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SCORES A HIT FOR
UK LOUDSPEAKERS

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editorial

Every year, more than 100,000 assorted tech-heads descend on Las Vegas in the first week of January for the annual CES expo. And, while very much the Senior Service of consumer electronics, hi-fi (or 'Specialty Audio' in CES-speak) still has a place in the winter sun. While a new loudspeaker might not grab the headlines like a thin, curved TV or 3D printer, audio can still spring some surprises.

In fact, CES itself actually began with audio. Back in the day, 'consumer electronics' wasn't just synonymous with audio equipment; except for TV, it WAS consumer electronics, games consoles, computers, home theatre, smartphones, tablets, wearable tech, drones, 3D printers... all that was to come. Today, CES has become such a byword for consumer electronics that the name itself has ceased to be an acronym. It's not the 'Consumer Electronics Show' any more: it's simply 'CES'.

Many of these additions to the consumer electronics pantheon have pushed interest in 'specialty audio' that little bit lower, and as a consequence what was once prime stand-filler category in the main halls has gradually been sidelined to its ivory tower in the plush Venetian Hotel.

Recently, however, increased interest in high-resolution audio and especially all things headphone-related have seen audio being shown across town, back in the halls of the Las Vegas Convention Center, also known as 'The Zoo'.

Whether or not your interests lie in hi-rez or headphones, it's good to see interest in music – and the sound it makes – has not been forgotten, and is not the sole property of the Baby Boomer generation.

With annual audio-only events in Munich and Hong Kong snapping at its heels, CES might not be the centre of the audiophile universe it once was, but don't count it out just yet. In fact, CES is one of the best places to discover both new products and, perhaps more importantly, new trends. You might sit around at home and guess that Tidal was going to be a big thing this year, but it takes seeing the high-performance streaming service being played in room after room after room that you begin to realise we're in the midst of an audiophile revolution!

In truth, we could devote an entire issue to the audio products and trends seen in the sprawling resort hotels on the Las Vegas Strip this year. But, while that would be exceptionally thorough, it might not make the most fascinating reading in print. Instead, consider our six-page photographic excursion more of an introduction to the event. For a complete run-down of what was new at CES, click on www.hifiplus.com.

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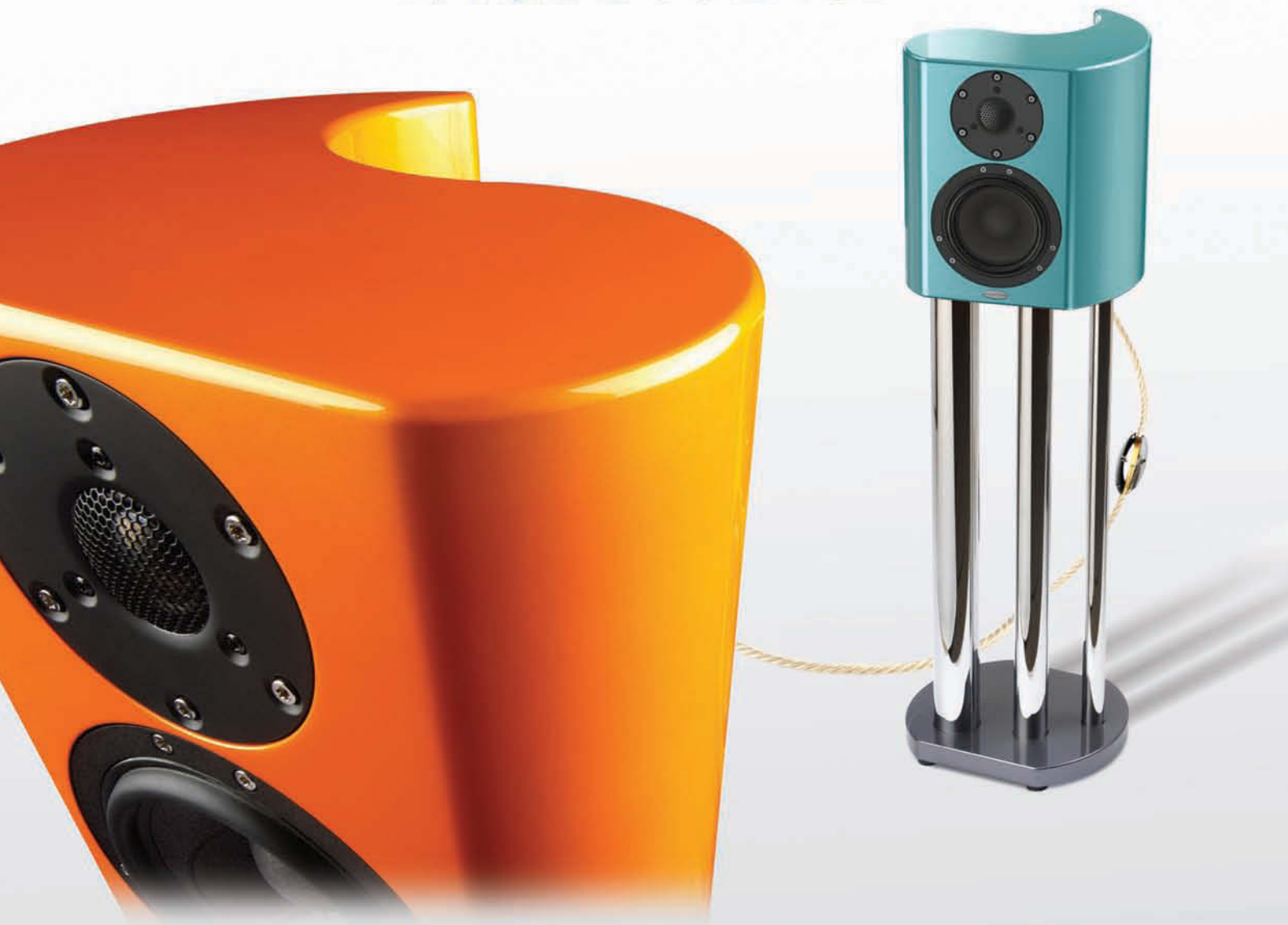


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contents ISSUE 120 EQUIPMENT+

COMMENT

4 **CES 2015 IN LAS VEGAS**
Once Upon A Time in the West

MUSIC

90 **CRAIG ARMSTRONG**
Composer, musician, and a bit of a hi-fi enthusiast, too!

98 **CONTEMPORARY, AUDIOPHILE, AND CLASSICAL MUSIC**

104 **CLASSIC ALBUMS**
Ornette Coleman
The Shape of Jazz to Come

14 **PMC TWENTY.26**
floorstanding loudspeaker

20 **CH PRECISION D1, C1, A1**
player, DAC/pre, and power amp

26 **TRILOGY 908/992**
line preamp and mono power amps

32 **OBRAVO HAMT-1**
headphones

37 **MONITOR AUDIO SILVER 8**
floorstanding loudspeaker

45 **MYAJIMA KANSAI**
moving coil cartridge

51 **RHA MA750i**
earphones

59 **JEFF ROWLAND CONTINUUM S2**
integrated amplifier

65 **FOCAL ARIA 905**
standmount loudspeaker

71 **ALACRITY AUDIO DUNDEE 6**
floorstanding loudspeaker

76 **REVOX JOY**
integrated streamer/amplifier

85 **CREAKTIV AUDIO 1 RACK**
equipment support system

87 **AUDIENCE AU24SE**
interconnects and loudspeaker cables



48 **SUBSCRIPTIONS**

92 **ADVERTISER INDEX**

87



Show Report: CES 2015

by Chris Martens, Syd Schips, and Alan Sircom

The annual Las Vegas CES in the first week of January is packed with everything you could possibly want with a plug or batteries. This year, all the mainstream focus seemed to be on auto-park cars, the biggest TVs, and the smallest drones and wearable tech, while by comparison high-performance audio is barely given a look in.

However, this year's Specialty Audio section at CES was smaller than usual. Although the number of exhibitors stayed more

or less the same, the visitor numbers – especially the international distributors and buyers – were significantly harder to find. And, with T.H.E. Show (the smaller show for the more hardcore specialist brands, which in the past was based at the nearby Flamingo Hotel) is now out of the Las Vegas picture, the number of public visitors sneaking in to CES on a trade ticket was way down, and the only brands on show were the larger companies that could afford the Venetian Tower or Mirage prices.

Nevertheless, 'smaller' is a relative term. There were still hundreds of new products on show from the world's best-known audio brands. There were distinct trends, too; hi-res streaming was everywhere, with Tidal being so popular, The Strip's internet access virtually ground to a halt. Also, with the Asian and Russian high-enders not walking the halls, hyper-expensive audio wasn't as popular as it once was. For an even more thorough walk-through of what CES 2015 had to offer, go to www.hifiplus.com +



CES sprawls across Las Vegas. 'Specialty Audio' is just a tiny part of the consumer electronics maelstrom on display



Mike Tsecouras is Audio Research's super-enthusiastic new head honcho!

Juno Audio's clever Viotone speaker is built into the body of a real violin



Avantgarde's Zero 1 is a complete system in an unphotographable box!



CES 2015 saw the return of Technics with two streaming systems



ENIGMAcoustics new Dharma headphones are hybrid electrostats



The Codex will be Ayre Acoustic's first headphone amp/DAC



Raidho's Michael Borresen is a relaxed presenter of the company's new fun-filled X-3 tower loudspeaker



Andrew Jones designed the TAD Compact Evolution One



Naim's new high-end cable range



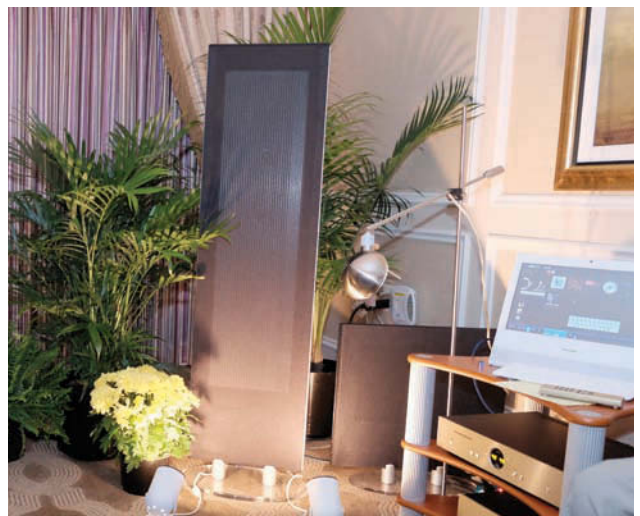
Chord Electronics' desktop Hugo TT



Skylar Gray of Audioquest shows off his innovative new Nighthawk headphones



Sandy Gross and his daughter Wendi introduce the new top value for money GoldenEar Triton Five loudspeaker



Magnepan's new 0.7 planar magnetic loudspeaker was powered by conrad-johnson's ET-3 and MF-2275 amps



Boulder's cost-no-object 2120 DAC



QAT's RS3 server can even rip from a USB CD drive!



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YG Acoustics launched the Carmel 2, the new entry point to the company's range



Magico's Alon Wolf relaxes on the new QSub18 subwoofer



Best known for its test gear, Prism is developing a DAC



Stellheim and Qualia went for the big-ticket with new amps and speakers



Aurender's first portable device is the new Flow headphone amp and DAC



VTL revamped two of its preamplifiers. The TL-2.5i is the new entry-level model



Devialet's unique Phantom speaker playing deep bass



HiFiMAN's HE-1000 flagship headphones



MartinLogan's Neolith was rocking the house (geddit?)



Dynaudio's active Excite X14



Lars Hansen and new Dragon Legend E in Wes Bender Studio's excellent demo suite



One of the stars of the show: Electrocompaniet's high quality EC Living active networked speaker system should give Sonos sleepless nights



EAT's new C-Sharp turntable combines clever use of materials with cool styling



D'Agostino showed an optional 'MLife' streamer for its Momentum amplifier



Astell & Kern has moved into servers with the 500N



Crystal Cable's first amp is the SAGA-derived Cube

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PM-2

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...a highly involving listen. ”



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“...by any standards this is a very special pair of headphones. ”



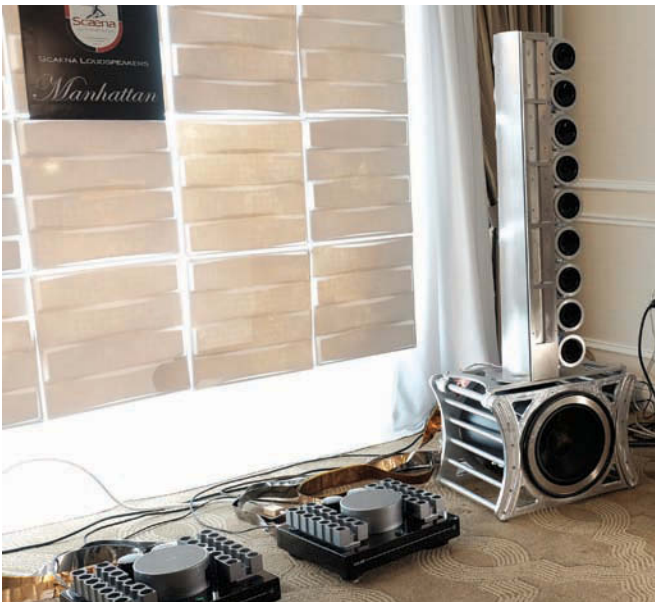
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Mark Levinson returns with an upcoming range of amplifiers



Krell's new technologically advanced Vanguard amplifier



Scana loudspeakers are always good sounding, but their big physical presence limited their popularity outside of the US. The new, smaller Manhattan should help change that



John DeVore with the excellent DeVore Fidelity Gibbon X loudspeaker, first seen at last year's RMAF show



Spiral Groove's new Revolution turntable delivers near SG1.1 quality at half the price



King Sound's full-range electrostatic Prince III loudspeaker deserves to be more widely known and richly received

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PMC TWENTY.26 loudspeakers

by Paul Messenger

PMC's Twenty.26 is the fifth and latest stereo pair in PMC's mid-price Twenty series, and appears to have a concept and numerous elements in common with the much more costly fact.12. However, many of those commonalities are in truth illusory; the only component the two models actually have in common turns out to be just the stainless steel spikes – even their associated locknuts are different!

That said, both are slimline three-way floorstanding designs, both use PMC's trademark 'advanced transmission line' (ATL) bass loading technique, and both feature 50mm diameter midrange drive units. These midrange dome drive units are both based on some very interesting research carried out at the National Physical Laboratory, by PMC's Oliver Thomas, alongside its resident physicists (see page 16). A radical non-intrusive laser-based method was used to optimise the shape of diaphragm and faceplate for the smoothest pattern of sound distribution. The difference between the two versions is that the fact.12's version is made in-house by PMC, while the later version developed for the Twenty.26 has been re-engineered for less costly manufacture and is made by an outside supplier. Otherwise, it's pointless trying to list all the differences between the two models.

The Twenty series currently consists of five stereo pairs – two standmounts and three floorstanders – plus centre-front 'dialogue' and subwoofer speakers for AV surround sound users. As previously stated, the range-topping Twenty.26 is a three-way design. Its bass unit is a 170mm cast alloy frame and a 125mm diameter doped paper cone with an unusually large (c90mm) dust cover. The 50mm dome-shaped midrange unit and 27mm tweeter both have soft fabric domes that are inherently rugged, even though both are also protected by perforated metal grilles.

Perhaps the most obvious distinction between all the stereo Twenty series models and the overwhelming majority of the competition is that they lean 'backwards' a few (actually only five) degrees. This is not only rather stylish, but also means that the voice coils of the three drive units approximate a vertical line more closely than would be the case if the drivers were mounted on a vertical baffle. This might well help simplify the crossover networks, which inevitably tend to be complex in a three-way design such as this, especially since PMC has always favoured steep (4th order) filtering. Indeed, the fact that the electrical and acoustic crossover points (measured at 500Hz for both and 4/3.5kHz respectively) are so similar is an indicator of the steep filtering, evidenced by the crossover points at 380Hz and 3.8kHz.

To stop the backward tilting enclosures from falling over – and also to ensure a solid foundation for the floor spikes – a hefty black-painted Medite/MDF plinth is supplied, with the rearward extension required to handle the tilt. This is bolted securely to the base of the speaker, albeit not so tightly as to crush the cork washers that add a measure of decoupling. The shiny stainless steel spikes come complete with matching lock nuts that may be tightly fastened.

The rear panel accommodates no fewer than three terminal pairs (just as a three-way arguably should), fitted through a large and removable metal plate that accommodates the crossover network and components, and also acts as some form of heatsink. The speakers are supplied with the terminals linked by gold-plated rods, but these can be removed for bi-/tri-wiring or bi-/tri-amping. ▶





“The only component the two models actually have in common turns out to be just the stainless steel spikes – even their associated locknuts are different!”

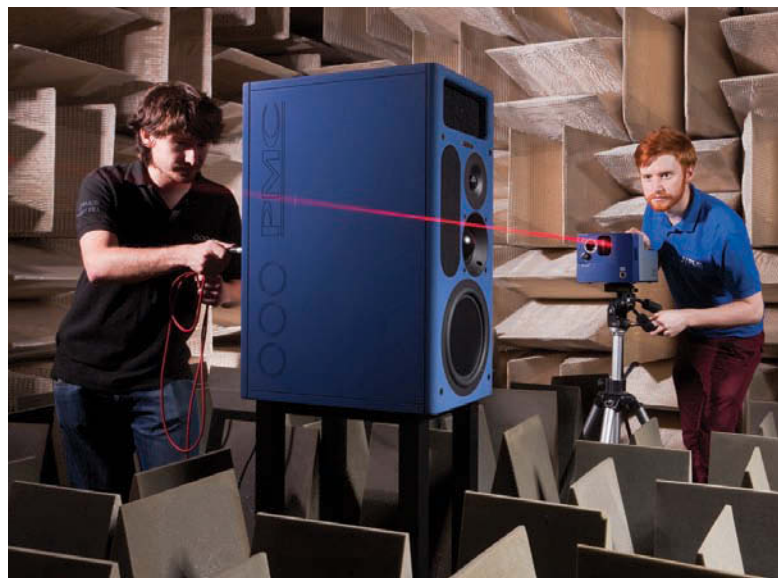
▶ When my reference PMC loudspeakers are installed in the listening room, I normally ‘float’ the speakers on Townsend Seismic Corners, and also use Vertex AQ links between the terminals. The same Seismic Corners aren’t practical with the Twenty.26, partly because they’re much lighter, but mainly because the rear of the loudspeaker’s plinth forms a semicircle and therefore lacks corners. However, it was possible to use the Vertex AQ links, and history suggests that these are often a rather effective indicator to the underlying qualities of a speaker system, as we shall see later.

