamic mid/treble energy allows each driver to excel and floating the

speakers at any height you wish gives sonic rewards and protection from prying hands in equal measure. They look stunning to my eye and if I were a music lover with great ears, interior design flair, disposable income and discerning friends, I'm not sure I'd need to look elsewhere. They are remarkably unphased being positioned near rear walls, but appreciate a little air around them. I've driven them with both solid state and valve amplifiers, and their combination of efficiency and easy load yields equally good results.

A fiver short of £5,000 is a considerable sum, especially when you need to budget extra for the dedicated stands and a subwoofer, but you are investing in precision engineering, handcrafted assembly and a design without apparent compromise. Every visitor to your home is likely to marvel at the Astutes when they are silent, and even more so when they make dynamic music ●



HOW IT COMPARES

Unique is an over-used word, but these speakers have few direct competitors. At this price (including a subwoofer and stands) some would consider Audio Note speakers, which offer great sensitivity and good dynamics, but they prefer wall reinforcement, and while handsome to me, are probably less of a treat on the eye. Sonus faber produces some beautifully finished floorstanders that often grace designer listening rooms, but sonically the Astutes would win me over. For design, build and sound quality I'm thinking of £10k+ speakers from the likes of Tannoy, Magneplanar or Gamut, which feels like strong endorsement indeed.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



VALUE FOR MONEY



BUILD QUALITY



EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL



LIKE: Impressive dynamics; innovative design; elegant styling; high build quality

DISLIKE: Styling may not appeal to all

WE SAY: Eye-catching speakers with design flair that manage to convey musicality at any volume





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Octave 6



SoundSpot
2.1 Ultra



DAC magic

For digital devotees who need every base covered, Cambridge Audio has its new 851D DAC/preamplifier. **David Price** listens in...

Somewhere around the turn of the millennium, hi-fi started getting interesting again – with DVD-Audio and SACD arriving, MP3 going gangbusters and computer audio taking hold. Then asynchronous USB conferred hi-res capability on Macs and PCs, and now easy wireless has come of age thanks to aptX Bluetooth. Cambridge Audio's new flagship DAC is a product of all this. Packed with most of the functionality that has popped up over the past decade, it purports to be a 'greatest hits of digital' in one convenient package.

Product manager Sam Ellenby says it's for, "a reasonably sizeable market

of people who want to know they're fundamentally hearing an uncoloured, unhindered reproduction of their source material." Fair enough, but the flagship Azur 851D is an expensive box of tricks, and Cambridge Audio has traditionally been associated with more affordable kit. Which begs the question, is it good enough to get people who'd normally buy more upmarket brand names interested? The company thinks so, calling it "the last word in high-end digital-analogue conversion."

Well it's certainly big and heavy for a DAC, and is very well finished at the price. What dominates the fascia is a large volume control and backlit,

reverse-video LC display. The latter has eight inputs – including a plethora of conventional digital ins, plus asynchronous USB and aptX Bluetooth via a bundled dongle. The volume control can be bypassed, and the unit configured to work as a DAC, or it can be enabled and used to drive a stereo power amplifier such as Cambridge Audio's 851W.

The unit offers twin Analog Devices AD1955 24-bit DAC chips, working in dual differential mode, and comes fitted with ATF2 audio upsampling to 24-bit/384kHz. It uses a special adaptive time filtering algorithm that de-jitters all digital sources and can also upsample them to 24-bit/384kHz. Upsampling itself is not new, but the 851D's implementation is unique to Cambridge Audio. It is claimed that it makes for a substantially smoother, more phase-coherent sound, as all the digital number crunching is taken so far away from the audio band that it can't interfere with the resulting analogue signal. Although not a completely unanimous view, many feel it's a worthwhile feature. User selectable digital filters – linear phase, minimum phase, steep – are provided.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Cambridge Audio
Azur 851D

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
DAC/preamplifier

WEIGHT
7.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
430 x 115 x 360mm

FEATURES
• 32-bit/192kHz
• aptX Bluetooth, optical, coaxial, AES/EBU, USB inputs
• 6.3mm headphone, XLR and RCA phono outputs
• Analog Devices AD1955 dual differential DAC chips
• ATF2 upsampling

DISTRIBUTOR
Richer Sounds

TELEPHONE
0845 9001230

WEBSITE
cambridgeaudio.com



There's a choice of unbalanced RCA or balanced XLR outputs; a full-size, 6.3mm headphone socket on the front panel and a bespoke "high-end, low distortion" headphone amplifier.

A sleekly finished product that feels very sturdy indeed

Sound quality

This is a very crisp and explicit sounding digital converter. Even compared to a current *HFC* favourite, Audiolab's M-DAC, it gives the sense of being the font of all detail. There's

masses of it, flooding out like flavour from a teabag! The 851D brims with information about the recording, from the precise location of all the instruments across the stereo soundstage, to their relative front-to-back spatiality. It locks instruments in the mix very boldly to precise points within the recorded acoustic, and never lets go. It seems very good on leading edges too, giving a very 'etched' sound that you can't fail to ignore.

Steely Dan's *Aja* comes over with tremendous clarity and impact. This is a fairly smooth and soft sounding track by the ultra compressed, computerised standards of modern recordings, but the Cambridge Audio really brings the music out of its shell. It gives a particularly upfront sound to the proceedings, although you'd never call it harsh. Singer Donald Fagen appears closer and more intimate than is often the case, on this track he usually sounds – to borrow one of his own phrases, "languid and bittersweet". Percussion is very tight and punchy; hi-hats thump hard and cymbals shimmer with metallic energy. This is a real seat of the pants sound.

Tonally, I find the Cambridge Audio to be a little on the 'well lit' side. It's not bright or hard, but it lacks the deep, dark, velvety tonality of Chord Electronics' Chordette Quite EX DAC, which can be found for only a few pounds more. Whereas the latter sounds quite sumptuous and silky, the Azur 851D is a good deal more upfront and in your face – think The Ramones to the Chord's Barry White. This isn't a criticism necessarily, but you'll not want to drop it into an already forward-sounding system. Feed the 851D a brightish recording like Ride's *Twisterella* and you'll feel every strum of the boys' guitar strings resound around the room, as well as the heavily EQ'd and compressed vocal tracks pushing out at you with a

vengeance. No shrinking violet, this! The switchable filters can help here, with the Linear setting coming over as the most forward sounding in my review system, and Steep being the smoothest. The others have a subtle effect, to varying degrees making the music marginally more effusive, but at the expense of a subtle amount of air and space.

In all fairness, a well chosen interconnect cable would help better here – and you'd be thinking more along Tellurium Q lines than Nordost. Give this DAC a good, well balanced recording, though, and it's in its

There's masses of detail, flooding out like flavour from a teabag

element. Yellow Magic Orchestra's *Technopolis* is a track I've listened to thousands of times, and I'm surprised to be honing in on small nuances I'd not quite heard before – little details like the subtly textured sound of the lead synthesiser, for example. Make no mistake, this is a very high resolution device.

What better than than feeding it with some hi-res music? Via USB 2.0 the 851D hooks up to my Mac without the need for a driver, giving sparkling 24-bit/192kHz sound. REM's *Texarkana* is rendered with dizzying amounts of detail – you have to get into dCS Debussy territory at nearly 10 times the price to really improve on what the Cambridge Audio gets out of the computer equivalent of the record groove. At the same time, feed it the beautiful, brooding *Snowflake* (24/96 WAV) by Kate Bush and it's once again impressing you with its spaciousness, and the rock-solid imaging within the recorded acoustic. That slight sense

CONNECTIONS



- 1 USB digital input
- 2 BNC coaxial digital in
- 3 AES/EBU digital in
- 4 Toslink optical digital in
- 5 Coaxial digital output
- 6 Control Bus input

Q&A

Sam Ellenby,
Product Manager, Audio Partnership



DP: What's the benefit of upsampling, in your view?

SE: We get to circumvent much of the processing that would normally take place within the DAC IC, their rather crude digital filtering algorithms and internal upsampling. This has a surprisingly detrimental effect on the maximum performance the DAC ICs are capable of reproducing. By implementing it inside an external DSP, we have far greater control and processing power available to reach a fundamentally superior alternative.

How does ATF2 differ from other upsampling processes?

The DSP guys at Anagram do some very clever stuff with noise shaping, pseudo random noise is injected into the data stream then cancelled in the analogue domain, this results in a linearity of 0.001dB from 0 to -130dBFS, the linearity graph of the 851D is straighter than my ruler!

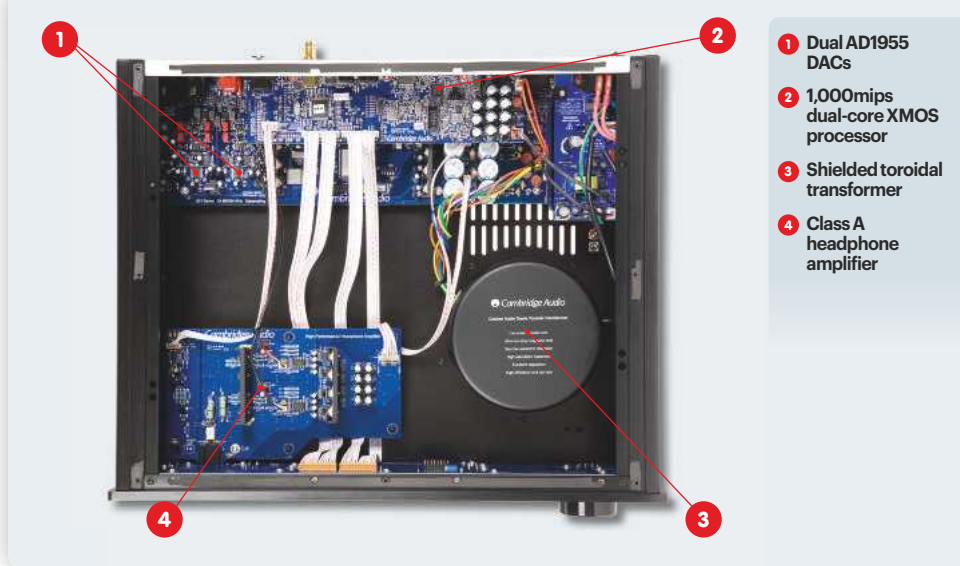
Why did you choose the Analog Devices AD1955 DAC?

We have done quite a bit of listening to the various DACs from every make you can imagine, and quite simply the AD1955s have the sweetest and cleanest sound. A lot of the very high performance ICs can have a brittle sound and some others have a warm, but unnatural sound. The AD1955s achieve our goals of accurate, uncoloured reproduction of the incoming signal.

Why doesn't your new DAC handle DSD?

With hi-res audio being in its infancy, we are quite concerned by competing formats undermining the significance of high-resolution audio. The sonic difference is largely imperceptible and we are yet to find a recording not available in the technically superior PCM format.

IN SIGHT



- 1 Dual AD1955 DACs
- 2 1,000mips dual-core XMOS processor
- 3 Shielded toroidal transformer
- 4 Class A headphone amplifier

of being 'brightly lit' subsides slightly with higher resolution digital files, the DAC seeming to fill out tonally and gain a bit more body. Bass isn't bad at 16-bit, but with hi-res it does get a touch more generous and better rounded, just as it should.

Bluetooth works well; the 851D gives a punchy rendition of Grace Jones' *Slave To The Rhythm* from an iPad. But just as the hi-res takes this DAC to warmer, fuller climes, so the Bluetooth takes it in the opposite direction. The lower resolution file quality makes for a slightly plasticky feel to the music and lighter low frequencies – although it certainly retains its rhythmic snap. Although not quite as 'hi-fi' as its proponents would have you believe, I'm a big fan of this connection method and regard it as really useful extra functionality for this DAC. There are some times when you just want to play a track or two while you're doing something else, and Bluetooth is brilliant for this.

This is an extremely good DAC then, giving a powerful, finely etched sound with excellent spatiality. But still not everyone will like it, because it's a little more of a 'Marmite' product than some. Its explicit and upfront sound may put some people off that look for a more mellifluous presentation. For example, the Chord Qute DAC seems better able to get into the rhythmic subtleties of a song, it swings along with a more instinctive feel for the groove on Sister Sledge's *We Are Family*, for example. By contrast, the Cambridge Audio goes out of its way to tell you all about the recording, whether the bass guitar had a slight buzz on a fret or if the second backing singer was

getting over a cold. It's a more technical, cerebral presentation; it's no less capable, but some will think it less satisfying. Tonally too, there are others that sound warmer and more sumptuous in the bass – something to keep in mind when system matching.

Conclusion

An excellent digital converter, it's one of the most detailed, insightful performers this side of the multi-thousand pound super-DACs, and many prospective purchasers will be dazzled by its fine sound, wide variety of connections and sturdy build. Moreover, if you've already got a power amplifier, it makes great sense to use it as a preamplifier, saving you money and giving better sound along the way. However, it's well worth auditioning it in your system before you buy, because it won't be to all tastes – musical and otherwise. I find it excels with electronic and classical material, and works best with sweeter, warmer sounding amplifiers and speakers ●

HOW IT COMPARES

The closest rival in functionality and design is Naim's DAC-VI DAC/preamplifier (£1,295). Being a half-size unit it's a good deal more compact, but packs a similar number of digital inputs, Bluetooth aside. It feels a lot nicer to use and to look at, but it lacks the excellent operational flexibility of the 851D. Sonically, the Naim is a little darker and smoother sounding, with a slightly more dynamic feel and generally more musical gait. It doesn't quite have the bite and incision of its larger rival, which is brimming with low-level detail. The Cambridge has more ultimate resolving power, but can't string everything altogether quite so cohesively.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful, clean, crisp, detailed sound; aptX Bluetooth
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Not as romantic sounding as some; no DSD
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Excellent value do-it-all DAC/preamp package
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



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Hi-Fi Choice



Dedicated to MM and high output cartridges - the £260 Gram Amp 2 SE

“Extracting both the music and emotion with utter conviction. The midrange textures were almost tangible, the treble sweet and airy, the bass deep and authoritative.”

Audio Video



Dedicated to low output MC - the £280 Gram Amp 3 Fanfare

Upgrade - the £185 PSU1 power supply steps these legends up a gear!

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“The optional bigger power supplies managed to lift the performance, particularly the sense of scale and openness.”

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Deeper love

Adding bass extension to a hi-fi system via a subwoofer is all about subtlety. **Lee Dunkley** is blown away by REL's latest

Anyone who thinks of themselves as an audiophile may be more than a little dismayed to see a subwoofer review in these pages, but as this month's *Guide to* explains (see p116-121), there's a lot to be gained from integrating a subwoofer into a two-channel hi-fi system that stretches beyond the reach of the majority of traditional loudspeakers. Subwoofers have come a long way in recent times, and with careful integration including a sub in your setup can have benefits on other elements of the sound aside from just extending its low-range performance.

REL has been at the top of the subwoofer game since the Welsh

company first appeared on the scene with models back in the nineties. It perfectly positioned itself for the home theatre boom, and the growth of the surround sound speaker market, with a range of dedicated subwoofer models that enabled movie fans to unleash multichannel soundtracks in their home.

The newly designed Serie S2 is part of a new range of models that REL calls Sub-Bass Systems, and has been three years in the making. The S2 is the baby of the new range at £1,000. Looking over the neat styling and flexible design it is easy to appreciate where your money is being spent, and it comes with a three-year warranty on parts and labour. The cabinet is

constructed from marine ply for better rigidity and superior bracing, and even the solid billeted piece of aluminium on the top face is said to aid the dispersion of unwanted energy from the cabinet.

Available in gloss piano black and white lacquer finishes, removing the front panel grilles reveals the front-firing 250mm long-throw paper mâché driver that is reinforced with a super alloy plate for greater rigidity. It's driven by a claimed 250W amplifier built by REL, which it says is designed to perfectly match and give the correct power for the relative size of the S2's cabinet and drivers. Underneath is a 250mm carbon fibre passive driver, and even the shape and height of the feet are designed to optimise performance.

The controls and connections on the rear panel have been simplified for ease of set up, and if you're not keen on trailing a cable from your amplifier to the sub there's a wireless receiver already built in. It uses the company's own Longbow uncompressed audio system to receive signals up to 15m away from the sending unit – available separately for £200. The sender utilises both high-level and

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT
REL Acoustics Serie S2

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
Active sub-bass system

WEIGHT
18.1kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
349 x 368 x 426mm

FEATURES

- 250mm long-throw active drive
- 250mm passive radiator
- Class D amplifier
- Claimed power: 250W

DISTRIBUTOR
REL Acoustics Ltd

TELEPHONE
01656 768777

WEBSITE
rel.net

LFE (where applicable), and is a simple pairing device with no need for the use of your home network hub, so although I don't use the S2 in this way it should be straightforward to connect to an amplifier and set up.

Sound quality

Positioning the S2 correctly in the room is without doubt the most important thing to get right. For optimum performance in my listening room I find it works at its best positioned in the corner of the room, placed in fairly close proximity to a pair of Dynaudio X38 floorstanding loudspeakers, and angled so that it fires diagonally down the length of

Nowhere is the inclusion of the REL more effective than with hi-res material

the room. After some fine tuning using the controls on the back with a broad range of musical styles containing natural low bass, I'm ready to rumble.

REL explains that because of the nature of the driver material it uses, it is necessary to spend some time running the unit in before it reaches optimum performance levels. Each model has already spent several hours being run-in before it is sent out, but REL recommends a few additional hours in situ and some reduction of the gain setting once it has had time to fully warm up.

The addition of the S2 into my system is a revelation, and instantly results in more drive and energy to the lowest register. It brings a

The height and curvature of the S2's feet are designed to aid performance



satisfying smile to my face when listening to Jennifer Warnes' *Ballad of The Runaway Horse*, giving the impression of a significantly fuller and larger soundstage, while the double bass that underpins the track sounds even more achingly sad than ever, showing the extent of low bass information I've been missing out on.

The inclusion of the REL with the Dynaudio floorstanders doesn't impact on their performance in any negative way whatsoever – it only appears to enhance their capabilities further and draw attention to the perception of the amount of midband detail. Lorde's *Royals* is very well extended and will show off the bass capabilities of any loudspeakers, but by adding in the S2 it's easy to

appreciate just how extended the bass line is, showing off the track's impressive range and highlighting the quality of the recording.

Nowhere is the inclusion of the REL more effective than with high-resolution material. A 24-bit/48kHz version of Jean Michel Jarre's *Oxygene* demonstrates just how rich and three-dimensional this track can sound, as the REL opens up its impressive scale and soundstage, breathing new life into the recording made in 1976.

Conclusion

The REL S2 merges beautifully into my system, adding a greater sense of scale and depth to tracks I thought I already knew. With some fine tuning, the S2 is effortlessly unobtrusive and impresses anyone that listens with its pace and insightfulness on recordings old and new. It shows off high-res audio to tremendous effect and will compliment any hi-fi system ●

CONNECTIONS



Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★	LIKE: Impressive musicality; smooth integration; flexibility
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★	DISLIKE: Slightly high price; the wireless transmitter is a £200 add-on
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★	WE SAY: Adds speed and dynamic energy to any system, and is musically engaging
FEATURES ★★★★★	

OVERALL

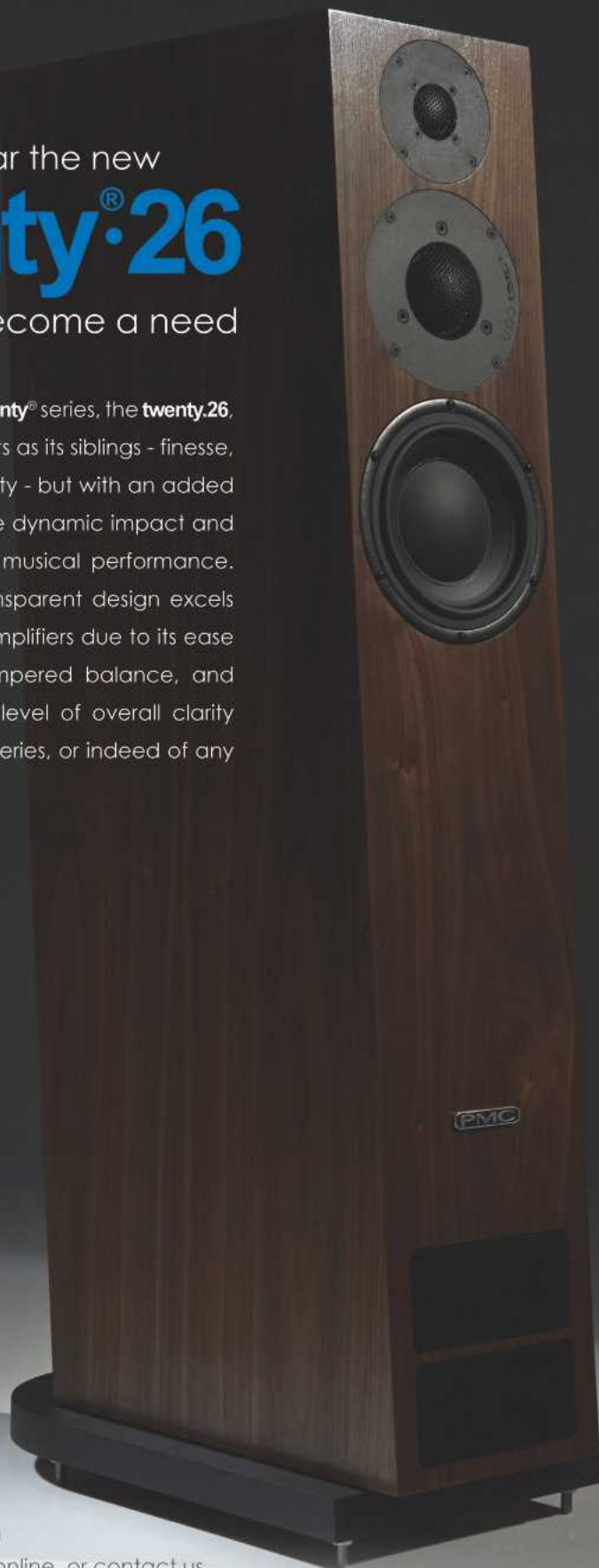




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- HiFi News, June '14

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Prime spot

The smallest member of the Morel SoundSpot family is a 2.1 package that has **Ed Selley** sitting comfortably

Last issue I tested the Morel SoundSpot 2.1 Ultra system and was impressed by the way this trio of speakers made music. While £699 is far from unreasonable in light of the excellent build and impressive performance, there is no getting away from the competition in the form of conventional stereo loudspeakers at the price.

In the case of the Primo system seen here – Morel’s smallest and most affordable 2.1 setup and most affordable speakers full stop – the competition this faces is still plentiful, but this is perhaps a happier stomping ground for such a system. There’s little arguing that you get a fair bit for your cash too. The SoundSpot SP-1 is smaller than the SP-2 and only mounts an 85mm driver, which raises the low-frequency cut off to a not desperately low 180Hz, but like the larger speaker it mounts its tweeter (12mm soft dome) concentrically to aid the focus and time alignment of the two drivers. The casework is metal like the SP-1 and in keeping with other speakers from the brand is effectively undamped except for the casework itself.

Slightly awkwardly for Morel, in some ways the SP-1 is a more convincing small speaker than its big brother. The foot can be used to mount the speaker both horizontally and vertically and as it is placed on the end of a hinged metal leg rather

than simply grinding up and down a fixed mount on the chassis, feels rather slicker in use than the SP-2. The SP-1 also boasts a proper pair of speaker terminals as opposed to the near useless holes on the SP-2. They won’t accept banana plugs and neither can you use hosepipe thicknesses of cable with it, but they are easy enough to use.

The Primo subwoofer partners the SP-1 and is a simpler affair than the swoopy-shaped PSW subs. The square cabinet is MDF and mounts a 203mm doped paper driver that is powered by a 100W (claimed) internal amplifier. Like the relationship of the SP-1 to the SP-2, the Primo sub is equipped with more input choices than the larger subs, but equally it doesn’t feel anything like as solid as the fibreglass models. The eagle eyed will notice when they look over the specs that the 150Hz upper register of the Primo sub doesn’t gel particularly well with the 180Hz cut off of the SP-1.

Sound quality

Connected to a Cambridge Audio 851A and Naim ND5 XS, and with the crossover of the Primo sub wound up as far as it will go, the good news is that there is no immediately obvious hole in the frequency response. Like the larger SP-2 system, the Primo manages to spend most of the time sounding like two speakers rather than three. With the higher crossover used in the Primo, it is important to

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Morel SoundSpot Primo 2.1

ORIGIN
Israel

TYPE
2.1 satellite/
subwoofer speakers

WEIGHT
Satellite: 1kg
Sub: 7kg

DIMENSIONS
100mm diameter
satellite enclosure
Sub: 300 x 300 x
300mm (WxHxD)

FEATURES
● Satellite: 12mm
tweeter, 85mm
mid driver
● Sub: 203mm
bass driver
● Quoted power:
60W RMS
● Available in gloss
black, white and
champagne finishes

DISTRIBUTOR
LEARS International

TELEPHONE
0208 4204333

WEBSITE
morelspeakers.
co.uk

keep the sub on axis with the front speakers, but if you do the result is convincing enough to not be at the forefront of your mind.

With material that is not overly fast like Oli Brown’s *Heads I Win, Tails You Lose*, the Morel is well integrated, capable of impressive scale for speakers so small and has a sense of fun that can sometimes be missing when a large powered sub is part of the picture. In fact, a partial weakness of the Primo sub is something of a blessing in disguise for it. As it never feels hugely powerful it tends to produce pleasantly refined bass rather than the slightly overboosted output that can plague so many more powerful designs. It lacks the last helping of pace, though, and more uptempo material can lead to it sounding fractionally behind the satellites. It is worth pointing out that at the £299 price point, there are few stereo pairs of speakers that can match the bass extension provided by the Primo.

The small size of the SP-1 satellites is less of an impediment to convincing stereo than might be expected providing you aren’t asking them to fill a hanger. They are fairly directional and that high crossover means they never sound especially full bodied, but they demonstrate good detail retrieval and a relaxed but reasonably faithful tonal balance. Pushed to high volume levels they can start to harden up a little, but the Primo is more than capable of a room-filling sound.

Conclusion

The great strength of the Primo is that it manages to rival similarly priced conventional stereo designs, but takes up an impressively small amount of space while it does so. The effective mounting options mean that anyone looking for a compact desktop system would be wise to audition this well thought out little system ●

Build is decent and comes in gloss black, white and champagne finishes



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★

FEATURES
★★★★★

LIKE: Smooth, well integrated sound; flexible placement and solid build

DISLIKE: Small soundstage; notional hole in the frequency response

WE SAY: A keenly priced and capable 2.1 system

OVERALL





Hi-res hero

Built like a battleship, the AK240 is Astell & Kern's most sensational portable hi-res player yet. **Adrian Justins** is impressed

No sooner had A&K started selling its flagship AK240 portable hi-res audio player than it announced it had also upgraded its two original portables, the AK100 and AK120 – reviewed issues 370 and 375 respectively. While the junior members of the AK club have been given new finishes and received a raft of performance enhancing measures (including Cirrus Logic CS4398 DACs) the AK240 remains the out and out leader of the gang. The defining feature of the flagship model is the presence of an extra XMOS processor, which provides native DSD support at both 2.8MHz and 5.6MHz. The cheaper models can playback 2.8MHz and 5.6MHz DSD files, but only by converting and downsampling to 176kHz PCM.

It won't take long to fill the AK240's 256GB of internal memory with DSD tracks (12.5min per GB), but there's enough space to accommodate 350 hours of music at 24/96 resolution. Plus the microSD card slot can provide a further 128GB of storage. The AK120 II's internal memory is 128GB, while the AK100 II's is 64GB. At £2,200 the AK240 is nearly three times more expensive than the AK100 II and £700 more than the AK120 II. To untrained eyes the AK240's off-beat and asymmetrical design arguably looks less appealing than one of the latest smartphones, but it's made from premium-quality materials including duralumin, which is an aircraft-grade alloy of aluminium, copper, magnesium and manganese. The shape and hard edges give it something of an industrial look and

feel. A premium leather case is supplied, although this is arguably to protect other items from the AK240 rather than the other way round, given the player's hardness and the sharpness of its edges. Using the case leaves the screen and external buttons and sockets accessible (aside from the SD card slot), and at least means you're less likely to cut a hole in your jacket pocket.

▶ DETAILS

PRODUCT
Astell & Kern AK240

ORIGIN
South Korea

TYPE
Hi-res digital audio portable player

WEIGHT
185g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
66 x 107 x 17.5mm

FEATURES
● 3.31in WVGA (480 x 800) AMOLED touchscreen
● Cirrus Logic CS4398 x2 (Dual DAC)
● 256GB memory, expandable to 386GB via Micro SD
● 16-24-bit playback at 44.1, 48, 88.2, 176.4 and 192kHz

DISTRIBUTOR
Computers Unlimited

TELEPHONE
0208 2008282

WEBSITE
unlimited.com
astellkern.com

Take control

The standout external feature is the volume adjustment dial, a finely milled cylinder that clicks as it rotates. If the screen is on, you see a lovely radar-style sweep overlay that changes position as the volume changes. There are tiny transport buttons on the opposite edge, a power switch on top and a home screen button built in to the screen. Annoyingly, you can't lock the player so it's possible to unintentionally change tracks, etc by accidentally activating the controls in your pocket.

Connections comprise a USB Micro-B input for charging and data transfer plus a dual-purpose 3.5mm headphone socket/digital optical audio output (note that DSD is not output optically) and a 2.5mm output for using balanced headphones with a special mini-XLR adapter cable.

Getting your tracks onto the player is a doddle, but the file transfer process is not iTunes compatible (so no automatic playlist copying), but dragging and dropping albums or tracks is simple. While the player is compatible with both ALAC and FLAC and can display metadata including resolution details, it automatically renames tracks according to their original ID3 download or rip name. I copy two versions of several tracks from Peter Gabriel's *So*, but my name alterations are deleted so only by selecting and playing each track can I tell my ALACs from my FLACs. I guess most people will only have one version of each track, but it's annoying if you've changed the names of any tracks.

The other option for transferring tracks is by streaming over wi-fi. With the MQS streaming server installed on your computer you can browse and select tracks of any resolution for download. I find dragging and dropping via USB a lot more efficient and a lot faster. Anyway, my computer isn't necessarily on when I want access to my music via the player.

The 3.31in WVGA (480 x 800) AMOLED screen is a decent size, has good clarity and is nicely responsive to touchscreen operation. It doesn't take too long to figure out how to navigate the player, with options to select music by track, artist, album, etc readily available. With the emphasis being on hi-res, within in each genre you have the option to view all types of tracks, DSD only or MQS only.

A row of tiny icons along the top screen shows the player's status for such matters as the EQ, gapless playback, DAC use (internal or external), wi-fi, Bluetooth, battery, etc. You drag the bar down to access and adjust the settings. The EQ (which is not available during DSD playback) has a Pro setting or you can

create your own settings by drawing your finger in a curve across the screen, which is slick and useful. Neither slick nor useful as far as Mac users are concerned is the AK240's ability to operate as an external USB DAC, which is limited to Windows XP, Windows 7 and Windows 8 only.

Sound quality

Even using unbalanced Audio-Technica headphones the AK240's DSD playback is simply music to my ears. Vivaldi's *La Stravaganza Concerto in D Minor Opus 4 no 8* is an incredibly decisive and utterly unblemished sound. The cellos are so clean and dynamic it feels as if they are playing inside your head and their

Don't Give Up has a cleanliness that transports you to the recording studio

terrific verve and energy almost lifts you off the floor, while the violins sound sweeter than a summer pudding served with clotted cream. Dropping (in terms of resolution) to a 16-bit/44.1kHz FLAC download of Vaughn Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* the marginal drop off in overall clarity (no doubt also affected by the fuller orchestration) is more than compensated for by a profoundly elegant and beautifully timed performance. The player takes the variation in loudness within the piece in its stride, with no danger of distortion during the crescendo.

Changing pace somewhat with an AAC download from iTunes of the Martin Garrix electro dance classic *Animals*, the AK240 again serves up the audiophile goods. The bass is meaty and powerful and the mids and highers of the synth are belted out with such gusto and tightness that

you can happily crank up the volume and listen to the track without fear of aural fatigue setting in.

The 24-bit/48kHz studio master download from Linn of Peter Gabriel's *So* is equally divine. The nuanced duet *Don't Give Up* with Kate Bush has a cleanliness and polish about it that transports you to the recording studio. It's not as finely detailed as top-flight DSD, but makes the original CD version seem muddy and strained by comparison. The punch in *Sledgehammer* meanwhile makes Vitali Klitschko's upper cut seem more like a slap from Charles Hawtrey.

Since hearing the AK240 with balanced headphones at a hi-fi show I have been eager to compare balanced with unbalanced in more controlled conditions. But while A&K's website espouses the virtues of using balanced cans, you need a replacement cable, which is terminated with an XLR jack, plus an XLR-to-2.5mm adapter. I have not been able to find the necessary parts for any of my headphones as even A&K doesn't routinely supply them. Still, even Sennheiser's senior acoustic engineer, Alex Grell uses his AK240 with unbalanced IE80s, because, as he told me at a recent press event: "It's too much hassle, and not needed."

Conclusion

Is the AK240 the ultimate hi-res portable? Not quite – operationally it's not perfect, but the build quality is insanely good and the AK240's ability to take medium-resolution files and squeeze every lost drop of sonic goodness out of them, in combination with its native DSD playback, makes it a truly wonderful player. It's madly expensive compared with most other players and the AK120 II should offer a comparable sub-DSD performance for a lot less dough. Still, if money is no object, the AK240 certainly warrants consideration ●

CONNECTIONS



- 1 Headphone/digital optical output
- 2 Balanced headphones jack
- 3 Power button

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Superb sound across all file formats

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Clunky operation; inelegant design; expensive

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Redefines what's possible from a portable audio player

FEATURES ★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★



Figure of eight

Monitor Audio's new Silver 8 floorstander is packed with go-faster goodies, and the result is a super sound, says **David Price**

Driven a new car lately? They're very good, aren't they? Even a relatively anonymous, middle priced Eurobox like a Ford Focus is now capable of safe, comfortable long distance travel, and is no slouch around country lanes. It's economical, nippy and practical, so what's not to like? Loudspeakers are getting this way too. Having started reviewing them in the mid-nineties, I come across fewer downright bad ones now. Perhaps it's because we're a bit further down the road, or up the

This is an excellent all-round loudspeaker that most will really enjoy

learning curve, to know how best to design a loudspeaker. Technology has helped massively here too, from cheaper and more powerful speaker measurement systems to a profusion of synthetic materials, which are so much better at the job for which they're intended.

Loudspeakers are getting a whole lot more sophisticated too – as the Monitor Audio Silver 8 attests. Not just in terms of its excellent cabinet finish but the different, complex cone and dome materials used in the drivers, and the choice of crossover components and wiring. In other words, things have only got better. The Silver series benefits from a range of nice goodies handed down to it from the company's impressive Platinum and Gold series. It's notable for being the cheapest real three-way design, as well as running two smallish bass drivers in parallel.

A good three-way speaker has an ease that no two-way, however great, can quite muster. To extend the car analogy, you can tune up a small

engine but ultimately there's no substitute for cubic capacity in the power stakes. A separate tweeter, midrange and bass unit will give an ease to a speaker that's easy to hear, and also it takes the crossing over work out of the critical midband region where it's all too easy to hear. That's why Monitor Audio has made the S8 a three-way with the addition of a 100mm midrange unit, and also why it has fitted two 165mm bass units. Running them in parallel lets the speaker shift a decent amount of air and retain its narrow dimensions.

Importantly, though, the midband driver is the same – albeit slightly smaller – unit as the bass drivers. This will provide not only a good tonal match, but it should keep good phase too, and have similar dispersion characteristics. All are C-CAM RST types, a catchy acronym for Ceramic Coated Aluminium Magnesium with Rigid Surface Technology. Roughly translated, this means a thin hybrid metal cone that has been dimpled to resist bending. Metal cones are stiff and light, but can come a cropper in the distortion department because metal isn't the least resonant material yet invented – hence the need for the RST. The tweeter uses a 25mm C-CAM dome, so again you get a tonal consistency that you'd lose if Monitor Audio had opted for, say, a silk dome. It vents internally around the outside of the magnet system into a large rear-loading chamber above the separate midband chamber.

The main part of the cabinet is the twin rear reflex-ported bass unit section. The box is 20mm MDF throughout, and sports bolt-through driver bracing, plus additional radial and cross-bracing, to stop it competing with the drive units as a sound source. It certainly feels a good deal more rigid than many at the price. Finally, the crossover uses carefully selected components,

including polypropylene film capacitors, air core and laminated steel core inductors.

Sound quality

The Silver 8 is surprisingly unfussy. I stand it about 30cm from the rear wall, gently toed-in and it sings. It has a surprisingly clean and neutral sound – unlike some rivals that also use metal coned drivers. Indeed, if anything it is ever so slightly on the warm side, and certainly able to live with a lively sounding source or amplifier. I'd judge it to have a perfect tonal balance considering the kit it's likely to be used with.

The Silver 8 sounds wonderfully integrated and all-of-a-piece. Thomas Dolby's *One Of Our Submarines Is Missing* comes over with a combination of detail and decorum that I simply hadn't expected at this price. This is an early eighties analogue recording, and I am able to discern the very subtle tape hiss in the background, which isn't something all similarly priced designs do, yet above this the various instruments separate out beautifully. Bass is strong and well articulated, midband crisp yet smooth and the treble beautifully detailed.

The Silvers image superbly; they provide a broad spread of sound and you don't need to sit exactly on-axis ▶

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Monitor Audio Silver 8

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker

WEIGHT
23.3kg

DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)
185 x 1,000 x 323mm

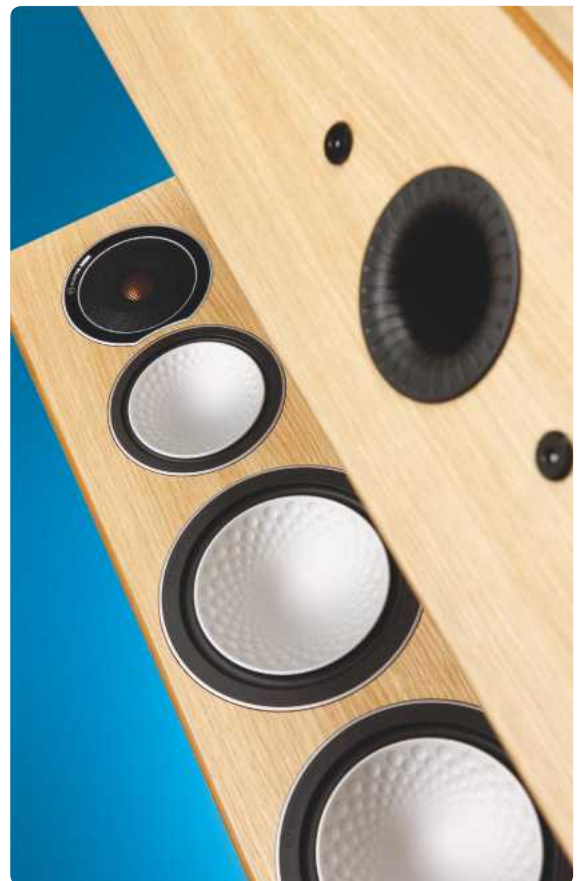
FEATURES
● 1x 25mm C-CAM dome tweeter
● 1x 100mm C-CAM midrange unit
● 2x 165mm C-CAM RST bass units
● Quoted sensitivity 90dB/1W/1m

DISTRIBUTOR
Monitor Audio Ltd

TELEPHONE
01268 740580

WEBSITE
monitoraudio.co.uk

The Silver 8s are available in a choice of fine quality wood veneers or high gloss finishes



Q&A

Dean Hartley

Technical director, Monitor Audio



DP: How does the new Silver range improve on its predecessor?

DH: As a whole, it has become more sonically refined. Even though some of the models look quite similar to their predecessors, the new drivers and tweeters have been developed from the ground up. The motor/magnetics have been refined to provide better damping and we have raised the overall impedances of most models to provide an easier drive, while maintaining good sensitivity. In the case of the Silver 8's predecessor (Silver RX8); it was a 2.5-way three driver model. Although it had great bass output, the LF extension was limited by the large combined piston area in a relatively small cabinet volume. It was equivalent to three 6.5in drivers working in the same air load. The new Silver 8 has only two 6.5in drivers working in a similar air volume. So each driver has more volume and is able to reach down lower and hence the overall system tuning is lower. The midrange chamber is a small damped enclosure taking up a very small space.

What benefits does a three-way design confer?

It gives better clarity in the midrange, because the driver is only allowed to work a smaller bandwidth and so can be made more efficient and optimised for mid-frequencies only. In the case of the Silver 8, we use a special midrange driver with underhung voice coil winding. This ensures the voice coil always has consistent magnetic force applied to it, within the power handling of the system. The result is significantly reduced modulation and extremely low distortion. The other main benefit is with a smaller mid-range driver, the off-axis performance can be improved to provide a more consistent directivity pattern and transition between drivers.

IN SIGHT



- 1 25mm C-CAM dome tweeter
- 2 Bass reflex port
- 3 100mm C-CAM midrange cone
- 4 165mm C-CAM RST bass unit

HOW IT COMPARES

B&W's 683 S2 (HFC 386) is the Monitor Audio's closest rival, costing just £50 less. It feels an awful lot cheaper though, not least because of a rather unlovely vinyl wrap to the cabinet. Despite the finish, the B&W's box is pretty sturdy and is a proper three-way just like the S8. Its sound isn't that dissimilar, but the B&W uses its own Kevlar drivers, which have a distinctively dry and crisp sound whereas the Monitor Audio is lighter, warmer and more subtle. It gives a more precise and transparent sound, but the B&W has just a touch more bounce to the proceedings. Still, feed the S8 some smooth classical, jazz or soul and it is sublime.

to get everything in all its glory. Rather than firing the sound out like a sniper rifle, they're closer to a bank job-spec sawn-off shotgun, dispersing all over. This gives a seamless, almost electrostatic-like sound in some respects; it spreads out easily into the room and the bass, mid and treble driver integrate better than most.

Not only is the sound clean, it is fast too – yet it gets its speed from its excellent tracking of transients rather than any sort of artificial tonal edge or 'zing'. It gives the very pleasant combination of openness and musicality, which proves infectious on Black Uhuru's *Party Next Door*. The 8s serve up large tracts of bass, which is tight and well articulated, with no sense of the speakers falling over their own feet, so to speak. Further up, that midband driver kicks in at 500Hz to give an even and spacious sound until the tweeter joins the party at 2.7kHz. You don't hear the transition and the impression the speaker gives is that you're listening to a large point-source. It's not quite as holographic as, say, a Tannoy Dual Concentric but it's not far off, and far better than most price rivals in its ability to conjure up a cavernous soundstage.

Indeed, one great talent of the 8 is its ability with vocals; there's a sense of natural ease that makes even the most challenging female voices a pleasure. The harsh, nasal tones of The Cookie Crew from Beatmasters' *Who's In The House* are surprisingly palatable with a wonderful sledgehammer bass set behind some frantic keyboard work and staccato drum machine beats. That dome tweeter really is very good, and marries so well with the midrange driver that you'd be forgiven for thinking you were hearing a far more expensive speaker.

Interestingly, the Silver 8 has no real weaknesses. Like the aforementioned modern Ford car, it doesn't hurt, offend, frighten or intimidate – it just gets on the job, does it well, and doesn't make a fuss. The only criticisms you can make is that it's not quite as open, three dimensional or powerful as other, more expensive and larger designs. At its price though, to criticise would be churlish, because it's just so darned competent at everything you can throw at it. Perhaps some would say it lacks a little character, that it doesn't editorialise as much as some price rivals. It certainly gives a less stylised or contrived sound, but I definitely don't find it dull.

Conclusion

As any good football manager knows, the easiest way to win is not to lose – and the Monitor Audio Silver 8 is an arch exponent of this. It simply doesn't give goals away gladly; there's little weakness on show in any respect. This is an excellent all-round loudspeaker that most will really enjoy. Those seeking a characterful sound might have less time for it, but people wanting a really capable design that gets on with the job of playing music in a subtle yet sophisticated way will love it ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY



LIKE: Clean, open, detailed and musical sound; finish

VALUE FOR MONEY



DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

BUILD QUALITY



WE SAY: Superbly competent all-round performer

EASE OF DRIVE



OVERALL





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Heavenly bodies

Elipson's Planet LW speaker now has an all new interface and **Ed Selley** wonders if their potential has been fully realised

It is easy to take one look at a product and jump to conclusions about what it was designed to do and the intentions and thinking behind it. One look at the science-fiction prop styling and lustrously shiny finish of the Elipson Planet and you would be forgiven for writing it off as some sort of fancy lifestyle bauble. Two spheres, the size and shape of a steampunk astronaut helmet can only have resulted from a serious need for attention surely?

The reality is that, the Elipson Planet is to French broadcasting what the Rogers LS3/5 is in the UK. The Planet has appeared in various versions over the last 50 years. The

most recent version, the Planet L, appeared in 2011 (*HFC* 350) and quickly revealed itself to be a supremely capable speaker. The spherical cabinet was certainly eye catching, but also allows for the greatest internal volume with the smallest external one while helping to keep resonance at bay.

With the passive Planet L proving very able indeed, it stands to reason that an active version sounds promising too. The Planet LW here was actually launched in 2012 and combines the 6.5in doped paper mid bass driver and the soft dome tweeter used in the Planet L with the IcePower Class D amps that were originally specified in the Music

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Elipson Planet LW and Audio Bridge

ORIGIN
France/China

TYPE
Two-way wireless loudspeaker system

WEIGHT
Speaker: 7.5kg
Audiobridge: 0.4kg

DIMENSIONS
Speaker:
290mm diameter
Audiobridge:
160 x 36 x 160mm
(WxHxD)

FEATURES
● Coaxial driver arrangement - 165mm mid with 25mm tweeter
● Built-in Class D amplifier
● Quoted power output: 100W
● aptX Bluetooth receiver

DISTRIBUTOR
BBG Distribution Ltd

TELEPHONE
01923 205600

WEBSITE
elipson.com/en

Centre all-in-one system. The most interesting technical decision taken by Elipson was to fit a stereo amp to both speakers. This means that each driver has its own amplifier channel, which is placed behind the crossover and makes the LW a truly self-contained active.

The reason that *Hi-Fi Choice* held off from reviewing the LW at launch stemmed from the other decision that Elipson took in the design of its speaker. The LW has no physical connection on the chassis. Instead the LWs use a closed wireless network to communicate firstly with one another and then with a transmitter. This took the form of a pair of dongles, one USB and one 30-pin Apple connector. These were both capable of transmitting a lossless signal, but left the Planet LW feeling more like a lifestyle product than a true hi-fi one.

To try and make good on correcting this perception, Elipson has now released the Audio Bridge. This is a small input box that allows for the connection of sources via either an analogue RCA or optical input. A nod to convenience is also present via the fitment of an aptX Bluetooth module as well. The Bridge is paired to two LWs (meaning that existing units can have one added), but if you turn it off, you can still use the supplied dongles too. This gives you a reasonable if not outstanding

The Elipsons sound nearly as good as they look and they look mighty fine

selection of inputs to choose from. The only catch is that the Bridge doesn't increase the sampling rate on offer, which remains locked at 16/48 meaning that however hi-res your source material, the Elipson will only ever work up to this rate.

The rest of the news is almost entirely good, however. The Planet LW is every bit as immaculately finished as its passive brother. This means it feels very substantial and the attention to detail is impressive. The paint in particular is exceptional with a depth and shine that considerably more expensive equipment can fail to match. Each speaker is hefty and almost entirely inert further aiding the benefits of the spherical form. Only the small and plastic remote and the slow volume ramp spoil the genuinely high end feel to them. The Audio Bridge is small and relatively light, but the construction is perfectly satisfactory.

The matching accessories are impressive too. Each LW is supplied with a mounting ring to place it on a flat surface but Elipson also offers dedicated floorstands, wallmounts and an amazing-looking ceiling mount as options too. These various fittings mean that a pair of Planet LWs and an Audio Bridge should be easy enough to accommodate although it will require three mains connections to make it work.

Sound quality

You should be prepared to rustle up enough plugs, though. After performing the simple pairing setup and with a Naim ND5 XS connected to the analogue input of the Bridge, the LWs demonstrate real ability. The most interesting part of this is that the LW is subtly different to its passive brethren. This is most apparent in the bass response, which is exceptional for a speaker of this size. There is

depth and control that gives the Elipson tremendous punch and drive for a speaker of this size. This is partly down to the bass port, which manages to move a significant amount of air without becoming audible itself. The authority this lends to music that needs a little low-end shove is considerable. Elipson quotes the same frequency response for the passive L as it does the active LW, but in use, the LW reaches its lower numbers with a greater effortlessness than the bald numbers suggest.

The bass might be notable, but it serves to finish an extremely clean

A beautifully implemented and impressively flexible active speaker

and consistent frequency response. The Elipson has seemingly been set up to be comparatively smooth and civilised, but this doesn't prevent the detail retrieval and tonal accuracy being notably good too. The Planet LW manages to make excellent use of the concentric driver principle in that there is a very wide sweet spot that results from placing them roughly 2m apart with slight toe-in. This never becomes overly diffuse, however, and there is always a very definite sense of the positioning of musicians and instruments as well as a sense of front-to-back depth. Some rivals can sound a little more exciting, but few are as satisfying to listen to long term.

Most of these attributes are available via the dongles, but what is interesting is that some comparative tests with lossless FLAC played via laptop and dongle and then via the Naim into the Audio Bridge do marginally favour the latter. As the Audio Bridge will be carrying out

processing on all the inputs, even the analogue one, in order to transmit wirelessly to the speakers, this is a little surprising, but it does seem that the Audio Bridge does this with sufficient transparency to retain some of the character of the source equipment. This means that as well as offering a bit more flexibility in terms of input choice, the Bridge does eke out a little more performance than the dongles can – although, of course, you can still turn the Bridge off and pair with the dongles if you want.

Conclusion

There is a great deal to like about the way that the Planet LWs go about making music and this is given considerable extra flexibility thanks to the Audio Bridge. In a perfect world, there would be a slightly wider choice of inputs and the wireless connection would not preclude using hi-def audio, but the first issue can be alleviated depending on your source equipment while you will have to decide for yourself if you feel that the lack of hi-res will be a problem. For me at least, these issues don't detract significantly from a beautifully implemented and impressively flexible active speaker. ●

HI-FIChoice

OUR VERDICT

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Powerful and refined sound; good looks; beautiful build
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Limited inputs; no hi-res; fiddly remote control
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WESAY:** An innovative and entertaining product that is slightly specialised, but capable of great results
- FEATURES** ★★★★★

OVERALL



CONNECTIONS



- 1 Bass port
- 2 Figure of 8 mains lead connection
- 3 USB input for Bluetooth updates
- 4 Analogue RCA inputs
- 5 Optical input
- 6 Pairing button

THE BEATLES AT THE MOVIES



THE BEATLES AT THE MOVIES

As *A Hard Day's Night* celebrates its 50th anniversary, **Simon Berkovitch** and **JT Rathbone** break out the popcorn to celebrate the Fab Four's flicks

Judging by the number of candles on the cake in 2014, the fire brigade are going to be on standby. Former Beatle Ringo Starr celebrates his 74th birthday on 7 July in the 50th anniversary year of the UK (and world) premiere of a musical feature film so influential that it is still imitated, mimicked and parodied half a century later.

We are, of course, talking about the godfather of all modern pop movies: *A Hard Day's Night*, a motion picture without which there would have been no *Monkees* TV series (definitely), no *This is Spinal Tap* (probably) and no *Spice World* (if only).

In fact, apart from occasional multi-artist gems such as *The Girl Can't Help It* and *Rock, Rock, Rock!* and *King Creole*, Elvis Presley's one convincing foray into serious film-making, from the previous decade, The

Beatles' first film raised the bar for pop movies so high that few, if any, subsequent celluloid outings have matched it. The Rolling Stones' *Gimme Shelter*, Slade's powerful and underrated *Flame*, and Python Eric Idle and Bonzo Dog Neil Innes' Beatles pastiche *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash* are perhaps three of the few that followed that even come close.

The Criterion Collection is marking the anniversary with a special, three-disc dual DVD and Blu-ray edition – due out on 24 June in the US – promising a new digital restoration and a plethora of extras and options, including the digital debut of the film with its original mono soundtrack. The director Richard Lester-approved restoration comes with three audio options: the aforementioned monoaural soundtrack, as well as newly created stereo and 5.1 surround mixes supervised by sound

producer Giles (son of George) Martin at Abbey Road Studios. These are presented in uncompressed monoaural, uncompressed stereo and DTS-HD Master Audio on the Blu-ray release.

In addition, the soundtrack LP as it originally appeared in the US has recently made its official debut on CD in both mono and stereo, as part of Capitol's *The US Albums* mammoth 13-disc box set – a long overdue addition to the group's digital catalogue (with the UK version of the album having appeared in remastered form a few years back).

In the first instalment of our two-part feature, we trace the black and white masterpiece from its initial inception to its subsequent global impact, and look at the attempt to follow it, in glorious Technicolor: 1965's *Help!*. Happy birthday, Ringo.



A Hard Day's Night

Tagline: "The greatest rock 'n' roll comedy adventure"

When United Artists approached Brian Epstein in 1963 proposing they produce a feature film starring the Fab Four, they were essentially after one thing; a soundtrack LP featuring exclusive material. In a canny move, the film company took advantage of the various muddled licensing agreements then in place for the band's US releases, and although they had yet to sell records in any great quantity Stateside (this being a couple of months before Capitol belatedly took up its option and helped make *I Want To Hold Your Hand* number one on the Billboard singles chart), its record division saw great sales potential in a spin-off soundtrack. They figured they would recoup the money lost on a cheaply made exploitation movie through LP sales.