I carried out my admittedly limited, but nonetheless useful portfolio of measurements, and as usual these proved an impressively accurate predictor of the loudspeaker’s overall character. The in-room far-field frequency response stayed within $\pm 4\text{dB}$ from 60Hz up to above 20kHz, and within an even more impressive $\pm 2\text{dB}$ from 900Hz up to 20kHz under similar conditions. One particularly distinctive trait is that the broad presence band (1.5kHz-5kHz) is notably restrained and laid back.

Under far-field in-room conditions, the sensitivity registers 87-88dB, which is slightly above the 86dB claimed by PMC. However, PMC’s eight-ohm load claim looks somewhat optimistic, as our measurements reveal that the impedance is actually close to four ohms between 100Hz and 200Hz – a decidedly power-hungry part of the audio spectrum. However, there is some compensation in a bass end that extends at full level right down to 20Hz. Indeed, under far-field in-room conditions, the sub-70Hz bass is arguably a little too strong, thanks in part to a c50Hz room mode, and in part to its 11ft transmission line being tuned to a very low 24Hz.

I spent a long time listening to the Twenty.26s – partly, I’m happy to admit, because they always sound unusually and exceptionally easy on the ears. Having them simply doing their thing in the listening room turned out to be hugely enjoyable, since they proved well able to communicate both speech and music with admirable quality and perspicacity, yet they never ever seemed to sound unpleasantly loud or aggressive. This is a difficult trick to pull off in reality, so much so that I can’t think of a speaker that manages it quite as effectively. I did spend a couple of brief hours with a pair of PMC fact.12s, and that time was sufficient to reveal the superiority of the more costly model, which has slightly sharper timing and more expressive dynamics. It’s also probably true that the fact.12s are slightly less forgiving than the Twenty.26s, but I guess that goes along with the same territory.

Arguably a more relevant point of comparison is my old pair of PMC OB1i loudspeakers. The OB1i is effectively the predecessor of the Twenty.26, as it’s a three-way



What is RAOS?

Loudspeaker companies have used laser interferometry for many years to examine the mechanical behaviour of enclosures, diaphragms and so on, but the National Physical Laboratory’s RAOS (rapid acoustico-optic scanning) approach avoids any mechanical contact and actually measures changes in the air’s refractive index in front of a loudspeaker producing an audio signal. These correspond to the pressure variations in the air, which are the actual soundwaves themselves of course, establishing the detailed directivity of a loudspeaker more rapidly and less invasively than traditional techniques. Ollie Thomas (son of PMC proprietor and founder Peter Thomas) has been working with the NPL to apply RAOS in several recent designs, examining, for example, the shape of the 50mm midrange dome’s front flange, an ideal problem since the technique is currently only applicable above 500Hz.

transmission-line loaded floorstander of similar height. A major difference, however, is that it uses a 75mm dome midrange sourced from Vifa, as PMC’s own 50mm unit was still just a gleam in designer Peter Thomas’ eye when the original OB1i made its debut more than a decade earlier. Another significant difference is that the OB1i has a conventionally vertical rather than a backwards tilted enclosure, and it somehow also looks a little less fashionable and up to date, a rather more nebulous but nonetheless relevant observation. ▶



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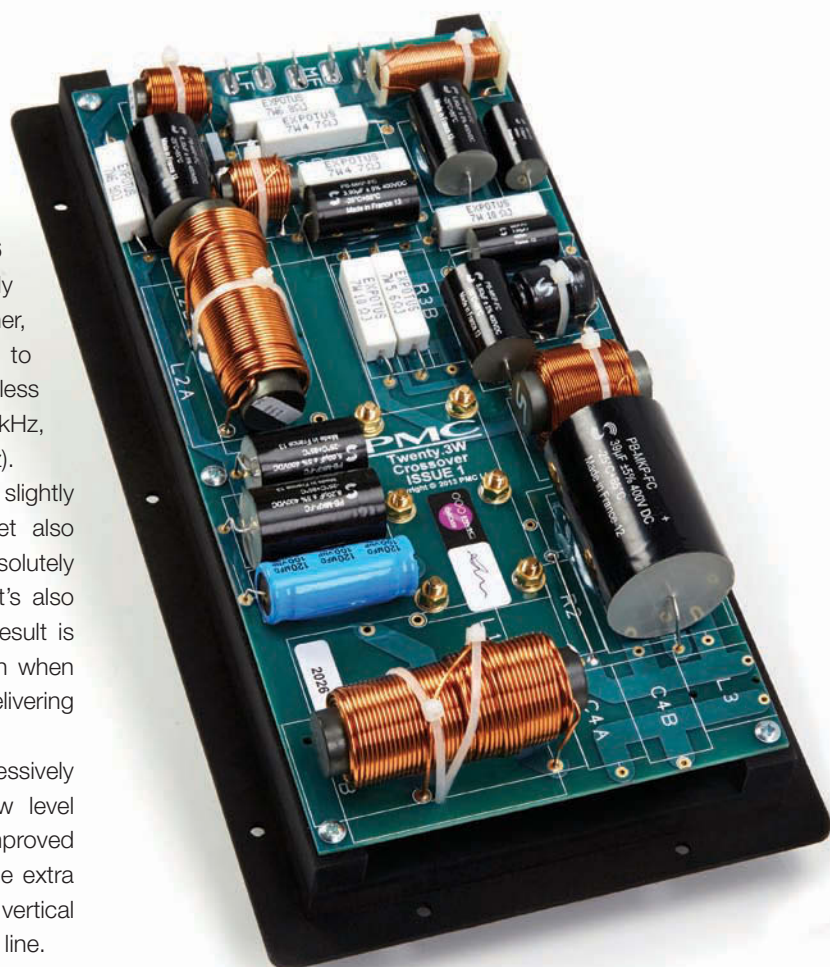
▶ The Twenty.26 is indeed an improvement over the OB1i, but the margin is perhaps not as big as one might anticipate. Indeed, when listening at modest levels some listeners actually preferred the earlier model, perhaps because it projects the upper midband a little more strongly. Where the Twenty.26 scores is in its superior overall smoothness, especially through the broad midband, which is certainly smoother, if also a little more restrained. Measurement tends to confirm this, showing that the OB1i is significantly less even (and indeed more forward) between 600Hz and 2kHz, and also rather stronger in the upper bass (80–180Hz).

The Twenty.26's combination of a smooth and slightly laid back midband is certainly rather unusual, yet also proved decidedly seductive. This speaker shows absolutely no tendency to shout or become aggressive, yet it's also invariably highly informative and full of detail. The result is a sound quality that remains easy on the ears even when playing music at relatively high levels, while still delivering plenty of explicit detail at more modest levels.

The latter has much to do with this speaker's impressively wide dynamic range and fine reproduction of low level information. That in turn may well be down to improved control over enclosure vibrations, perhaps due to the extra reinforcement and stiffening provided by the additional vertical dividing panels that are used to create a transmission line.

Stereo imaging is about as good as it gets, with well layered perspectives on material with appropriately simple miking. Fine details and airiness were convincingly portrayed, and some clues to various recording studio techniques could also often be heard. Coloration here is also very low, probably thanks mainly to the very smooth delivery of that new midrange unit, which ensures that the voice band is generally and rather unusually even, as well as restrained.

Earlier in this review, I mentioned that introducing Vertex AQ's terminal links was usually a good guide to the quality of a speaker. Doing so did indeed create a significant improvement, confirming the Twenty.26's underlying qualities. This is unquestionably a superb loudspeaker, with the sort of restrained and laid back balance that ensures it will never become aggressive even when playing music at high levels. It can become a little untidy when loud, revealing plenty of power handling but also minor timing limitations compared with the fact.12. However, at any normal level it's beautifully balanced, with ample bass weight and an excellent dynamic range. PMC's Twenty series has proved to be its most commercially successful to date. With models like the Twenty.26 in that range, it's not hard to see why! Highly Recommended. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Freq response: 27Hz – 25kHz

Sensitivity: 86dB/W (measured at 88dB/W)

Effective ATL: 3.3m (11ft)

Impedance: 8 Ohms (measured 4 ohms min.)

Drive Units: LF: 177mm cast frame with doped 125mm paper cone. MF: 50mm twenty-series dome. HF: PMC/SEAS 27mm soft SONOLEX dome

Crossover frequencies: 380Hz, 3.8kHz

Input connectors: 3 pairs 4mm socket/binders

Size (HxWxD): 106.2(+25 spikes) x19x43.9(+16 grille)mm

Weight: 22.5kg

Available finishes: walnut, amarone, diamond black, oak

Price: £5,750 per pair

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CH Precision D1, C1, and A1 system *by Alan Sircom*

This must rank as one of the most expensive one-make audio systems we've ever explored. CH Precision is based in Switzerland and it's designed and built by people who used to design and build Goldmund audio equipment. Each component is built like a brick outhouse, without even an implication of a suggestion of compromise. It's hyper-flexible, engineer's engineering. And the whole package costs well north of £60,000. Cor!

The system tested here is comprised of a D1 SACD/CD player, which becomes a transport to the C1 digital to analogue controller that in turn drives an A1 power amplifier. This last is perhaps the easiest way to define the 'hyper-flexible' nature of the system, because it's designed to be used as a lone 2x 100W amplifier, or with another A1 amp as a dual-mono, a passive or active bi-amplified system, or as a bridged design, delivering up to 350W per channel. All are equally good and valid ways to make sound, and all depend on what best suits your system. There is also an X1 power supply, designed to feed the D1 or C1, and this can be factory configured to feed one or two units. There is also an M1 reference two-channel amplifier. This has all the flexibility options of the A1, but doubles the power throughout. At twice the height and 75kg per chassis, it makes the 43kg A1 seem almost sylph-like. Like the X1, the M1 was not available at the time of review, in part because I wouldn't be able to get this into my room without having to resort to structural changes to the property.

There's a common theme to all CH Precision components in terms of design and overall look. They all share the same wave like front panel with centre display panel and all use the same chassis: large, heavy, and allowing the designs to be built on a common modular motherboard/card layout akin to a desktop PC. This not only means shared chassis components, but extends the working life of the design, by allowing up-coming changes to the design to be implemented by card additions and substitutions. The common chassis also allows a clever stacking arrangement, where decoupled screw-in bars fit in the place of the four feet, meaning the system becomes its own rack. Of course, this means whatever the three or four components rest on needs to be structurally sound, because it's taking a load that tips the scales at an impressive 99kg (142kg if you use two A1 amps) – that's almost 220lb in the developed world.

The 'no-quarter' build quality extends throughout. Take the D1 for example; it is a SACD/CD player based around a modified Esoteric VMK-5 VRDS transport mechanism. CH Precision uses that big, weighty chassis to its advantage by mounting the VMK-5 on a 15kg steel plate and heavy steel rails, thereby conferring even more vibration immunity to the disc replay mechanism. You could do this on a smaller, lighter player, but run the risk of the steel plate buckling the chassis. If you take the top off the player (no mean feat in and of itself) you

are met with a series of custom-made circuit boards, each one isolated from the others (which helps explain why all the CH Precision products come with a transit screws to lock things in place). Then, the modular layout underpins the flexibility of the system. There are five slots for daughter cards at the back of the player, allowing the D1 to be configured as a stereo player, a stereo transport, a dual-mono player (one dedicated output card per channel), a multichannel player, a multichannel transport (for a multichannel DAC), or a multichannel transport for multiple DACs. There's also a clock board for connection to an external clock, or syncing to the D1. You can also control the D1 through Ethernet and update its firmware through USB. It's a potentially bewildering array of options, made no simpler by reading the manual, but is explicable by someone who understands the CH configuration options.

The C1 is no less flexible, and no less daunting in configuration. There are options for digital and analogue inputs, USB and Ethernet connections, and clock connections, as well as the aforementioned X1 power supply upgrade block. It's ultimately best to pick and choose what you need instead of just stacking the C1 up with extra features. There are fewer options on the A1 (as befits a Class AB power amplifier), although there is a USB input for software updates, Ethernet for remote control, and the mono buffer boards for dual mono use.

Card options aside, the CH Precision components can be neatly summed up as products made the way they should be made, to deliver their best. Where possible, discrete components abound. CH Precision developed its own 'CH Link' allowing PCM up to 32bit, 768kHz, and one bit DSD to 5.6448MHz, as ►



▶ well as asynchronous USB to 24/192 PCM and 2.8224MHz DSD and asynchronous Ethernet to 24/192 PCM and 5.6448MHz DSD.

There are superbly clever aspects to the design (small remote controls with magnetic bases that attach to one side of the cabinet), but with these come some frustrations. Until recently, the player and DAC controller were controlled by a series of menus on the AMOLED screen, driven by a dual concentric knob with a central push button. Functions change relative to what 'state' the device is in at the time you access these menus, and whether you tap the push button, or press it for two seconds (the former puts it into shortcut mode, the latter puts it into standby). The manuals describe the processes needed to access these menus accurately, but they are BIG manuals. The A1 has a more conventional array of five buttons, but these also allow you to adjust global feedback levels in 20% steps and precise adjustable gain control to match your loudspeakers in room.

Fortunately, at CES this year, CH Precision showed a handy app that took over these functions, as well as acting as the control point for a streaming solution. This means you no longer need to be a safecracker with an eidetic memory just to know how to fast forward.

The CH Precision system is pretty damn outstanding in its default settings, but if you don't delve through the manual, you may never know there are five PCM filter settings and four DSD settings, or that it allows you to synchronise the clock in the D1 to the C1, the clock in the C1 to the D1, synchronise both to an external clock, or simply ignore the clock options altogether, depending on your tastes and the rest of the system.

Although I received two A1s, my system (culminating in Wilson Duette Series 2) needed just one. The second used in bridged mode didn't justify its inclusion. Your speakers and room may make different demands.

CH Precision's 'thing' is one of gradually winning over the listener. It's impressive by not being impressive, although there's some of the typically Goldmund 'writ large' presentation about the overall sound. But more importantly, it's one of those systems that defies description, because the flexibility allows it to adapt to the demands of the loudspeaker so well, it becomes something of a shape-shifter. It does the big, bold Wilson loudspeaker signature sound, but when you move from Wilson to Wilson-Benesch, it delivers the kind of tight, controlled, and authoritative sound you expect from Wilson-Benesch. And when you plug in a pair of loudspeakers that don't have the word 'Wilson' in their name, CH Precision adapts to them too. ▶



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

D1 Digital CD/SACD player/transport

Transport: TEAC VMK-5 VRDS-NEO

Formats supported: CD, CD-R/RW, SACD (single-layer, dual-layer, and hybrid)

D/A conversion: 1x Wolfson WM8742/ch

Digital filter: user selectable:

Connections: CH Link, AES/EBU, S/PDIF, Toslink, Clock input/output

Dimensions (WxHxD): 440x120x440mm

Weight: 32kg

Price: £22,800

C1 D/A Controller

Digital inputs: CH Link (PCM to 32bit, 768kHz, DSD to 5.6448MHz), AES/EBU, S/PDIF, Toslink (all to 24bit, 192kHz)

Streaming inputs: USB (PCM to 24bit, 192kHz, DoP to 2.8224MHz), Ethernet (PCM to 24bit, 192kHz, DSD to 5.6448MHz)

Streaming formats supported: PCM: WAV, AIFF, FLAC, ALAC, AAC, MP3, DSD: DSF, DFF

Analogue inputs: 1x XLR pair, 1x RCA pair

Analogue outputs: 1x XLR pair, 1x RCA pair

DAC: 4x PCM1704 per channel

Dimensions (WxHxD): 440x120x440mm

Weight: 24kg

Price: £18,500

A1 power amplifier

Inputs: Balanced: 2x XLR

Single-ended: 2x RCA, 2x BNC

Power output: 2x 100W/eight ohms (stereo), 1x 350W/eight ohms (bridged)

Bandwidth: DC-450kHz (-3dB)/1W/8Ω

Dimensions (WxHxD): 440x120x440mm

Weight: 43kg

Price: £21,000

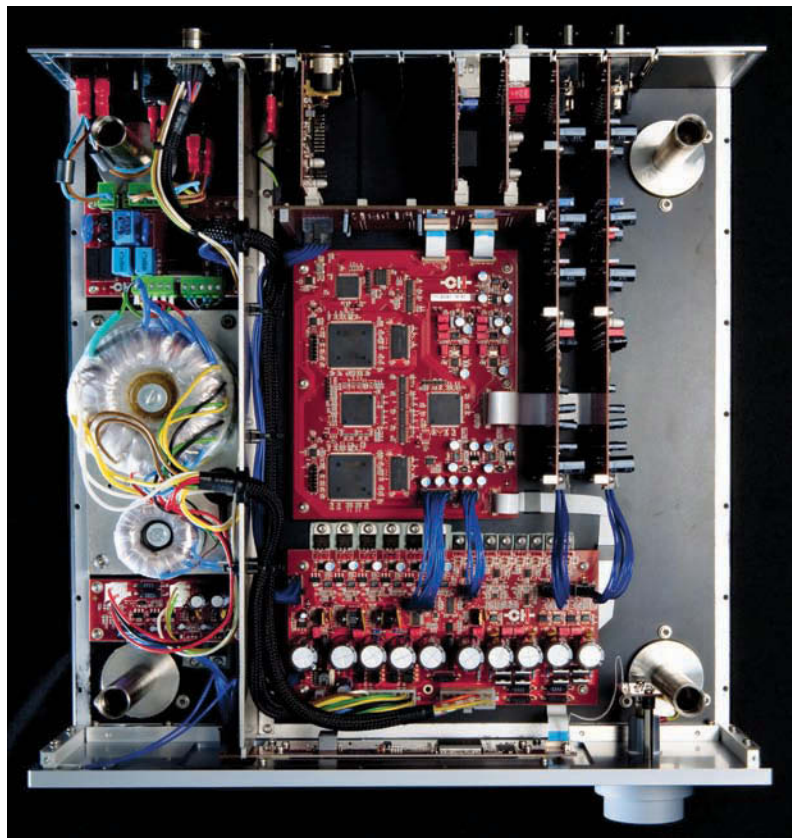
Manufactured by: CH Precision

URL: www.ch-precision.com

Distributed by: Wilson Benesch

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▶ If there is a 'house' sound for CH Precision, it's one of dry precision and infinite dynamic range. By 'dry' I'm talking more 'Martini' than 'Gobi desert', because the whole package is sophisticated, refined, elegant, and mature. I'm making this sound a little cool and distant, and that's not the way the CH Precision system sounds. Instead, it's so fundamentally correct that it makes other amplifiers and digital sources sound like they have some kind of overhang and bloat, and there's often no way back once you hear that.