It was with this in mind that United Artists offered Epstein what eventually became a three-picture contract and quickly set in motion plans for the production of *The Beatles' first* – and for many, best – feature film. A meagre budget of £180,000 was assigned and Liverpoolian playwright Alun Owen found himself fashioning a script that would capture the band's unique wit, creating exaggerated versions of their four personalities for the big screen.

A hard day's hit

Against this somewhat cynical background, it's a minor miracle that the film – which hit the silver screen in 1964 – turned out to be a minor gem. Just as music critics had been stunned into writing respectful reviews when confronted by the brash freshness of *The Beatles' first LP*, many of their film-reviewing colleagues now found themselves having to admit that *A Hard Day's Night* was actually quite good, one enthusiastic scribe from *Village Voice* declaring it "the *Citizen Kane* of jukebox musicals".

Much of the credit for this must go to the film's innovative (and at the time virtually unknown) director, Richard 'Dick' Lester. A UK-based American – who, like George Martin, had previously worked with Beatles' favourites The

Goons – Lester not only assembled a fine and varied cast of character actors, such as Wilfrid 'Albert Steptoe' Bramble as Paul's grandfather – around the four leads, but also gave the picture a look all of its own. His innovative style set a template for music films to this day, particularly in his use of multiple camera angles for the live performance sequences. The director even later had the epithet 'Father of the music video' bestowed on him by MTV. "I demand a blood test!" he wryly retorted.

United Artists recouped its modest outlay many times over from the film revenue alone, but it also showed foresight by acquiring the US marketing rights to the accompanying LP, rush-released weeks before the film's US premiere, shifting a staggering million-plus copies in four days.

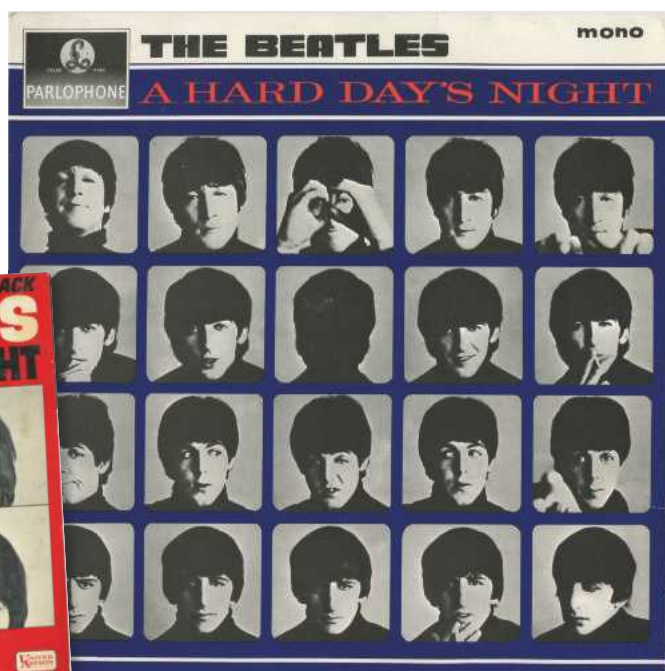
So what did UA get for its money? Although still firmly grounded in a pop mode, both musically and lyrically, the new recordings showed a growing maturity in both composition and arrangement. Acoustic guitars, buried in the mix on their first two LPs, now often come to the fore, and the first

One scribe from *Village Voice* declared it "the *Citizen Kane* of jukebox musicals"

use was made of George Harrison's new Rickenbacker 360 12-string electric – its trademark sound soon becoming ubiquitous on contemporary records.

The Rickenbacker was also the instrument that contributed the title track's infamous opening guitar chord, provoking nearly 40 years of debate among guitarists until Harrison revealed it to be "Fadd9 with a G on top" in 2001. But whatever it is, this powerful intro became instantly recognisable – much

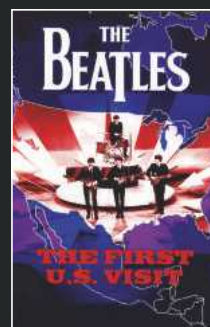
The original UK mono album (right) and its US counterpart (below)



WHAT'S HAPPENING!

The fifth – and first – Beatles movie...

There are long-running debates among Beatles fans as to who was the fifth Beatle. Stu Sutcliffe? Brian Epstein? Derek Taylor? In truth, all three men lay claim to the title. But when it comes to the fifth Beatles movie, there is only one true contender – and chronologically it was their very first.



Lets clarify things: *Shea Stadium* and *Magical Mystery Tour* were both made for TV, but the Maysles brothers' fascinating documentary, *What's Happening! The Beatles in the USA*, about the Fab Four's first Stateside trip (still unavailable on DVD in its original form) was shot on 16mm black and white stock and intended for US movie theatres.

The film views like a blueprint for *A Hard Day's Night*, filming of which began a few weeks later, and much has been made of the many similarities, though in truth the close proximity of the two productions must allow for some coincidence. The main difference is that in Albert and David Maysles' film, the train journeys, press conferences, nightclub scenes and live performances are all quite real.

Around an hour of the footage was incorporated into the 1991 release *The First US Visit* (pictured above). The brothers went on to shoot the acclaimed *Gimme Shelter* film, documenting The Rolling Stones' infamous free concert at Altamont, five years later.

to the delight of producer George Martin who had requested "a particularly strong and effective beginning", knowing it would open both the film and the accompanying LP.

A Hard Day's Night was also the first time the group had recorded a whole album using EMI's recently installed four-track machines, allowing for more easily double-tracked vocals and extra overdubs where needed.

THE BEATLES AT THE MOVIES



The boys wave to their many fans, and the movie's tie-in paperback (left)

This added a depth, absent from some of their more brittle-sounding early recordings, which perfectly suited the more adventurous arrangements. Despite still largely basic subject matter – the ups and downs of young love – it was clear that Lennon and McCartney were honing their songwriting skills and, compositionally, had travelled a significant distance since *From Me To You* had sped up the charts barely a year earlier.

The US soundtrack featured eight new Beatles songs, plus four George Martin

instrumentals. One of these, *Ringo's Theme* – a version of the previous year's Beatles track *This Boy* – became a minor hit single in its own right. The LP also featured one song not featured in the movie at all. *I'll Cry Instead* was originally intended to accompany the celebrated sequence when the group break out of the TV studio and horse around on a playing field in double time. To this end, the track was artificially extended by a minute to fit the already filmed segment.

Can't buy me love

During post-production, however, Dick Lester substituted their recent transatlantic number one hit, the more upbeat *Can't Buy Me Love*, considering it more appropriate. *I'll Cry Instead* eventually played behind the end credits when the film was released on home video in the eighties.

I'll Cry Instead also featured in its original form on the UK version of the *A Hard Day's Night* LP, which was even better than its American counterpart. For the home release, out went their producer's instrumentals, with the seven movie songs now constituting side one. The second side featured six non-film tracks, mostly recorded a month or so later. The B-side of the LP displayed The Beatles' most accomplished work to date in the shape of ballads *Things We Said Today* and *I'll Be Back*, and Lennon's searing, sneering *You Can't Do That* – arguably the best of the group's early rockers.

And the classic UK LP sleeve? A neat bit of design, it utilised multiple images of the band members as if from a reel of celluloid film, though it was in fact shot in the much less glamorous setting of a railway station photo booth.



Help!

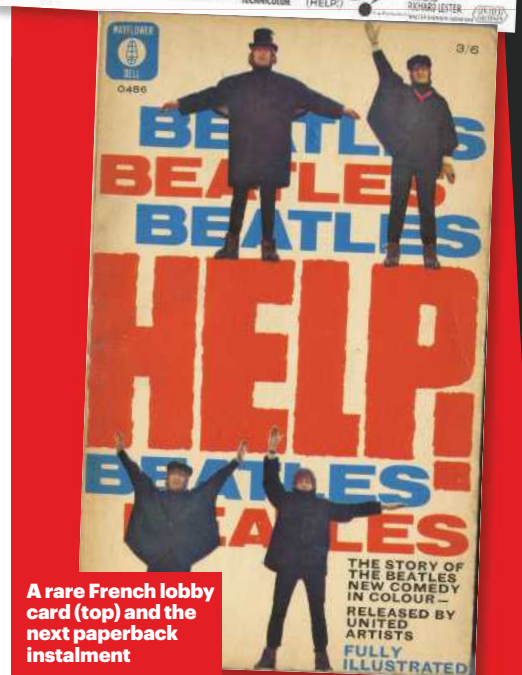
Tagline: "Stop Worrying!
HELP! Is On The Way"

Day's Night, that United Artists was keen to exercise its option and get the group's second feature into production as soon as possible. So, less than nine months after their debut premiered, the clapperboard snapped on the follow-up movie: *Help!*

This time there would be no lucrative soundtrack for the film company – EMI's American division having finally gained exclusive rights to The Beatles' releases – but having done such good business with the first film in cinemas worldwide, and with the world-conquering foursome seemingly in a position where they could do no wrong, the budget was virtually doubled



LES BEATLES Au secours! TECHNICOLOUR (HELP!) DIRECTED BY RICHARD LESTER



A rare French lobby card (top) and the next paperback instalment

Members of the band have spoken of long and tedious delays and endless retakes

this time out. Filming took place in far more exotic locations than Newton Abbott and Notting Hill Gate: the first scenes of their sophomore effort began shooting in the more glamorous surroundings of the Bahamas. And it was even shot in glorious colour. Sixties, start swinging!

Essentially 'a good guys on the run from the bad guys' romp, Lester blended plenty of Marx Brothers-inspired tomfoolery, some very English Goons-like humour, and a heavy nod to another of United Artists' contemporary successes: the James Bond ▶

The sheer volume of live and personal appearances expected of The Beatles at the height of their popularity, not to mention the demands of their record label EMI for ever more fresh product, cannot be overstated. No slouches, in 1964 the group had toured England, Scotland, France, Scandinavia, North America, Canada and the UK again – this time extensively – recorded 34 new tracks (24 of which were original compositions), made more than 15 live television appearances (including a dedicated special, *Around The Beatles*), eight BBC radio shows and charmed their way through countless interviews. Resting on their laurels they most certainly weren't.

And then there was the little matter of making their first film. Such was the unprecedented – for a pop group, at least – critical and commercial success of *A Hard*

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THE BEATLES AT THE MOVIES

movies. With this expanded palette, *Help!* inevitably lacked the claustrophobic intimacy of its monochrome predecessor, but – although somewhat forced in places and the plot particularly supermodel svelte – was nevertheless enjoyable fare, containing some well-filmed set pieces for the group's new original songs. And that, essentially, was *Help!*'s main purpose.

The director, retained at The Beatles' request, did his best with the script's flimsy premise and again gathered another stellar supporting cast, including Roy Kinnear, Eleanor Bron (playing the only true heroine of any Fabs' film) and Victor Spinetti, who'd impressed the group sufficiently in *A Hard Days Night* to claim a second prominent role in the new film.

A hard day's slog

The more elaborate sets and scenarios, however, demanded harder work and more concentration. Members of the band have spoken in interviews of long and tedious delays and endless retakes due in many instances to their own mischief and often mildly inebriated state: apparently, marijuana had replaced scotch and Cokes as their tippable of choice. George Harrison confessed that they often pushed the talented and amiable Lester to the limits of his patience.

In truth, the group were tired. They should have had a break at the beginning of 1965. Instead, they were given just four weeks before recording a new LP, shooting another movie and performing live concerts began again – as well, of course, as the seemingly endless round of interviews and promotional appearances. They would eventually slow the pace of this treadmill, but for now the great juggernaut of fame coasted on.

Despite this inevitable fatigue, their music was progressing at more than a steady pace. Within the year they would record and release the first of their true LP masterpieces – *Rubber Soul* – but the best of the songs from the *Help!* sessions nevertheless showed both a fresh approach and eagerness to explore the recording process further.

Indeed, the band's first release of 1965 – *Ticket To Ride* – immediately signalled bold new sonic sensibilities with its chiming guitar riff, laconic pace and a hypnotic rhythm. John Lennon, the song's principal author, was also pushing the Beatles' musical envelope with the gorgeous *You've Got To Hide Your Love Away* – a sparsely recorded acoustic ballad with just tambourine and a flute cameo joining the singer and accompanying guitars – and the deceptively

The best songs from the *Help!* sessions showed an eagerness to explore the recording process

sophisticated *You're Gonna Lose That Girl*, gloriously highlighting the group's immaculate harmonies. Both songs heralded the tone of some of his sterling compositions on *Rubber Soul*.

Lennon also provided *Help!*'s memorable title track. The film had originally gone under the awkward working title of 'Eight Arms To Hold You', that name even appearing on the label of the US *Ticket To Ride* 45. Late in production, however, the more snappy *Help!* was substituted – and he was quickest off the mark to write a song of that name. A breezy, but mildly melancholy ditty, it featured unusually soul-searching lyrics for a 1965 pop song, but nevertheless topped record charts around the world when issued as a tie-in single.

As before, the American and British

The US LP (left) and a scarce Spanish EP (below)

THE BEATLES AT SHEA STADIUM



Documenting the prehistoric days of stadium rock

The Beatles' first concert at the William A Shea Municipal Stadium in New York on 15 August 1965 was groundbreaking for a number of reasons – including being the first ever pop concert to be performed and filmed in a large arena, ushering in a new era of enormous crowds and sound systems.

The PA they and their fellow acts had to contend with that day, however, was a far cry from those later giant Marshall stacks. The venue was home to the New York Mets baseball team and the sound was relayed through the decidedly lo-fi Tannoy's used for match announcements.

This – combined with their weedy amplifiers and the relentless screaming of a large percentage of the 55,600 fans, a record audience at the time – rendered any music virtually inaudible. That the group managed to actually keep in time with each other was a minor miracle, but the resulting recording was poor, and necessitated extensive re-dubbing back in London before the documentary could be completed.

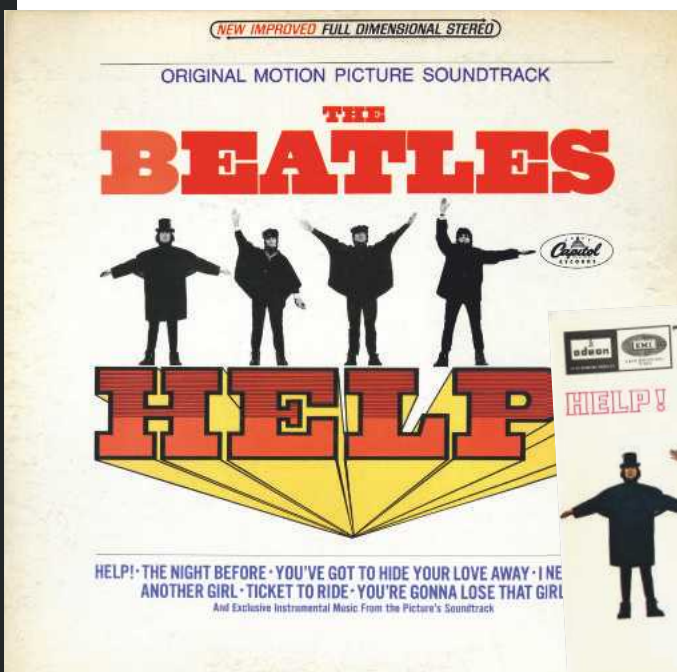
It eventually premiered on BBC TV in May the next year, though US fans had to wait another eight months to see it – by which time The Beatles had already returned to Shea just a few days before their final concert in August 1966.

The soundtrack remains officially unreleased, but the sleeve of this eighties' vinyl bootleg of the concert (above) is a neat tribute to the US *Help!* soundtrack LP (despite the poor sound quality).

LP releases differed greatly in appearance and content. Once more, the American album featured the new movie songs alongside some incidental selections, courtesy of film composer Ken Thorne, and included a snippet of John Barry's James Bond theme, as well as the first appearance of sitar on a Beatles record. It was apparently while fooling around with the latter instrument on set – a prop in a restaurant scene – that George Harrison's passion for sitars and Indian music in general was first ignited.

Side two of the domestic version again contained non-soundtrack songs, including their last cover versions, and Paul McCartney's deathless *Yesterday*, the first Beatle recording to feature only one Beatle. There would be more in the future...

Help! very much marked the end of an era. There would be no new film in 1966: instead the group would finally get to concentrate their creative energies solely on the recording studio ●



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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.



NEVILLE ROBERTS

EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

Retired NHS director, electronics engineer and physicist Neville is very much into valve technology. He's a classical music lover and a serious vinyl junkie.



PATRICK CLEASBY

EXPERTISE: TECH GEEK

Patrick works in a high-level technical support role in the broadcast industry, when not fiddling with his networked music collection and a rapidly expanding shelf of vinyl LPs.



TIM JARMAN

EXPERTISE: ENGINEER

Electronics boffin Tim drives a 1959 Beetle and maintains the best B&O resource on the internet. When he's not rebuilding faulty review kit, he enjoys scouring audiojumbles.



JASON KENNEDY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER

Former HFC editor Jason loves music so much that he has dedicated his life to finding the ultimate system. A long time vinyl nut he also enjoys a well-streamed file.

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LETTER OF THE MONTH

➤ New for old

First, I love your magazine and try to get my hands on it whenever I am in England. I love the online offerings too.

I imagine many of your readers own vintage (ie pre-1980) stereo equipment, yet it is difficult to be sure how one should pair this equipment with modern speakers. My question is: What should one look for when buying new speakers for an old system, say a Marantz or McIntosh preamp/amp? These setups are generally praised for their warm sound. Is it, therefore, better to look for warm or lush sounding speakers to compliment a vintage setup? Or would this pairing make the presentation sound too syrupy? Alternatively, should one look for speakers with a more forward or assertive sound that counteracts the warmth of a vintage setup? I want to use my vintage equipment (Marantz 140/Marantz 3200/Marantz 112), but I also want the most truthful presentation as possible and to enjoy the music as it was meant to be heard. Hope you can help.

John Eicher
Department of History
The University of Iowa

ES: Hi John, the warmth of some older components is overstated,

but there is a certain truth that they have become a little brighter over time. Partnering older components with more modern speakers for a neutral presentation will be a matter of trial and error, but speakers with a bolder presentation like Monitor Audio or Triangle will give you a pairing that should hopefully be fairly neutral while at the same time not presenting too challenging a load to the older electronics.

What's the best way to pair older kit with modern loudspeakers?

TJ: This is a frequent problem that I believe comes about as the result of the changing 'fashions' in sound. For example, sixties loudspeakers tend to sound a bit tight and dry with little in the way of extension at either frequency extreme, but this didn't matter because the amplifiers of the period tended to lack bass 'control' and the sources of the day weren't strong in the treble area. By contrast, the seventies were characterised by powerful, accurate amplification and the beginning of the widespread availability of really decent sources and broadcasts, so quality seventies loudspeakers traded sensitivity for flatness of response. DC coupled amplification made ported enclosures with little in the way of natural damping a practical proposition; these

would not have worked well with sixties gear! On to the eighties and it was all about sheen and sparkle to make the most of CD; at last there was a source that could produce endless accurate treble and so the loudspeakers were tuned to make the best of this with big basslines being generally out of favour. We are currently living in an era dominated by low-quality compressed music (not that HFC readers would ever get involved in this, of course!) and so to liven this up ported loudspeakers are back in favour, as are high sensitivity designs with lumpy responses to suit the low output power of valve amplifiers.

All this makes matching between the generations a bit

fraught. Oddly, you may find yourself having to explore the higher price bands to find something that is reasonably even handed, galling as it is to have to spend serious money to buy a pair of loudspeakers that will work well with an older amplifier like yours.

I wouldn't regard your Marantz kit as excessively warm sounding in the great scheme of things and it is certainly punchy enough to drive a typical modern quality loudspeaker. For the sound you are looking for I think that something from the PMC range may please you, you don't mention the size of your listening room or budgets so it would be difficult to be any more specific.

JK reckons Tannoy's Prestige range hold the answer for John



JK: It's an interesting question and one that a lot of vintage gear enthusiasts must have to tangle with. My view is that the older amplifiers are, the softer they tend to sound. If you want to hear them as their original makers did you can either replace key internal components such as capacitors and resistors to liven up the sound, but this is a palaver if nothing else and risks diminishing the component's charms. Alternatively, you can find a speaker that has, as you say, a more assertive sound. One brand that seems to be very popular with vintage audio users is Tannoy. Its speakers are a little more forward than average if you listen to them on axis and

Tannoy's speakers are a bit more forward than average...

this combined with generally high sensitivity in the larger models makes them well suited to use with low-powered valve amplification. I would recommend one of its Prestige range models, the largest you can afford, both domestically and fiscally, of course.

▶ Cable conundrum
Having read DP's response to my letter in the March issue of *HFC*, we took our existing equipment (Creek Destiny 2 amplifier, Cambridge Audio 840C CD player and KEF iQ5 floorstanders), along with several very familiar CDs, to the demonstration room

▶ Cambridge confusion

I must say I was surprised by the information in the latest *Group Test* that Cambridge Audio's Azur 651A amplifier has a built-in RIAA stage for MM pickups. To my knowledge it has not and the importer here in Sweden even makes a point of this – those who own a vinyl player must add a separate RIAA stage.

And why, considering the fact that four of the six amplifiers in the test have phono stages, did your reviewer not have anything to say about the quality of these stages?

Following the rising popularity of vinyl in recent years, built-in phono stages have become a selling point, particularly in the budget segment, and my own guess is that many readers would have appreciated if the test had included a few sentences on the performance of the amplifiers playing LPs.

Olof Kährström, Sweden

LD: Thanks for your comments, Olof. Due to the huge volume of information that we have to squeeze into the magazine, occasionally errors creep in, and, of course, we apologise for this. The *Group Test* review format is designed to highlight the fundamental sonic character of six products, and compare and contrast them to the others in the group to give a good sense of perspective. Sadly this doesn't leave much page space for further exposition of particular features like built-in phono stages or DACs, unless the group is specifically themed around them. It's hard to make meaningful comparisons of something as variable as phono stages across several products in a sentence or two. That's why we recommend that you look out for our three-page 'standalone' reviews on particular products, for a wider and deeper understanding of their various capabilities.

Sadly, the Azur 651A doesn't have a built-in RIAA stage



of our dealer (Analogue Seduction). The object was to try out some of DP's recommendations with a view to replacing our speakers and improving the sound output of our CD player with a DAC. Having set up our basic system we had a bit of a shock because the system sounded better there

than in our own lounge! This could have been due to the different rooms, different speaker cables (the audio room had expensive Van den Hul's) or the fact that my units are positioned between the speakers at home, but in the demo room they were well to the side and forward of the speakers. Food for thought there, but my hosts thought the different audio qualities of the rooms were the most likely cause.

We tried three different floorstanders: Spendor A6R, Spendor D7 and PMC twenty.24s. All three were clearly better than our KEF iQ5s, and the Spendor A6R was quickly placed in third place. Ranking the other two was more difficult, but after trying choral music, quartets, large orchestras, quiet music and loud music we chose the twenty.24s as the clear winner, precisely for the reasons explained by DP – they had their own character

with plenty of grip and punch; the D7s, although very good did seem a bit more anonymous.

By this time it was time to eat and relax, but we returned in the afternoon to test two DACs, the Audiolab M-DAC and the Naim DAC-V1, in combination with the twenty.24s. Sound quality of our CDs saw an improvement with both DACs, but we could not detect a significant difference in sound between them in the time available. We were mentally flagging by this stage anyway so we opted for the M-DAC as it was half the price of the other.

Now, after over a month of listening to our new acquisitions, we are really pleased with the outcome and we are very grateful for your advice. To complete the setup you asked me to get back to you for interconnects and speaker cables to buy. To get started we had to buy two coaxial cables to connect the ▶



**NR recommends
ISOKINETIK Melody 2
interconnects for Peter**

THANK YOU!

We would just like to say thank you to all those that helped us this weekend at the Cranage Hall Audio Show.

Especially to Peter (the porter) and Stephanie (conferences) for all their help in making things run smoothly, and to Kris for organising the event. See you again next year!

ADDITIONAL THANKS TO

Larry – The Audio Works; Michael – Astin Trew; Remo – Sonneteer; John – TAD;
Colin – Brodmann; Mike – Track Audio; Stephen, Jon and Peter – Doug Brady's.

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CD player and our Cambridge Audio 751BD Player to the DAC so we bought fairly cheaply, but please suggest replacements if you feel they are not up to scratch.

Listening to my system now we sometimes get a hint of too much brightness and so would want interconnects and speaker cables that are on the smooth side to counteract this. Currently the CD player is connected to the DAC with an Atlas Compass digital coaxial, the BD player to the DAC with a QED

I'm looking for cables that sound smooth, what do you suggest?

Reference digital coaxial, the DAC to the amplifier with Chord Cobra and finally we are using Chord Carnival Silver Screen speaker cables. Which of these are acceptable (if any) and what do you think the rest should be replaced with?

Peter Payne

NR: Hello Peter, you have some great equipment in your setup and I can't really fault the choice of your digital and analogue interconnect cables. However, if you are looking to tone down a slightly exuberant top-end, may I suggest you try some ISOkinetik Melody 2 or Mark Grant G1500HD interconnects in place of the Chord Cobras connecting your DAC to your amplifier. These are in a similar price range and having all-copper signal conductors, they may just help you achieve your goal of subtly rounding off the edges of the high frequencies.

➤ Driving ambition

I am a music fan looking to have all my CD and new hi-res downloads stored in one network-enabled central location. Up until now I have simply been downloading music on iTunes and ripping my CDs to my MacBook's hard drive. I have recently begun to download hi-res music through various sites and I would like to store all of my music in a central

location so that I can access it through numerous network-connected devices around the home.

For quality reasons I would prefer not to use wi-fi and instead plan to use wired connections from the central storage device connected to a streamer via my broadband hub. I am currently using the basic hub supplied by my broadband provider PlusNet, but wonder if there are any audiophile hubs out there with possibly more than four Ethernet inputs that might be better suited to my needs.

I have heard that you can improve connection speeds and signal quality by ditching the supplied broadband hub and purchasing one for around £100, but which ones are best suited to my needs and will sound decent? Also what NAS drive would you recommend for my music storage that has decent sound quality?