Talking musical examples is invalid here. Everything is a musical example. If you find yourself thinking how good the backing vocals are on Funkadelic albums, you know that you are in the presence of audiophile royalty, and yet CH Precision wears the crown well. While it gives you insight into the music, it doesn't do so at the expense of the music. Of the three components tested, the D1 is the breakout star of the show. That's not an easy statement to make, because that show has one hell of a cast. But if the rest are Oscar winners, the D1 is Brando in *The Godfather*.

The CH Precision D1, C1, and A1 are in our Formula One; precision products, custom made for uncompromising users to deliver the ultimate performance. This top elite remain an ultimate, a goal towards which we should all strive, even if not all of us can reach it. And that's the thing; CH Precision is one of that select list of products we as audiophiles should try at least once in our lives. And for a lucky few (who not only have the financial clout, but are prepared to take time to learn how to really use the system), they get to live with one of the best systems ever. +



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EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Trilogy 908/992 pre/power

by Jason Kennedy



Trilogy Audio makes great amplifiers in the UK, and puts them in world-class casework. Until recently, this meant the products made by Nic Poulson and Simon Dart were relatively expensive, but this latest combination of a half-width 908 line preamplifier and similarly sized 992 mono power amps brings the entry price down to a more sensible

level – still serious, but rather more approachable. Trilogy could have taken the traditional approach and used bent steel boxes with a slab of aluminium on the front, saving a fair amount of cost in the process. But that's not the way that the company operates; attention to detail is clearly paramount in design and execution. There's a nod to affordability with a folded cover, but the 908 and 992s have softly radiused

corners and are fashioned from solid aluminium. These pieces may not be massive, but they are built to a standard that few surpass, and the machining on the power amp especially is very classy indeed

The casework does little to give away the technology used inside these components, but in fact both have valves onboard to provide amplification. That being said, the 908 preamplifier uses only one valve to produce gain, the rest of the hybrid design is resolutely solid state. There are very few examples of completely hidden glass power in our world, but it has always been the Trilogy approach; the company takes its international safety certification *extremely* seriously.

That's not all that distinguishes Trilogy's creations; the other common factor is extensive control software, and the sheer variety of set-up options border on the confusing. Thankfully, the menus and sub-menus are all pretty straight forward once you get to grips with the multi-functional nature of the buttons and knob (encoder) on the front of the 908. You expect this sort of functionality out of brands like Linn, Meridian, and Cambridge Audio, but that a company as comparatively small as Trilogy can provide such flexibility on its entry-level preamplifier is remarkable.

Trilogy lets you alter the 908's 'home page' – the information displayed in normal use – which can be set to 'input', 'volume', 'time', or the Trilogy logo. You can set different home pages for operation and standby, too. Other options include input naming, the ability to set inputs in unity gain (film mode for mixed stereo/surround systems), timer on and off, and both maximum and start volume settings. One thing that I haven't encountered outside of the Trilogy range is PIN coding; a security system that 'bricks' the 908 in the event of theft. This is an idea taken from the computer world of course, but as your average 'tea leaf' won't spot this until he's swiped your system, it's not the sort of thing that would have me turning off the intruder alarm.

The 908 has six RCA pairs for its line inputs, plus record and main outputs using the same connectors. The rear panel also sports a pair of RJ45 sockets for dedicated 'TASLink BUS' control of attached components. These not only allow on/off switching of all attached Trilogy components with one button, but can establish the status of said components and flag up any problems. The six LEDs on the back are used by dealers for BUS-related diagnostics.

Under the lid, the preamplifier circuit is a single-ended, Class A affair without feedback. Amplification is provided by a single ECC88 triode that Trilogy considers to be good for "thousands of hours of service". There are separate transformers for control and signal and the power supplies for the audio side are shunt regulated types, an approach that's highly regarded in valve circles.

The 992 monoblock power amps produce 100 watts each and also incorporate an ECC88 in the amplification chain. Here, this double triode is used to provide voltage gain only, something that valves are particularly good at, while current is provided in two stages by solid-state devices. A FET delivers the first and most important Watt, the one you listen to most of the time, and bi-polar devices back it up when more grip is required. So it's a hybrid amp in more ways than one. The machined front panel acts as a thermal and mechanical anchor point for the output devices; its large fins getting rid of heat without vibrating along with the music.

The 992's power supply consists of a toroidal transformer based linear supply allied to a choke, which is a substantial transformer in its own right and irons out the supply to the Mundorf reservoir caps. These sit in an aluminium and stainless steel case with a single pair of speaker cable terminals and an RCA phono input socket. The only other 'furniture' on the rear are TASLink sockets and some more LEDs. The 992 is a satisfying little brick to behold, one that takes the small is beautiful ethos very much to heart.

I gave the Trilogy amps the task of driving a pair of PMC fact.8 loudspeakers with a Resolution Audio Cantata MC as the source and Townshend Audio cables for most of the connections (see more on this below). This was a task that they took to with no shortage of enthusiasm, delivering excellent musical flow regardless of material and digging out emotional expression with particular flair. On Schubert's Trout Quintet [Alfred Brendel with the Forellenquintett, Philips], the timbre of the stringed instruments is very clear, especially on violins, and the piece is well layered front to back, but it could have more weight, and the piano is a little bit distant. Oodles of detail makes up for this to an extent, but with a bit more listening it became clear that the system as a whole was not gelling. So I removed the length of Chord Sarum TA interconnect that usually sits between pre and power amps in my system and substituted another Townshend interconnect, the DCT300 version. This calmed down the presentation and brought out the muscle in the bass. It lost some scale in the process, but the balance was far more even. Now the Trilogys had excellent drive allied to the ability to bring you closer to the music. This is more than likely related to the presence of valves in the chain, but these amps do not sound 'valvey': they don't sound obviously 'transistory' either, so both elements are working together to deliver a coherent, even handed result.

The 992s power amps do not have the meatiest of low ends, but they are very strong on acoustics and precision of tempo, they never sound hurried. It's not a 'reach out and grab you' sound, but one that rewards attention; a connoisseur's presentation. It's revealing, but not analytical; on Patricia ►

▶ Barber's 'A Touch of Trash' [*Modern Cool*, Premonition], it's easy to follow the various instruments and the 'thickener' on the double bass is more obvious than usual, but you are drawn into the song and Barber's slightly over large voice recording. And when the engineers have done their best to produce a natural sounding result, the effect is powerful. This happened with Brendel's *The Complete Beethoven Sonatas* [Decca]. Here, the 'Piano Sonata No. 16 in G major, Op. 31/1: 1. Allegro vivace' was even more delightful than ever. The combination of low noise, good image depth, and a truly remarkable bit of playing revealed the full radiance of the work to a powerful degree: a tear-inducing degree to be honest. I am on even more of a Brendel tip since hearing him through the Trilogys, so you might have to get used to it!

Contrasting the 992 power amps with my Velvet A3.5 Class A monoblocks made for a big change. The latter produce a considerably bigger and softer sound, with less focus, but also sweeter highs and greater ease. As ever with this game, synergy is key, but this exercise did reveal that the Trilogy power amps have good focus and leading edge definition. In some respects they are not that well matched to the PMC speakers I use, because both elements are extremely open and it takes a decent recording to not have its shortcomings revealed. That said, as the Beethoven Sonatas demonstrate, when everything comes together, you have a recipe for musical nirvana.

My reference components are, if anything, on the cool side of neutral, and this quality was enhanced when the 908 and 992 were added to the mix. In the past I have had great results with Trilogy amps and Bowers & Wilkins 802 Diamonds but sadly they are no longer in my armoury, so I tried the ATC challenge with a pair of SCM 11 stand mount monitors. This proved to be a surprisingly happy pairing, despite the notably power-hungry nature of the speaker; the system eliciting excellent reverb from John Campbell's 'Down in the Hole' [*Howlin' Mercy*, Elektra]. The sound was crisp and polished, and provided fabulous sonic vistas in which the percussion in particular made its character clear. Extension in the bass was limited, but this is not a large loudspeaker. I also became aware of how much volume control precision the 908 offers via its remote. It's easy to exact single decibel steps, which is not something you can say of all infra-red remotes.

I also tried an alternative line source – a Naim UnitiQute 2 – to see if a bit of extra warmth at the front end would balance matters. It certainly did, and was arguably a better system match than my reference Resolution Audio. Playing some Arvo Pärt, it became clear that I needed a bit more gain than the Trilogy 908 was set up to deliver (-20dB), but the menu-driven preamplifier was surprisingly intuitive, and it proved very easy to change this parameter. The manual shows all the options, which makes it seem a little daunting – but in practice, it's *almost* twerp proof. ▶



DI NORMA ECCELLENTE



Norma REVO IPA 140 DUAL MONO INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

The **Norma Revo IPA-140 integrated amplifier** represents a definitive choice for amplification. Its high power (140W/80hm, 150A peak current) and the ability to drive the most demanding speakers, make it an extremely versatile amp. Versatility is enhanced by the ability to customize the input/output connections (pre-out, direct input) and to insert the Phono MM/MC board as well as a 24/192 internal DAC. The elegant and

sophisticated style is perfectly in tune with its sound personality. Power, dynamics, speed and transparency are combined to create outstanding musicality and a total absence of listening fatigue. The inside workings show that the technical refinement follows the same philosophy. The **Revo IPA-140** uses a proprietary circuitry, regulated high-speed power, low noise and is built with a careful selection of the best materials available.

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Alan Sircom, Hi-Fi + Magazine

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Trilogy 908 Preamplifier

Valve complement: One ECC88 valve.

Analogue inputs: 6x single-ended RCA inputs

Analogue outputs: 1x single-ended output, 1x tape RCA

Bandwidth: 10Hz – 30kHz +/-0.5dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 78 x 220 x 385mm

Weight: 10kg (packed)

Price: £2,095

Trilogy 992 Mono Amplifier

Valve complement: One ECC88.

Analogue inputs: 1x single-ended RCA input

Analogue outputs: One pair 5-way binding posts

Power output: 100W @8 Ohms, 160W @4 Ohms.

Bandwidth: 10Hz – 30kHz +/-0.5dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 78 x 220 x 385mm

Weight: 10kg (packed)

Price: £2,395 each

Manufacturer: Trilogy Audio

URL: www.trilogyaudio.com

UK Distributor: Symmetry

Tel: +44(0)1727 865488

URL: www.symmetry-systems.co.uk

▶ Getting back to Pärt [*De Profundis*, ECM], the system revealed monster bass from the organ. It's a remarkable piece of music overall; you can't beat Arvo when it comes to gothic levels of misery, and the Naim/Trilogy/ATC combo really freed up the music's inner gloom! The Naim proved to be a muscular, earthy sounding source compared to the Cantata, one that delivered a physical and engaging soundstage that sounded really excellent at full chat. Going back to the PMC speakers, the sound didn't change dramatically in character, but you could hear a lot more and the scale was greatly improved. This system added more body to the Brendel Beethoven piano mentioned earlier, but lost a little of its magic in the process; sonic transcendence is nothing to do with a comfortable balance, it would seem.

I admire these amplifiers for their combination of build quality, understated flexibility, and their ability to make the most of a great piece of music. I did ask why Trilogy built this range as monoblocks rather than a stereo power amp, and it comes down to the fact that Nic Poulson likes monophonic amplifiers, and that he feels there is a market for high quality, compact monoblocks. He may be right, but it's not an area where there's a lot of competition. Regardless of whether a big stereo or two smaller mono amps is the way to go, with this Trilogy combo, you do get remarkable transparency for the price, and even if they didn't look and sound so good, and didn't have as many bells and whistles, I'd still want to give them the little house room they require. Great things do come in small packages, after all! +



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Cleaning

oBravo HAMT-1 headphones

by Alan Sircom

The Taipei-based electronics maker oBravo (more accurately Stymax, although as that sounds like a treatment for conjunctivitis in horses, most people run with the oBravo name) has been quietly designing audio products for almost a decade, but it wasn't until it showed the distinctive HAMT-1 headphone that its name became more well-known beyond its native Taiwan.

The HAMT-1 was one of two similar-looking headphones shown by the brand in 2014. The cheaper HRIB-1 is currently still a work-in-progress, although it's a regular fixture on the headphone show scene, but the HAMT-1 arrived last year, and is making a lot of friends wherever it hits. The difference between the two is obvious by the initials; both hybrid designs with conventional dynamic bass units, the HRIB-1 features a ribbon tweeter, while the HAMT-1 sports a 40mm AMT tweeter. Heil's clever Air Motion Transducer is a folded ribbon tweeter held in an array of high-performance magnets. The AMT is difficult to make (it's inherently hand-made, takes time to construct, and requires highly-skilled workers to manufacture), which means it's expensive, but the linearity of high-frequency sound it produces makes it worth the effort.

This tweeter sits at the acoustic centre of a 57mm cone mid-bass driver with a neodymium magnet system, making this a true coaxial design. Between them, they are claimed to deliver a frequency response from 15Hz-45kHz, although it's worth remembering that headphones are not expected to (or, for that matter, recommended to) deliver a truly flat frequency response, so placing +/- decibel limits is worthless.

The HAMT-1 is one of those 'looks better in the flesh' designs, although I don't think it looks too bad in print, either. The whole package is top class; the cardboard slip-case opens out to a grey velveteen drawstring bag, emblazoned with the company's logo. Inside that bag is a small Halliburton style aluminium case, again with the company logo inset into a discreet mirrored logo on its flank. Inside is a plush cloth (similar to Crumpler's 'Slip' laptop screen and key cloth, but once again with the oBravo logo) and some foam inserts. Other case candy include a set of monocrystal headphone cables, and a mini-jack to ¼" jack adaptor. The oBravos use the same screw-in terminals used by HiFiMAN, which meant I have a set of excellent Vertere cables made for my HE-500s to compare.

The HAMT-1s themselves have that distinctive 'Cyberman' look most recently seen in Abyss headphones, although in oBravo's version, the squared off headband isn't adjustable for width. In fairness, it doesn't need to be, as it uses its brown velvet/velour top pad to rest on the top of the listener's head, and the arms of the ear-cups themselves are angled in. Adjustment is limited to ear-cup position, but the gimbaled earcups themselves allow a lot of wiggle room. In truth, unless you are about six, are unlucky enough to be exceptionally cone-headed, or have a head the size of a basketball, the net result is comfy and doesn't look as weird as you might expect. The brushed aluminium, the contrasting brown suede/velour head and ear pads, and the air-dried light wooden inserts (with the logo yet again) give it a surprisingly classy, and – initially at least – pleasantly aromatic, presentation. Also, while you do feel the oBravo resting on the top of your head (rather than a band across the top of your head), this is not a heavy headphone and long listening sessions are no more or less difficult than wearing a pair of Stax headphones. The ear-cups are large enough to cover most ears, but while these are closed cans, they do not massively attenuate the world beyond the headset, because there's no feeling of being 'clamped'. Also note, the HAMT-1 are not 'handed'; left and right are defined by what channel cable you plug into the bottom of each ear unit.

Although the HAMT-1 comes with a mini-jack, realistically this is a headphone designed for home listening. They don't leak sound too much, and a 56ohm impedance and 105dB sensitivity mean they are not hard to drive, but the combination of a fairly large physical appearance and the overall presentation demands high-performance domestic audio environments. Those sensitivity figures mean the HAMT-1 isn't too amp fussy, and it's more demanding of quality than quantity of power, however. oBravo also makes a lithium ion-powered headphone amp called, naturally, the HPA-1. While this model is not yet sold in the UK, this natural partner to the HAMT-1 ably demonstrates that a hulking great power amp masquerading as a headphone amplifier is not required to drive the HAMT-1 well. I used a Wadia 121 DAC/headphone amp, which drove the HAMT-1's with consummate ease.

Running these headphones in, however, is mandatory, because the headphone sounds somewhat unbalanced straight



out of the box. The AMT unit needs some hours to bed in, and prior to that it tends to sound recessed, and the dynamic driver for the bass tends to sound a little wild and overblown until it's had a few hours of play-time. As a consequence, the headphone you hear when you open the box bears almost no resemblance to the one you hear a few days later. The change is one of the most significant I've heard from an audio component, up there with the rollercoaster of good and bad sound you get from a stone-cold and new Naim preamp. Fortunately, once the two drivers have formally introduced themselves to one another, things settle down nicely.

You can tailor the sound with an inexpensive (c. £30) optional kit, which allows you to take off the wooden back plate of the headphone and insert one of several sets of silicon grommets into the three small ports, thereby changing the tonal balance. Crazy bass-heads can mature into reflective string quartet enthusiasts without changing headphones!

Perhaps the most immediate aspect of the HANT-1's overall presentation is that the headphones don't sound 'headphone-like' to those who think that a pejorative. A big part of that comes down to the extremely open, natural-sounding mid-range, which gives a sense a little more like a good electrostatic loudspeaker than a pair of normal closed ear 'cans' (an entirely appropriate term, given the design). But an even larger part of this acceptance by old-school audiophiles is the HANT-1's 'scale' like a pair of good dynamic loudspeakers. If you move from Ellie Goulding's small-scale, well-recorded girl-with-guitar music up to something big and operatic (*Opern Gala*, on DG, for example), the HANT-1 present both with the kind of physicality and size they demand. No 20-foot guitars or scrunched up orchestra pits here. That sense of scale is something few good speaker systems (whether in room or on head) can execute well, but it's something at which the oBravo headphones excel. ▶

Raidho acoustics



X-3

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▶ There is an underlying sense of deep, powerful bass running through the HAMT-1 sound. This isn't an artificial bass depth, and it doesn't rumble along, turning folk into dub reggae; instead, it adds a degree of authority to the piano player's left hand, a solid foundation to the bass player's performance, and a sense of rootedness to drum kits. This comes across best on small-group jazz pieces; the classic 'Cantaloupe Island' by Herbie Hancock [*Empyrean Isles*, Blue Note] sees Hancock on piano, Ron Carter on bass, and Tony Williams on drums playing off one another's rhythms, and the HAMT-1 picks up on that well, making the piece sound fresh and exciting, instead of anodyne and anaemic. This is helped by the mid and treble being able to perfectly portray Freddie Hubbard's sublime cornet playing, and in the process helps to perfectly separate the instruments out without the album sounding too dissolute. That's the joy of having your ear an inch or so from an AMT device.

The HAMT-1 headphones by oBravo deliver a uniquely audiophile-friendly sound, one that helps bridge the gap between the traditional audio world (that doesn't 'do' headphones) and today's buyers (who don't 'do' loudspeakers). They are efficient enough not to need a brute amp and could even run from an iPhone, although it doesn't show the HAMT-1 in the best light. Best of all though is the sound, which is at once deep and powerful, big and bold, and subtle and refined. It's like strapping a little pair of Wilson Audio loudspeakers to your ears.

We're not done yet, though. We're keen to see just how much those grommets can change the tonal balance of the HAMT-1, which is a shameless excuse to hold on to a great set of headphones for another month or so! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: two-way coaxial closed back headphones with AMT tweeter

Drive Units: 40mm Air Motion Transformer (AMT) tweeter in acoustic centre of 57mm cone mid/bass with neodymium magnets

Frequency Response: 15Hz-45KHz

Sensitivity in dB/1W/1m: 105dB

Impedance: 56 Ohm

Sound pressure level: 105 dB

Supplied with: flight case, bag, monocrystal signal cables with mini-jack connector. Mini-jack to ¼" adaptor

Weight: 543g

Price: £1,499

Manufactured by: oBravo:

URL: www.obravoaudio.com

Distributed by: Absolute Sounds

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Monitor Audio Silver 8 loudspeakers

by Steve Dickinson



It's strange, but the only people who don't realise just how mind-bendingly huge the British audio brand Monitor Audio has become... are the British. We still associate the brand with those beautifully finished loudspeakers of the 1980s and 1990s (so commonly spotted with Audiolab electronics) that represented the upgrade from Mission 770s for many a risk-averse purchaser. Today though, wherever discerning people buy loudspeakers in big numbers, they tend to buy a lot of Monitor Audio. And loudspeakers like the Silver 8 go a long way to explain that correlation.

Monitor Audio of today may remain true to the company's roots of sensible pricing, and finishes that belie that price tag, but the intervening years have also brought significant innovation to the driver technology employed throughout. But, let's not pussy-foot around – you still get a lot of box for the money; the Silver 8 offers a genuine three-way, four-driver design, housing those drivers in a decent-sized floorstanding cabinet finished in an impeccable wood veneer, for a frankly astonishing £1,250 per pair, or £1,375 for a sumptuous high-gloss finish.

The Silver 8 sits below the larger floorstander, the range-topping Silver 10, above a small floorstander, the 2.5-way Silver 6, and two two-way standmounts: the Silver 1 and Silver 2. AV users have surround and subwoofer options too. All the models in the Silver series benefit from 'trickle-down' technology developed for the Gold and Platinum ranges. The Silver 8's all-new 165mm mid/bass drivers use aerospace technology C-CAM (Ceramic Coated Aluminium/Magnesium), in the form of dished metal cones without a centre cut-out. These are then dimpled for extra stiffness, in what Monitor Audio dubs RST (Rigid Surface Technology). The new drivers also benefit from larger voice coils and motors, and a specially designed coupling assembly. The midrange driver sits in a separate, damped, and optimised enclosure within the cabinet. The tweeter also employs a C-CAM dome, with careful attention to airflow and venting for reduced resonance and better damping. All this is said to aid improvements in breakup modes, with the aim of clean, low-distortion output.

The drivers are a 'bolt-through' design, fixing to the rear of the cabinet via tension rods and are effectively decoupled from the front baffle. This also creates additional bracing, to aid cabinet rigidity. The elimination of fixings to the front baffle and the uninterrupted dish of the drivers makes for a very neat and modern appearance, all the better with the grilles removed. The loudspeakers are configured for bi-wiring; replacing the supplied links with dedicated links from Chord brought a useful improvement in overall coherence, and I used the loudspeakers single-wired with either Studio Connections or Audiomica cables.

The overall presentation is hearty and generous, definitely offering a lot of sound for the money. Bass from that pair of C-CAM woofers goes very



▶ deep, even if it sounds perhaps a tad fulsome at times, but before you start to wonder if using the Silver 8s would be a bit like living with Brian Blessed, fret not; the clear impression is that this is a loudspeaker that tries hard to convey the broad scope of signal presented to it. It is far from being one of those loudspeakers that works fine within tightly constrained limits, but not well at all outside them. Instead, the Silver 8s will make a decent stab at anything you care to send their way.

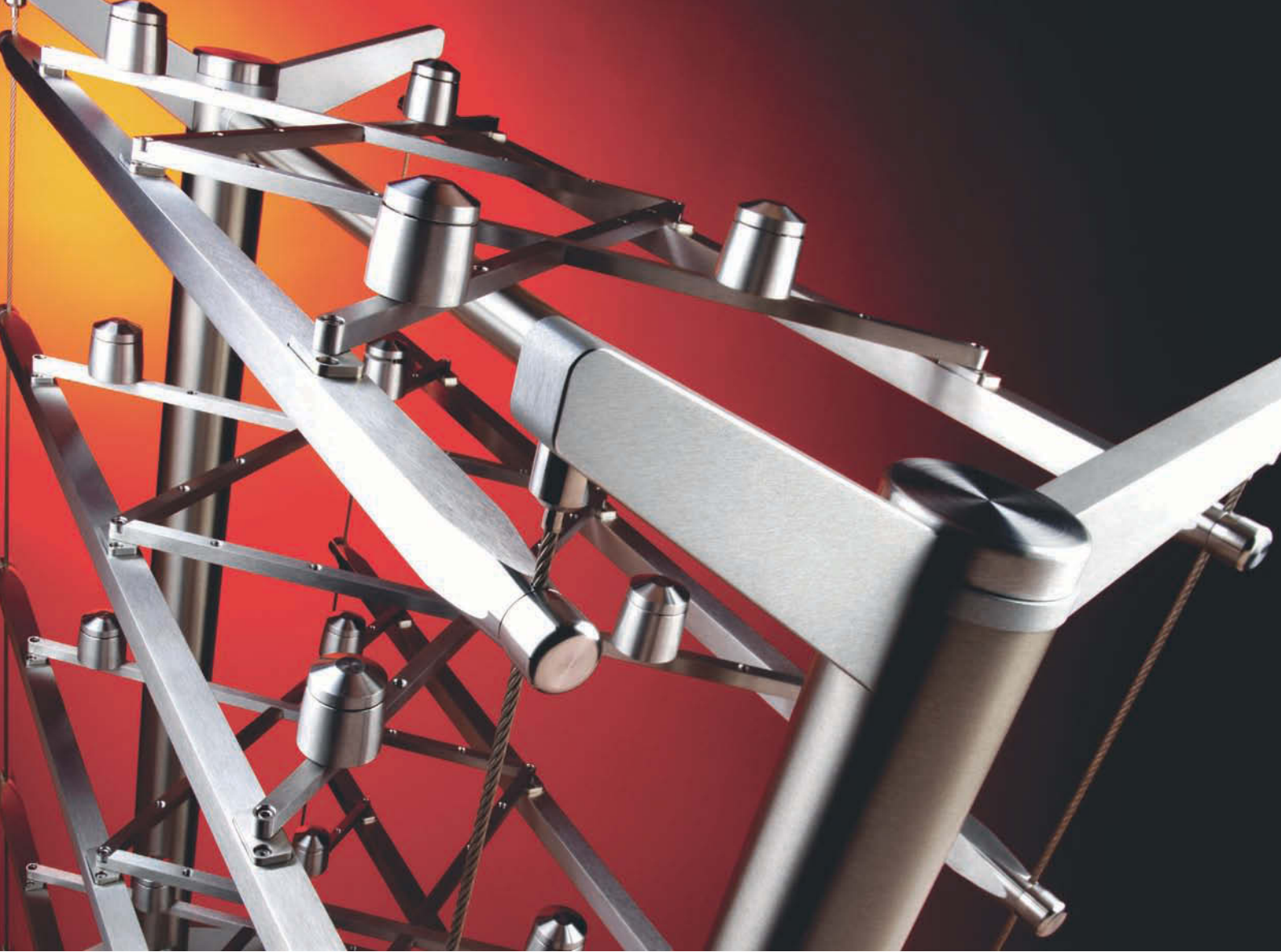
They will boogie when asked: they can do scale, weight, and authority; timing is respectable; and soundstaging is generous and well-proportioned. When the price is taken into account, it's quite a package – and as an all-rounder, the Silver 8 delivers a satisfying and well-judged performance.

I set them up in the sort of system they might typically inhabit, in this case teamed with a Creek Evo CD player and integrated amp: a combination which can, for all its modest price, deliver a lot of what I want from a system in terms of sheer music-making. If you are on a budget, this is where it starts to get worthwhile, so it was interesting to discover what the Monitor Audios brought to this particular party. And 'party' isn't such a bad way to describe it – these are fun loudspeakers with a big, confident sound, deep and spacious soundstage, and respectable dynamics.

Of course, better electronics bring out better sound, especially in the bass; although the combo turns in surprising bass depth, the Silver 8 is capable of greater bottom-end definition than the Creeks can muster. The Dies Irae from Britten's 'War Requiem' on the Turtle Records sampler *The Spirit of Turtle* [TR75538] had that deep and open soundstage, with plenty of air and space, but the dynamics relied heavily on that bass for their effect, and then mostly in terms of its weight. Dean Peer's 'Mars' from the same album didn't have enough impact because the bass, while weighty, lacked sufficient speed, attack, or precision to give that 'right between the eyes' effect that is so overwhelming when you hear this piece on a truly great system. That said, few systems at any price manage this particular trick, on this particular track.

In fairness, it's probably unfair to expect more from a budget system. While the Creek combination was a likely partnering, it was clear the speakers could do better, given a chance. So out went the Creeks, and in came my dCS Puccini and Albany pre/power combination. Not the most obvious of bedfellows, perhaps, but the exercise shows just how much more the Monitor Audios are capable of giving, when faced with a system of the first water. Put simply, beefing up the electronics helped a lot! ▶

“It was interesting to discover what the Monitor Audios brought to this particular party. And ‘party’ isn’t a bad way to describe it – these are fun loudspeakers with a big, confident sound, deep and spacious soundstage, and respectable dynamics.”



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▶ Now, Gretchen Peters' vocals on 'Idlewild' from *Hello, Cruel World* [PRPCD094] has much more sense of storytelling, mostly due to the way she handles those subtle little inflections and micro-dynamics. The vocals are better focussed, the instruments are played with more sensitivity, and the song is more meaningful and affecting as a result. It's also more obvious that it is Gretchen Peters doing the singing than it was in the Creek set-up; the timbral differences between voices are much better resolved. Similarly, Abdullah Ibrahim and Kramat from *Ekapa Lodumo* [TIP-888 840 2] is lively and tuneful, the percussion has clear timing and balance, and there is more sense of the piece building to a climax and conclusion than the Creek/MA system could deliver, not least due to the increased awareness of the nuance and inflections in the playing. The bass tends more toward 'impressionistic' than 'explicit', but overall this is a significant step up in intelligibility and communication – the band has regained its mojo, but remains under control – and the whole is simply more foot-tappingly enjoyable.

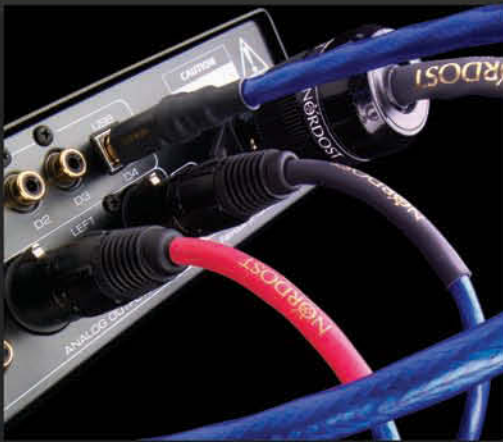
It was an fascinating exercise, because it was clear that the speaker had the capability to resolve a lot of the improvements to the upstream end of the system. A sure sign of a good loudspeaker is that it can rise to the occasion, and the Silver 8 certainly did just that. However, the loudspeakers never sound like a pair of £12,500 loudspeakers trapped in a £1,250 body; they are fine value for money, but the Silver 8s are not audiophile giant-killers. In terms of overall presentation, there is an air of mild airbrushing of fine detail, which might almost be thought of as a form of coloration, a sort of papery sheen to proceedings which overlays the music. Any compromises are perhaps most evident in the bass, which trades a little solidity, timing, and tunefulness in favour of a more broad-brush sense of scale and weight. Compromises are also manifest in a loss of fine-grained subtlety, sweetness, and precision in the upper registers.

In many ways, these are not criticisms but simply observations. Such observations begin to fade when you consider that vast Monitor Audio audience out there in the real world – not every Silver 8 buyer is going to pamper these loudspeakers with the finest quality audiophile-grade musical material, and where those seeking filigree detail might pass up the Silver 8, those with more eclectic tastes that go beyond the best recordings might find the tonal balance is a benefit, not a hurdle. ▶

“Not every Silver 8 buyer is going to pamper these loudspeakers with the finest quality audiophile-grade musical material, and... those with more eclectic tastes that go beyond the best recordings might find the tonal balance is a benefit, not a hurdle.”



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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 3-Way, floorstanding loudspeaker with twin bass reflex ports

Driver complement: 2x 6.5" C-CAM, RST bass drivers; 1 x 4" C-CAM, RST mid-range driver; 1 x 1" (25 mm) gold dome C-CAM tweeter

Crossover frequencies: 500Hz; 2.7KHz

Frequency response: 32Hz-35KHz

Impedance: 4 Ohms

Sensitivity: 90dB

Dimensions (HxWxD): 100 x 18.5 x 30cm

Weight: 23.3Kg (each)

Finishes: Black Oak, Natural Oak, Rosenut, Walnut real wood veneers; black or white high-gloss lacquer

Price: £1,250 /pair (£1,375 for high gloss finishes)

Manufacturer: Monitor Audio Ltd, 24 Brook Road, Rayleigh, Essex, SS6 7XJ, UK

Tel: +44 (0) 1268 740580

URL: www.monitoraudio.co.uk

▶ The Monitor Audio Silver 8s are designed for all kinds of music (not just audiophile music) and even, gulp, multichannel movies. In such contexts, the generous bass and the impact and drive from those two paired bass drivers will satisfy many, and will do so more adroitly than walking a high-end tightrope where a microphone placement half a centimetre out of place is left baldly exposed. Granted, playing something understated like Melody Gardot is going to sound faintly glossed over, even to the point of sounding gauche, but many recordings will benefit from the Silver 8's handling of loudness as 'quantity' rather than 'intensity'.

Sure, speakers costing many times the price can comprehensively better the Silver 8's but such comparisons are always invidious. Not least because better loudspeakers might well tell you things you'd rather not know about your source, amplification, or cabling. We need to keep in mind that a £1,250 pair of loudspeakers is likely to be called upon to partner equipment at the budget-to-sensible end of the market, and building in a bit of forgiveness or compliance is likely to be the kinder and ultimately more enjoyable approach.

I think Monitor Audio has produced an all-rounder in the Silver 8, one that will impress in an AV system, while still satisfying with two-channel. What the Monitor Audio Silver 8 does do, and what I found most engaging about these very likeable loudspeakers, is to convey a broad sense of why we bother about all this stuff. They'll root out the fundamental sense of joy and fun, or drama and magnificence, or pathos, in a recording and make you remember why you decided to invest in a decent hi-fi system in the first place. They are perfectly capable of raising the hairs on my arms, or making me grin like a loon.

These are not oafish, unsubtle loudspeakers with feet of clay and manners to match. They are, rather, big-hearted and generous partners with a sense of fun and musicality. They can raise their game when called upon to do so, but they can just as easily work within a modest system, and get more out of it than you might have expected. They will reward attention to partnering equipment and setup, and are more than capable of telling you, for example, when you've installed a more suitable cable. They don't obsess about fine detail, preferring the bold, broad strokes that get your attention. I wouldn't argue against that approach – too many systems give detail without supplying context or meaning for it; in those circumstances, you're frankly better off without the distraction.

What I did find, during my time with the Monitor Audio Silver 8s, was that I often just put on music and enjoyed the experience. Outside of the reviewing sessions, I didn't spend my time listening critically; I just went with the flow of the music. And that was really easy to do because the speaker doesn't demand constant attention and fussing over; it just is what it is. And that's no bad thing. +

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Myajima Kansai cartridge

by Raphael Todes

Buying a high-end cartridge is not for the faint-hearted. Dealers, however good, are not always willing to give up their time to conduct the extensive demonstrations required fully to understand what a cartridge is doing, as they are fiddly and take time. Loaning customers cartridges can be equally onerous in the case that something goes wrong, so the only way to get to terms with a cartridge's personality is by a review, or taking the plunge and buying blind. If you get it wrong, it can be a costly, painful three or four year mistake!

Miyajima has been making cartridges in Fukuoka, Japan for the past thirty years, under the aegis of founder Noriyuki Miyajima. The company's current range includes several specialist mono cartridges, as well as dedicated 78s cartridges, tailor-made for these older formats.

In a traditional moving coil cartridge, the cantilever is held in place by a wire under tension: As the stylus tracks the groove, this tension changes, and some 'slack' can appear which results in a loss of information. In the patented crossing system (CRS), the rear end of the cantilever touches a 'slide bar' making point-to-point contact, like the end of a shaft on a turntable bearing, and is thus much more accurate. The other major difference in this technology, is that the core of the CRS is non-magnetic, and a forward and backward motion of the cantilever is equally easy. The conventional MC has a magnetic core, and forwards and backwards motions are not equally easy. These two significant innovations should yield greater accuracy of converting tiny cantilever motions into voltage changes.

The Kansui is beautifully constructed from the Tanzanian hardwood known as 'mpingo', which may be found in clarinets and oboes, and requires the use of a Roland Camm-3 CNC milling machine to ensure the accuracy of cutting required. The cartridge uses a Shibata stylus, and tracks at between 2 and 2.5 grams.

Installing a high-end cartridge for someone as cack-handed as myself can rapidly reduce life-expectancy – both the cartridge's and mine when I see the repair bill. Some manufacturers recognise this and make the surgical procedure as painless as possible by the inclusion of a stylus guard. The Kansui has a flexible plastic stylus guard that covers the bolts, but as it cannot be used when fitting the cartridge to the head-shell, installation has to be done unprotected!

The cartridge apparently was two degrees off-centre in terms of azimuth alignment, and using a Feickert spirit level, I inserted some paper shims to rotate the cartridge in the head shell. Azimuth adjustment is something that the all-singing and dancing SME V tonearm sadly lacks.