Alfie Parker

NR: Hi Alfie, I must confess that I haven't come across any hubs that are specifically designed for audiophiles – nor any NAS drives for that matter. Given that both

of these items are working entirely in the digital domain, your requirements are essentially the same as for any high-quality computer network, namely, resilience, low jitter, etc. The exception to this is that the NAS should also support media handling. However, starting with your query about hubs, most domestic hubs that include an ADSL modem and wireless are only fitted with four wired Ethernet ports. Some or all of those ports may support Gigabit speeds and this is something you may consider when choosing a NAS. If you want more ports than available on your hub, I suggest purchasing an eight-port Ethernet switch to extend your hub, such as made by Cisco, and these are widely available. A very good hub about which I have heard good reports is the AVM Fritz!Box 3390, which also has one of the best user interfaces I have come across! As for the NAS, have a look at the Thecus N2520 as this is a great quality 'home and office' NAS. This has an auto-switching LAN port that supports 10/100/1000 BASE-T (therefore Gigabit compatible), an iTunes server and even an HDMI output to allow you to connect your NAS directly to



➤ Feet first

In the last issue DP referred to Veda Foculpods and I thought I would try them out. I have checked online and they seem no longer to exist (one online reseller has them, but the pictures suggest that they are another make). I have found similar Foculpods from Deflex and Milty. Is that the same or should I try to get Veda ones? If the latter can you please advise some retailers that may have them?

Also if you have any other suggestions on good feet for speakers (PMC FB1i) that work to reduce vibrations going to my suspended floor that would be great (I currently have the Missing Link 4x Sorbothane 50mm on top of Granite plinths under each speaker). This made a great improvement, but maybe other Foculpods would be even better.

I have seen the Townshend feet, but think that they are too expensive

Paul Bjernklo, London

NR: Well Paul, Foculpods are all the same, but supplied by different companies. Foculpods, Polipods and Superpods are all manufactured by Deflex Audio and can be supplied by ISOkinetik, amongst many others. The different names relate to three different sizes of plastic feet that can be placed under equipment of different weights. They are all made from sorbothane, which is extremely good at absorbing vibrations and, feeling slightly tacky to the touch, has great anti-slip properties. For your speakers (a great choice by the way – I love transmission lines!) – since the Townshends are out of your price range, you could try the Superpods if you want vibration absorption. Each of your FB1i's weighs just under 20kg and four of the chunky Superpods will support up to 100kg and are low cost, so well worth a try.



JK suggests Alfie checks out Synology's DS214 NAS drive

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your TV for device management and watching HD video playback should you need it.

JK: Wired connections are always the way to go if you want to stream hi-res music files Alfie, in fact they are the only way if you are interested in sound quality to be frank. Rather than replacing your hub/router I would recommend getting a gigabyte switch, which can have as many outlets as you like (8, 16, 32 etc) and will provide a bit of isolation between the network

What NAS drive would you recommend for music storage?

and your system. There are no audiophile versions available to my knowledge, but I use a Netgear that was recommended by Naim Audio and gives fine results. What you can do to improve matters is use a linear rather than switching power supply with the switch and, more importantly, get decent quality Ethernet cable – it really does make a difference.

NAS drive choice seems to come down to QNAP or Synology, with Windows users preferring the former and Maccies the latter. As you are a Mac user I recommend a Synology DS214 two-bay

Ian would like to see how Clearaudio's Emotion compares to Rega's RP8



enclosure and a pair of hard drives to suit your requirements. This approach is initially more expensive than buying an off-the-shelf NAS, but is considered better sounding and is much more flexible to use.

ES: I'm afraid I don't believe that there is such a thing as an Audiophile router, but you can do a damn site better than the routers supplied free with your contract. Products like Netgear's R7000 can handle pretty much any demand an audio streamer can make of it without breaking sweat over wired or wireless connection and it looks like it was made from bits of Stealth bomber too, which may or may not appeal (it does to me!).

PC: My preference is for Logitech Media Server running in UPnP and my recommendation is to buy a two or four-drive QNAP or Synology according to capacity

needs and taste and go SSOTS or SSODS as appropriate. I still feel more comfortable with QNAP for both ease of customisation and sound quality, but the margins are tight.

As Ed says, for routers try Netgear – don't go fancy white and silver consumer grade, go boring blue box corporate, generally the same innards in a nice utilitarian (and cheap) box.

➤ The price is wrong I'm a regular subscriber to your magazine and have been for many years. I have got this month's copy and there is a *Group Test* for amplifiers under £400, last month we had a *Group Test* of beer budget turntables and next month we will probably have a *Group Test* of beer budget speakers.

My point being I can't remember the last time you did a *Group Test* on anything

other than budget products. My system is a Naim CDX2, Magnum Dynalab MD102, Naim 200 and 202 amplification feeding PMCFB1s all sat on a Quadraspire rack.

While I started out with budget products, my system has evolved over 30 years – budget products are fine, but it seems to me as if each and every *Group Test* revolves around products that cost less than a grand.

Your individual reviews are fine and your comments are intelligent and well informed, but please let's have some ambition on the *Group Test*, how about a round up of turntables and arms at over a grand? How does a Rega P8 cope against VPI Traveller against a Clearaudio Emotion?

Ian Hall

LD: Hi Ian, thank you for your letter and *Group Test* suggestions. I'm sure you will have noticed that the hi-fi market is changing at quite a pace these days, and nowhere is more buoyant in terms of numbers of new models than at the more affordable end of the market, which is great news for hi-fi enthusiasts looking at the possibilities for the first time and those looking to return to hi-fi and rekindle their passion after some time away. We try to ensure our *Group Tests* focus on those price points that are experiencing the greatest number of new products and developments in technology, with a range of models jostling for position and the interests of *Hi-Fi Choice* readers. We try to ensure that there's something for everyone in each issue of the magazine with a broad spread of prices throughout all our standalone reviews as well as regular *Exotica* reviews, *Beautiful System* and *Dealer Visit* features to satisfy the hunger for those looking towards more costly hi-fi components. Look out for components costing more than £1,000 in our *Group Tests* in the near future.

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House music

It took a recent house move for **Lee Dunkley** to realise just how many CDs he's got. But as downloads become ever more popular, is he the exception to the rule?

How many CDs do you own? 200? 500? 1,000? I bet that it is a lot more than you think. A poll of 1,000 UK households in 2005 estimated that the average music collection contained just 178 albums and had an estimated value of around £1,500 – although when asked many people seriously undervalued their album collection at only £600 according to the survey carried out by Barclays insurance at the time. Of course, music collections will have continued to grow during the intervening years and the latest figures suggest that the average music collection of physical media is likely to have increased significantly in value to around £4,000. That's more than double the number of CDs (and LPs) in just nine years, despite the increased growth in download music sales!

Having moved house recently I can vouch for the more recent figures being a good estimate of the value of my own music collection. I hadn't counted the number of CDs I actually own in recent years until my own household contents insurance policy came up for renewal, forcing me to switch my cover. There's nothing quite like the upheaval of relocation of your possessions to spotlight just how many CDs you have managed to collect over the years, and the enormity of the task of boxing them up.

Despite my years spent steadily expanding my CD collection album by album, and a recent vigour for purchasing several discs at a time – seemingly single-

I believe the album is a journey to be enjoyed from beginning to end

purchasers continuing to buy albums. I am sure that the majority of *HFC* readers still buy mostly physical albums like me, but if recent figures are to be taken seriously then it would seem that we are in a minority, and one of the few groups that feels passionately enough about buying an artist's LP to add to our music collection rather than just downloading the one or two tracks taken as singles from the album to promote it. Although I do download single tracks to create playlists for my iPod, I usually also end up duplicating them with the purchase of the physical long player on CD. I have, of course, also moved to purchasing some albums as hi-res downloads, but legitimate purchasing from within the UK is so restricted that the number I have managed to make is extremely small, and the majority of the albums I already own on CD anyway as there doesn't appear to be that many new releases in

handedly propping up the music business in the process – it seems I am one of only a relatively small number of

a hi-res format available. But I digress.

I've always believed that an album is a journey to be enjoyed from beginning to end, as the artist intended. Not just listen to the hit track snapshots. Of course, I do skip through tracks occasionally to get to my favourites, but I've never been into buying 'greatest hits'. I prefer to own the original album the hits were taken from. Admittedly, some are more easily enjoyed in their entirety than others, and I firmly believe that there once was a time when creating an album as an entire work was taken a lot more seriously than it is today. It seems that with our short attention spans caused by the frenetic way we live our lives today and our thirst for non-stop hits over the art of listening to the album fillers between the hit tracks, anaemic album sales are jeopardising the future of the format altogether.

Attack of the stats

The health of the British music industry is measured by how smoothly album sales glide past the 1 million mark, and in 2014 music sales are looking in need of some resuscitation mid way through the year thanks to a lack of serious big hitters. It could be a bit of blip as the popular artists that the music sales are measured on suffer from a lack of distinction and begin to sound very much the same. We've still got the music festival season to come and the biggest music sales period in the run up to Christmas when the majority of albums are purchased, but the trend is clear to see when you consider that album sales were at 94 million last year compared with 159 million 10 years earlier in 2003.

I have no doubt that streaming and hi-res services will change the music industry, and that my own CD purchasing habits look set to slow down as soon as there's a hi-res site with a decent back catalogue providing legitimate purchases within the UK. Although it won't replace the physical medium, it does have its attractions. It will certainly make it easier to transport when it comes to the next house move, but I am not sure how home insurers will factor the value of music purchased and stored on a computer drive somewhere into their policy cover. But that looks set to be another story for another day ●



Bombay Bicycle Club sold just 19,646 UK copies of its new album in the first week, but still reached the No 1 spot





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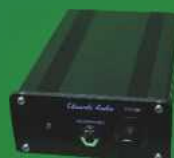
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HA1 headphone amplifier

Never had it so good

It's all too easy to look back with rose-tinted goggles. But we should resist the temptation for audio nostalgia, says **David Price**, things are nowhere near as bad as they used to be

Fashion is cyclical, and what goes around comes around again. For as long as I can remember, our mass culture has tried to sell us back things from our past. Even fairly mundane objects become iconised and are suddenly redolent of a golden age, which all too often never actually happened.

I may be wrong, but I think our fascination with all things 'classic' started in the eighties. Remember those Levi jeans adverts set to the strains of Marvin Gaye's *I Heard it Through the Grapevine*? Then there were the fifties flat-top haircuts and the sudden reinvention of those awful finned American cars as objects of cool, rather than derision.

Just a few years later, and we were all undergoing a sixties revival, with 'Cool Britannia' channelling the time when we were all swinging. Austin Powers drove his Shaguar, Oasis crashed Rolls Royces into swimming pools and made a career out of sounding like the first four bars of The Beatles' *I Am The Walrus*. Then, by the new millennium, it was time to go all gooey over the seventies.

Round about this time, the notion of 'classic hi-fi' appeared. And I'm afraid I played my very own part in spreading it, because I was – and still am – reliving my childhood by proxy, via lovely bits of kit spawned in the decade that fashion forgot. When I started writing about such things – half-expecting to get a tirade of abuse from

readers to the effect that I was a Luddite and a seventies throwback – I got many words of praise from folk who wanted more!

So much of what was on sale in the seventies was just plain nasty

It's true to say then, that I've surfed the crest of the revivalist wave, but does that make me someone who looks at the past with rose-tinted glasses? Well, in some cases I think there's a lot to learn from earlier audio epochs, but in others I actually believe that we've never had it so good.

Reality check

So much of what was on sale in the seventies was just plain nasty. We forget those lovely Signal Yellow Ford Cortinas we see in period TV dramas were pretty horrid things to either drive or be driven in. Live rear axles, sealed beam headlights, engines that needed reboring every 60,000 miles and ventilation systems so useless that you'd literally stick to your vinyl seat in summer – this is what we forget.

Hi-fi's the same too – our primary source was vinyl and almost none of it was in the league of a modern starter

deck like a Rega P3. If you were lucky, your Garrard SP25 mk IV dragging the spherical stylus of a Goldring G850 cartridge around the groove of a 3g wouldn't recut your records before you'd had the chance to 'tape' them on a middling cassette deck that lopped the high frequencies off your disco records. Those new-fangled transistor amps put out 20W or 30W of mushy, harsh sounding power, and loudspeakers ranged from the weird and wonderful to the just plain weird. Most were invariably the latter, with lots of mismatched drive units that used primitive cone materials, going via complex crossovers packed with so-so sounding components and the same wiring used for your doorbell. As for the cabinets, they had more in common with a cheap wardrobe than anything else I can remember.

All of which got me thinking, isn't hi-fi so much better today? The Monitor Audio Silver 8 loudspeaker I have just reviewed on page 56 is the perfect exemplar – right across the board, from the cabinetry to the drive units, internal wiring to the crossover, it is devastatingly well designed compared to a speaker costing the same in real terms 40 years ago. You'd be looking at a Wharfedale Dovedale SP, Celestion Ditton 33 or suchlike back then. This premium brand mid-priced loudspeaker would come with poorish sensitivity, low power handling and a limited frequency response as standard, not to mention awful stereo imaging and a flatulent, opaque sound. By comparison the latest crop of £1,000 floorstanders are as far away from this as a Ford Focus ST is to that rattly old Cortina.

I'm not saying that everything has automatically got better, but most of it has. And the brain's penchant for nostalgia conveniently filters out all the rubbish we'd be having to put up with several decades ago. Just as Mr Average would have to depend on his 1.7 litre Hillman Hunter with one-speed heater and rubber floor covering, so audiophiles of the day – apart from the really well healed ones, that is – would be living in a world of earth loops, blown tweeters, worn styli and rumble. Makes you thankful for small mercies, doesn't it? Now, where's my copy of ELO's *Out of the Blue*? ●



Wharfedale's Dovedale SP doesn't compare well with today's £1,000 speakers



DAVID PRICE
Hi-Fi Choice writer

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Teenage clicks

When hi-fi forager **Chris Ward** realised that his son needed a bigger bedroom, he saw the perfect opportunity to go on the hunt for some vintage hi-fi bargains

My teenage son has just moved bedrooms. A recent growth spurt caused him to wedge in his original box-room like a battery hen, so a change was essential. I saw this as a perfect opportunity to upgrade his new room with a starter hi-fi setup. This prompted me to remember the powerful emotions of getting my first hi-fi system.

I can still recall the sweaty-palmed excitement from endlessly thumbing through Richer Sounds leaflets and *Hi-Fi Choice* imagining the perfect sonic combinations I would create. And how perfection would be created, if only I had more money to bi-amp the speakers.

After some careful saving I set out intent on buying the system I'd yearned for on paper all summer. But on actually listening to the dream team my heart sank, as they sounded harsh, thin, stilted and soulless. I went to another hi-fi dealer and told him about my heartbreak. He looked at me like a benevolent priest and simply said the word "synergy". I came out of his dealership with a different CD player, amp and speakers that were a marvel then and my daughter still loves today.

With this wisdom in mind I set out recently to source a starter system for my son using ebay and *HFC's* classified ads. Two weeks later and the larger bedroom is set up with a system that really sings. A Rega Planar 3 turntable with RB300 arm/Shure cartridge (£120) and Cambridge Audio

I am a big fan of turning the clock back to find great yesteryear bargains 640C CD player (£50) on a sturdy isolation stand (£5) feeding a Rotel RA-820BX amp (£16) into Opera 111a floorstanding speakers (£41) via Sonic Link cables (free with speakers). For just £232 I have created a beautifully balanced system that would've cost over £5,000 in its heyday.

Wheeler dealer

The only reason I could buy on ebay with such confidence is because so many quality dealers have passed on their wisdom and let me listen to many of their excellent product combinations. Without giving these dealers some custom back, we will all be in the dark ages very soon. To prove the point, go to your local dealer and ask them some juicy stuff about impedance matching and damping factors and make sure they know your room size and the kind of music you love. The resulting discussion and any demo should leave you confident that experience is well worth paying for, and you should hear system synergy that you've not heard before.



Five star reviews will always exist for individual products, but hi-fi is about the natural flow between components to unlock the joy of music. If a system doesn't connect with you emotionally and you can't follow the music effortlessly, then chances are you've become too interested in frequency responses and spec sheets. Hi-fi is a means to an end, and that end is the love of music.

A local dealer told me he buys his cars second hand and so fully understands why some people do the same for hi-fi. And when I brought home the bargain Opera speakers from five miles away even he was agog, but when things go wrong we only have ourselves to blame. Even as an audiophile, I have bought items online that seemed like bargains, but arrived in bits or well past their sell by date.

I am an unashamed fan of turning the clock back to find great yesteryear bargains that were beautifully over engineered by quality brands to lavish price points from previous decades. Many of those same brands are now delivering some truly amazing modern kit that would have seemed unimaginable even a few years ago. Systems can now stream the highest levels of audio from a swipe of an iPad or smartphone, wires are vanishing from sideboards, DACs have more processing power than NASA and vinyl, valves and horns have bounced back with some incredible digital-busting qualities. Now is the best time for hi-fi, but there's one other, less obvious insight that struck me.

It grates me to see children share left and right headphone buds on the school bus. I get it and it is 'social', but hearing all the music played through loudspeakers in my son's new bedroom shows me he's grown in every sense of the word. Sharing music out loud is a mark of knowing yourself, who you really are and what you love, and wanting others to hear it is an essential teenage rite of passage that headphone users may be missing. And, of course, me actually liking my son's music is absolutely non-essential! ●

Is Chris' son one of the luckiest teenagers around? We're certainly jealous



CHRIS WARD
Hi-Fi Choice writer

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Download denied

Back at the beginning of the year **Ed Selley** made a vow not to buy any Compact Discs for 12 months. Now that he's halfway through 2014 it's time to see how he's managing...

When I decided to make 2014 a CD-free year, I was confident that a combination of lossless and hi-res audio downloads and vinyl purchases would allow me to buy all the music I wanted without having to resort to a format that I can't actually play anywhere other than in my car. Halfway through this 12-month project, this confidence has not proved completely unfounded but it is fair to say that not everything is going according to plan.

First up, the realities of life with a baby have meant that I've been buying less music while I try and keep up with my son's prodigious demands for consumables. I try not to think of a week's worth of nappies, horrible fusions of fruit and veg in little pouches and adorable but painfully expensive clothes in terms of lost albums, but sometimes it is hard to avoid the feeling. The demands of my son haven't precluded buying albums full stop, though, and this is where the surprises have made themselves felt.

Back in January, I believed that this little experiment was going to be a vindication of the availability of downloads. Vinyl was going to be used to fill in the gaps that the various websites were unable to fulfil. Six months in and things haven't panned out that way. The fact of the matter is that there are huge numbers of downloads available to buy, but the number of these that actually bisect with

Finding high-quality content is still a massive labour of love

music I want to buy is lower – dramatically lower. What is most galling is that while some albums are simply not available as downloads, a frustrating subset of them are available in lossless and hi-res formats, but not in the UK. While Qobuz has relaxed the restrictions on its varied and interesting catalogue, many of its most desirable albums remain frustratingly off limits to UK buyers. At the time of writing, the latest Kasabian album, *48.13*, has just been released in the UK. Qobuz is in possession of a 24-bit/44.1kHz version, which would be perfect for playback on my multiple streamers, but I can't buy it in the UK without resorting to proxy servers and general dishonesty, which as a law-abiding type I'm loath to do.

If this restriction was to protect UK websites selling the same hi-res downloads, I could understand it. But at the time of writing I cannot find a single UK site offering me the same Kasabian album, which makes my inability to buy it from the one place that has it maddening. This is exactly the sort of album that might attract interest from purchasers not currently overly concerned about high-

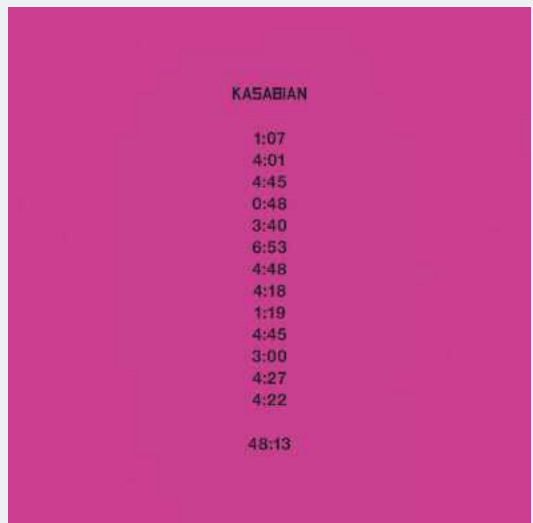
quality downloads, but this would seem to be a potential market too involved for the record label to envisage. I've no doubt that label bosses will point to low demand while ignoring the reality that there's little demand for something that you can't buy.

Talking to Lothar Kerestedjian, director of German-based High Res Audio, a site that has made great efforts to make its catalogue available beyond the borders of its home country, it becomes clear that finding high-quality content full stop is still a massive labour of love and there seem to be a plenty of hoops to jump through to secure it. Lothar is a better negotiator than most and his 65 percent international availability is admirable, but still speaks volumes for the restrictions that the download business faces. To be clear, High Res Audio is also solely interested in full hi-res and not ordinary lossless, which complicates matters further (although it does mean its catalogue is of peerless quality).

For the record

This means that far from filling in the gaps, vinyl has been the main format for my purchases in 2014 and a copy of *48.13* will be joining them this evening. It is a few quid more than the Qobuz download, but it is at least legal for me to buy it in the UK. I had hoped that 2014 would show that the download had come of age, but so far it has more accurately shown that vinyl has returned from the brink and looks set to bury the format designed to replace it. I've been more than happy with the quality of the discs I've purchased so far as well – the pressing errors and quality issues that bedevilled some releases have been absent for me at least.

I should be happy that the experiment is working at all, but I can't pretend I'm truly satisfied with the results so far. Vinyl is a wonderful, tactile and exciting format, but it is emphatically not the answer to the continued relevance of high-quality audio in the 21st century. Like the great Magnus Magnusson, I've started so I'll finish, but I'll be doing so with a slight sense of disillusionment ●



Unable to get Kasabian's album as a hi-res download, Ed has been forced to buy it on vinyl



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Minitest

HEADPHONE AMP/DAC £167-£395

Neville Roberts looks at four DACs that can receive digital audio from your PC's USB port and drive your headphones directly

ADL

X1

PRICE: £395 CONTACT: 01189 814238
WEBSITE: soundfoundations.co.uk

THIS PORTABLE DESIGN supports digital inputs from Apple iOS devices up to 16-bit/48kHz as well as 24-bit/192kHz hi-res files from your PC via a USB port. In addition to the USB digital input, the X1 has a 4-pin 3.5mm line-level input for use with analogue sources. The 4-pin 3.5mm output will drive any headphones in the 12-600ohm range.

As well as standard headphones, the X1 also supports those fitted with a microphone and a switch on the front panel enables those fitted with a 4-pin jack. An adapter will be required if your headphones are fitted with a 6.35mm jack. A 3.5mm Toslink optical digital output delivers the digital USB source signal at up to

24-bit/192kHz sampling. Internally, the X1 has reference-quality components, including a gold-plated circuit board and connectors. It also has an internal rechargeable battery charged via the USB port.

When I connect the X1 to my PC and plug in the headphones, I am treated to a performance that is convincing and exuberant. As with

the other devices reviewed here, the higher sampling rates reveals greater clarity and somehow the quieter sections sound quieter!

VERDICT

A convincing and exuberant performer in a neat, slim case with an internal rechargeable battery



Fostex

HP-A4

PRICE: £269 CONTACT: 03301 222500
WEBSITE: scvdistribution.co.uk

THIS COMPACT BUT well-made offering supports DSD 5.6MHz and PCM 16-bit or 24-bit from CD-quality 44.1kHz up to 192kHz sampling frequencies. Apart from the 6.35mm headphone socket, the front panel has a smooth volume control potentiometer and an array of four push buttons to select the source, a switchable filter, low or high gain and audio output selection. There is also a line of LEDs to show power and input audio stream data rates.

The rear houses the USB, a pair of RCA phono sockets, a pair of Toslink optical connectors for digital input and output and, uniquely, a microSD card slot for upgrading the firmware.

Although the unit is 'plug and play' when used with a Mac, a driver is required for use with a PC. When

connected, the unit appears as another audio device in Windows. However, to take advantage of the higher resolution replay of the unit over standard 16/44 CD-quality, Fostex has developed an audio player that integrates nicely with the HP-A4. This player is a standalone application that doesn't need to be installed on the PC – you just run it and load your hi-res files into it to play them.

When I connect the HP-A4 to my PC, I find there is bags of volume for my headphones and there is a very

noticeable improvement in quality when playing my test files at the higher resolutions. Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No 3* 24/192 resolution simply sparkles with effortless clarity and fullness. All in all, this is a superb performer that renders very compelling performances from a PC.

VERDICT

A versatile device that delivers a compelling sound and has a great range of facilities





Listening on headphones makes for a very personal musical experience. However, good quality cans require a decent amplifier to drive them. Digital music is often stored on a PC these days, but the computer's sound card and headphone amp are generally not up to the job. This is where a dedicated headphone amplifier/DAC (digital-to-analogue converter) comes in. It will bypass all of the PC's audio circuitry and take its feed directly from a USB

port and then use its own internal DAC and headphone amplifier to drive your quality cans!

Each DACs is connected to Sennheiser HD580 Precision headphones fitted with a Russ Andrews HC-2 cable. I use a variety of music, including a recording of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3* with Artur Pizarro and The Scottish Chamber Orchestra in a range of formats up to 24-bit/192kHz.

Korg DS-DAC-100m

PRICE: £348 CONTACT: 01908 304699 WEBSITE: korg.com/uk/

A NAME OFTEN associated with musical instruments and DJ gear, Korg has recently moved into the hi-fi arena with a number of innovative products. The DS-DAC-100m is a portable version of the company's DS-DAC-100, with just a headphone and line-level 3.5mm stereo mini-jacks as outputs and is powered from the USB port.

It supports 1-bit DSD native playback on a PC or Mac. An audio driver is free to download to support this mode of operation and the higher sampling rates of audio. When used with the AudioGate playback software, music is routed directly to the DAC-100m and completely bypasses the computer hardware. The Korg DAC obtains its power directly from the USB port, meaning that there is no need for a separate power supply.

The USB type mini B connection is the only input source and it has a



3.5mm stereo mini-jack socket for the headphones (so you will need an adapter if your headphones have a 6.35mm jack) and an additional 3.5mm mini-jack on the rear as a line-out connection to an amplifier.

One LED in the row on the front panel lights up to indicate the incoming audio sampling rate, which is a nice feature. The DAC-100m is fitted with a two-button digital volume control (one to increase and one to decrease the volume) and although I would have preferred a traditional rotary volume control,

the digital one works well enough. Also, I find that there is an adequate amount of volume available to drive my headphones.

Musically, the Korg sounds impressive with my test FLAC files and the dynamic range of the Beethoven Piano Concerto at 24-bit/192kHz is clearly evident.

VERDICT

A neat and slim design that performs well across a wide range of musical genres



Epiphany Acoustics EHP-O2D

PRICE: £167 WEBSITE: epiphany-acoustics.co.uk

AS WELL AS the digital input via the mini USB socket on the rear, this unit can also be fed from an analogue signal via the 3.5mm input jack on the front. It is powered from the supplied AC power unit and comes complete with 4 self-adhesive rubber feet so that it sits comfortably next to your PC or on your audio rack.

The on-board filtered power supply ensures that any potential noise from the supply is eliminated. The DAC is based on the TE7022L UAC1 engine ES9023 24-bit DAC chip and supports 16-bit and 24-bit at sample rates of 44.1kHz, 48kHz and 96kHz. The EHP-O2D will work with Windows, Mac or Linux PCs. As the USB is Class 1 (hence the 96kHz maximum rate), it can use the standard Windows driver meaning that no special driver is required for Windows PCs, just plug it in and it installs itself automatically.



The DAC is not clocked by the USB port on the computer, but rather it uses an on-board crystal-controlled oscillator to re-clock the digital signal to improve the overall performance.

The amplifier section delivers up to 641mW into 33ohms, which is more than enough for most headphones and I find there is plenty of volume available. In addition to the great analogue volume control, there is a switch to set the gain to x1 or x5.

The sound produced by the EHP-O2D is full and easy to listen to

over a wide range of music. I do rather miss the 192kHz support, but this does not detract from an excellent performance with 88.2kHz and 96kHz music and it should be noted that this is the lowest price of the four reviewed here and is excellent value for money.

VERDICT

The EHP-O2D is a superb all-rounder that represents excellent value for money



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your ears



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moving sounds

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Tel:0148 442 4000, www.audiovation.co.uk

INSPIRE HI-FI, Derbyshire, S43 3QE
Tel:0124 647 2222, www.inspirhifi.co.uk

JORDAN ACOUSTICS, Dorset BH23 6BB,
Tel:01202 911886, www.jordanacoustics.co.uk

MIDLAND AUDIO EXCHANGE, Worcestershire DY9 9TD,
Tel:01562 731100, www.midlandaudiox-change.co.uk

MOTH GROUP, Bedfordshire, MK45 3HT
Tel:01234 741152, www.britishaudio.co.uk

PAUL GREEN HI-FI LTD, Bath, BA1 3JN
Tel:0122 531 6197, www.paulgreenhifi.co.uk

PHASE3 HIFI, West Sussex BN11 4HW,
Tel: 01903 245577, www.phase3hifi.co.uk

PROGRESSIVE AUDIO LTD, Kent, ME8 8QY
Tel:01634 389004, www.progressiveaudio.co.uk

RAYLEIGH HI-FI, Essex, SS6 7EA
Tel:01268 779762, www.rayleighhifi.com

SENSO SYSTEMS, Cornwall, TR1 2LS
Tel:0187 227 3215, www.senso-systems.co.uk

STONE AUDIO UK LTD., Dorset BH16 6FE,
Tel:01202 630066, www.stoneaudio.co.uk

TAVISTOCK AUDIO, Devon, PL19 0DE
Tel:0182 261 8940, www.tavistockaudio.co.uk

THE MUSIC ROOM OF GLASGOW LTD, Glasgow, G3 6AX
Tel:0141 333 9700, www.music-room.com

ZOUCH AUDIO LTD, Leicestershire, LE65 1BQ
Tel:01530 414128, www.zouchaudio.co.uk

Van den Hul The Wave/ CS-122 Hybrid £310

From Holland comes this long-established cable specialist, with an impressive pairing

DETAILS

PRODUCT

Cable loom

ORIGIN

Netherlands

TYPE

Interconnect/
speaker cable

FEATURES

- Interconnect: silver-plated copper with Hülliflex jacket
- Speaker cable: silver-plated copper and carbon hybrid speaker cable with Hülliflex jacket
- Prices: interconnect £130/1m, speaker cable £20 per metre unterminated

DISTRIBUTOR

Flamingo Audio

TELEPHONE

07833 955014

WEBSITE

vandenhul.com

From a company that has made itself a great name for the fine moving coil cartridges it makes, comes a vast range of interconnects and speaker cables. The Wave is towards the more affordable end of this, and is another silver-plated, copper cable featuring a “massive” 0.9mm central conductor of oxygen-free copper. A specially foamed dielectric insulation material is said to minimise high frequency signal attenuation. The outer and inner layer are made of the same material as the central conductor, which is described as a “triple shield” that is said to aid interference suppression. As with all van den Hul cables, it is covered in the company’s own ‘Hülliflex’ cable jacket, which is claimed to be both environmentally friendly and contain no halogens.

The CS-122 Hybrid is an updated version of one of vdH’s classic speaker cables, and sports two conductors made of 147 strands of 0.16mm diameter, high-purity, matched-crystal oxygen-free copper with a very dense pure-silver coating, alongside a carbon saturated layer that is said to

improve the sound. The cable jacket is also made of Hülliflex and is described as “a very attractive matt cream colour”. During the debrief one of our panelists counters: “it looks like something you see in a hospital!”

Sound quality

From the opening bars of the Beethoven piece, it is obvious that what we are dealing with here is special. For the first time in the test, the sound hangs back from the speakers and dissolves into the room, rather than appearing to come from two points in space – which is what happens to a greater or lesser extent with the other looms. Indeed, the transparency of these cables is superb, but it isn’t transparency at the expense of musicality, as the vdH loom also has a wonderfully mellifluous quality to it that sees the music ebbing and flowing in a seductive and arresting manner.

The Paul Simon track is proof positive of the way these cables are able to let the singer’s real intentions flood out – every vocal inflection is carried beautifully, giving a mesmeric quality to the music. Sure, all the detail is there, but the bigger picture isn’t lost in the process of rendering it.

The first track is startlingly different to most of the other cable looms, in the way the decay on the voice seems to hang on, rather than ‘falling off a cliff’ with most of the others. The vocals are expressive and dynamic, and this is set over a backing that suddenly takes on an urgent, snappy quality to it – when previously the musicians seem to just be going through the motions. It is amazing how the same beats sound so different, as if they’ve been set free.

Soundstage width isn’t as good as some here though; this is where the

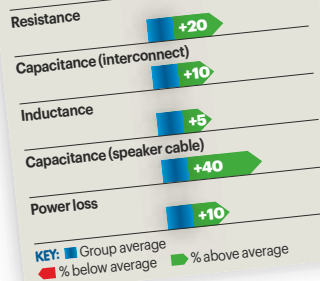


ON TEST

In common with the Atlas Asymmetric interconnect, vdH’s The Wave is also a 75ohm coaxial type and so lends itself to both ‘analogue’ and ‘digital’ (S/PDIF) duties. This common geometry is reflected in the similarly low inductance and capacitance of the two interconnects although vdH’s greater conductor area lends it a very slightly lower 45mohm/m loop resistance.

VdH’s partnering CS-122 speaker cable, now in ‘Hybrid’ guise with mixed metal and carbon conductors is a very different beast from the original CS-122 that I tested for Hi-Fi Choice over 21 years ago. The spaced, figure-of-eight geometry means the 1.0µm/m series inductance is unchanged, but the improved dielectric means capacitance is half what it was at just 17pf/m. Resistance has also been cut by a factor of nearly 3x at 11.4mohm/m, further improving the achievable amp/speaker damping factor. **PM**

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



vdH falls slightly short; it isn’t constrained or shut in, just not quite as expansive as – say – the Tellurium Q. That said, depth perspective is brilliant, “The first cable I’m hearing with front-to-back dimensionality,” says one panelist. Tonally it is pretty even – maybe just a touch on the dark and velvety side, but certainly not as sepia-tinged as the Tellurium Q. The overall effect is of an absolutely stellar cable combination and one that’s an essential audition for anyone that’s in the market for such a thing. The great thing is that it’s not really all that characterful, it’s just very unobtrusive and lets the music’s true flavour come flooding out.

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★☆

OVERALL

★★★★★

LIKE: Very musical, engaging sound; open and detailed

DISLIKE: Slightly constrained stage width

WE SAY: Superb value cable loom, one that’s an essential audition



Scale model

With its LS3/5A monitor, the BBC attempted to offer a grown-up sound from a small loudspeaker, remembers **David Price**

There is plenty of fine classic hi-fi, and many excellent products that have stood the test of time. But the BBC 'monitoring loudspeaker type LS3/5A' goes beyond this and has become the stuff of legend. What was revolutionary about it was its performance relative to its physical dimensions. Before its arrival, all small speakers were regarded as sonically inferior to larger ones. There was no sense that a diminutive design could in some ways better a big one.

"It's a loudspeaker that gives the impression of having a lot more bass than it actually has," says Spendor's Philip Swift. "Nobody put so much effort into compact, low coloration loudspeaker than the BBC."

The story starts back in the early seventies, when our national broadcaster decided it required a compact speaker for its outside broadcast vans. This prompted the

commencement of work in the corporation's Research Department, under the stewardship of HD (Dudley) Harwood at Kingswood Warren. A team led by TE Sommerville and DE Shorter had been undertaking research into acoustic scaling, and came up with a quarter-scale monitor. The legend goes that it was thought to have good performance down to 100Hz, despite only having been designed to reach 400Hz, for speech-related purposes. The team found it worked well with music material, especially when wall mounted. It was dubbed the LS3/5, and found its way into mobile TV control rooms for producers to monitor mixing desk output.

Shortly before the BBC was about to issue licences to a number of companies – as well as the BBC's own Equipment Department – to manufacture it, the drive unit supplier changed some characteristics of the

mid/bass driver, and the speaker was carefully reworked. When this was finally done, it was renamed LS3/5A and commercial production licences were finally granted to a number of British loudspeaker companies.

This two-way infinite baffle design uses a specially selected KEF B110 Bextrene mid/bass driver and T27 SP1032 19mm mylar dome tweeter. The latter is fitted with a perforated metal grille, which BBC engineers said, "has a small effect on the frequency response, which is wholly beneficial as it raises the output somewhat at high frequencies". Thick strips of felt surrounded the tweeter to reduce secondary waves reflected by the cabinet edges.

Box of delights

The box itself is extremely carefully constructed and damped. The cabinet walls are 12mm birch plywood, braced on every joint with beech wood battens. Lots of work went into its design, to the point that different types of hardwoods were auditioned for the bracing. For example, one seventies report states that BBC engineers found Pirana Pine to have clearly audible colouration due to it resonating with the bass driver chassis, and so was rejected. The cabinet walls received a layer of Bostik sound deadening panelling, and a layer of 16mm anechoic-grade foam went on the sides, along with two layers of deadening pads and a 25mm layer of foam. The result was a heavy, highly acoustically inert box.

The crossover was unusually complex for a small speaker, using 26 elements. One of the reasons for this was that it was designed to work optimally with a wide variety of drive unit samples. In the event of a tweeter blowing, the service engineer would measure the replacement unit and select the appropriate tap position on the autotransformer to give optimal frequency response. The crossover itself is mounted behind the tweeter and damped by a thick felt

A legend in the making: the LS3/5A



pad to prevent resonance. "It was this elaborate crossover network, done very carefully and very skillfully, that gave a much better sounding speaker" says Philip Swift.

Construction techniques varied from manufacturer to manufacturer, with Audiomaster pulling each crossover component tight onto the board to prevent resonance, while Rogers used the long legs of the components to keep them away from the board. Even the grille cloth was carefully specified to be in contact with the felt stripes around the tweeter or there would be a frequency response anomaly.

The BBC's Equipment Department manufactured small numbers for reference purposes, to maintain quality control with outside suppliers. Legend has it that each licensee would keep a BBC-built pair of speakers to use as a production reference; an official production test schedule required these to be compared to the licensee's production run speaker using high-quality tape

After a period of inactivity, it is back in production via Stirling Broadcast

recordings of a variety of programme material. Quality control was rigorous, with lots of companies that applied for licences being rejected.

As it transpired, the first two manufacturers were Rogers and Chartwell, then Harbeth (the company formed by Dudley Harwood on leaving the Beeb) and Spondor (formed by Spencer Hughes, chief engineer of the BBC's acoustic scaling speaker project) followed. Then other licensees including Audiomaster (whose designer Robin Marshall later founded Epos) and RAM, Goodmans and KEF. More recently, others such as Stirling Broadcast have embarked on LS3/5A production. The first LS3/5A bore the Rogers brand, was released in 1975 and is now a collector's item.

Some believe Rogers made the best versions, because the company was first to market. It's certainly true that there were minor component variations – Rogers bought in its chokes and Chartwell wound its own. For a good part of the seventies, Rogers and Chartwell Electro Acoustic Ltd were both owned by Swisstone Electronics, and the speakers were reportedly made on the same line. In truth, the LS3/5A was very closely

LS3/5A VARIANTS

In the late seventies, Jim Rogers produced the JR149, using the same drivers as the LS3/5A in a cylindrical aluminium housing. Aside from looking radical, the round enclosure is more rigid and holds fewer standing waves, making for a better sound. As a key manufacturer of the speaker, Spondor has also done several revisions, such as the S3/5se. The original seventies Spondor SA1 was a direct rival and the company's brand new D1 is its spiritual successor, says Philip Swift. In the nineties, Harbeth re-engineered the speaker to produce the HL-P3ES, which sounds similar, but is again a better all rounder.

The LS3/5A itself got just two major changes over the course of its long life, the first being when it became 11ohms instead of 15, and the second when it was made bi-wirable. Aficionados have strong views about the relative merits of both. Rogers' matching stand/subwoofer – the AB1 – came along in 1995 and transformed the baby box into a far more usable loudspeaker. More recently, however, the little speaker has been resurrected by Stirling Broadcast which has been granted a licence to make the LS3/5A V2. This uses Stirling's own drivers, as KEF's are no longer available, but is said to retain the authentic BBC sound.

specified and highly tolerated, so there will be a very high degree of uniformity across the manufacturers, with some brands lying slightly above the average, and others below.

In 1988 the little box got the first of two updates, with the mid/bass unit getting a more lossy vinyl material in its surround. The crossover was also tweaked to bring the frequency response a little closer to the original target, and also to make the speaker fractionally easier to drive. The speaker was no longer specified at 15ohms – quoted impedance became nominally 11. Subsequently bi-wiring was introduced, bringing the LS3/5A into the modern era.

Some think the LS3/5A to have a sublime and unique sound that has never been bettered, others believe it to be an outdated anachronism, limited by its ancient drive units with their low-tech cone materials. What's certainly agreed is that the 83dB sensitivity of the speaker makes it essential to use a powerful solid-state amplifier – around 50W RMS per channel at the very least. The LS3/5As also works best on frame stands – such as those made for the Linn Kan – very close to a rear wall.

Properly set up and with good partnering equipment, LS3/5As sound very smooth and well balanced, almost euphonic. There's a dramatic lack of boxiness to them that lets you listen right into the sound. However, they have a very small scale by the standards of most speakers,

and there's a sense you're peering through a compact looking glass. Bass is surprisingly enjoyable for a speaker that almost has none, being tight and clearly delineated. The midband is most pleasing in its clarity and neutrality, and the treble is smooth and delicate, but not very extended.

The LS3/5A seems happiest with light acoustic and small scale classical, where its fine tone and subtlety can shine through. Put some crunching heavy metal on and you'll feel let down by the lack of bass extension, slightly compressed dynamics (especially at higher volumes) and a rather unatmospheric high treble. Its problem is that it just can't shift air like big speakers, and goes to pieces if asked to.

End of an era

Ultimately, the LS3/5A's problem was that it had had its day fairly early into its life. Spondor still has original documents from the company's founder Spencer Hughes – who was involved with the original design – saying that, "the advent of pop music will lead to a requirement for speakers that can take more power". So, best think of this as a specialised product that does a few things well and others not quite so adeptly.

Up to 1988, over 60,000 pairs were made, and after a period of inactivity, it is back in production again via Stirling Broadcast. Expect to pay between £500 and £1,200 depending on age, type and condition; £800 should get you a very nice, usable pair which if looked after is unlikely to ever depreciate ●

An early advert for the LS3/5A from Chartwell



Turn to Stone

Stone Audio has taken its custom-built premises and made it a temple of hi-fi for **Ed Selley** to enjoy

Most UK hi-fi dealers use buildings that started life in another capacity. Be it a conventional retail store, converted house or even some of the more leftfield buildings like chapels and hotels that *Dealer Visits* has passed through in the not-too-distant past, but it is rare to find a bespoke hi-fi building. Just such a building exists, though, in the form of Stone Audio, a (ahem) stone's throw outside of Poole, Dorset. Company owner Alex Scott-Simons made the decision to have a bespoke building constructed in 2008 after some years as an online retailer and then operating out of a conventional shop.

The resulting building is a truly impressive space and one designed from the outset to show audio at its very best. Alex is a huge fan of two-channel audio, but Stone Audio's extensive brand portfolio also covers multichannel (with an incredible cinema demo room to show it off) and custom install as well as some clever accessories like mirror TVs and elegant hi-fi cabinets. This portfolio also covers a very extensive price range with Alex just as happy to sell compact all-in-one systems as he is high-end setups. As such, I was extremely interested to see how this was reflected in the three systems Alex had set up for my visit.



THE EXPERT



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gamutaudio.com

clearaudio.de

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sonusfaber.com



System test music



ACTIVE CHILD
You Are All I See
Vinyl



AIR
Moon Safari
CD



BEATLES
Revolver
24/96 FLAC

System 1 – Majik act

SOME SYSTEMS THAT I'm shown leave me wondering exactly how representative they are of the sort of business the store actually does day to day. This system is a perfect antidote to that as Alex has sold this exact configuration on several occasions – indeed, it is currently exiled from the demo rooms to give other setups a chance. When you look at what these sophisticated Scots can deliver, you begin to see why it is so popular.

Linn has been a mainstay of the Stone Audio lineup for years and Alex feels the current Majik is the most impressive range the company offers. There is certainly no shortage of features. The Majik DSM is an all-in-one offering UPnP streaming, a bewildering variety of digital and analogue inputs and a 90W internal amplifier controlled by a slender remote or the Kinsky app.

A kind of Majik

The DSM serves as the core of a Majik system that incorporates two mainstays of the Linn ethos. The first is that by adding the Majik 6100 power amplifier, you can run the Majik 140 loudspeakers in their active mode. A recent development from Linn is that the cards modify the system to allow this are now supplied free of charge making the decision to run the system this way a no brainer.

The second is that this system also plays host to the LP12. The Majik version seen here makes use of a Pro-Ject arm and makes use of a classic lines and basic spec of the evergreen deck are immediately recognisable. As the DSM has a phono stage onboard, there are no additional box requirements for the phono stage and the overall impression of the system is compact and discrete. The flexibility is ably demonstrated by the demo system also featuring an Oppo Blu-ray player, which is routed through the Linn and out to a Picture Frame LCD TV as might be used in a customer lounge.

I start proceedings with a blast of Active Child's *You Are All I See*. It doesn't take very long to understand why this system has proved so popular. It's not the sort of setup to immediately grab your attention with a vast but slightly artificial sound. Instead Pat Grossi's soaring falsetto is perfectly proportioned

and layered beautifully over the sparse, shimmering electronica. It might not be the exact studio master, but it's not too difficult to imagine the artist raising a smile on hearing their work played on it.

While this isn't a showy system it does have a sense of life and energy that is wonderfully compelling. I'm sure I'll be yellow carded by the audio journalist cliché police, but the LP12 really presents music in a way that is quite unlike anything else. The Cinematic Orchestra's *Ode To The Big Sea* is a curious time signature, but the LP12 nails it perfectly. The performance of the veteran deck is almost good enough to leave the streamer section untested, but that would be a mistake. A quick blast

The Linn LP12 presents music in a way that is quite unlike anything else

(there really is no better term) of Scratch Massive's *Communion* reveals that as well as the fleetness of foot the 140 floorstanders have great low-end shove and lovely fine detail retrieval.

One of the more notable aspects is how consistent it is across all sources. You won't find yourself favouring one because it sounds decisively better than the others. When you throw in convenience features like the internet radio, streaming direct from Apple devices and the huge number of inputs, you have a system that can genuinely handle almost any configuration of electronics that you might be trying to connect to it. It is easy to see why the Linn appeals to quite so many people that walk through the door.

- 1 LINN MAJIK LP12 TURNTABLE £2,700
 - 2 LINN MAJIK DSM AMPLIFIER/STREAMER/DAC/PHONO STAGE/ INTERNET RADIO/AIRPLAY ETC... £2,965
 - 3 LINN MAJIK 6100 POWER AMPLIFIER £2,720
 - 4 OPPO 105D BLU-RAY PLAYER £1,099
 - 5 LINN MAJIK 140 LOUDSPEAKERS - OAK £1,660
- LINN SILVER INTERCONNECT 1.2M PAIR £210
LINN MAJIK 140 UPGRADE STANDS £395
8M LINN K400 LOUDSPEAKER CABLE (£13 PER METER) £104
32X QED AIRLOC PLUGS £158.40
TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £12,011.40



The slim Majik components are fronted by a Linn legend



In active configuration, the Majik 140 is a very talented speaker indeed

System 2 – Run the Gamut

NEXT UP IS something you won't currently find on demonstration anywhere else in the UK. Gamut is a Danish company that produces complete systems – electronics, cabling and speakers in-house. Initially Alex trialed the M'inent M5 floorstander on its own. This 2.5-way design uses a pair of 7in drivers – each slightly different from one another to better suit them to their respective roles – and a ring radiator tweeter. The M5 showed promise, but Alex felt it was a little on the warm side.

And so he was persuaded to go 'all in' and added the Di150 integrated amplifier and CD3 CD player to complete the system. The Di150 is one of the most expensive integrated amps I've encountered, but this 180W, 32kg monster feels worth the asking price even before you turn it on. The build quality is immense, with beautifully finished heatsinks and a front panel that could stop a bullet. The CD3 is built in the same lavish casework and makes use of a Burr-Brown PCM 1792 DAC that allows for 192kHz upsampling from CDs.

Crystal clear

To finish the system, Alex has added a Clearaudio Performance DC turntable and Musical Surroundings battery-powered phono stage. While he is a huge fan of the LP12, Alex isn't blind to the slightly demanding setup options of the Linn and he feels that the incredibly logical and beautifully implemented Clearaudio offers the perfect solution to this. There is no arguing that the Performance DC is a wonderful looking deck and it must be said, very impressive value too. The overall asking price is actually slightly lower than the Majik LP12 in System One and this is helped by the inclusion of a £700 cartridge effectively as a freebie.

Starting with CD – allowing me to experience an all Gamut presentation – the way that this trio handles Air's magnificent *Moon Safari* is an elegant demonstration of the benefits of going for a one-make system. Any excess warmth that the M5 speakers might have shown with other electronics is absent here. To be clear, the presentation hasn't gone out the other side – the reproduction of Beth Hirsch's fabulous vocals in *All I Need* is liquid

smooth and almost entirely unconstrained from the speaker cabinets. The 7in drivers of the M5 lend this system an impressive low-end shove that once again is totally unforced. The vast output of the Di150 give this system a tremendous sense of effortlessness that even in the vast open plan area of the building never shows any real signs of strain.

Switching to the Clearaudio and giving it The Hidden Orchestra's *Archipelago* – a truly expansive record with some dense instrumentation to unpick – and the system delivers a spectacular pay off. The Clearaudio is slightly more matter of fact than the Linn, but it produces a sound that fills the room and underpins it with immense low-end extension and pin-sharp positioning of instruments and performers. The breaks and beats of *Spoken* are delivered with real accuracy and perfect timing. This is not a turnable you would buy for a warm and romantic, stereotypical vinyl sound, but if you have a wide variety of genres on vinyl and you really want to hear what is on the disc, this is one of the most accurate decks anywhere near the price.

What makes this system special is that the performance is greater than the sum of its already capable parts. They combine to give you a setup with nigh on unlimited headroom and a tonal balance that allows for upbeat and high impact music to be felt as much as heard with real power and drive to it, but just as easily replay a delicate vocal piece with startling immediacy and power. When you consider the immaculate build quality and the handsome appearance of the components – not to mention that the end result is still usefully compact – you have a mighty system.

The M5 is an advanced and potent performer



- 1 GAMUT M'INENT M5 LOUDSPEAKERS – WALNUT £7,700
 - 2 GAMUT CD3 CD PLAYER £5,250
 - 3 GAMUT DI150 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER £7,700
 - 4 CLEARAUDIO PERFORMANCE DC TURNTABLE £2,495
- MUSICAL SURROUNDINGS NOVA II PHONO STAGE £1,090
GAMUT XLR AND LOUDSPEAKER CABLING POA
TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £24,235



The Gamut electronics and Clearaudio turntable combine to great effect

System 3 – Chrome and class

THE FINAL SYSTEM is incredibly sophisticated, powerful and flexible. It is also gobsmackingly attractive and beautifully built. The range of components from Absolute Sounds is a key part of the Stone Audio lineup and two of its brands combine with a little help from Linn to form this vision of beauty.

Devialet has been an unstoppable force in audio since its arrival. Since then, the range has grown to multiple products, all based around the same unique design principle of configurable inputs mated to an innovative amplification stage that combines Class A elements with Class D power output. The 250 has 250W on tap from the single chassis and the option to configure it in a wildly varied number of ways.

One of these options is a UPnP streaming board, but Alex feels that it still has a little further evolution to undergo before he would make use of it all the time. And so, the Devialet is fronted by a Linn Klimax DS – one of the most capable devices of its kind you can buy. It is connected to the 250 via an analogue interconnect and means that the same excellent Kinsky app is available for control.

Olympic games

The final component in the system runs the Devialet close for sheer beauty. Sonus faber rarely produces anything other than beautiful speakers, but the Olympica II ranks as one of its prettiest. This three-way floorstander – making use of a dedicated midrange driver as well as a bass unit and the classic Sonus faber DAD arrowpoint tweeter – is almost perfectly proportioned. The curved cabinet, leant back for time alignment is almost perfectly set off by the walnut finish and leather baffle that makes almost every other speaker look rough and ready.

Rough and ready is not a turn of phrase you are likely to apply to the way this system sounds either. In the same way that the Gamut electronics work to bring out the best in the M5s, the Sonus fabers

are the perfect foil for the Devialet. There is a natural richness to the Olympicas that fleshes out the 250 and the result of the partnership is utterly compelling.

Kicking off with the 16/44 FLAC of Ali Farka Toure and Ry Cooder's *Talking Timbuku*, the way that this system builds the piece is utterly spellbinding. The body and weight that plucked strings have is so immediately compelling that you find yourself calmly suspending disbelief at the two artists not actually being present in the room and performing for you. The depth and extent that the sound field extends beyond the speakers borders on the supernatural.

At this point you should be impressed, but not too surprised – this is after all the Sonus faber comfort zone. Where the Devialet shows its character is when you move out of this historical happy place and ask this combination to get to grips with Kraftwerk's *Minimum Maximum*. The fast moving, almost seismic bass of *Aerodynamic* is chewed up and spat out with disdain by the Olympicas with their dose of Devialet smelling salts. This is a minor work of art that also manages to get the head nodding and this delivery on so many levels is the hallmark of something special.

To wrap up a very satisfying day, a quick blast of the Beatles *Tomorrow Never Knows* is utterly wonderful. The ability of this system to take you straight back to a smokey EMI studio and hear what is unapologetically my favourite Beatles track on my favourite Beatles album is a work of magic. This ability is so outstanding that I'd tolerate the electronics being wedged into biscuit tins and needing me to wear sturdy gloves to operate them. That this system is also perfectly built, astonishingly flexible and possessed of styling that would grace any lounge is what makes it truly outstanding.