Having set up the cartridge on the arm mounted on an Inspire Monarch Direct-Drive turntable, playing through a VAC Signature Mk2a phono stage and preamp, with VAC Phi 200 Monoblocs driving B&W802d speakers, I set about doing some listening.

First up is the Mozart E flat String Quintet, the Amadeus Quartet with Cecil Aronowitz, recorded by DG in 1969. I am struck by a presentation which is unfamiliar. There is a solidity and richness to the midrange which I don't often hear on a high-end cartridge. It is a dense, characterful sound, which seems to convey more detail about the makers of the instruments being played than I get with my resident Lyra Scala. The sound stage is just a little condensed, some of that classic moving-coil 'airiness' is less present than I'm used to, but the cartridge is really excelling in differentiating the subtle textures of the instruments, and making them sound utterly believable. The cello is particularly well reproduced. The Miyajima seems to time



▶ better than I've heard on my Scala, bass notes seem to start earlier with a cleaner attack. This affects the sense of timing of the group, as if the players are better together. It is also resolving a greater amount of bass detail. I also notice that some of the higher first violin passages that can shriek a little on the Lyra are better handled. I don't know if the cartridge is a fraction rolled-off at the top, but somehow the sound reminds of an old-fashioned, pre-CD world. There is also a master tape-like feel to the performance. There's no gloss to the sound, which can make for pleasurable listening, but more a matt patina. I have got used to a bit of gloss in my system, which I realise doesn't exist in the concert hall.

A similar set of sonic results follow with 'Rhapsody in Blue', with Bernstein conducting the LA Phil from the piano, on DG. The sound is not particularly euphoric, but again has a master tape feel to it. The lower orchestral bass is particularly superb; I am aware of notes that I've not heard before, and there is a sense of real refinement of timbre. Rhythmically, when the orchestra breaks into toe-tapping cross-rhythms, the cartridge captures the moment beautifully. Accurate, yes: panache, maybe not.

I had some Magnepan 3.7i's knocking around, which I tried as an antidote to the B&W802ds. The presentation is not surprisingly, shockingly different. They are a planar magnetic speaker that use ribbons, and have a startling clarity to them. Listening to some old Blue Note recordings, such as Kenny Burrell's classic *Midnight Blue*, yielded the nearest thing to being in a jazz club I've yet heard. There is something about the synergy between a timbrally fastidious cartridge, and the

larger-than-life, character of the Maggies, that really rocks – a rightness tonally and energy-wise that sucks you into the heart and soul of the music.

The Miyajima Kansui is a cartridge capable of some uniquely intelligent and ear-opening sounds. It has an old-world feel to it, but needs careful partnering with other components to get the energy levels right. While naturally introverted in character, it is brimming with insight and comes thoroughly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Low output moving coil phono cartridge. Stylus/ Cantilever: Shibata

Tracking Force: 2.0 - 2.5g 2.25g recommended

Load: 100 Ohms

Compliance: 100Hz : 7×10⁻⁶cm/dyne

Output: 0.23mV

Weight: 10.4g

Price: £2,395

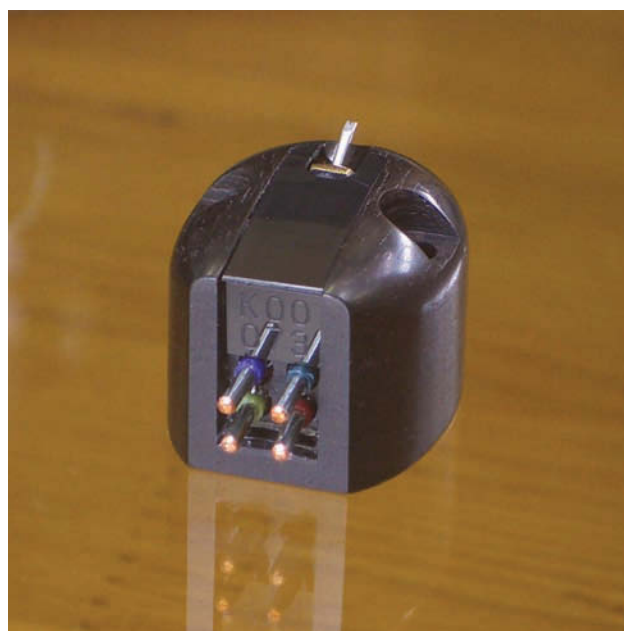
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FEATURE

Classic Album Living Room at Vintage

By Alan Jones

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EQUIPMENT REVIEW Kaiser Kawero II Vivalce loudspeaker

By Paul Marston

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By Alan Jones

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BY TRAIN: Temple Meads Station is a short distance from the Marriott.

BY CAR: From the M4 take J19 (M32 - Bristol). Follow signs for City Centre and RAC signs to the Show. For those using satellite navigation systems the hotel post code is BS1 3AD. Easy local parking in Cabot Circus car park and Broadmead and Bond Street NCPs.



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WHAT HI-FI?

EQUIPMENT REVIEW



RHA MA750i Earphones

by Chris Martens

RHA is no stranger to the pages of *Hi-Fi+*. We recently reviewed one of the brand's latest top-dog design (the T10i), and have a lot of time for its high value MA450i earphones sold by the pallet-load in Apple Stores around the world. To recap, RHA is a British (well, Scottish) audio manufacturer that aims to revise our thinking on what a genuinely modestly priced

pair of earphones can be and do, both in terms of sound and build quality. As a case in point, I would cite RHA's former flagship, the still-current MA750i, which sells for \$129.95 (US), £89.95 (UK), or €99.95 (EU). If you stop to think about it, you could easily go out with your mates, enjoy some delectable pub grub and a few pints, only to find you'd actually spent more for the evening than RHA's top-flight MA750i would have cost you. In my book, this little bit of arithmetic makes the MA750i a potential bargain (or what we Amurricans might call "a screamin' good deal"), provided the earphones sound good and are well made. But is that the case?

Yes. Full stop. End of story. Now read on. ▶

▶ While we could pretty much end this review right there, it would hardly seem sporting. After all, surely *Hi-Fi+* readers are eager to learn how and why a British earphone is acquiring a bit of a reputation as a giant killer on both sides of the Atlantic and on both sides of the English Channel? I generally prefer to leave discussions of sonic character for last, so let's begin by looking at what your £89.95 will buy you if you invest in a set of MA750i's.

When you open the box, you'll discover the MA750i is beautifully made. For starters, its earpiece enclosures are made of machined 303F-grade stainless steel, which creates a strong, positive first impression. Nothing—absolutely nothing—looks cheaply made, here. The 'phones are supplied with a large diameter set of smoothly-jacketed, steel reinforced, oxygen free signal cables that terminate in a robust, knurled metal mini-plug fitted with a gold plated, four-conductor plug tip. The 'four-conductor' bit refers to the fact that the MA750i is fully iPod/iPhone/iPad compatible and accordingly comes with a machined metal in-line three-button remote/mic module (with soft rubber button surfaces for better ergonomics). Sturdy strain reliefs are fitted where the signal cables enter the earpieces and where the signal cable routes into the connector plug. Even the 'Y-yoke' (the joint where the left and right earpiece leads join the main signal cable) is handled via a knurled metal connector whose fit and finish mimic those of the main output connector.

On the inside, the MA750i equipped with RHA's handmade 560.1 dynamic drivers said to provide, "precise, balanced and articulate sound reproduction with a great depth of soundstage." In a rare move, RHA publishes a frequency response curve for the 560.1 drivers on its web site, enabling prospective buyers to judge for themselves how smooth the curve is. In particular, the broad region between 20Hz through 7kHz is exceptionally flat and smooth, while the MA750i's high-frequency response handily extends out beyond 22kHz, for a spot of high-resolution listening.

But another big part of the MA750i's appeal involves (with apologies to Thomas The Tank Engine fans everywhere) its really useful set of accessories. We think users will especially enjoy the RHA's padded, leatherette, zipper-closure, carrying case, which is about the size of a small pocket diary. On the left hand interior of the case, elastic straps hold in place a stainless steel ear-tip holder populated with an impressive assortment of tips. All told, the MA750i comes with six pairs of dual density tips (two sets each of sizes S, M, and L), two pairs of double-flange tips (sizes S and M), plus two pairs of universal-fit memory foam tips. The sheer variety of ear-tips provided should enable most any MA750i listener to obtain a comfortable, airtight fit. The right hand interior of the case provides a stretchy mesh pocket where the earphones and their signal cables can be stored. Finally, there is a cable garment clip for those who wish to use one.

The picture I hope readers will take away from the foregoing description is that the RHA MA750i neither looks nor feels like an "entry-level" earphone; instead, it feels like something more, which may explain why these 'phones carry an impressive (and uncommon) three-year warranty. All of this is well and good, but how does the MA750i sound?

Sonically, the MA750i does not disappoint. It's defining characteristic, I would say, is a broad, smooth midrange band that is, as promised, articulate, smooth, and expansive. Indeed, the MA750i's midband performance makes the entire earphone sound more sophisticated (more 'high-end-orientated,' if you will) than it has any right to do for the price. Thus, the MA750i's midrange is the star and centrepiece of the entire show, which is all for the best.

Bass is taut and nicely defined with good depth, though it might be just slightly too lightly balanced for some tastes. This bass characteristics results, I suspect, from the fact that RHA designers have given ▶



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
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

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▶ the MA750i uncommonly flat bass response, whereas some earphone aficionados would argue that a judicious, well-calculated touch of bass lift can help earphones more closely duplicate the in-room sound of fine monitoring speakers. (If that statement seems odd—as in, “How could flat bass response not be good?”—it helps to bear in mind that loudspeakers typically enjoy some degree of low frequency ‘room gain,’ where earphones do not). Connoisseurs of flat response, however, should be quite pleased. Either way, let your ears be your guide.

Up in the upper midrange and treble region, the MA750i is a good performer with plenty of edge definition and clarity, though—on some tracks—there are occasional faint hints of a very subtly coarse or granular sound. This may not be a matter of inaccuracy or coloration, however; rather, it could be that the MA750i is simply “telling it like it is” vis-à-vis less than excellent recordings. Like many upper tier audio products, the MA750i sounds noticeably better when fed with good musical software and driven by high quality (though not necessarily high cost) electronics.

During my tests, I tried the MA750i with both my iPhone and my office iMac, playing lossless files from both. Both Apple products had adequate output for the MA750i, but they were not good enough, in a qualitative sense, to tap the RHA’s full sonic potential. To do that, I found a good portable amp (or amp/DAC) was required and two I might suggest would be the terrific iFi iDSD nano DAC/headphone amp and/or the iFi iCAN nano headphone amp. Through electronics like these, you’ll soon get a much clearer picture of the performance potential the MA750i has on offer.



“It could be that the MA750i is simply ‘telling it like it is’ vis-à-vis less than excellent recordings. Like many upper tier audio products, the MA750i sounds noticeably better when fed with good musical software and driven by high quality (though not necessarily high cost) electronics.”

Listening to the MA750i’s on Charlie Haden and Antonio Forcione’s performance of ‘For Turiya’ from *Heartplay* [Naim, CD] proved instructive. On this very well recorded track, the bass balance of the RHAs seemed picture perfect, while the low-end tautness, control, and pitch definition of the MA750i’s let me hear the textural subtleties of Haden’s acoustic bass. Haden, in my view, was one of those bassists who was able to go far beyond merely playing the right notes at the right time, so that he became in a very real way a sculptor of timbres. Here, the RHA ‘phones are in their element, showing one layer of textural subtlety after another. At the same time, the clear, ▶

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Five Stars 2011, *What Hi-Fi*



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▶ liting voice of Forcione’s guitar lofts up above the bass lines, supplying melodic direction and piquant sonic commentary. There is a spacious and almost ethereal quality to Forcione’s performance and the sweet, detailed, and expansive mids of the MA750i do it full justice—especially in terms of capturing the sound of the guitar as it interacts with the reverberant acoustics of the recording space.

The MA750i is not a perfect earphone (common sense should tell us there probably is no such thing), nor will it be all things to all people (especially not for those who want either a little or a lot of bass boost in their ‘phones), but it is hands down the finest earphone I’ve heard at its price point. If you’ve debated over whether to pick up a good set of earphones, or to make do with the cheapie earbuds that probably came with your iPod or mobile phone, the MA750i gives you a compelling, no-brainer answer. Buy a set of these RHA ‘phones and you’ll soon enjoy surprisingly sophisticated sound at what must be considered a bargain basement price. Our thought: buy ‘em before RHA comes to its senses and decides to charge more. +

“If you’ve debated over whether to pick up a good set of earphones, or make do with the cheapie earbuds that probably came with your iPod or mobile phone, the MA750i gives you a compelling, no-brainer answer. Buy a set of these RHA ‘phones and you’ll soon enjoy surprisingly sophisticated sound at what must be considered a bargain basement price.”

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Driver type: Single RHA 560.1 dynamic-type driver

Frequency range: 16Hz – 22kHz

Impedance: 16 Ohms

Sensitivity: 100dB

Cable: 1.35M, steel reinforces, OFC conductors, with gold-plated 3.5mm mini-plug.

Weight: 36 grams

Price: \$129.95 (US), £89.95 (UK)

Manufacturer Information: RHA (Reid Heath Acoustics)

Tel: +44 (0) 141 221 8506

URL: www.rha-audio.com, www.rha.co.uk





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Go Deeper



Jeff Rowland Continuum S2 integrated amplifier

by Alan Sircom

Jeff Rowland is one of those brands that audio people like to show off to non-audio people. The company's products go some way to quiet the "it cost HOW much?" cries from non-audiophiles, thanks to off-the-chart external design and build criteria. With its thick gloss black casework and contrasting scalloped so-shiny-it-might-be-lenticular front panels (all machined from top-grade 6061-T6 aluminium alloy), Jeff Rowland sets a build quality standard that is rarely matched, and never exceeded. It's the Leica lens effect – spending that much money on metal and glass is an absurd idea right up until you handle one.

The Continuum S2 is Jeff Rowland's 4th generation integrated model in a line of electronics that range in price from about a 3.0 to a 9.5 on the Richter scale; the more 'reassuringly expensive' mono power amplifiers in particular are extremely popular with the Masters of the Audiophile Universe. Alongside that sumptuous build, Jeff Rowland is perhaps best known for being one of the first high-end brands to embrace Class D operation. Jeff Rowland has not tied itself to one circuit design, however, and recent launches from the brand have used a range of 20th and 21st Century modes of operation. It's a pragmatic approach that has paid off, even if there are those who swear blind that one amplifier design ►

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▶ sounds better than another, the fact is Jeff Rowland amps have a signature sound, one that does not appear unduly altered by the internal architecture.

The Continuum S2 operates in Class D, which is how the company manages to deliver 400W into eight ohms from a relatively small 15.9kg chassis. The first indicator that Jeff Rowland does Class D right is that it doubles its power perfectly into four ohms; most Class D designs might have an impressive performance into an eight ohm load, but quickly fall apart when faced with any loudspeaker more challenging. The Continuum S2's ability to face off low impedances shows just what the company's learned with Class D over the years. Perhaps the secret is the Continuum S2 running surprisingly warm for a Class D design; not Class A warm, but way beyond the 'is it on?' feeling you get when handling most switching PWM amps.

In its standard guise, the Continuum S2 is a line-only design, with five inputs, or four if you switch in the home cinema by-pass. However, Input One can accommodate optional cards, which bring either a DAC or a phono stage to the mix. These cards can be fitted by a dealer, and that's highly recommended. Technically, each card requires one pin block and affixing a single grub-screw to a stand-off, and these are conveniently located at either end of the rear panel PCB, so it's no big deal. Except that the screened off power amplifier stage severely limits access (at least to those of us without long, thin fingers with magnets for fingernails). In the end, I undid both the bolts holding the top plate and the rear panel to gain access. But, taking the Continuum S2 apart does give you an appreciation of how that uncompromising

build extends inside and out. In a world where a five year life-span is three years too many, Jeff Rowland is made to old-school standards. This is an amplifier for the long game, and it will still be making good sounds decades from now.

Personally, I'd go for the RIAA module, rather than the DAC boards. The latter may turn the amp into a 'digital future' device and it sounds excellent, but it lacks Ethernet or USB connection, although in fairness, Jeff Rowland suggests a dedicated USB to RCA converter gives the best performance. The MM/MC phono stage, on the other hand, is a good option for many audiophile listeners. It's not as refined, detailed, or flexible as the best external options, but it's more than just a make-weight phono stage. At Munich in 2014, Jeff Rowland put together what I think is the perfect configuration, with the company's Aeris DAC connected to a laptop for digital duties, and the built-in phono stage for playing the black stuff.

Like most Jeff Rowland equipment down the ages, this is a balanced amplifier that can 'do' single-ended well. Balanced operation, where possible, is the best option, both in terms of flexibility (there are only two single-ended inputs on the amp, one of which can end up a phono stage) and in sonic terms, although in fairness the Continuum S2 works far better with single-ended inputs than most balanced amps. Nevertheless, if you have the chance to run it in balanced mode, go for it!

The Continuum S2 is one of those rare amps that does not shout at you. Audio systems are increasingly bright and forward, which might make for more immediate aural pleasure (roll your tongue over those words a few times for the sheer fun of it), but makes sustained listening enjoyment harder to achieve. This forward sound has become so prevalent that ▶

▶ the alternative can get overlooked, even though music rarely has the same forward presentation in the real world. In fact, after listening to the Continuum S2 for some weeks, a lot of amplification sounded hard and glassy, and I found the Jeff Rowland amp harder than most to give back.

Beyond that natural presentation, the Continuum S2's presentation is difficult to pin down, but in a very good way. It's not the kind of sound that lends itself to pithy description, and that's a fault of the vocabulary, not the electronics. It's the way it makes stereo happen; it's like it redraws your listening space around you. It's not 'holographic'; it projects the sound of the recording on your room with such drive that it makes you think you are sitting in a different listening space. The amplifier is remarkably transparent (but not to a fault, bad recordings are not laid open for autopsy – they are just bad recordings) and has a noise floor and grain structure so subtle, unless you live a cloistered life in a soundproofed bunker, the world outside is more imposing on the music than the Continuum S2 will ever be. But, this is a double-edged sword; few electronics systems have that kind of absence of coloration and noise, and as a result many will be used to hearing some excess flab along with the music, and when the Continuum S2 takes that away, you might spend time reorienting yourself to how music is supposed to sound.

The Class D elephant in the room is actually not really an elephant at all, unless you make it such. The Continuum S2 is not just a good Class D amplifier. It sounds like any good Jeff Rowland amplifier; enjoyable, detailed without sounding forward, unfussy, and natural in a way that you wish other brands could discover. It gets on with the task of making good sounds, and does it with real aplomb. In fact, my only real grumbles with the Continuum S2 are the binding post terminals (which only take bare wire and spade lugs as standard, although 4mm clamps are available as an option) and the cheapie remote it comes with. Given the luxury finish of the amplifier, I'd hope for something just as sexy in my hand (careful now), but the handset is like something from a 1980s Philips CD player.

“The Continuum S2's presentation is difficult to pin down, but in a very good way. It's not the kind of sound that lends itself to pithy description, and that's a fault of the vocabulary, not the electronics.”

I like the Continuum S2 for the same reasons I like products from brands such as Conrad-Johnson, because it sounds unforced and intrinsically 'right'. It's the polar opposite to the highly detailed, extremely analytical and musically 'cold' sound many like. As a reviewer I need to have both sounds on tap to deal with the demands of walking the path of the listener, but I can't help but feel the Continuum S2's sound is more right sounding, even if this less forward presentation is not so immediately attention and headline-grabbing.

There are two contrasting forces at work in audio today, and the Jeff Rowland integrated is just about perfect for both. On one side, we have the upgrader, who is beginning to return to the audio fold after a decade and a half's absence. They have rediscovered that music isn't just an accompaniment to an early-morning jog, and are busy rising through the audiophile ranks. On the other, we have the downshifter, who has spent decades at the audiophile extreme and wants something that delivers the goods without the space and expense of a full-blown system. Both of these types of listener are usually dealing with smaller spaces for a listening room. This means less room, but does not mean compromise. All of which points to the Jeff Rowland Continuum S2. To say this comes highly recommended is putting it mildly – this is the kind of amplifier I could happily live with and never feel the need to upgrade ever again! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Inputs: 2x XLR balanced pair, 2x RCA single-ended pair, 1x RCA single-ended bypass pair

Outputs: 1x XLR balanced pair, 1x RCA single-ended pair

Speaker Terminals: CE-approved wire/spade-lug clamps

Optional inputs: DAC or MM/MC phono board

Power output: 400W into eight ohms, 800W into four ohms (continuous, both channels driven)

Frequency Response: 5Hz-70kHz (-3dB @ eight ohms)
THD+N: <0.05%, 20Hz-20kHz

Dimensions (WxHxD): 394x135x380mm

Weight: 15.9kg

Price: £7,995 (£8,495 with DAC or Phono board option)

Manufactured by: Jeff Rowland Design Group

URL: www.jeffrowlandgroup.com

Distributed by: Signature Audio Systems

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AC/HFP/83

Focal Aria 905

by Jason Kennedy

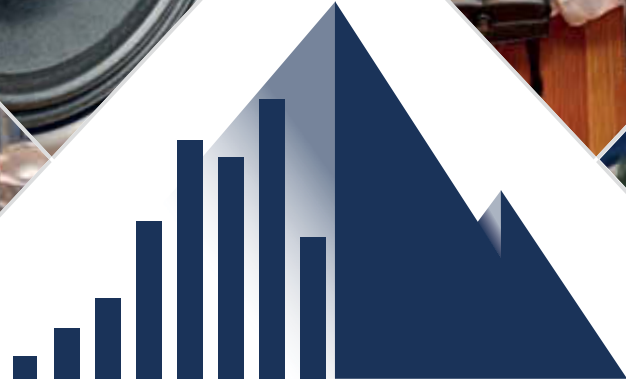
I have not always found Focal's more affordable models to be entirely to my liking. This is partly because metal tweeters are rarely that smooth, and because Focal's inverted domes seem a little obvious in budget packages. The Utopia range reveals that the French company's approach works extremely well when executed to the highest standards, so it's just the compromises that affordability brings were not right for me. But the flax-coned Aria range seems to have changed things in a very positive way. I've heard the bigger models sounding very convincing in demonstrations, and getting the entry level bookshelf onto my stands has proved that with this technology, Focal is making truly inspiring, yet affordable loudspeakers.

The 905 is the smallest member of the Aria 900 family, but it combines the glass top, leatherette baffle, and glossy side panels found throughout the range. A slick finish in other words, and one that makes this speaker stand out among the imitation veneers and paint finishes of its competition. But, it's the main driver that's the most distinctive element: this is made not of polypropylene, aluminium, or doped paper as is found on all the alternatives, but flax, or hemp. This material appealed to Focal's engineers because it has a tubular structure that makes it inherently light and stiff when sandwiched between glass fibre skins in the Focal style. Its other advantage is that it's self damping; it does not ring because its structure is organic and thus not totally even. Naturally, Focal uses French flax fibre in its drivers and makes these in house at its facility in Lyon, the latter being quite an achievement given European manufacturing costs.

The tweeter is the latest version of Focal's aluminium/magnesium inverted dome; a combination of metals that was engineered to maximise stiffness to weight, and inverted because the French like to do things differently! The inverted dome is an approach that has found favour among many high profile brands like Wilson Audio, however. Where this particular Al/Mg tweeter differs from those used in earlier ranges is that it has a Poron surround. This material was developed for the Beryllium tweeter of the Utopia range and results in significantly lower measured distortion through the midband compared to conventional rubber surrounds. I suspect that this has as much to do with the success of this loudspeaker as the flax cone, because it allows the tweeter to operate in a more linear fashion at the point where our ears are most sensitive.

The main driver on the 905 has a 130mm cone in a cast aluminium basket, which sits in a front ported enclosure that stands just over 32cm tall. It has a keyhole on the back for wall mounting and, as ever with Focal, just the one pair of cable terminals. I suspect that multiple cable terminals are, like the spike, an idea whose time is passing. You really don't need multiple runs of cable unless you are a cable manufacturer, for everyone else they muck up phase and make a mess in the room. The tweeter is surrounded ►





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▶ by a urethane waveguide, a more absorbent surface than is usually found and one that is claimed to improve imaging. It's not a million miles from the felt rings used by some speaker makers of yore.

The side cheeks can be high gloss black or faux walnut and the Aria 905 is supplied with magnetic grilles for those not drawn to the distinctive look of flax. The specs suggest a manageable 89dB sensitivity allied to a minimum impedance of four Ohms, so in theory at least you don't need much power to drive this speaker. But quality and quantity are different things; this is a revealing loudspeaker and the better the amplification the better it sounds. I used the 905 with a number of amplifiers and on each occasion the speaker reflected what it was being fed with uncanny ease.

At heart this is a very good two-way. It has a rightness of timing and coherence that can only be achieved with a near minimum of drive units, and it combines this with a lack of coloration that means you rarely think about the speaker. I put the Aria 905 on 60cm stands, placed them with a 40cm gap to the back wall, hooked up the Townshend Isolda DCT cable and pressed play. The result was positively entrancing for such an affordable loudspeaker, Brendel's *The Complete Beethoven Sonatas* [Philips] provided the melody and the speaker made a fine job of the dynamics while revealing the finesse of the player's timing. Switching to 2L's recording of Mozart Violin concerto in D major [Marianne Thorsen, *Trondheim Solistene*] I was struck by how even-handed this speaker is, and how natural the violin sounded, almost as if the naturalness of the cone material is better

suited to fine acoustic instruments than man made alternatives. With more bass heavy material from Patricia Barber ['Constantinople' from *Modern Cool*, Premonition], where the double bass is bowed, you get no sense of a reflex port in action. The sound is not subtly thickened as is so often the case, yet it has extension and power. Having used transmission line speakers for so long, I find that ports are very often obvious with some material, undermining the transparency and speed of the overall result, but that is not the case here. I really like the drive that these speakers deliver; it's greater than you expect for the size, but not perhaps the sensitivity mentioned earlier.

The above results were achieved with the slightly unbalanced combination of Trilogy's 908 preamp and 992 monoblock power amps; lovely amps, but rather pricey for this speaker. Rega's Elex-R (£898) integrated is a more sensible partner in budget terms and produces a coarser result by comparison, but before you get used to its balance, you are swept away by the pace that it produces with the Focal. The bass is still well extended and the sound escapes the boxes well, but it's the voice that grabs you; the combination of integrity of timing and coherence of image makes for very convincing singers indeed. I was however drawn back to the classical repertoire, this time Schubert's Trout Quintet [Alfred Brendel with the Forellenquintett, Philips]. This revealed the timbre of the cello which is normally masked by the rest of the instruments, perhaps an indication of a slight hump in the response but also of a lack of ▶



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- ▶ cabinet coloration which can have a similar effect. Either way, it resulted in a delightful performance that revealed the interplay between musicians in the context of decent image scale and dynamics.

The bouncing beat of 'Uptown Top Ranking' [Althia & Donna, Virgin] proved to be a little more box-bound, but timing remains tight given the amount of energy being produced. Yello's 'The Expert' [*Touch*, Polydor] has a similar effect thanks to its low-end antics, but again the sound remains nimble and well extended. The image is not as big as it can be, but it's big enough and once again there is no hint of port character in the bass. In fact, the speaker remains highly articulate across the board. Some bass lines reveal the inevitable limitations that a small enclosure tends to have; low bass guitar notes can lack differentiation, but at this price there is going to be some compromise. On the plus side, the smaller box is easier to make stiff at the important frequencies, which means it's less likely to join in and smear the timing, or the voice.

The highlight of this particular review came when I put on a bit of a hi-fi dem track, John Campbell's 'Down in the Hole' [*Howlin Mercy*, Elektra], something that you hear too often at shows because it's a very good recording albeit of seemingly yawnsome music. But in the Focal's hands, it brought forth a genuinely spine-tingling moment, this induced by the harmonies on the chorus. It's quite a beautiful bit of work that reveals an extremely polished recording that can also communicate on an emotional level. It transcends the medium when the conduit is this good. I will be trying it on every

speaker that comes along now, and not just for that velvety bass line.

The more I played on the Aria 905s, the more I enjoyed them. The combination of technologies gels perfectly to produce a sound that is very revealing and coherent for the price. It warrants decent ancillaries but works well with those at its price point. At last I seem to have found an affordable Focal that I like and I think you will too. Highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: 2-way, two-driver stand-mount monitor with front-ported bass reflex enclosure.

Driver complement: One Al/Mg 25mm inverted dome tweeter, one 130mm flax mid-bass driver.

Frequency response (+/- 3dB): 60Hz – 28kHz.

Crossover frequency: 2.5kHz.

Impedance: 8 Ohms, min. 4 Ohms.

Sensitivity: 89dB/W/m

Dimensions (HxWxD): 334 x 212 x 245mm

Weight: 5.8kg/each

Finishes: Walnut, Piano High-Gloss White.

Price: £600/pair (Black), £699/pair (Walnut).

Manufacturer: Focal-JMLab

URL: www.focal.com

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Alacrity Audio Dundee 6 loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

There's a need for people to step beyond the norm, even if 'normal' works for most people. If no one were willing to step beyond the norm, we would still be hunter-gatherers living on the plains. Progress happens by people unwilling to settle for the norm, and although many such people end up developing things that never make the grade, we need such people to challenge the status quo. So it is with Alacrity Audio.

Alacrity's first loudspeaker was the Caterthun 6, a standmount typo-in-waiting. The 6 was quickly followed by a scaled-up Caterthun 8, designed for larger rooms. The Dundee 6 is the brand's first floorstander, a tall and thin two-way loudspeaker featuring a $\frac{1}{4}$ -wave transmission line, but more on this later. All of these designs work to Alacrity's Acoustic Induction concept as applied to the bass driver.

Acoustic Induction is a novel cabinet loading technique. A loudspeaker cabinet has a natural resonant frequency, typically somewhere around the 80Hz-150Hz region. At this point, the walls of the cabinet sing along with the output of the bass driver. There's not much you can do about this; the physical dimensions of the cabinet and the material from which the enclosure is made largely govern the resonant properties of the box itself. It's possible to move that resonance into less harmful parts of the frequency range (this is one of the reasons thin-walled ply BBC cabinets were coated with bitumen, and one of the reasons companies use more organic cabinet shapes and materials like Corian in place of MDF, for cabinet construction), but Alacrity claims to address the problem at source by loading the cabinet, thereby "converting the energy into a standing wave that does not permit the bass units to significantly move, while at the same time physically out-performing the bass units to which it is coupled." Alacrity further claims this principle makes the cabinet behave more like a coil than a capacitor in an electrical circuit, hence the name 'Acoustic Inductor', resulting in the designer coining the term 'acoustic back-EMF' in the process.

Back to that transmission line; in most systems, the line itself is terminated with a large foam bung at the exit point. This is deliberate, because otherwise the transmission line labyrinth acts as (more accurately – *is*) a folded horn. However, even a cursory glance at the rear of the loudspeaker shows an exit point for that transmission line completely free from foam bungs. Once again this comes down to that Acoustic Induction loading, which is claimed to act as a 36dB/octave filter, and as a result means there's no energy release from the rear exit point at the top of the cabinet. In fairness, there's no air pulses seeming to emit from that letter-box exit point and if you cram it with





▶ bubble-wrap, sweaters, spare bits of acoustic foam, little animals, or any other temporary structure designed to stop a port from working, it has no effect on the tonal balance of the loudspeaker whatsoever. But, this runs counter to the received wisdom of loudspeaker design, and either Alacrity's designer Jon Carroll is right and the received wisdom needs a reworking, or he's built a labyrinth for no real reason into his new flagship loudspeaker.

The concept of 'acoustic inductance' is reasonably well documented, but broadly speaking applies to state-of-the-art room acoustics design, and is predicated on a lot of graduate-level mathematics. However, the Acoustic Induction concept underpinning Alacrity's design ideas does not entirely fit into the current loudspeaker design models. So, you either take this concept as read and go with the Alacrity flow, or dismiss Alacrity's Acoustic Induction (and the loudspeakers) as stuff and nonsense, almost without needing to listen.

Enough of the theory, the loudspeaker itself is a tall, slimline design, resting on a metal floor plate. It's a two-way design, with a 160mm mid-bass unit sitting above a 20mm soft-dome tweeter. Below this is a small patch of acoustic foam, with 32 small pyramids, often used as room treatment in semi-pro studios. At the rear is the aforementioned 'exit' at the top of the loudspeaker and a terminal block at the bottom. The loudspeakers come supplied in very solid, wheeled flight cases, and come in a choice of four oiled, real tree veneer finishes as standard, and high-gloss finish on application.

This is a loudspeaker that can work to a close-to-the-wall installation, with a slight toe-in. The comparatively easy 86dB efficiency, eight-ohm load, and 300W RMS power handling suggest a loudspeaker that is nonchalant to its input, where in fact it benefits from careful system matching (think a lot of power, and some character; CH Precision – yes, Devialet – no, Burmester – maybe). In some respects, it shares all these qualities with its little Caterthun brothers.

As suggested, this is not an anodyne, one-size-fits-all loudspeaker. Instead, what it does is build upon the Caterthun's strengths of deep bass and tonal warmth, while adding a greater degree of soundstaging. Moreover, unlike the Caterthun, which needs to be so close to the wall it's practically screwed in place, bringing the Dundee 6 out a little (it's best 10-15cm from the rear wall) opens up the soundstaging still further.

This is a loudspeaker that puts the accent on entertainment. It's extremely good at portraying and projecting vocals, and the clean, deep bass gives those vocals a sense of being physically in the room instead of floating like a spectre. This applies even to quite light vocal talents; Birdy's delicate voice on her version of Bon Iver's 'Skinny Love' from her eponymous 2011 debut [14th Floor] should need no bass reinforcement, but the solidity of the bass helps the piano and voice seem that little bit more real and in the room with you. Her voice has good intonation anyway (in spite of that breathy thing every singer does these days in an attempt to sound 'emotional'), but the Dundee 6 brings it to the fore. It gives a sense of structure to a sound that can so easily sound too airy and rootless. A similar robust construction to the architecture of the mix seems to apply to many folk, rock, and jazz recordings.

Conscious or not, there's a distinct tonal link between this loudspeaker and the old Rega ELA loudspeaker of some 20+ years ago. I really liked the ELA, because of its ability to play small-group music with a kind of lithe sense of ▶

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► rightness that I also get from the Dundee 6. And, like the ELA, the Dundee 6 is not the first choice for those who listen predominantly to classical music. Although I don't hold to the notion that a loudspeaker is 'best for' a specific musical genre, the Dundee 6's strengths play to vocal music and electric instruments, and there are better loudspeakers for classical replay. A lot of that comes down to that tonal warmth; where it adds a sense or richness and body to wailing electric guitars and the kind of controlled depth that makes you realise why Fender called one of its basses the 'Precision', that kind of enhancement is not required (and definitely not called for) in classical music. Period instrument recordings can sound more like their modern counterparts on the Dundee 6, which kind of defeats the object of period instruments. Moreover, if you are trying to unravel the complexity of contrapuntal music, the Dundee 6's ability to layer music in a tonal manner is somewhat limited. Temporally and dynamically, the Dundee 6 has no issue, and this lends itself to more contemporary genres of music, but what I feel should be called 'tone-smearing' that works well with contemporary themes, can overwhelm the delicate interplay of melody and harmony in early music. Put simply, it sort of makes Bach sound like Handel, and Handel sound like Philip Glass. This is not an unattractive effect by any standing, and actually works to the music's benefit with less enmeshed themes, but if your buying trends view Mozart as some up-and-coming whippersnapper, the Dundee 6's charms will be lost on you.

The loudspeaker world is a broad church, but often that's forgotten, as there seem to be a lot of 'me-too' designs out there. The Alacrity Audio Dundee 6 could never be classed among the 'me-too's. It might not be the most analytical, most starkly accurate, or most universal loudspeaker in production, but it is one that is capable of repeatedly pushing your fun button. This is not an everyman loudspeaker by any stretch, but those who like what the Dundee 6 does will struggle to find anything to better it. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Rear-ported two-way standmount

Drivers: Tweeter: 20mm soft dome,
160mm mid/bass cone

Bass Port: Rear Transmission line tuned
to 32 and 27 Hz

Frequency Response: 20Hz-60kHz, +6dB
max, 100Hz-20 kHz \pm 1dB max

Sensitivity: 86 dB

Minimum Impedance: 8 Ohms.