- 1 DEVIALET 250 £11,800
 - 2 SONUS FABER OLYMPICA II LOUDSPEAKERS £6,998
 - 3 LINN KLIMAX DS £12,950
- CHORD COMPANY CABLING POA
TOTAL SYSTEM PRICE: £31,748



The Olympica is a very pretty and seriously talented speaker



The Devialet is peerless supported by the mighty Klimax DS

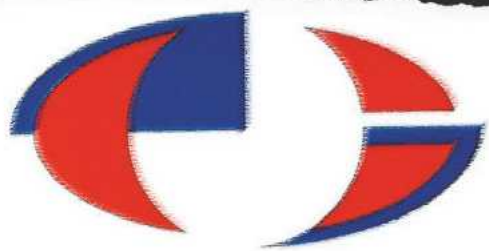


It is fitting that in a building purpose built to demonstrate hi-fi in the best possible way, I have experienced three systems that deliver sublime performance. All three do the most important thing any collection of audio electronics should do – they deliver the emotional content

of the music you play on them. What sets them apart is that they do this while making no concessions for flexibility, beauty or dimensions.

This is where the wide-ranging portfolio of Stone Audio comes into its own. Alex may love two-channel, but he

understands absolutely the demands of custom installation and this makes itself felt in the lack of rough edges or compromise in the way that these systems are assembled. Stone Audio is not simply a magnificent premises, it is also home to some stunning systems.



Creation



Creation Records

The label that genuflected at rock 'n' roll's altar. **Simon Berkovitch** revisits the home of the UK's most exhilarating guitar bands of the eighties and nineties

Hard to believe, but it is 20 years since Oasis, Creation Records' chart-dominating flagship band, detonated *Definitely Maybe*, the album that put the swagger back into indie rock 'n' roll and Creation into the fast lane.

At the time, the rivalry between Oasis and Blur was likened to The Beatles and the Stones – a wholly appropriate comparison for a label inspired by ambitious, sixties pop on its formation in 1983 until its dissolution in 1999.

The supersonic success of Oasis may have catapulted Creation into a whole other league, but its

risk-taking ethos remained the same – see the signing of former Dexys Midnight Runner Kevin Rowland for controversial comeback album *My Beauty* (1999). The label had travelled some distance since coming into being to release a 45 by obscure indie artist The Legend! with the help of a £1,000 bank loan...

Pop-art punks The Creation gave the label its name, and co-founder Alan McGee took inspiration from the mods' songbook when christening his own outfit, Biff! Bang! Pow! A fusion of rock 'n' roll, Byrdsian jangle and seventies punk and post-punk gave the early Creation groups – such as The

Pastels, The Loft and Slaughter – their sound.

The Jesus and Mary Chain was the first group to transcend its own set of influences and translate them into chart success, laying claim to being the label's first great group. Their *Upside Down* (1984) single is one of the most significant releases in Creation's history – alongside seminal records from My Bloody Valentine and near-hits from The House of Love in the late-eighties.

Shoegazers Ride were the first Creation act to hit the top 40 with the exhilarating *Like A Daydream* single (1990), with Primal Scream's dance-rock

hybrid *Loaded* defiantly sticking the label's flag in the *Top of the Pops* studio, paving the way for the all-conquering Oasis and other hits from Super Furry Animals and The Boo Radleys in the mid-nineties.

The road to commercial success was not without its problems: My Bloody Valentine allegedly caused Creation financial heartache during the prolonged midwifery of their critically acclaimed *Loveless* album (1991). Indeed, McGee sold half the company to Sony in 1992, signed Oasis and then rode the rocket of their mega-success until the label finally shut up shop in 1999.

Oasis

Northern charisma in spades and a songbook that will *Live Forever*

After signing to Creation in 1993 on the back of an 18 Wheeler support slot (see Shopping List), top 10 third single *Live Forever* made it apparent that Noel Gallagher was working to a masterplan. The Slade-meets-Beatles nursery rhymes of *Supersonic* and *Shakermaker* couldn't hold a candle to his towering anthem that set the scene for debut album *Definitely Maybe* (1994).

This was the fastest selling debut album in UK chart history, hurtling straight to number one on initial release, but bottling that genie was another matter. Recording sessions to capture Oasis's live set were troubled, until producer Owen Morris had a crack at the mixes. The end result was the final piece of the puzzle slotting into place, as the calibre of Gallagher's skyscraping songs and charismatic younger brother Liam's larynx – part-Lennon, part-Lydon – was never in question.

Post-*Definitely Maybe*, Oasis had crossed over into the mainstream. They may have been Creation's flagship band, but the level of success they were about to achieve meant they were no longer an indie label concern.

Follow-up album *What's the Story (Morning Glory)* (1995) saw songwriter Noel stretching out, embracing ballads and

This was the fastest selling debut album in UK chart history

strings – most significantly in *Wonderwall* – alongside the Stonesy glam of tracks such as *Some Might Say* and *Roll With It*.

Third album *Be Here Now* (1997) captures the band in the eye of the hurricane, famously described by *Q* as “cocaine set to music”. B-side compilation album *The Masterplan* (1998), Oasis' last for Creation, is a far more satisfying, diverse listen.

Now 20 years old, *Definitely Maybe* has been reissued and remastered



Primal Scream

Hedonistic rock 'n' roll historians who cut a diverse run of great LPs for the label

Formed by The Jesus and Mary Chain's sticksman Bobby Gillespie in the early eighties, Primal Scream released its first 45, the effervescent *All Fall Down*, for Creation in 1985. This sixties pop-inspired incarnation of the group released two singles and an album – *Sonic Flower Groove* (1987) – for short-lived Warner Brothers subsidiary Elevation.

Back on Creation, the real Scream story begins with 1989's self-titled album. The group had regrouped as a hard rock trio that sounded like it was driven by both the high energy rock 'n' roll of The Stooges and MC5 and the downer ballads of Big Star and Dennis Wilson. It was one of these heartbreakers – *I'm Losing More Than I'll Ever Have* – that, in the hands of house DJ Andrew Weatherall, became hit single *Loaded*, one of the big records of the indie-dance crossover of the early nineties.

Primal Scream's crowning achievement, the *Screamadelica* album (1991), swiftly followed – a joyous, eclectic mix of Rolling Stones' rock, spacey dub, electronica, uplifting house music and comedown ballads.

The follow-up *Give Out But Don't Give Up* (1994) channelled

A joyous, eclectic mix of rock, house and electronica

the spirit of mid-seventies rock 'n' roll and soul, while *Vanishing Point* (1997) was a return to the group's more experimental, post-punk roots.

My Bloody Valentine's Kevin Shields swelled the ranks for the politicised, harder-edged, *XTRMNTNTR* – the last LP released by Creation in 2000. The group shows no signs of winding down operations, having released four LPs since Creation's demise.

XTRMNTNTR was the final Primal Scream album on Creation



The Jesus and Mary Chain

The blessed union of Phil Spector pop and godlike guitar feedback

Inspired by the Sex Pistols, The Velvet Underground, The Ramones and sixties' girl groups, the music that Jim and William Reid – the core of The Jesus and Mary Chain – made stuck out like a sore thumb in the sea of eighties pop – and none more triumphantly than on their first Creation release.

Upside Down (1984) was Creation's first great 45; a record that still sounds like it's hell-bent on escaping the confines of its grooves. Proof positive that the equation of wall of guitar feedback, plus Velvet Underground drums, plus sixties girl groups songwriting sensibilities equals pop perfection, *Upside Down* is a life-affirming slab of noise pop; one that's often imitated, never bettered.

After this fearsome blast, the group signed to Warner Brothers' subsidiary Blanco y Negro (with Creation supremo Alan McGee retained as

manager) and released one of the eighties' greatest alternative rock records: *Psychocandy* (1985). Going full circle, the Mary

Chain returned to Creation in the mid-nineties, recording sixth LP *Munki* (1998) for the label – their last studio album before splitting up in 1999.



The House of Love

One of the great Creation bands, according to label founder Alan McGee

Described by label boss Alan McGee as “one of the great Creation bands”, indie rock outfit The House of Love may have had a clutch of classic songs to their name, but internal disarray meant that they weren't destined to become the label's first big breakout act.

At the heart of The House of Love lay vocalist and guitarist Guy Chadwick and lead guitarist Terry Bickers. Indeed, it's the partnership of Bickers' melodic, psychedelic style and Chadwick's classic songwriting chops on which the group's reputation lies.

Their first single releases on Creation – *Shine On* and *Real Animal* were rounded up on an excellent, untitled, German-only compilation (1987).

Although tipped for success, this unstable lineup soon imploded and a new incarnation of The House of

Love signed to major label Fontana – with mixed results.

Bickers went on to form cult neo-progressive rock act Levitation in the early nineties,

while Chadwick continued to captain The House of Love, before reforming the group with his former guitarist for a spell back in 2003.



► SHOPPING LIST

Alan Hake, from nineties Creation act 18 Wheeler, picks the lost albums and singles that are definitely, not maybe, worth hunting down



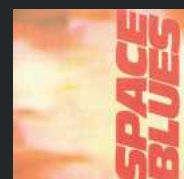
Slaughter
I'll Follow You Down
“The dark magus of Creation's history. This is a glorious shambles of feedback, free jazz, garage and debauchery.”



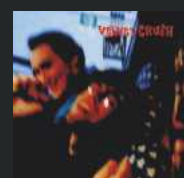
The Jasmine Minks
Cold Heart
“C86 anorak indie at its best. A lovely song, but aren't those chorus vocals slightly out of tune?”



Bill Drummond
The Man
“A strangely forgotten LP given the KLF's pop domination. Often dismissed as a joke, I certainly took it seriously.”



Felt
Space Blues
“Far removed from jangly, indie pop, euro synths back a typically bittersweet Felt lyric on this marvellous track.”



Velvet Crush
The Post Greatness EP
“Home to the power-pop double whammy of *Window To The World* and *Atmosphere*.”



Teenage Fanclub
Thirteen
“The follow-up to breakthrough *Bandwagonesque* was a relative failure critically and commercially. I'm not sure why.”



Arnold
Hillside Album
“Hailed as the new Radiohead, I thought they sounded like Pink Floyd. *Fleas Don't Fly* is pure post-Syd floatiness.”



Super Furry Animals
Northern Lites
“The last great band Creation signed. They had an effortless run of singles and this is my favourite.”



“Get up and drive your funky soul!”

James Brown

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100 Shakti
Natural Elements



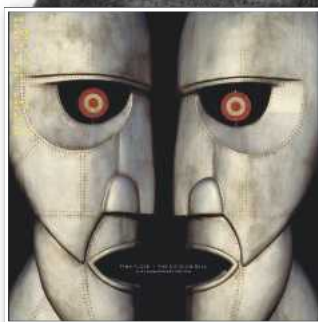
100 Hollie Cook
Twice



101 John Coltrane
Blue Train

Musicreviews

Albert Watson



Pink Floyd The Division Bell

★★★★★

**ALBUM
OF THE
MONTH**

Expanded multi-disc box set **Parlophone**

HAVING WRITTEN MOST of the material on *Dark Side Of The Moon*, *Wish You Were Here*, *The Wall* and *The Final Cut*, Roger Waters believed that he was Pink Floyd. He likened Floyd without Waters to The Beatles without John Lennon and after leaving the group in the mid-eighties resorted to the courts in an attempt to prevent his former colleagues continuing without him. Guitarist Dave Gilmour, keyboardist Rick Wright and drummer Nick Mason had other ideas and to Waters' fury won the legal right to the famous brand name.

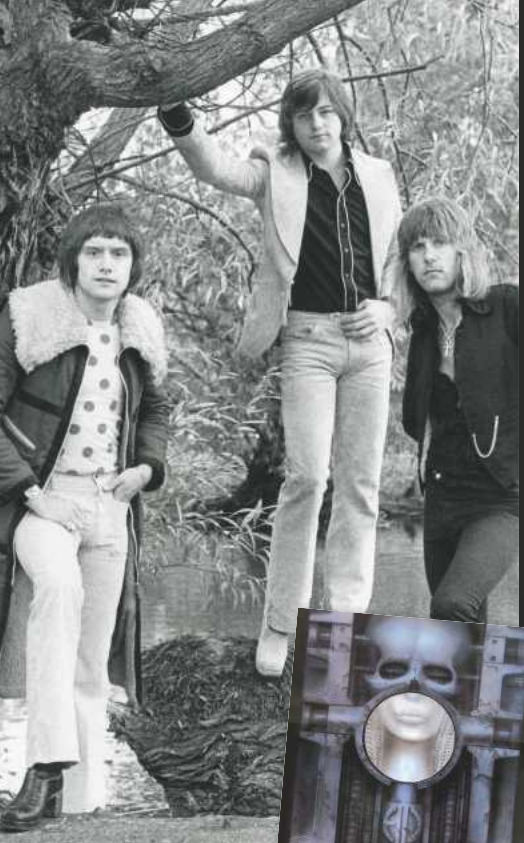
The first album in Floyd's Gilmour-led incarnation, 1987's *A Momentary Lapse Of Reason*, was disappointingly flabby and insubstantial, saved only by Gilmour's own burnished guitar playing. But the 1994 follow up – which to date remains Floyd's last studio album – was a far more satisfying affair. Bob Ezrin, who had helmed *The Wall*, reassuringly resumed the producer's role and Dick Parry, whose

sax playing had graced *Dark Side Of The Moon* and *Wish You Were Here*, returned for the first time in almost 20 years, helping Gilmour to recapture the group's eternal essence. *The Division Bell* went on to top charts around the world and gave Floyd its first number one album in America in 15 years.

All great Floyd albums require a concept and Gilmour came up with the theme of communication and the space between us. Many of the album's lyrics were interpreted as a broadside against Waters, particularly on *Lost For Words*, *Poles Apart* and *A Great Day For Freedom*, with the double entendre of its references to "the day the wall came down". Gilmour diplomatically denied any of it was an attack on his old colleague, but the theme and the frisson of anger, real or imagined, gave *The Division Bell* a consistency and coherence that *A Momentary Lapse Of Reason* had lacked, while the empathy between Wright's

keyboards and Gilmour's guitar on the instrumentals *Cluster One* and *Marooned* returned to Floyd's cosmic glory of the early seventies.

Lavishly repackaged in a 20th anniversary box set, there's a previously unreleased 5:1 surround mix for the audiophiles and a two disc 33rpm LP version for the vinyl junkies. Above all, there's some cracklingly potent Floyd music. Gilmour's U2 imitation on *Take It Back* now sounds like a bad mistake and the sampling of Stephen Hawking's voice on *Keep Talking* doesn't really convince. But they're rare blemishes and the likes of *What Do You Want From Me* with its *Comfortably Numb*-style guitar solo, the ethereal *Poles Apart* with its inventive Michael Kamen orchestration and the magisterially doomy ballad *High Hopes*, which brought the album to a close proved conclusively that there was far more to Pink Floyd than Roger Waters. **NW**



Emerson, Lake and Palmer

Brain Salad Surgery

★★★★★

Three disc deluxe edition

Sony

SINCE ITS RELEASE back in 1973, ELP's fourth album has been widely derided as a rather self-indulgent extravagance that epitomises everything wrong with prog-rock. This 40th anniversary edition, augmented by a second disc of alternative mixes and rarities, and a DVD Audio version, gives an opportunity to reassess. In reality it will probably only reinforce existing views of arguably the ultimate 'Marmite' band of its era.

With its famous "welcome back my friends to the show that never ends" intro, the sprawling centrepiece, the

Big, bold and ambitious or trite, pretentious and overblown – the choice is yours...

three-part suite *Karn Evil 9*, finds Keith Emerson turning into the Hendrix of the keyboards, coaxing an astonishing array of sounds out of his instruments, including the Moog Apollo, billed as the first polyphonic synthesiser. Elsewhere the versions of *Jerusalem* and Ginastera's piano concerto are among rock music's most formidable settings of classical themes. Big, bold and ambitious or trite, pretentious and overblown – the choice is yours. **NW**



MUSICREVIEWS



John Martyn Well Kept Secret

★★★★★

CD

Esoteric

STRONGLY INFLUENCED BY Phil Collins, Martyn's 1982 album moved away from the evanescent folk-rock of earlier albums in favour of smooth pop arrangements, polished production and slick sessioners.

The outcome was the disco sheen of tracks such as *You Might Need A Man* and *Back With A Vengeance* – and his first top twenty album. But his airy sensuality was still to the fore on the likes of *Could've Been Me*, the sultry *Hung Up* and a heartfelt cover of Joe Scott's beautiful *Never Let Me Go*, now sympathetically remastered for the first time in more than 30 years. **NW**



Hollie Cook Twice

★★★★★

CD

Pledge Music

HOLLIE COOK'S SECOND album continues the laid-back, sunny pop reggae of her debut but this time the songs are more sophisticated. Moving away from standard stylings towards establishing a signature sound, based on roots reggae, but incorporating Bond-style string flourishes, Brazilian percussion and choral harmonies. Production by Prince Fatty is consistently fine throughout, showcasing Cook's high, childlike vocals to great effect, and helped by a few very distinguished guest appearances including Dennis Bovell and Omar. Highlights include *Ari Up*, a tribute to the Slits' lead singer and *Looking For Real Love*. **DO**



Chrissie Hynde

Stockholm

★★★★★

CD

Will Travel/Caroline Records

THE QUEEN OF kohl returns without her trusty Pretenders in tow. Not that you'd really notice to be honest. They may not be sophisticated, but Hynde still has a knack for a catchy chorus, as testified by *Don't Be Such A Baby* and *You're The One*. Her distinctive alto voice is undiminished too and is still a sexy pleasure to lose yourself in.

As a paid-up member of rock royalty she now has access to great guests which is how we come to see Neil Young lending his string-bending skills to *Down The Wrong Way* and John McEnroe (yes, that one) laying down some guitar work on *A Plan Too Far*. With or without her regular band, Chrissie Hynde is still very much a star. **DO**



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AUDIOFILE VINYL

★★★★★

Shakti Natural Elements

180g vinyl

Columbia/Speakers Corner



with tabla supremo Zakir Hussain, violinist L Shankar and percussionist TH Vinayakram. They made three albums of which this, the last, was recorded in 1977, yet it has enough exuberance to be the first. Shakti in this guise is not unlike an acoustic Mahavishnu, there is easily as much fire and flamboyance on the opening piece *Mind*

AFTER THE JAZZ rock odyssey that was the Mahavishnu Orchestra, speed demon guitarist John McLaughlin looked east for his next project. This coalesced into Shakti, which he formed

Ecology to put it up against McLaughlin's electric work. But the acoustic factor brings a lightness to the fast and furious proceedings on many tracks, it's not combative, however, the two lead players manage to work together (and alone) in complete harmony, leaving the percussion players to drive the sound with their amazing ability to play in synch at high tempos. If anything *Natural Elements* could do with some of the serenity found in earlier Shakti albums, there is only one down tempo piece at the end, dubbed suitably enough *Peace of Mind*. This is a distinctly analogue recording in the Columbia style, it's not given much dynamic range, but there is plenty of natural reverb to add depth. **JK**

HIGH RESOLUTION DOWNLOADS



The Gloaming The Gloaming



Apple Lossless

B&W Society of Sound

THE GLOAMING ARE an odd hybrid of traditional Irish folk and New York experimentalism. To the fore is Martin Hayes' plaintive violin, ably accompanied by piano, voice, guitar and hardanger fiddle on a series of *sean-nós* (old style) traditional songs. This is no exercise in nostalgia, though, and the five master musicians use the old songs as jumping off points to explore new directions and derive new depths of emotion. **DO**



John Coltrane Blue Train

HOT PICK



ALAC 24bit 44.1kHz

Linn Records

SAXOPHONE GIANT COLTRANE had broadly two sides to his incredible career – the mind-expanding later work and his earlier, more lyrical interpretations of original and standard songs. This is firmly in the latter camp and contains some of the most beautiful and expressive music committed to record. Legendary engineer Rudy Van Gelder's attention to detail is beautifully showcased by this hi-res digitally remastered version. **DO**



HOT PICK

Respighi Brazilian Impressions; La Boutique Fantasque, Orchestre Philharmonique de Liege, John Neschling



Hybrid SACD

Bis

Mixes lush sonorities and rich sparkling tone colours to create a timeless languid mood

THE SHIMMERING OPENING of *Brazilian Impressions* perfectly showcases Respighi's ear for orchestral detail. The mix of lush sonorities and rich sparkling tone colours creates a timeless languid mood. It's followed by *La Boutique Fantasque*, based on tunes by Rossini. Conductor John Neschling captures the effervescent mood of the piece perfectly, and the Orchestre Philharmonique de Liege responds with witty, spirited playing. The recording sounds crisp, open, and effortlessly detailed. The sound is naturally balanced, but quite brightly lit, and beautifully transparent. The SACD layer sounds slightly more open and tonally sweeter – the CD layer is more forward. **JH**



Mendelssohn Ruy Blas overture, A Midsummer Nights' Dream, Piano concertos 1 and 2



0289 481 0778 0

Decca

FOR COLLECTORS, THE main item of interest on this disc is the original 1839 version of the overture *Ruy Blas*. The familiar version is superior, but it's fascinating to hear Mendelssohn's first thoughts. It's followed by the *Overture* and four numbers from the incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Last but not least, the two piano concertos complete a well-filled disc. The performances are crisp and lively. Chailly can be a bit hard driven in Mendelssohn, but the music is always kept moving. The piano concertos are brilliantly played, and soloist Ashkar copes well with the fast tempi. The recording is clean, open, and well balanced. **JH**

BLU-RAY DVD ★★★★★

Patricia Barber Modern Cool

HOT PICK

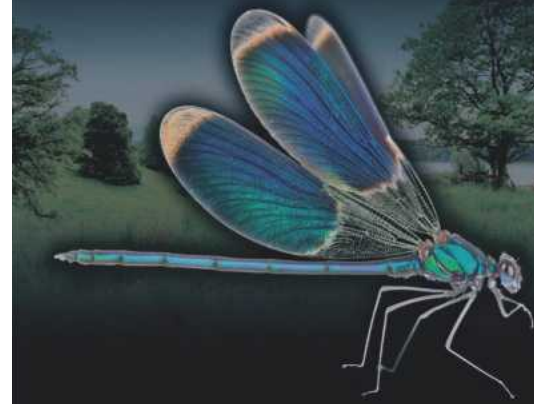
Blu-ray

PREMONITION RECORDS



Modern Cool was originally released in 1998 but had not been released beyond CD and vinyl before this Blu-ray. Unusually it's a dedicated audio disc with only a format choice and track menu showing onscreen. The 24/192 PCM mix is sumptuous and the playing captivating. The 5.1 DTS HD Master 24/96 is a completely new mix and opens up an already revealing recording further. Barber and band have a tendency to smoothness, but when they cut loose as on *Constantinople* things get a lot more interesting. **JK**

Nature's Dragonfly



Our DRAGONFLY



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ORTOFON MCA10 battery-operated preamp, excellent condition comes with new batteries. 1x Ortofon MC10 Super cartridge, boxed, plays well, but may need a re-tip (no way of checking), £50 including postage. 1x BTE passive preamp, 3 inputs, American Walnut, excellent condition, very little use, £50 including postage: **01382 644815 (Dundee).**

NAIM Nait 5i integrated amp in excellent condition original box, still under warranty receipt provided, £499: **07967122765.**

VPI Scout 2/JMW 9T/Linn Klyde. £1,750 ono: **0208 4649044.**

POWER supply for Class A amplifiers, self contained, suits John Linsley Hood's or any low power Class A amplifier, £279. Pair of used SEAS 10in drivers, £99: **0207 499 8729.**

GALE 401 speakers with chrome ends, fully reconditioned, original paperwork and boxes, first reasonable offer secures.



YAMAHA YSP 2200 sound bar and subwoofer, all cables and leads and instructions, only 18 months old (RRP £750) £390: **01294 822562 (North Ayrshire).**

Sadly they must go: **01825 722936** or email: **spartridge37@btinternet.com (Sussex).**

MICHELL Gyro SE with Origin Live Rega RB600, Goldring 1642. Mint condition £875. Audiolab 8000 Q (British) £280. Audiolab 3000P £180. Acoustic Energy AE1 Classics £575. All mint condition: **01484 427426 (West Yorkshire).**

ARCAM irDAC £195, mint condition and boxed: **02392 453382 (Havant).**

WANTED Technics DVD stereo system SC-DV-150 or later version. Good condition essential. Quadrophonic amplifier also desired: Sansui QRX 9000 or 999 or Pioneer equivalent: **01985 213952 (Wiltshire).**

ATACAMA Equinox hi-fi rack in piano black with glass shelves. Five shelves and not four in mint condition (RRP £430) £150: **07905348812 (Watford).**

WANTED Quad 50E mono amplifier, must be in good working order: **07946 522644 (Sheffield).**

SONUS FABERS Concertino speakers with Sonus faber Piano Black fluted stands in excellent condition, with original boxes £695. Musical Fidelity X-Dac v3 £250, Pr 3M bespoke Silver High Breed Quintessence speaker cabled, banana termination, £95: **02476 679165** or email: **dewi244@icloud.com (Coventry).**

REGA Brio amplifier. Two years old, moderate usage £300. Monitor Audio BX5 Floorstanders, two years old, perfect condition £250: **07908 945608 (Battersea).**

ATC integrated SIA2 150 mint condition, superb sound, just £1,250: **01225 706783 (Wiltshire).**

AKG VQ701 Quincy Jones Signature Line Headphones in white, one and a half years old, mint condition, boxed (£340 new) £170: **07905 348812 (Watford).**

AERIAL ACOUSTICS 10T speakers in Rosewood (£8,000 new), asking £2,200. Lexicon processor DC2 (£4,000) VGC £950: **0152614055 (Fleet, Hants).**

NORDOST Red Dawn RCA interconnects. Superbly transparent sound, mint condition, were £300 will take £100: **01484 427426 (West Yorkshire).**

WANTED four track tape deck or recorder for up to 7in spools: **01535 661278 (West Yorks).**

PINK TRIANGLE LPT Rega £300. Musical Fidelity E100 Electa amp, E600 CD, E50 tuner £550. Linn Index speakers £70. Sony Sports Walkman £25: **01708 457691 (Essex)**

CHORD Signature links x4, brand new, unused (cost



STAX SR-007 reference system, ie: SR-007 electrostatic earspeaker with matching SRM-00711 direct coupled dual triode vacuum tuber energiser. Original owner, absolutely new £2,200 ono: **01505 346791 (Renfrewshire).**

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!



SPENDOR S3/5R² black speakers £400. REL T3 Sub, black £200. Linn Pekin tuner, black £150. All unmarked and perfect working order: **01952 728773 (Shropshire)**.

£90) £60. Chord cobra Plus sub lead, 10m (cost £147) + 3m (cost £70) £100 for both + p&p. Russ Andrews RGB Scart (cost £200) £60: **01772 812992 (Preston Lancs)**.

ARCAM CD37/SACD player (black) £699. Roksan Kandy K2 integrated amplifier (silver) £550 and K2 CD player (silver) £550. Both only months old with latest remote control RMX-111. Denon TU1800 DAB/FM tuner (silver) £175. All items in immaculate condition with original boxes: **023 80738935 or email: golf3385@hotmail.co.uk**.

EAR 509, Mk 2. Pair of mono valve amps, 100W per channel. Very good condition, late eighties, little use. Can demo. Buyer to pay postage or collect, £2,000: **07527 567829 or email: abaird2011@btinternet.com (Berkshire)**.

MUSICAL FIDELITY A1 integrated amp (2008), A1CD both in excellent condition and boxed. £1,000 for both ono. Will split: **07791 529128**.

QUAD 99 System consisting of amp, preamp, CD and tuner in original boxes, mint condition, complete with leads and remote control. Prefer buyer collects. £800 ono: **0208 8576346 or email: pp.marden31@ntlworld.com (Bromley)**.

NACAMICHI DR-3 cassette deck (only 6 tapes ever played/rec) including 10x TDK SA90-2xTDK MA90 blank tapes unopened and 2x 1m pairs of QED silver spiral interconnects (for play/rec). Includes original box and manual, £165: **01202 515474 or email: johnlangley17@**

talktalk.net.

MARANTZ Champagne PM 7200 KI amplifier in mint fully working order. C/W KI certificate, manual, remote and packing carton, £300: **07505 920373 (Warrington)**.

CHORD Indigo Plus Digital 2M RCA-to-RCA £300 and 3M of same £350, excellent condition can demo. Upgraded to tuned array: **02380470107 or email: lesliestubbs@tiscali.co.uk**.

PMC GB1 compact floor-standing loudspeakers, immaculate cherry veneer, in original boxes, £450: **01403 255153 or email: richermail@aol.com (West Sussex)**.

REGA Elicit R amplifier, 6 months old, as new condition. Complete with original packaging and receipts.



LEAK 2075 speakers, excellent condition, no scratchers, can demo. Collection only due to size and weight £650: **01472 885413 or email: bilton1234@virginmedia.com (Grimsby)**.

£1,200: **07933 109234 (Leicester)**.

MUSICAL FIDELITY V-Dac MkII £80, X-Cans MkI £40. Headphones: Grado SR80 £40, Sennheiser HD580 (minor cosmetic issues) £35. Townshend Seismic Sink platform black £95: **07931 571915 or email: tjohnston@atlas.co.uk (London)**.

CHORD Anthem 2 RCA interconnects, 1 metre, boxed, 2 pairs (£300 per pair). Chord Epic Twin speaker cable, 3 metres (£350). All as new, all £150 per pair. Linn Ikemi CD player, immaculate (£2,200), £550. Buyer collects: **07870 159725 or email: johnsidebottom@hotmail.co.uk (Somerset)**.

PROAC Speakers Response D1 for sale. Cherry finish with black grilles. As new £850. Buyer to collect: **01628 626085 or email: dandpotter@indosmail.com (Maidenhead)**.

KIMBER Select 9033 number set with super burn in £250. Kimber Orchid digital XLR 1/2m £130. Kimber HD19 HDMI cable 0.75m £50. Isotek Sigmas mains conditioner £800: **01772 314151 or email: Jamesmckendrick@btinternet.com (Lancashire)**.

PRECISION Eikos CD player fully upgraded by Tom Evans just under two years ago to his very latest spec. with external

power supply at a total cost of £3,600, asking £1,575 (have now moved to streaming) Audiolab 8000T tuner £115 (£800) had from new, but hardly ever used: **01202 515474 or email: johnlangley17@talktalk.net (Bournemouth)**.

PROAC Studio 140 Mk1 floorstanding speakers in maple. Due to weight, buyer collects. Unmarked A1 condition. £750: **07597 499299 (Hampshire)**.

CUSTOM DESIGN wall-mounted turntable support, black steel frame, toughened glass shelf, complete with all fixings in as-new condition. Offers please: **01293 524587 or email: davedagenham@hotmail.co.uk (West Sussex)**.

NAIM Intro 2 Speakers, beech

finish. Excellent condition, original boxes and floor spikes. £275: **07837 654593 or email: kinkyafro@gmail.com (Lincoln)**.

SOMETHING SOLID speaker stands. Black, 63cm height, mass filled, spiked feet, photo available. Ring for other dimensions. Quality stands. VGC. £40: **01582 423791 (Beds)**.

CLASSICAL LP collection for sale. Over 2,000. Many highly rated performances. All in really excellent condition. Sell as one collection or smaller quantities: **07804 782950 or email: hope.colin@yahoo.co.uk (Maidenhead)**.

ACOUSTIC INSIGHTS Aurousal VSx speakers. Excellent condition with boxes dark cherry £895, sale reason colour change wanted: **0208 9513178 (Middlesex)**.



ROKSAN Kandy K2 integrated amplifier, in black, 17 months old, perfect and as new and boxed. £595. Would prefer demo and collection to posting: **0113 2188797 (Leeds)**.

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HiFi World, July 2013

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Eltax

Monitor III BT wireless speakers

ACTIVE SPEAKERS WERE once seen as pro market products, but are now a rapidly growing area in domestic hi-fi with seemingly every speaker brand introducing at least one wirelessly connected active speaker model to its range.

The new Monitor III BT is based on Eltax's original passive Monitor III standmounted loudspeaker and adds a built-in amplifier with Bluetooth – there's no aptX logo – as well as a useful selection of analogue (RCA and 3.5mm jack) and digital (optical and coaxial) connections for wired sources making it a very versatile option indeed. There's also a subwoofer output, while a USB input is provided for charging of a Bluetooth device, but not audio playback.

The cabinets are nicely constructed made from 18mm thick MDF and each speaker measures 195 x 330 x 230mm (WxHxD). They look rather understated, but remove the speaker grilles and you will find a bass port slot on the front baffle beneath a 25mm tweeter and 130mm mid/bass drivers. Our review model has a pleasant matt black textured finish, but a white option is also available.

Which is which?

A built-in amplifier quoted at 2x 50W max power is in one of the speakers, and feeds the passive model via a supplied speaker cable linking the two together. Rather unhelpfully there is no information on the back of either speaker unit or clearly detailed in the instruction booklet to indicate whether the active speaker model should be positioned on the left or the right side for accurate stereo. Place the speakers the wrong way round, and the soundstage will be confused.

Thankfully the hit and miss approach to speaker placement isn't evident when it comes to connecting your Bluetooth device – simply select the input using the speakers' remote control, followed by the pairing button, and the Eltax see your Bluetooth device. Select the speakers, and hey presto! A white



LED light behind the active speaker's grille provides helpful connection status info.

With 25 years of manufacturing behind the brand and a design based around an already successful passive speaker version, it's hardly a surprise that the Eltax deliver a sonically satisfying listen. With a CD player connected via the optical digital input to test their sound quality capabilities with uncompressed audio, they have a well-rounded and surprisingly engaging performance – I have heard more costly models that don't sound this good. The midrange proves to be a particular talent and the voicing gently highlights the vocals on London Grammar's *Hey Now* giving them a presence that makes it easy to hear Hannah Reid's every breath within the recording.

With the active speaker positioned on the left for correct stereo, the soundstage performance is also rather impressive for such affordable models, and it manages to conjure up a larger sense of space than I imagined from the relatively small speaker boxes spaced just 1.5m apart. Jennifer Warnes' *Ballad of the Runaway Horse* extends across the width of my listening room to form a solid soundstage – something that you'll only be able to appreciate by placing the left and right speakers in their correct positions.

The bass performance adds a sense of scale and is fairly well controlled and extended thanks to the front port, helping the Monitor III BT to sound surprisingly potent. There are some mild cabinet resonances in the mid bass at times, although this is only triggered by certain tracks, but it's a good idea to ensure that the speakers are firmly supported by a solid base and use the supplied foam pads to assist with isolation from any external vibrations.

With music streamed over Bluetooth running Qobuz from my tablet the results are still decent, and the speakers follow the same sonic characteristics as with direct source connections. There's a noticeable downwards shift in terms of audio quality, but it's still very listenable.

Hey good looking

There are plenty of Bluetooth speakers for buyers to choose between, but few are as well specified or as engaging as the Monitor III BT. Its wireless Bluetooth connectivity may not claim aptX support, but this doesn't score against it. The inclusion of so many wired connectivity options suggests that the Eltax's wireless connectivity isn't its *raison d'être*, but one that adds to its flexibility as an active speaker package and makes it even more attractive at the price. **LD**

DETAILS

PRICE
£200
CONTACT
0333 9000 093
WEBSITE
richersounds.com

OUR VERDICT



Arcam miniBlink Bluetooth DAC



NOWHERE ON THE top three sides of the packing box can you see the word Arcam. Instead, it's described as a 'miniBlink', with '123' added on one surface. Now this isn't because Arcam is a modest company with much to be modest about, it's because the Cambridge-based operation is selling this little device into a market that neither knows nor cares who or what Arcam is. In other words, the miniBlink is unashamedly a mass market, consumer audio product. And why not?

Arcam has been quick to market with a extensive range of wireless and/or network-equipped DACs. This shows that the company has been fast to recognise the potential of a brave new audio world where mobile phones and tablets are now our music sources. Indeed, we're getting to the stage now that computer audio is for dads with their ripped CD collections, while the kids are happy with their mobile devices and downloads!

Blink and you'll miss it

So the miniBlink is aimed at a younger demographic, and maybe their more hip, groovy and swinging parents too – but certainly not at folk who worry that aptX may not be a sufficiently high-fidelity medium to transmit digital audio over. All the miniBlink has to be is small, cute and ultra easy to use – and so it is. It weighs just 40g and measures 60 x 30 x 75mm (WxHxD), meaning it's small enough to be truly portable. Indeed, Arcam intimates that this is how it sees many miniBlink customers using it, flitting between friends and family music systems for the few years we have before everything on sale gets Bluetooth connectivity built in as standard.

It's claimed to be "as easy as 1-2-3" to set up, and so it proves. All you do is unpack the unit, plug it into the USB power supply that comes in the box, switch your device's Bluetooth on (if it isn't already) and press the miniBlink's one button to pair it. This done, it will light up a

lovely shade of violet. Oh, and don't forget to plug the supplied RCA-to-3.5mm cable into your hi-fi; there's also a 3.5mm-to-3.5mm lead included too, for those who don't have hi-fis. The whole process is done and dusted in just under a minute.

Arcam says "much" of the miniBlink is taken from the company's £160 rBlink. This is the audiophile version, with an S/PDIF output and a swanky alloy case. The miniBlink feels like a very light plastic pebble; it's

Shows that aptX can be great with a lively, detailed and just plain fun sound

beautifully surfaced with a gloss finish, but you wonder how long it will last without being scratched. It sports a Burr-Brown PCM5102 24-bit DAC, which is a fine design; I think the biggest limiting factor won't be this, but the very cheap USB power supply and the very modest connecting leads. Although adequate, the miniBlink would surely sound significantly better with either or both of these upgraded.

Audiophiles shouldn't worry about aptX. Standard Bluetooth sounds gruesome, but this special wireless

protocol that piggy-backs onto it offers really rather good sonics. It's claimed to be as good as CD, but I've never heard it that good; rather it's best described as matching top-quality AAC, which is certainly no bad thing. When it's had a few minutes to warm up, the miniBlink shows you that aptX can be great with a lively, musical, detailed and just plain fun sound.

Power and the glory

For example, Grace Jones' *Private Life* comes over with power and passion. Driven by my Sony Xperia Z smartphone, the miniBlink shows itself to be excellent at capturing the song's dynamics. There is a lovely punch to Sly and Robbie's percussion work, with a lithe, supple bass guitar and wonderful thwack to the bass drum. Tonally it's not the deepest, darkest sounding thing around; instead it has a bright and spry sort of nature that picks out loads of detail with zest and vigour. But you'd never call it hard; it comes over as being a well executed, low distortion design. Indeed Arcam's new miniBlink is ideal for its intended market, giving portable music fans a taste of quality sound that they may not be used to, yet it remains highly enjoyable to more tweaky hi-fi types too. **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£90
CONTACT
01223 203200
WEBSITE
arcam.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



icon Audio

Pure Valve Phono Pre-Amplifiers



Serious about vinyl? Then you should read this



PS 3 MK II



PS 1 MK II

designed by David Shaw

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Vinyl reproduction needs simple valve quality. Not Complexity!

Our three phono pre-amplifiers have consistently won top awards in Hi Fi World, Hi Fi News, and Hi Fi choice, and other countries whenever they are reviewed.

The brilliantly conceived 1950's RIAA equalisation for LP reproduction calls for a simple low noise valve stage which attenuates treble according to frequency. This may be done easily in stereo with three valves preserving the minute musical details recorded in the groove giving a "warmer" satisfying sound without emphasising surface noise and scratches that older vinyl is prone to have. Whilst technically speaking modern solid state designs work well, their complex multi stages "lose" something in comparison to valves and often sound cold, clinical and uninteresting, lacking the passion and emotion in the music whether it be Vivaldi or the Verve.

Whilst the Compact Disc is stuck with its dated 1977 software, vinyl technology continues to advance. Improved stylus shapes and tone arms keep pushing the technical boundary on what can be recovered from an LP groove and with an Icon Audio phono stage can reveal simply astonishing results, even from 1950's recordings. As the definition of equipment improves we have refined our designs to maintain the focus and presentation to be without any "mechanical" or contrived quality.

The PS1 MK II. Our original design updated with improved separate power supply both valve and "choke" regulation. This may also be fitted with our high quality "in house" made moving coil transformers suited to the finest moving coil pick up cartridges.

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The PS2 improved. A simplified "one box" version of the PS1 MK II. Comes with an all important substantial power supply, a carefully tuned circuit all hand wired, with selected valves for optimum performance with moving magnet or high output moving coil designs.

Awarded "RECOMMENDED" - Hi Fi Choice 2013.01

The PS3 Mk II. This design is unique in having a "state of the art" power supply including a valve rectifier, two special "chokes" for ultra smooth power, a unique pure valve referenced and regulated circuit to give DC current of the very highest purity. Our very low noise high definition double cascode pre amplifier then uses the superb 6SN7 output valve. Optional British made moving coil transformers, or our newly developed "premium" type suited to the finest moving coil pick up cartridges. Capable of exceptional performance and very low noise when connected to the best MM or MC pickups.

MK I version awarded 5 Globes "Exceptional Valve phono stage of fantastic ability" - NK HiFi World 2008.11. "OUTSTANDING PRODUCT" - Hi Fi News 2010.07

All our amplifiers are designed and finished in Leicester. Warranty and service is done by the engineers that designed them so you can be sure of long term performance. All of our amplifiers are hand made using "point to point" soldering without using printed circuit boards. This allows the use of bigger audiophile quality components easy servicing, upgrades and modifications. High quality components are used throughout including an "ALPS" volume control, silver plated PTFE audio cable SCR capacitors audiophile resistors. A choke regulated power supply adds richness to the sound quality that silicon devices alone are unable to do. Bespoke upgrades available including silver/copper capacitors, valves and design. All original designs by David Shaw made exclusively in our own factory.

PS2mm from £599.95(MM only) PS1 from £999.95 (£1,199.95MC) PS3 from £1,899 (£2,099 MC) (inc UK VAT). Buy direct from us or you dealer. (Part exchange welcome)

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250
DEVIALET

The Devialet 250 may be used in stereo mode, as well as the master unit of the Devialet 800, Devialet's ultimate audio solution. By purchasing a slave Devialet 250 (without the Wi-Fi module and the remote control), you can build the most incredible of Devialet systems.



400
DEVIALET

Finally, a dual-mono solution at an affordable price! The Devialet 400 is the most comprehensive and high-performance dual-mono model. Extreme power (400W), an inexhaustible wealth of adjustable parameters and unsurpassed performances (THD + N 0.00025%), the Devialet 400 finally enables you to make the transition to a system comprised of two power blocks.



800
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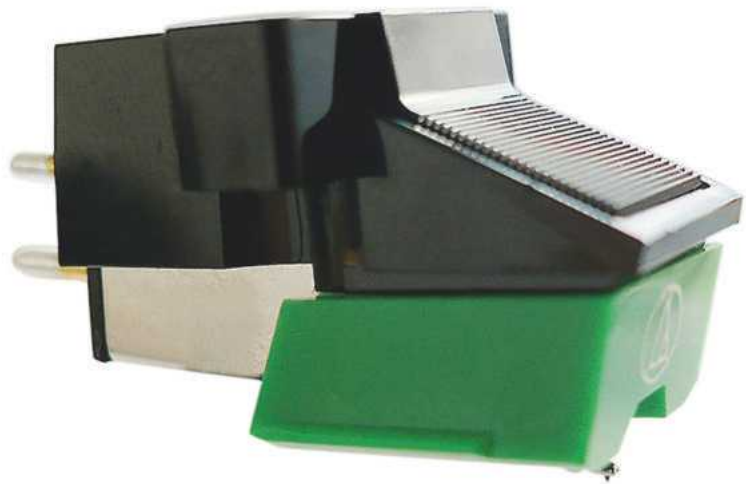
AT-95E phono cartridge

MANY PEOPLE IN the West tend to regard Japanese companies as massive corporations, on a par with Sony. Some are, of course, but not all – and Audio-Technica is one of Japan's smaller ones. It's basically a family-run business, started in 1962 in Tokyo's central Shinjuku district by Hideo Matushita. Japanese cultural, craft and artisan tradition has always placed a premium on precision engineering on a small – or even micro scale – and so it was no surprise that many companies started making pickup cartridges during the vinyl era. Audio-Technica started with the AT-1 and then AT-3 moving magnets, then the AT-1001 tonearm and latterly micro cassette recorders, headphones, microphones and interconnects.

By the early eighties when the AT-95E was launched, the company had a strong provenance of making phono cartridges, and began to do well in moving coils as well. A precision-made dual magnet design, it sports a green plastic detachable stylus assembly to which a standard aluminium cantilever is attached via a rubber damper. At the end you'll find a bonded round shank stylus, with an elliptical profile. When it was introduced, elliptical styli were still fairly prestigious things to have on budget cartridges, but now it's totally routine. The cartridge motor assembly is housed in a screened metal case and glued to a black plastic half-inch mounting block. It's all solidly made in Japan, and very well considering the price.

Tale of the tape

The vital statistics of the AT-95E are pretty routine nowadays, but were extremely good at the time of its launch. It tracks between 1.5g and 2.5g (I get best results around 2.2g), weighs 5.7g in total so will balance in most tonearms with ease, and has a standard 47,000ohm recommended loading. The company claims a 3.5mV (mV at 1kHz, 5cm/sec) output, which is decent but nothing special and a frequency response of 20Hz to 20kHz, which is fine.



With its detachable stylus, the joy of the AT-95E is that if you break it you can slot a brand new one in for around £20. Better still, if you're feeling tweaky there are various fancy aftermarket alternatives, such as the LP Gear (www.lpgear.com) ViVid Line for around £60. Or, if you're feeling keen, supergluing a brand new stylus to your AT-95E body will further improve the sound. This is precisely what Linn did back in the mid-eighties to make the Linn Basik cartridge – although it did it to the 95's cheaper AT-93 sibling, which had an inferior spherical diamond fitted.

This is no giant killing cartridge – £1,000 Lyra moving coils need not stir from their slumbers – but what it does do is provide an extremely good basic level of performance in a totally fuss-free way, for a very small amount of money (in cartridge terms). Rather like a good cheap hatchback car, you keep coming back to it thinking you're having a little more fun than perhaps you've paid for!

Housed in a good basic turntable – such as a Rega P3, for example – the Audio-Technica sounds fast, fun and frenetic, making music a pleasure to listen to and throwing loads of detail out at you. It tracks surprisingly well for a cheap cartridge, and delivers a spacious and deep soundstage that captures the fundamentals of the music brilliantly.

Tonally, it's ever so slightly bright and forward, but then again the vinyl medium isn't, so the AT-95E has some help here. The result is an explicit, well defined sound that has a taut, lithe bass and an open and engaging midband. In absolute terms, it pushes images just a little forward and into your face, but it's all relative and by CD standards sounds quite laid back. Treble is decently smooth and couth with no obvious nasties, although it's not the last word in extension.

Needle craft

Critics of the Audio-Technica will say it's slightly sterile and analytical. It's true to an extent, inasmuch as you'd never call it a romantic cartridge, and it doesn't time as well as really good moving coils. But at the price there are no complaints. Again, tonally it could do with a slightly more generous bass, but careful setup can help here, as can supergluing the stylus in place – although you'll void your warranty if you do this, of course. Properly aligned in a semi-decent tonearm, tracking at the right weight and given an LP side or two to warm up, the AT-95E is capable of a surprisingly good sound. Overall, it's a cracking little MM phono cartridge for any starter or classic deck – pick-up a bargain now! **DP**

DETAILS

PRICE
£30

CONTACT
0113 2771441

WEBSITE
eu.audio-technica.com/en

OUR VERDICT



Analogue Studio

Cork and rubber turntable mat



TURNTABLE MATS CAN serve a very important function. Apart from supporting the record on your platter, they also help to reduce unwanted vibrations and minimise the risk of slipping during playing. Incidentally, to check for any slippage, put a tiny mark on the edge of a record, line it up with a mark on the platter and then play the record. If there is slippage, it doesn't take long for the marks to become misaligned.

Of course, it is very easy for a turntable mat to accumulate dust and dirt from the air and from any records that have not been cleaned for a while, so replacement of an old mat is also a very good idea. Enter the Analogue Studio cork and rubber turntable mat.

This mat is 295mm in diameter and is made from a unique combination of cork and rubber

granules. This composite layer mat should suit most turntables and has been specifically designed to absorb resonances and vibrations. It is 3mm thick and it should be noted that this may well affect the VTA (Vertical Tracking Angle) of the stylus on the record, which should be checked and the tonearm height adjusted if required.

Labelled with love

A particularly nice feature of this mat is a recess in the centre to accommodate the label area of the record. This ensures that the mat is supporting the playing surface and not any thick centre label.

I compare this mat with a well-used felt one that I have available and I do indeed notice an improvement in instrument positioning and focus with the Analogue Studio offering. The bass response is also clean and



well controlled. At the top end, strings sounds more natural with the Analogue Studio mat than with the felt option. In addition, vocals seem to be more involved and well integrated with the instrumentals. This indicates that the mat is reducing unwanted reflections of record vibrations back into the cartridge.

This mat is a good-value upgrade and provides noticeable audible improvements. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£27

CONTACT
01733 350878

WEBSITE
analogueseducation.net

OUR VERDICT



B.M.C. Audio

PureUSB 1 cable



GERMAN COMPANY B.M.C.

Audio GmbH latest selection of products are being distributed here by Colab Audio. They include a range of high-end audio equipment, such as belt-drive CD players, DACs, amplifiers and the PureUSB1 active USB digital interconnect cable, which is available in 2m or 5m lengths.

It is important to appreciate that digital cables are just as important as analogue cables for ensuring high-quality audio reproduction. Poorly designed cables and connectors can result in unwanted reflections and timing issues that give rise to jitter and other errors in the digital signal. These errors can lead to degradation of the resultant audio signal, hence the importance of using well-designed and high-quality digital cables.

The B.M.C. (Balanced Music Concept) Audio PureUSB1 cable is

fitted with a gold-plated Type A flat-section USB plug at one end and a gold-plated Type B square-section plug at the other. While many audiophile USB cables attempt to limit transmission losses and noise by material tuning, the PureUSB 1 cable provides what B.M.C. considers to be a better solution, which is an active electronic circuit connected in the cable itself near the DAC plug end.

Keeping noise at bay

This circuit takes advantage of the 5V DC power available in a USB cable to power the active circuit that restores and reshapes the digital USB signal just before entering the DAC. The circuit also filters the noise on the

USB power supply. Another advantage of this approach is the reduction of length sensitivity; the active circuit allows for the cable to be longer without causing losses, so a 5m cable sounds virtually the same as the 2m length.

A/B tests against a conventional USB cable do indeed demonstrate noticeable audible improvements, especially in terms of the spatial precision of instrument placement. Considering that this is an active design, the price is quite reasonable – and it works a treat! **NR**



DETAILS

PRICE
£175 for 2m cable,
£250 for 5m cable

CONTACT
07702 168000

WEBSITE
colabaudio.com
bmc-audio.de

OUR VERDICT



WELCOME TO THE NORTH EAST

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Lindy

NCX-100 Active noise cancelling headphones

WHEN IT COMES to headphones, active noise cancelling models are by necessity more complex than their conventional passive brethren. This design requires microphones, power and amplification to knock out extraneous noise. This adds size, weight and complexity and with it, usually a hefty price tag.

This makes the Lindy NCX-100 something of a pleasant surprise. The accessories manufacturer has an extensive range of cables, electronics and accessories, and the NCX-100 is the larger and more expensive of the two noise cancelling models in the lineup. 'Large' and 'expensive' are relative terms in this case. The design is usefully compact and £100 is far from a high price for a pair of noise cancelling headphones.

First impressions are positive. The Lindy is an over-ear, closed-back design and, as you might expect from something designed to alleviate the noise of the outside world, is a folding design to make it easy to stash away when not in use.

The headphone part of the NCX-100 is simple enough. A pair of 40mm dynamic drivers with neodymium magnets are set a reasonable distance into the earpad and a detachable cord attaches to the left-hand earpad. This includes an inline remote and mic that makes using them with portable devices entirely painless and you also get a quarter-inch jack adapter.

It's oh so quiet

The noise cancelling arrangement takes the form of a pair of AAA batteries that are fitted in the left-hand earpad, which provides power for up to a claimed 95dB noise reduction. The right-hand switch moves the NCX-100 between standard passive operation, active noise control and a bass boost setting. The switch is easy enough to reach while wearing the Lindys and overall it is clear that a considerable amount of thought has gone into



the design. The headphones are comfortable enough and the build is very solid. The soft touch plastic attracts fingerprints and the pressure on the head via the spring loading of the band is fairly high, but this should keep them in place on the move.

In use, the most important aspect of the performance is that they are more than listenable when used as regular passive headphones. The closed-back design means that the NCX-100s are not the most expansive of performers and there is a certain slightly lead-footed nature to the bass performance, which means that faster tempo music can be robbed of a little of its drive and excitement, but the tonal balance further up the frequency spectrum is more assured and voices are rich and detailed. Compared to the Grado SR80 at the same price, the Lindy sounds a little leaden and closed in, but this is judged on a level playing field which doesn't reflect its other abilities.

Activate the noise cancelling with no music playing and the levels of cancellation are effective without being overblown and unnatural. Like many of these systems, the processing is more effective at lower frequencies than higher ones – it will do a better job of masking the noise of an engine than it will a drill, but this covers some standard annoying noises like aircraft cabins and commuter trains.

When you start to play music, the noise cancelling does not seriously affect the performance that the Lindy demonstrates in passive mode, but with a useful jump in sensitivity that means that the NCX-100 is unlikely to be a challenge for all but the feeblest portable devices – useful considering the standard locations you will actually want to use noise cancelling in.