Crossover Frequency: Not specified

Power Handling: 600 W (300 W RMS)

Bi-wireable: Yes

Connections: 4mm Gold

Finish: Oiled, real wood veneers or high
gloss lacquers

Dimensions: W x H x D: 1200x180x300mm

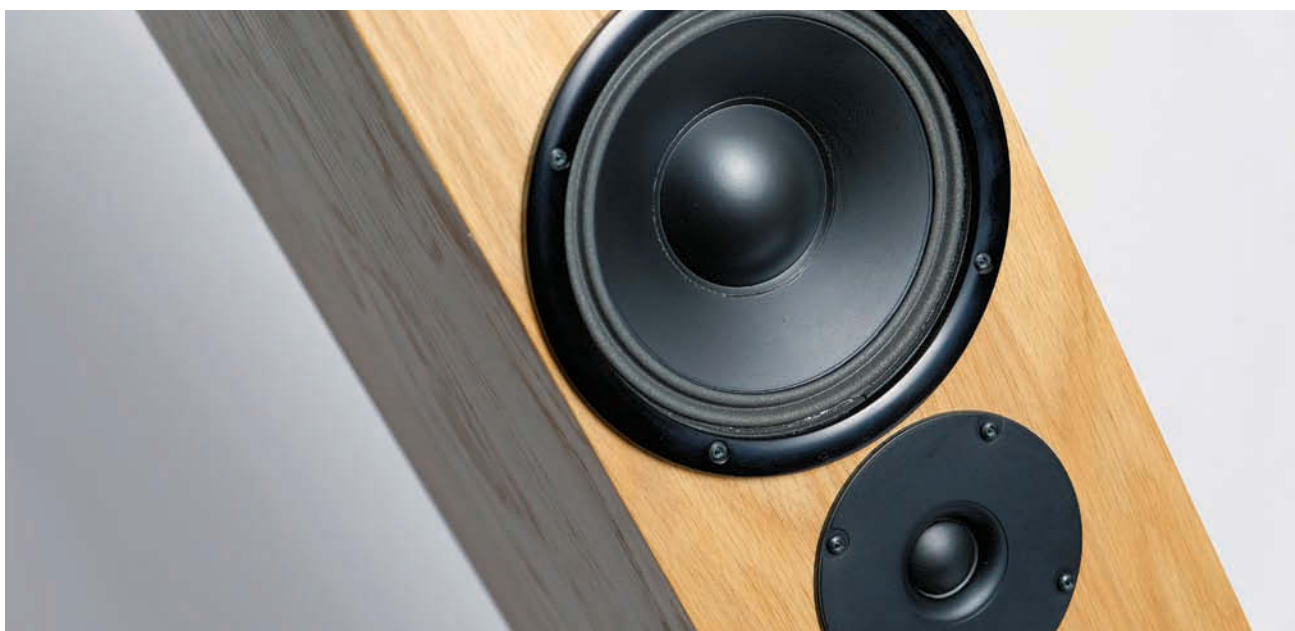
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Revox Joy S120

by Jason Kennedy

Revox is a name with the full weight of history behind it; a brand that was once among the most highly regarded in this business, but somewhere along the line it seemed to diminish. Revox itself started when Willi Studer began making professional tape recorders in 1951 under his own name; the Revox brand was born the following year to cater for the domestic market. It went on to develop classic tape recorders like the A77, and expanded into loudspeakers and parallel tracking turntables. It was one of the first companies to build multiroom specific electronics way back in the 1980s, and had a reputation for making some of the best electronics in the business, especially with regard to tape recorders and tuners.

In the mid-1970s, Studer-Revox was a large company with several thousand staff, but today it has just 65 – what happened? Well, the company owned a fair amount of property in Regensdorf, Switzerland when Willi Studer retired and sold the business in 1990, and the company Studer-Revox was

sold to essentially asset-strip the business, selling off the real estate before selling the professional division to Harman. The Revox brand was bought by private investors who set about rebuilding the company out of two bases (in the Black Forest and Switzerland), which resulted in digital loudspeakers, televisions, and a dedicated audio server built for multiroom integration. This Revox-redux ultimately led to the new Joy one-box streaming range that is bringing the company back to the UK.

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▶ with a 25 Watt amp; the S119 ups amplifier quality for £1,650 (60W) and the S120, seen here, is specced at 120 Watts a side and goes for £2,090. Functionally, they all share some similarities with products from Linn and Naim, and in control terms are very similar to Cyrus streamers. There aren't very many options on the market when it comes to sourcing the key elements in a streamer, so Revox offers an optional two-way RF handset that is a dead-ringer for the one provided by Cyrus, but unlike that company's first streamers, an app for iOS and Android is also available from the outset.

The minimalist casework conceals a powerful box of audio tricks that supports most music file formats (except Apple Lossless) and can be augmented with an FM and DAB+ tuner module at a sensible price (£170). Most users will probably want to listen to the plethora of stations available on the net using the vTuner facility, and this gives access to 'listen again' type functionality with some stations, making it a whole lot more powerful than a regular tuner.

Where the audio manufacturer does have a choice with streamers is in the amplifier and digital to analogue converter. For the Joy S120 (and S118 for that matter), Revox has gone for a PWM Class D amplifier. Pulse Width Modulation amplifiers first came to the audiophile fore with the TACT Audio (latterly Lyngdorf) Millennium designs from Denmark, but are taking their time to filter through the high-end amp world. In this instance, Revox has used a linear power supply, which is generally 'a good thing' but invites the question, "why go down the Class D route if you're not going 'switch mode'?" The answer is you can get a lot more power without producing heat, so the 120 watt rating on the S120 is probably realistic, despite its shoe box dimensions.

The S120 is a very 'less is more' design. You can buy it in other colours (which include all white and all black), but there really is nothing to play with once you've connected it up. This means you'll need the app or optional remote on hand to do anything. The advantage of the remote is that it's dedicated to the task, and therefore likely to stay in the vicinity where it's required. It is also quick to bring to life thanks to an onboard motion sensor, and this version has greater tactile appeal than the Cyrus example, thanks to rubbery buttons that give an encouraging click when pressed. When it comes to searching for music in a

"Revox has used a linear power supply, which is generally 'a good thing' but invites the question, 'why go down the Class D route if you're not going 'switch mode'?' The answer is you can get a lot more power without producing heat."

big library, however, Revox's own iPad app is a far more intuitive experience, at least once you've mastered its basic logic. It can't give you a screen full of album sleeves like some apps, but it does show artwork for the album being played. It also has an A-Z list, so that you can jump quickly to a particular album, artist, or genre.

Once the track is up and playing, you get all the following tracks on that album plus any you have added to the 'playqueue', it's also possible to add tracks to 'My Music', which is not a playlist but a folder at the top of the hierarchy that can be quickly accessed and contains both stored music and radio stations. The vTuner internet radio system works well in my experience, allowing you to find stations by type or location, although not by search.

There are two headings on the net radio page whose function only becomes clear if you read the manual. They are 'Favourites' and 'Added Stations', both of which can only be altered via Revox's IAP (internet audio portal). This is useful for finding an obscure station, but adding such stations to favourites could be easier. The 'My Music' option is, in fact, an easier route to the same end. ▶



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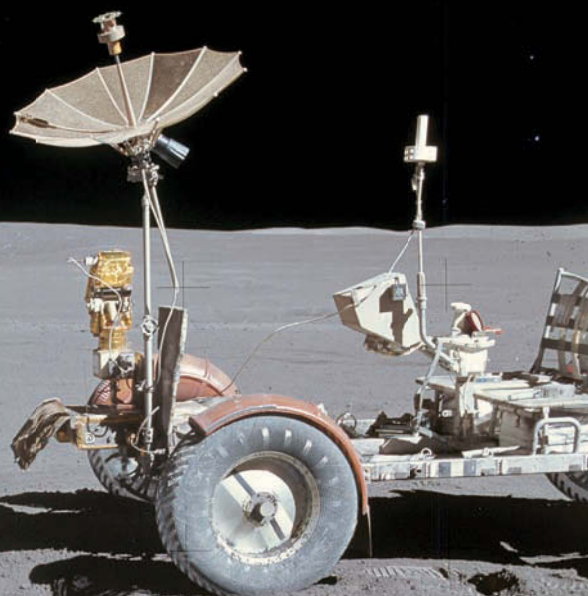
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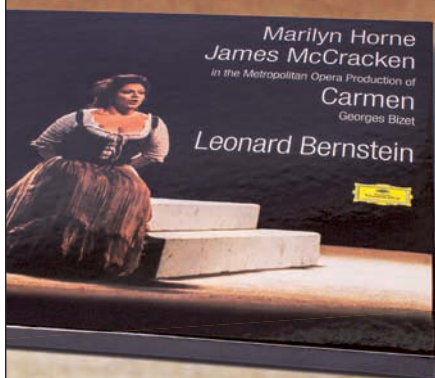
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*Michael Fremer Stereophile,
T.H.E. Show Newport 2013*



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▶ Looking at the quick start manual, it becomes clear that differences between the most affordable Revox Joy and its siblings extends beyond the amplifier to the inputs and outputs. These are considerably more extensive on the S119 and S120 which features digital and analogue inputs, USB input, connections for DAB+/FM and Wi-Fi antennae and both digital and analogue outputs, the latter volume controlled. Those wanting to connect their mobile phones can hook up to the integrated Bluetooth receiver, an option not afforded the S118 entry level Joy receiver.

There are a pair of RJ45 connectors, one for the network and the other for the Joy series CD player. The latter matches the S120 in appearance, and this connection means you get to control it from the app or handset. If you want even more Joy, there is also a matching server, a ripping NAS device that appears to be like a Naim UnitiServe but with a smaller 500GB hard disk for £2,200. Those in search of the full Revox experience can complete the system with a Re:sound G series loudspeaker; a range that comes in matching glass fronted, silver boxed cabinets that have a very high 'wife acceptance factor' on account of their diminutive stature. I was supplied with the 'G shelf' that has a baffle that's a mere 104mm wide. Should you choose one of the Revox speaker models, there are custom EQ setting in the settings in the Joy S120 for all the Re:sound G series models, alongside 'any speaker' for every other speaker on the planet.

I kicked off with the S120 hooked up to the network with AudioQuest CAT7 Forest cable and to the PMC fact.8 speakers with Townshend Isolda DCT speaker cable. Not entirely a balanced combination in truth, and one in which the high transparency of the speakers does tend to reveal the slight forwardness of the Revox. It's hardly 'in your face' though. Dynamics are good and there is an immediacy to the sound that is quite rare, a quality that I recall from PWM amplifiers from back in the day.

I put on the title track from Calexico's *The Black Light* [Quarterstick] and discovered just how good a recording of a drum kit can sound. The rest of the band sound pretty good too, but it's the leading edge snap of the snare and metallic qualities of the cymbals that catch your attention. This is delivered with plenty of drive, thanks to what are clearly adequate power reserves from that linear PSU.

At this point I changed tack entirely and put on the unusual but inspired recording, *Horowitz Plays Scarlatti* [Sony], where a piano is used rather than the traditional harpsichord. Here, the nervous energy of the playing is reproduced with vim and spark; it's strangely reminiscent of Glen Gould in its mannerisms, but works remarkably well for such a thin sounding instrument. The recording, especially through the Joy is ample proof that performance is more important than recording: see AC/DC's *If You Want Blood* and Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska* for further examples.

The pace of the Joy S120 provoked my next choice, Henry Threadgill Sextett's 'Bermuda Blues' [*You Know The Number*, Novus]. This also has a drum kit in an open acoustic and you can appreciate the natural reverb through this system. The double bass seems a little thickened here, but the dynamics distract you from such quibbles and allow the groove to gather you in. Listening in a more objective fashion, it's apparent that image depth could be better, while the brass is pretty solid, but it's largely in one plane. Moving over to a competitor in the Naim UnitiQute 2, which has pretty much the same feature set in a similarly sized box, the Class AB amplifier is considerably more relaxed and open sounding than the Class D amp in the Revox; you lose power and speed, but gain a sound that could be enjoyed over rather longer periods, with this particular speaker at least. The Revox is somewhat lacking in spaciousness when you make this comparison, but it doesn't sound 'wrong': it's more like the truth must lie somewhere between the two extremes.

It seemed a good opportunity to change the loudspeaker to something more appropriate in price and resolution to a source and amp of this nature. Fortunately, the Focal Aria 905 bookshelf speakers reviewed elsewhere in this issue were to hand, because they proved to be an excellent match. Their innately great sense of timing and the forgiving nature of the flax cone proved perfect for delivering the immediacy of the Revox, without emphasising its ▶

“Fortunately, the Focal Aria 905 bookshelf speakers... proved to be an excellent match. Their innately great sense of timing and the forgiving nature of the flax cone proved perfect for delivering the immediacy of the Revox, without emphasising its limitations. That, after all, is what system matching is all about: finding the best compromises.”

▶ limitations. That, after all, is what system matching is all about; finding the best compromises. The way that finger cymbal appears out of nowhere on Felix Laband's 'Minka (And the Notes After)' from *Dark Days Exit* [Compost], is quite magical and the following 'Notes' remain tight and coherent in a big sound stage that's pretty engrossing.

I noticed that the remote handset displays bit rate, but not word length or sample rate. Perhaps more importantly, it shows volume in a real world style, with higher numbers equalling higher levels. This is something that is still quite rare, as designers cling to a counter-intuitive decibel scale that must baffle those we hope to lure into the audio appreciation fold.

I thought I'd see how this combination coped with something a bit bigger and put on Daniel Barenboim's version of Beethoven's 7th [*Beethoven For All*, Symphony No.7 in A, Op.92, 24/96, Decca], and I have to say that I was very pleasantly surprised. The loudspeaker must take some credit of course, but rarely has this piece proved so engaging, dynamic, and powerful, I couldn't get it out of my head for days! There is clearly something about PWM that works very well and when you have the right speaker for the job it works even better. I'm starting to sound like a convert.

In an effort to be professional I gave the S120 a spin with a Bluetooth source, an Android phone with aptX. Pairing didn't take long and the result was really rather listenable. The sound was not quite as precise as that achieved with the UnitiQute, but not dramatically worse, so long as you steer clear of anything busy; keep it simple would seem to be the rule for Bluetooth.

You pay a premium for the Revox name and the German manufacture of the Joy S120, but it's a cool brand with a fabulous heritage. The player itself is pretty cool too; minimalists will go crazy for it and audio enthusiasts should give it serious consideration, too. With the right speakers, it can deliver a spine tinglingly powerful result, which for something that could have been created designed for TV's *Grand Designs* is quite an achievement. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Streamer/amplifier with Bluetooth and optional DAB+/FM tuner.

Storage: N/A.

Analogue Inputs: Two unbalanced (via RCA jacks).

Digital Inputs: Two coaxial S/PDIF (via RCA jacks), two TOSLink, USB.

DAC Resolution/Supported Digital

Formats: Sampling rate for D/A conversion 192 kHz/24 bit . FLAC/WAV/MP3/AAC/OGG-vorbis/WMA

Analogue Outputs: One stereo unbalanced (via RCA jacks), subwoofer (via RCA jack).

Digital Outputs: One coaxial S/PDIF (via RCA jack).

Output power: 120W/channel.

Network connection: wired or wireless.

User Interface: Optional 2-way RF handset, free iOS/Android app.

Supported servers: UPnP AV1.1 and DLNA.

Dimensions (HxWxD): 88 x 200 x 322mm

Weight: 6.3kg

Price: £2,090

Optional remote: £300

Optional DAB+/FM tuner module: £170

Manufacturer: Revox GmbH

Tel: +49 772187040

URL: www.revox.de



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Most wanted component award STEREO TIMES (USA)

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Creaktiv Audio 1 Rack equipment support

by Alan Sircom

Eagle-eyed visitors to our room at the 2014 National Audio Show might have noticed we were using a Creaktiv Audio 1 rack. We were using it for very good reason; philosophically, it's performing a fine balancing act.

Creaktiv makes a product that looks like furniture but performs like a system component. What look like standard wooden shelves are in fact a 'multiplex' of solid wood and ply, designed for a combination of stability (without excess mass) and good sound. Each shelf features isolating out-riggers, with aluminium tube uprights. There are also several enhancements for the Audio 1 rack, including filling the uprights with 'Ci²P' material, but as my German isn't up to translating and explaining what these enhancements actually do, we just went with the standard Audio 1 rack, which is excellent in its own right.

Assembly of the Audio 1 is quick and easy, although it's so easy, you can get some shelves back to front if you get over confident. Levelling is easy, for a foot-in-every-corner device, and you can have the whole thing built and ready inside of an hour. The shelves can take a deceptive amount of load; we filled the rack with B.M.C. Audio equipment at the show, and the B.M.C. amp in particular is a weighty beast, which the Audio 1 took in its stride.

I've often thought the best equipment supports just let the electronics get on with the task in hand, neither adding or impeding, and that's precisely what the Audio 1 does so well. It doesn't pitch the tonal balance forward, it doesn't bring out the bass (although it does help a system with good bass define that bass line clearly), it simply gets out of the way. The Audio 1 shows just how few do that, by some quick system chops and changes. It doesn't impose a character on the equipment, it just help bring the equipment's character to the foreground.