Bass in your face

The third 'bass boost' setting over eggs the pudding and then eggs it a bit more. The general presentation is not something that really needs more bass and for the most part I'd suggest leaving the boost setting alone although it may come in handy in really very noisy environments. If it was the only other way of listening to the Lindys it might be an issue, but as it is it's effectively just a curio.

It should also not detract from a very capable and reasonably priced pair of headphones. The Lindys are good enough to be used from time to time as a home headphone, but offer genuinely effective and well balanced noise cancelling when used on the move. When you consider the useful supplied accessories and sturdy build, you have a very fine pair of noise cancelling designs at a thoroughly sensible price. **ES**

DETAILS

PRICE
£100

CONTACT
01642 754000

WEBSITE
lindy.co.uk

OUR VERDICT



Mackenzie Hi Fi

VooDoo Audio Avatar powercord



SOMETIMES, IT'S WORTH hunting further afield when searching for good-quality, yet affordable audio accessories. This is the approach taken by the Northamptonshire-based Mackenzie Hi Fi and, as a result, it came across VooDoo Audio which hand-makes its products in the USA.

The VooDoo Audio Avatar Powercord is the entry-level product in the VooDoo Audio mains cable range and has been designed to be both a cost-effective and versatile power cord that is suitable for any audio component. The Avatar is constructed with #10 AWG high-purity silver-plated copper conductors insulated by a Teflon dielectric. These conductors are arranged to offer a high line capacitance to act as a filter to mains-borne interference. This is evident by the size of the resultant

cable! Although it contains just three conductors, the outer diameter of the powercord is a whopping great 20mm, which is clearly required to accommodate the internal spacing of the conductors.

Voodoo Child

The Avatar is fitted with a cryogenically treated gold-plated VooDoo PowerPhase IEC connector at the equipment end and a UK Duraplug (fitted with a 13A Bussmann fuse) at the other. The substantial rubber Duraplug may cause problems if space is an issue around your mains supply. Both the connectors are hand polished and treated with contact enhancer. The powercord is nicely finished in a black braid and the cable is surprisingly flexible, given its large diameter.

I waste no further time in connecting the Avatar to my system –

my preamplifier power supply to be precise! Swapping between it and a standard 'kettle lead' showcases the improved dynamics and lower noise floor offered by the Avatar. The opening crescendo of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* with Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic (DG 410 987-2) somehow swells to greater magnificence and during the quieter passages you feel you can hear a pin drop! If size is not an issue for you, then this is an excellent cable to consider. **NR**

DETAILS

PRICE
£213 for 3ft Powercord

CONTACT
07905 362545

WEBSITE
mackenziehifi.com

OUR VERDICT



Maxell

MXH-DBA700 earphones

WHAT'S THE FIRST thing that goes through your mind when you think of Maxell? For me, it's the TV ad with the guy listening to *The Ride Of The Valkyries* on a Maxell cassette as the sound blows his hair and tie back like he's got a hurricane blowing through his living room. Whether or not these earphones will have the same affect remains to be seen, or should that be heard?

The hybrid design of the MXH-DBA700 combines the benefits of two sound transducer technologies, according to Maxell. The balanced armature is claimed to offer precision in the mid-to-high frequency range, while the 8mm dynamic driver is better suited to handling the lower frequencies. The 3.5mm gold-plated minijack is attached to a more than generous flat cable that's 120cm long, which includes an in-line microphone to allow you to take calls while

listening to music on a smartphone and control volume levels.

The earpieces are shaped into a rather swish-looking cone and appear a little large for my tender ears when I first try them, but experimenting with the choice of four different-sized attachments results in a comfortable fit. They are treated with silver-ion, which is used in dentistry to reduce bacterial infections and, I suppose, is designed to stop all the gunk that comes out of your lugholes from becoming a breeding ground for nasty germs.

Bring the noise

These earphones certainly go loud and though at no time do they blow my hair back like the eighties ad, they certainly have plenty of grunt. The bass response varies according to how well they are sealed in the ear, but with the smooth electronica of Plaid's *Hawkmoth*, it's tight and reasonably



deep – if not the lowest. The audio spectrum is generally well balanced and moving to some spoken word reveals them to be clean and clear with dialogue.

On Pavement's *Frontwards* the guitars sound harsh and overly bright – as they do with a variety of guitar-based music – suggesting that these may not suit all tastes. **JDW**

DETAILS

PRICE
£100

WEBSITE
uk.maxell.eu/en/

OUR VERDICT



MWA-RC Magnetic Wave Absorbers



"Dynamics in the music seem to be more refined with the Magnetic Wave Absorbers fitted and the music flows more smoothly. This is an excellent value accessory for your hi-fi system"

HI-FI Choice, October 2013



These simple yet effective products from Oyaide in Japan have been designed to add further improvements to the equipment and cabling in your system.

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Subwoofers

How low can you go? Our invaluable guide shows you how to add some serious bass depth to your rock 'n' roll

If you have a well-developed aversion to subwoofers in two-channel audio systems, don't stop reading just yet. Many audiophiles have just such an opinion and for justifiably good reasons too. Integrating separate sub-bass speakers into a stereo configuration, to seamlessly extend the low frequency response of the system by an octave or so, is actually rather tricky and fraught with problems. Chances are you have heard music systems with subwoofers that are not optimised, clouded through the midrange and over blown or peaky through the bass region? Thought so. Then read on.

The benefits

Firstly let's look at what a subwoofer is actually trying to achieve and what sort of high-fidelity music replay system will benefit from one. In an ideal world your loudspeakers will have a pretty flat frequency response across the accepted range of human hearing of 20Hz to 20kHz. In an

absolutely perfect world their actual response will extend well beyond these upper and lower boundaries to ensure optimum performance through the audio band. SuperTweeters achieve this at the top end by extending the loudspeaker's HF response out to over 30kHz. Down at the bottom end, the trouble is that

Get the integration of a good subwoofer right and the results can be sublime

there are no commercially available loudspeakers that achieve a flat response to 20Hz, no matter what the manufacturer's literature may claim.

Even larger floorstanders will struggle to remain flat to 40Hz, let alone 20Hz. The reason being that low frequencies require a lot of air movement to generate the long wavelength wave. So large drivers, large amplifiers and cabinets designed

specifically for the task of producing these prodigious waves of sound are essential. Loudspeakers are designed to have a flat response and sound great over the (almost) full audio band, and even very large speakers do not have the ability to shift enough air to remain flat deep into the bottom octave. If you want a high-fidelity audio system with an even balance between 20Hz and 20kHz, then the only way you can practically achieve that is with a loudspeaker and subwoofer configuration.

Why the bad rep?

Why do subwoofers have a bit of a 'bad rep' for use in two-channel systems? Part of it is a historic hangover from the subwoofers of the seventies, which were really, really bad. There simply wasn't the technology at the time to manufacture powerful enough amplifiers, robust enough drivers or cabinets with the integrity to deliver a clean, even, low frequency response. The other part of the prejudice is that

HOW TO CONNECT A SUBWOOFER

There are several ways you can connect a subwoofer into a stereo system, each with its own advantages and challenges. Some things are constant, however, and the use of good-quality cables is essential in getting the best from a sub-bass system. Most manufacturers feel the need to include a 'get you started' cable in the box, but replace this with a good-quality cable at the first opportunity.

Line Level

Running RCA or XLR cables from a spare pre-amp output directly to the subwoofer is the simplest and most common method of connection. The power amplifier in the subwoofer is getting exactly the same pre-amp volume controlled line-level feed as your main amplifier. If you are using an integrated amplifier you may not have a viable pre-amp output and pre-amplifiers with a single output may need a splitter cable to afford connection to power amp and subwoofer simultaneously.

High Level

Running a second set of loudspeaker cables, in parallel to your current cables, from the amplifier terminals to the sub can have real sonic benefits. The subwoofer's high level/speaker level input is receiving exactly the same signal as your main speakers, so will include any LF 'character' of the amplifier. While using high level input

can compound some issues with subwoofer (see box: The volume issue), this connection is very high impedance so will not affect the signal going to the speakers.

LFE

The Low Frequency Effects (LFE) input is designed primarily for use with AV receivers and movies, however a number of stereo integrated amplifiers come with an LFE output. Using an RCA interconnect cable, LFE inputs bypass the subwoofer's own HF roll-off settings so the crossover between the sub and main speakers is handled within the amplifier itself. This can be very accurate, but rarely has the level of control for fine tuning with different loudspeakers and subwoofer models.

Loop Through

Connecting pre-amp to the subwoofer and then the subwoofer to your power amplifier, via RCA or XLR cables, is the most contentious but, potentially, the best hook-up method. The subwoofer itself controls the crossover, filtering the signal sent to both its onboard amplifier and your main power amp. Using a crossover frequency that both sub and speakers can easily achieve, often 60Hz or 80Hz, the subwoofer applies steeper roll-off filtering to ensure the subwoofer handles all of the low bass and your main speakers do the rest.

we would suggest dipping no lower than about the same cost as one of your speakers to get the optimum performance and integration.

If you are planning to run two subwoofers for discrete left and right channels (See Box: How many Subs?) you should be looking to spend about the same as you paid for your main speakers. Yoinks, getting deep bass isn't going to be cheap then? Sadly not. A sub has a complex and demanding job to do and will have a profound influence on your system's overall sound, so going cheap here will do you no favours.

Positioning a high-quality subwoofer is the next big challenge, physically and acoustically. Their location in the room is perhaps even more critical than main loudspeakers because of the wavelength of the notes produced. A 40Hz note has a wavelength of 8.6m. If the source producing that note is exactly 4.3m (half wave) from a reflective surface, like the room's rear wall, the sound will bounce back and the second half of the wave will cancel out the first half. The result being that 40Hz will be several dB down in-room. If you hit multiples of quarter wavelengths, the opposite happens

Subs with very good EQ systems can be placed in a corner if room space is tight

and the frequencies compound creating a 'room node' where those frequencies are several dB up. As subwoofers have a wide dispersion pattern the same sort of thing is going on between side walls too, creating a sound scape that looks like ripples in a tank of water. Factor in similar effects going on between the floor and ceiling and the room becomes a three-dimensional soup of waves that are constantly interacting with each other. Chances of actually calculating a 'best spot' for a subwoofer are nil. So like many things in hi-fi, we are down to trial and error.

There are some obvious black spots to avoid and, arguably, room corners are probably at the top of that list. Placing the subwoofer in a corner gives you around 9dB of artificial gain in the bass region as the natural radiation pattern of the sound is steered into the room, rather like a giant horn. However, as wavelengths across our target frequencies will respond quite differently to this corner 'amplification' the output becomes



- 1 Gain control for hi/low level inputs
- 2 Gain control for LFE level input
- 3 HF roll-off crossover
- 4 Speaker level (hi) input
- 5 Phase control
- 6 LFE input for AV use and sub set up
- 7 Line level (low) input

properly integrating an active subwoofer and controlling genuine 20Hz-40Hz output in a domestic living room is nothing like as simple as subwoofer makers would have you believe. There are considerable challenges involved. Chances are, if you have heard a quality audio system with a subwoofer and didn't like the result, it was because it wasn't set up properly or it was exciting the room in all the wrong ways. Yet, get the integration of a good subwoofer right and the results can be absolutely sublime. Not only does the bottom end of the sound fill out, but it has a profoundly positive perceived effect much further up the spectrum too. It adds richness and natural warmth to vocals and gives instruments a greater sense of depth and body.

Challenges

Effectively overcoming the challenges of integrating a subwoofer starts with the choosing the right sub for the job. A subwoofer, at the very least, is a

loudspeaker and a mono power amplifier combined and needs to be of sufficient quality and fidelity to partner your current amp and speaker system. This would suggest the ideal balance of budget for a single sub should be around half the cost of your speakers plus half the cost of your amp. Arguably the sub is only handling a small section of the audio spectrum, but it's an important bit, so

Velodyne's DD18+ sub is built for large rooms



much less even, often resulting in a peaky response and clouded or rather boomy bass. Subs with very good EQ systems can flatten a peaky response like this, allowing corner placement if room space is tight, but you are better off trying to get a suitable position in the first place.

To hit the sweet spot you will need a test CD with some LF test tones or a LF sweep from 20Hz up and ideally a sound pressure meter with good response in the LF range. Failing that a smart phone running one of the Sound Pressure Level (SPL) or spectrum analyser Apps will do fine. As a temporary measure for set up connect a pre-amp output to the subwoofer's RCA or XLR input labelled LFE and disconnect your main speakers. Make sure the gain and filters on the subwoofer are set to maximum, play the CD and gently raise the volume on the pre-amp until the SPL meter is reading 85-90dB at your listening spot.

Music and movement

The idea is to move the subwoofer a few inches at a time to obtain a sweep of LF frequencies that are as even as possible with the fewest big peaks or troughs through the target range. There is no point in searching for a flat response, it won't happen. Just find a position, preferably near a main speaker, that gives a relatively even balance. If you are using two subwoofers don't assume the correct spot will be a mirror placement of the first one. Repeat the whole procedure for sub number two. Assuming you are not physically spent by this point many subwoofers, particularly those with multiple drivers may also benefit from being rotated away from the obvious forward-facing position. Rotate a few degrees and measure, repeating until you find the flattest response, or give up and open wine. So much for hi-fi being pastime with no heavy lifting!

In a perfectly integrated loudspeaker and subwoofer system, the goal is to get the HF roll-off of the sub to coincide with the LF roll-off of the loudspeaker to create a perfectly flat response with no audible joins. Smaller standmount main speakers are clearly going to have different lowest LF response to large floorstanders, so the actual crossover frequency and filter slopes will vary by speaker, sub and room. There is a definite 'process' to getting this correct, largely irrespective of how you have connected the subwoofer into the system (See box: How to connect a subwoofer).

First off, the subwoofer and speakers need to be in phase so that bass notes produced by both through the crossover region do not cancel out. Again, set all the main subwoofer controls (HF roll-off and gain) to their maximum levels. Play the bass test disc again or, if your head is already thrumming, play music with a strong repetitive deep bass beat. Measure the SPL of the bass notes at the seating position. Flick the subwoofer's phase switch to 180° and measure the SPL again. The loudest position, where the bass output from both devices combines, is the correct one. On subwoofers with infinitely variable phase commander a willing assistant



Tannoy's Definition subwoofer has opposing 12in drivers

THE VOLUME ISSUE

One of the biggest pains of actually using a stereo loudspeaker/subwoofer system is keeping the relative output levels of each part of the system matched. The trouble is both subwoofer and main speakers are using amplifiers with different gain, drivers with different efficiency, in cabinets with different resonant frequencies and in different positions in the room that may offer more or less boundary gain. Say you have set up and fine tuned a subwoofer to your speakers at a level that will give you 85dB from 20Hz to 20KHz, the perfect flat response. Move the volume control a click or two upwards and the different system efficiencies may mean that your speakers gain 2dB in volume, while the subwoofer might be more efficient overall and will have gained 4dB for the same input. You now have a system that will be producing 89dB from 20Hz-60Hz, but only 87dB from 60Hz upwards, which will sound overblown in the bass. The opposite is true as soon as you turn the volume down and the LF will now sound lighter than it should. Depending on system efficiencies that could be the other way round completely, mild or acute. While you can set up the subwoofer at a marked position on the volume control and stick to that level for listening, differences in source material recording levels will have just the same effect. This is often the reason why subwoofer systems can sound great with some recordings, while sounding rather overblown with others.

to gently rotate the phase control while you measure the SPL from the seating position. Stop when the bass is at its loudest.

To blend the crossover point manually, turn the gain and HF roll-off controls on the subwoofer to minimum, effectively switching the subwoofer out of the system. Play a favourite track through your speakers at a volume level that you most regularly listen at. This is

A sub has a complex job to do and will have an influence on your system's sound

important as you can only really seamlessly integrate a subwoofer at one sound pressure level (see box: The volume issue). Gently bring up the subwoofer's HF roll-off to about 10Hz below your loudspeakers' -6dB roll-off point as stated in the manual. Sitting in the seating position with the SPL meter, gently raise the gain on the subwoofer until it just begins to have an effect on the SPL of bass notes. Now continue to raise the HF roll-off until it too just begins to have an upward effect on the SPL of bass notes.

At this point the system will be about as smoothly crossed over as possible without measuring tools. Play some more favourite tracks and

HOW MANY SUBS?

It is very difficult to perceive the direction of deep bass notes. Their very long wavelength means our ears are too close together to garner the critical delay timing info to pinpoint the location of the source. In a pretty typical living room our perception of source location for very low frequencies is further hampered by sound reflected from the walls, floor and ceiling. The conclusion then is that a single subwoofer is fine for producing deep bass from both left and right channels as we can't obtain a stereo image from these frequencies anyway. It is also easier to integrate a single subwoofer.

Ultimately, however, a single subwoofer in a stereo setup is a compromise. If you have the funds and the time/inclination to set up a discrete twin left/right subwoofer system, there are definite performance gains to be had. Each sub is fed a dedicated channel signal, so out-of-phase bass notes won't cancel each other out before being produced, and each has a reduced power

requirement to achieve the same overall in-room volume. We've found that two subwoofers improves the presence and imaging of the overall sound, not just the LF, and many recording studios have the same experience and run dedicated left/right subwoofers.

In Floyd Toole's definitive publication *Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms* he forwards the theory that four is probably the best number of subwoofers for the smoothest LF reproduction in a typical four-sided room. These would be placed two close to the back wall near each main speaker and two mirrored at the opposite end of the room. The argument being that by producing these long waves at both ends of the room there is less chance of single note standing wave nodes in the listening position. The book is worth a read although it's rare to have the space to allow you to try Toole's ideas on four subwoofers for stereo sound.

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ascertain the result. If there is simply too much bass, gently reduce the gain. If there is clouding or boominess, gently reduce the HF roll-off. Experimenting is fun. Well, maybe not for your neighbours. If you do have access to a spectrum analyser, and as noted a smart phone App may suffice, the process is easier. Using a sweep tone you can make adjustments and view the results on the analysers immediately. The aim is to achieve the smoothest response across the range of around 20Hz-80Hz

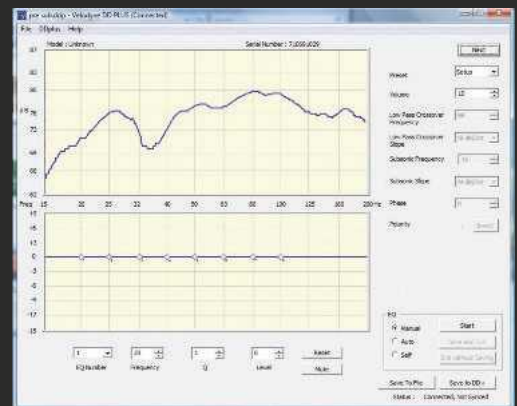
Taking control

More up-market subwoofers are often supplied with electronic controls for gain and HF-roll-off, and maybe a variable slope filter. The process is the same although you will also have to experiment with the filter slope as well. However, the move towards self-setting subwoofers supplied with their own mic takes all that guesswork and a lot of manual twiddling out of the picture. Ensure the subwoofer's EQ system is switched off initially and place the mic in the listening position (it's a good idea to place it on top of your head). Run through the specified set up sequence and use any 'notch filters' to tame any particularly aggressive room node frequencies. Even if the electronic set up has declared *fait-accompli*, don't be afraid to make manual adjustments if things don't sound perfect.

Subwoofers with EQ systems are a long way from traditional purist hi-fi, but where subs are concerned Room-EQ can be of benefit. Room nodes, where waves either add up or cancel out, tend to be very large with low frequency/long wavelength sound. Unfortunately putting more energy (gain) into frequencies that are cancelling out won't help, making your initial positioning just as important. It is more practical to tame aggressive compounding room nodes by reducing energy at problem frequencies and a good EQ system can do this over several points at the same time.

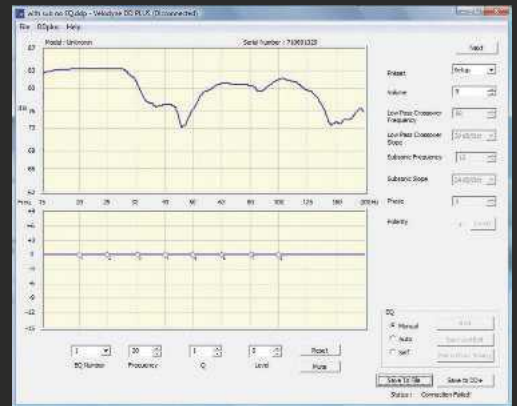
Some EQ systems are fine and forget and measure the sub as a standalone device. More comprehensive systems measure the sub and speaker as a complete system, then applying filters to the subwoofer output to deliver the smoothest balance. These subwoofers have a video output, to screen or PC, showing spectrum analysis of the speaker-subwoofer system from 20Hz to 250Hz. In manual mode you play a sweep frequency and have up to eight filters to apply, each with variable phase, gain, slope and Q in an effort to smooth the response across the bass region. Assuming you have the room position correct in the first place, the results can be an outstanding success with incredibly smooth and linear LF response down to 20Hz. Set up like this, the benefits of integrating a subwoofer into your two-channel systems will be truly sublime ●

EQUALISATION MATTERS



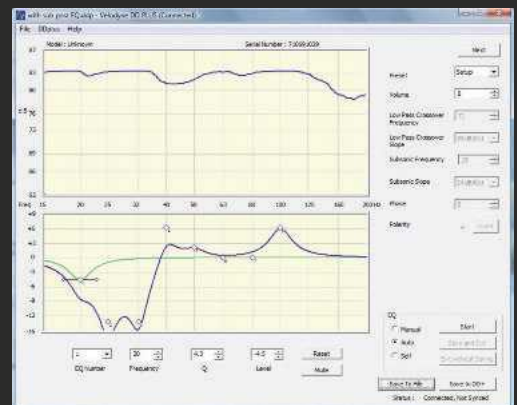
Speaker and no sub. (Tannoy DC10A)

Very peaky across the LF region, response starts rolling off down from 45Hz with a room node peak boosting 25Hz before tailing off.



Speakers and Sub (Tannoy DC10A + Velodyne DD18)

The subwoofer massively fills out the bottom octave down to below 15Hz, but response across the LF is still peaky across the LF region.



Speakers and Sub with EQ (Tannoy DC10A + Velodyne DD18)

Velodyne's Auto EQ system applies eight filters from 20Hz to 100Hz to smooth LF response to near flat across the entire LF region

NEXT MONTH: Guide to room tuning – how to get the very best sound from your hi-fi in your listening room

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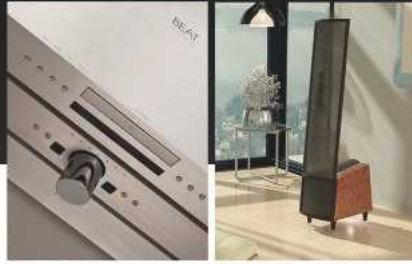
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


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WE HEAR...

CLEARAUDIO IS JUST ABOUT TO LAUNCH its widely anticipated new phonostage, unassumingly called the Absolute Phono. Interestingly, it includes a tiny gain stage, which is designed to be installed in the tonearm's headshell or armtube. If you're not willing to do this, then the company can sell you the conventional Absolute Phono Inside, which is as other phono stages and doesn't require tonearm tampering. UK retail prices are yet to be confirmed.

MAKE A DATE WITH FATE, IF YOU'RE A tape head that is! Saturday 27 September, 2014 is the next Cassette Store Day. Following on from the unexpected success of last year's event, it will now be split between the US and UK/EU to ensure that Compact Cassette fans on both sides of the Atlantic will get to snap up some great releases from musicians, new and old alike. Last year's Cassette Store Day was a huge success with stores participating in over 80 cities worldwide and releases from the likes of The Flaming Lips, At The Drive In and Deerhunter. For more information point your browser towards: www.cassetestoreday.com

CHORD ELECTRONICS IS UPGRADING ITS SPM2800 integrated amplifier. The new MkII version of the company's prestigious Class D design is expected later in the year and while the basic configuration and proposition remains the same, Chord will be implementing the company's latest DAC technology into the unit, bringing it bang up to date with the latest FPGA Rob Watts' tech, a little East Farleigh-based bird tells us...

THROUGH THE PAST, SMARTLY...



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 109 AUGUST 1992
"Sony ferried the cream of Europe's journalists (er and some others) to Salzburg for a briefing on the status of Mini Disc" reported our news pages back in 1992 before the small shiny disc that recently trundled off this mortal coil had even been launched. The target, our roving reporter informed us, was for the new players to be in shops for December that year, but what could we expect of this new slice of technology? "Initial prices look like being in the vicinity of £250... Battery life for playback was quoted as one and half to two hours and software prices will be in the same sort of ballpark as CD. But as far as prerecorded titles are concerned, MD is trailing behind DCC with only eight companies having signed up to produce software." Early impressions were mixed, but our expert felt that Mini Disc would prove to be a good replacement for cassette, but not in the same league as CD.

Meanwhile in the music world we were treated to The Smiths *This Charming Man*, Freddie Mercury's *Barcelona* and the start of a horrific dynasty with Billy Ray Cyrus' *Achy Breaky Heart*.



HI-FI CHOICE ISSUE 217 AUGUST 2001
Jump forward nine years and we've swapped one format war for another. Substitute Panasonic's DVD-A and Sony's SACD for Mini Disc and DCC, and you begin to get the picture. *HFC* editor Jason Kennedy explained it quite succinctly on his intro page, noting: "As things stand there is no identical software for both DVD-A and SACD, so it's not possible to make a definitive statement as to which format is best. The sensible thing is to get the machine that makes your CDs sound the best – after all, that's still what you'll play the most of – and leave the format war for the market to fight. Both formats sound superb when it comes to high-resolution software. It's not a war, it's a choice." Wise words indeed...

Though being a rather dire year for music, August was a particular low point with the number one spot dominated by dross (So Solid Crew's 21 Seconds To Go), awful covers (Atomic Kitten's version of the Bangles' *Eternal Flame*) and forgettable dirge (Five's *Let's Dance*). Salvation came in the shape of Bob The Builder's stunning version of *Mambo No 5*.



DESERT ISLAND DISCS

This month **Isabel Whitley** from Computer Audio Design picks four of her all-time favourite long players...



THE UNDERTONES THE UNDERTONES
I spent so many teenage evenings listening to John Peel and I loved his delight for new music. He was right, *Teenage Kicks* is the ultimate single!



TALKING HEADS SPEAKING IN TONGUES
My dad gave me a record player to take to university, and every time that I moved rooms *This Must Be The Place* would be the first thing I'd play.



OSCAR PETERSON THE WAY I REALLY PLAY
One of the classic series recorded in Germany in 1968, Peterson always performed best live and this music is just breathtaking to listen to.



LEONARD COHEN OLD IDEAS
I stopped buying music for almost 20 years. My husband Scott Berry made me a DAC and the rest is history. This recording made me stop and listen!

Hi-Fi Choice

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