There's a lot going on beneath the surface to make an equipment support platform this even-handed. But the Creaktiv does this with such ease, you'd be excused for thinking it was just another flat-pack piece of furniture. The Audio 1 is extremely good and comes highly recommended. +



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Outer dimensions (W x D): 620 x 500 mm

Floor space per level (W x D): 530 x 500 mm

Effective height per level: 160, 200, or 240 mm

Maximum bearing capacity per level: 60 kg

Finish: Natural, Brown, Black, White as standard, Cherry-red, Cherry-yellow premium to order, other finishes on request. Aluminum tubes in black or silver

Price: from £840 (for four tier rack)

Manufactured by: Creaktiv

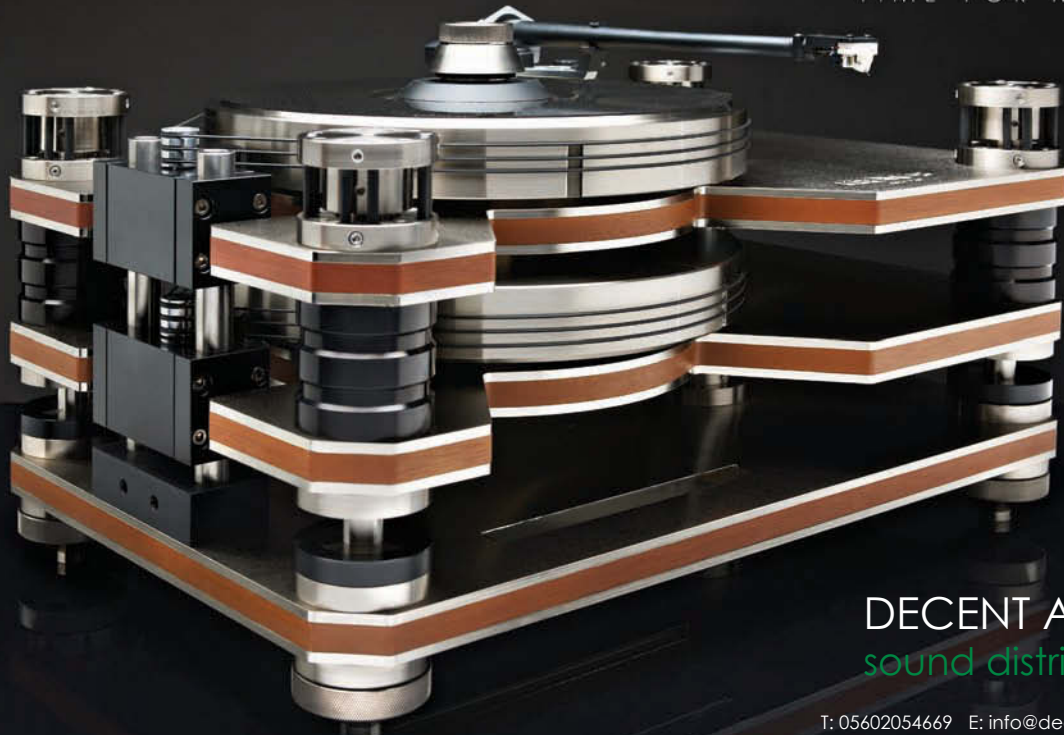
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Audience Au24SE interconnects and loudspeaker cables

by Alan Sircom



I'm a big fan of Audience's Au24e interconnects and loudspeaker cables. They are on the cool side, but these cables are also incredibly detailed, fast, open, precise, and dynamic. What's more, in a world of tree-trunk sized cables, Audience picks up the ball passed to it by classic slimline wires of old and runs with it squarely over the high-end audiophile goal-line.

Recently though, Audience released the Au24SE series of cables, which build upon the strengths of the Au24e cables. Note that 'SE' does not replace 'e', it sits above the 'e' range, in terms of price and performance. In fact, a lot of what applies to the Au24e also applies to the Au24SE. Both are made from Ohno Continuous Cast monocrystal copper, using several tiny copper cables per conductor. The largest of these conductors is in the loudspeaker cable, and even that's just 4mm in diameter. Polypropylene sleeves insulate these conductors, and the whole thing is wrapped in a woven polyethylene jacket. The cable construction is designed specifically for low eddy current resistance, and goes for low impedance over DC resistance, or even heavy-handed RF shielding. As far as I can see, what separates 'e' from 'SE' mostly falls to the construction of the lower-mass, high-purity copper alloy connectors, and the way they interface with the cable itself. Taking the uncompromising stance right down to the plug itself shows

the kind of dedication seen by the likes of Nordost with its Holo:Plug. Typically, such changes to the connector demand more subtle changes to the conductors, too, but Audience is playing its cards close to its chest on this.

Our counterparts on *The Absolute Sound* have nothing but praise for the Au24SE power cords. Every time one of their team gets a complete system rewire with Audience's finest, they all bang on about the power cord, and almost ignore the interconnect and speaker cables. So, it was felt best to take the power cord out of the equation, and focus on the RCA interconnects, the XLR interconnects, and the loudspeaker cables. And I'm glad I did, because those 'wow, what a power cord!' reviews are missing out on just how the rest of the wire system performs. The reality is 'wow, what a cable!', no matter what plugs in where.

We have a nasty habit in audio of evaluating things – especially cables – by the physical dimensions: by weight; by price, and by just how shiny the product is. Audience does none of that; it's thin, lightweight, doesn't cost as much as a lunar mission to buy, and all the cables are finished in a black woven shield. The only visual difference between Au24e and the new SE cable ostensibly is the terminations. You could ▶





- ▶ swap these out and upgrade your cable without anyone noticing (and I think that might be the point).

Like any good cable, Au24SE takes time to bed in. Audience also seems to need both a lengthy initial run-in period (for this, a Blue Horizon burner-inner thingy comes in extremely handy) and a much shorter 'settling' time, when swapped out. Fortunately, that settling time is measured in minutes, rather than weeks, but the cables do sound distinctly better if they've had 30 minutes or more after being plugged into a new system. But don't think these cables 'fussy', they are in fact a great equaliser of audio equipment and the polar opposite of 'fussy'. It's just they like a few minutes to compose themselves after a journey. I'm 'technopomorphising' I grant you, but who doesn't?

The reason I like Au24e is it's extremely natural sounding. It doesn't draw attention to itself, and if you have good electronics and loudspeakers that are well balanced, the Audience cables simply get out of the way of the music. The Au24SE by comparison, makes the Au24e sound almost electronic and arch. Which means it makes a lot of other cables sound extremely 'hi-fi'; all boom and tizz.

Au24SE is resolving enough to highlight iniquities in the system, especially cable iniquities. It doesn't demand an all-Audience 'loom' (although that helps), but put something wildly off kilter in the mix and it will highlight the differences in micro-tonality that sometimes get swamped between the phono sockets. Despite this, what the Au24SE does is raise your system's game, whatever that system.

You get a significantly improved soundstage, both in terms of width and depth. Mahler's Eighth [Solti, Chicago SO, Decca] has all the size and scale required of this grand work. But, beyond this, you get a sense of deep bass foundations, extremely fine detail, outstanding dynamic range and shade, and sense of very real musicians in a very real space. If you are seeking these things in your audio system, and would like more of the same, the Au24SE will provide just that, without bringing any superfluous extras to the table.

I suggested we should never judge a cable by its size, but inadvertently found myself doing just that. I was pleasantly surprised by the bass weight of the Au24SE loudspeaker cable. It's actually got excellent bass delivery regardless, extremely deep and taut and right, but that shouldn't be surprising because of the diameter of the cable. This is not just Au24SE's rendition of powerful bass notes, although playing

Funkadelic's *Maggot Brain* [Westbound] shows just how much depth and groove this cable has. It's about authority and complete control over your music, no matter what the music. In order of merit, the loudspeaker cables really ram this home, while the interconnects continue the story.

Audience Au24SE isn't a cable that grabs you by the scruff of the ears and throws you around a bit. It is more refined, more subtle, and ultimately more revealing than that. It's the kind of cable that points you back to your musical core. Out came Bob Dylan's *Desire* [Columbia], not to highlight issues with the system, but because it's been a constant companion for decades. Other cables can place accent and emphasis on the pace, the detail, the brightness, the richness, or the imagery, but Au24SE just reminds you why you listened to Dylan in the first place. Just like Au24e before it, but more so.

If you've 'had it' with high-end cables that are so hefty they lift your preamp off the table, or are so thick you could cut them open and drive a car down them, Audience has the answer. It had the answer in the Au24e, but it has the definitive answer in the Au24SE. If you determine cable performance by the sound it makes rather than the amount of floorspace it takes up, you owe it to yourself to give Audience a listen. It's one of the best. Very highly recommended. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

RCA interconnect cables: £999 per pair (as tested)

XLN interconnect cables: £1,589 per pair (as tested)

Loudspeaker cables: £2,420 for 2x4m pair (as tested)

Manufactured by: Audience

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Craig Armstrong

by Jason Kennedy

Craig Armstrong is a film score composer who's work includes *Romeo + Juliet*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Ray*, *Fever Pitch*, *The Incredible Hulk* and more recently *The Great Gatsby*. He has also worked with a number of artists including Massive Attack, U2, and Madonna in a career spanning three decades. His first two solo albums were released on Massive Attack's Melankonic label and he's gone on to release a number of other works, and even received an OBE in 2010. His best known piece, 'Escape', has been used extensively on film and TV, appearing on *Euro 2012*, *Top Gear*, and *Spider-Man 2*. Chances are you've heard

it. Armstrong's latest solo release is *It's Nearly Tomorrow*, which is available on the Naim Label as a 24/96 WAV download. It includes collaborations with Brett Anderson of Suede, trumpet player Chris Botti, and a personal favourite, Finnish electronic musician Vladislav Delay, among others. The album combines Armstrong's trademark orchestral compositions alongside songs and a smattering of electronic effects.

Armstrong plays piano and violin and studied at the Royal College of Music, but also has studio experience; a look at his full resumé reveals that he is a hard working musician. When I finally managed to drag him away from the ►

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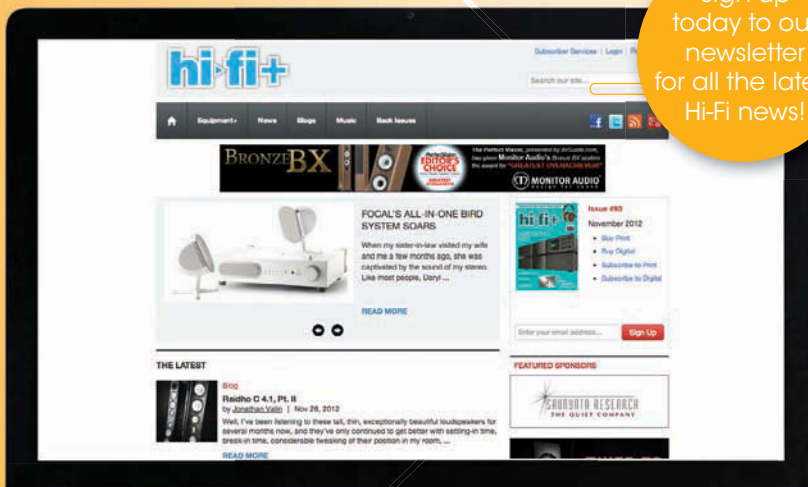


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Alacrity..... 79	Enjoythemusic.com..... 70	Lotus HiFi..... 8	Russell K..... 53
Analogue Seduction..... 89	Entreq..... 31	Managed Media Limited..... 60	Select..... IFC
Angelsound Audio..... 96	Epicuren Audio..... 89	Meridian..... 7	Signals..... 97
ART Loudspeakers..... 83	Epiphany Acoustics..... 89	Midland Audio Exchange..... 97	SME Ltd..... 63
Audio Destination..... 96	Fidelity Art..... 79	Naim Audio Ltd..... 58	Sonata Hi-Fi..... 97
Audio T..... 50	Flamingo Audio..... 68	Nordost Corporation..... 42	Sound Fowndations..... 57
Auralic..... 36	Future Shop..... 13	Norma Audio..... 29	Sound Hi Fi..... 77
Basically Sound and Vision.....96	Gauder Akustik..... 80	NuNu Distribution..... 19	Speakers Corner..... 80
BD Audio.....96	GIK Acoustics..... 89	OPPO BD UK Ltd..... 11	Stirling Broadcast..... 84
Black Rhodium.....74	Graham Audio..... 68	Oranges and Lemons..... 84	studioAV Ltd..... 97
Brian and Trevor's.....96	Graham Slee Projects Limited.....73	Origin Live..... 84	Symmetry..... 40
Choice HiFi..... 23 & 96	Hegel..... IBC	Oxford Audio Consultants Ltd.....97	The Audio Consultants..... 64
Classic Hi-Fi..... 96	HiFi Sound.....96	Raidho Acoustics..... 34	V'Audio Hi Fi Consultants... 97
Cloney Audio..... 83	High End Cable..... 47	Rayleigh Hi-Fi..... 97	Vivid Audio Ltd..... 17
CoLab Audio Ltd..... 73	Highend Headphone Shop...96	Redline Distribution..... 74	Walls of Sound..... 77
Crystal Cable BV..... 2	Infidelity..... 96	Revox..... 44	

► mixing desk in late November, I found a softly spoken and dedicated musician with a clear passion for his calling.

JK: You manage to fit solo albums in between your score work. Are you a workaholic?

CA: For me it's important to do work that's not exclusively film work. I think one feeds off the other; if you were to do films all the time it might be a bit dull, and it's nice to mix it up a bit. In the last couple years, I did an opera, my solo album, and I did *The Great Gatsby*. I like that mixture of doing different things, sometimes. Even with the film music, if you get a classical commission, something you've done on a film score can influence one of those things and vice versa. It's not that I don't like doing film; I *really* like doing film, but I like a balanced mixture. I've been like that right from the start; in Glasgow there's a theatre called the Tron Theatre and I used to do a lot of work for them while at that time doing arranging for commercials, in the early days. I have been quite busy lately!

You say that *It's Nearly Tomorrow* is "to do with looking back at life, but it's also quite optimistic". Does that suggest you feel you're running out of time?

[Laughs] I hadn't really written any songs for an awful long time. I was signed to Massive Attack's label at one point and I think the last song type record I made was nearly a decade ago. I like the feeling of *It's Nearly Tomorrow* being a new day, so that's positive while at the same time you've only got so much time in your life, and you want to make sure you're doing the right things.

You always say to yourself one day I will make that symphonic record or one day I want to work with a jazz ensemble, and then you realise that you've really got to start doing it. Life doesn't go on forever, unfortunately.

There are some interesting collaborations on the album – Brett Anderson and Vladislav Delay for instance. How did these come about?

I wanted it all to be people I'd worked with before, so it wasn't like phoning up someone cold and saying, "would you like to sing on my record?" So, it's with every artist I've worked with in the past; I'd done string arrangements for Brett Anderson in the nineties. With Vladislav Delay, we had a little group called the Dolls. It goes the same with Paul Buchanan; I'd worked on one of the Blue Nile albums and I've known Paul for a long time.

I sort of put it together like an old fashioned record. I know people don't buy music like that any more, but I did it like it was a proper album, so every track went into one another. A lot of the tracks are instrumental and maybe it is four or five tracks have got a voice on.

It was writing something about where you are; I enjoyed writing and co-writing the songs. The last time I used words was when I wrote an opera for Scottish Opera; that was quite a long piece, but I don't see why you shouldn't write a song. I'm more or less seen as a composer because I've done so many movies, so people start to say why's this guy writing songs now? But in saying that I don't see why anybody shouldn't do it anyway. I don't see why you bother about what people should think; you should just do it. When you get to a certain age, you just do whatever the hell you want!

You can't please everybody! I've done movies where the soundtracks have done really well, but there's probably as many people hate them. It's one of life's great lessons to teach your kids; not everyone can like you, so you may as well do what want.

You can never please all the people all the time.

I try and give myself something different to do every year. Next year, I'd like to write a big orchestral piece. I've done a new album, which I'm just finishing that I'm going to mix – that's just strings and piano. Mostly now if I do a film, it's one film a year. I release that as my 55 year old plan! It doesn't always work out, as you know.

What's your take on hi-res, is it relevant to music lovers outside of the hi-fi world?

I think it definitely is. I have a brother who works in hi-fi (Bill Armstrong at the Music Rooms), and I suppose like a lot of musicians when you're making an album, you're mixing on stuff like KRKs or NS10s.

Horrible loudspeakers!

Horrible loudspeakers. Before Bill took me in hand as it were, I was always a bit of a Tannoy person because they had a lovely pair at college. The first system I bought was a Marantz CD player, a couple of Tannoy 6s, and a nice turntable. It sounded great, actually. I would say it's a bit like pianos, from what I've heard, speakers are like pianos. A Steinway is subtly different from a Bechstein, a Fazioli, or a Yamaha; they all do different things. But as for hi-res, I think it's a really positive ►

► thing. When you really compress MP3s, they do sound pretty bad. They're fine for listening to on your phone, but even then they're very hard on your ear.

For this album I did a vinyl version; only one of my soundtracks has been out on vinyl, so it's been quite interesting to go back to that. In my studio, I've got PMCs which are really, really good. They've got a great sound, but I don't know if I'd use them at home; one because of the size of them but also they're a little bit analytical, which is good for me because I can hear everything. At home I've got a really nice system, with ATC speakers and a Mark Levinson CD player. The ATCs were in a studio I was working in, possibly Air. I've had them for six years or so and there's nothing I'm really missing. It's a nice speaker because a lot of high-end audio is very coloured in some way, whereas the ATC sounds exactly how you imagined your mix; but it's a little bit warmer, so you can listen to a whole album.

I listen to quite a big variety of things and I think the ATCs sound really good if you're playing popular records, whether it's

an old or new one, and then if you play something symphonic it sounds good too. That was a big thing for me because some systems are really great for classical and some are good for pop music, but I really wanted something that wasn't specialised; something that sounded good round the board.

When I was younger I was obsessed with synthesizers and pianos, but – I think you'll find this with a lot of musicians – they don't really obsess over hi-fi.

Who are your musical heroes?

Like a lot of kids growing up in the 1970s, The Beatles were big heroes. When I started to work in Air Studios many moons later, I got to know George Martin a little bit, which was nice because I really remember hearing 'The Long And Winding Road' when I was a kid. I'd never heard anything like it, it stopped me in my tracks. It was like magic, I wouldn't have had any idea how to make a record like that.

It's Nearly Tomorrow is out now on vinyl, CD and WAV and FLAC download. +



“At home, I’ve got a really nice system, with ATC speakers and a Mark Levinson CD player. The ATCs were in a studio I was working in, possibly Air. I’ve had them for six years or so.”

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NOLA

record reviews

How To Read Them

The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and – where possible – serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information, the scale rates a standard, good quality pop recording as slightly below average.

This issue's featured reviewers are:

- DD** – Dennis D Davis
- RG** – Roy Gregory
- JK** – Jason Kennedy
- PT** – Pete Trewin

	CD		120g LP
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	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		200g LP
	Double Disc		10" LP
	DVD		Availability As S/H LP
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	Hybrid SACD		45 RPM
	Multi-Channel		



Heliographs

Erik Honoré

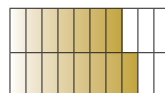
Hubro



Erik Honoré may not be a familiar name unless you are a fan of ambient electronica, but he has worked with the likes of Brian Eno and David Sylvian. He was also the co-founder of the Punkt festival, the foremost event for electronica in Europe if not the world. Honoré has taken his time in committing his musical ideas to a solo project, but all that experience shows in a subtle but engaging album that features Evind Aarset and Arve Henriksen alongside Dutch violinist Jeffrey Bruinsma. The most obvious collaborator, though, is Sidsel Endresen, a singer who has worked with a panoply of Scandinavian artists and who has a distinctive high pitched voice that has never sounded better than it does on two of the nine tracks of this LP length release.

The title *Heliographs* comes from one of three books that Honoré has written and refers to a fictional early photographic technique that is described as 'sun writing'. Which gives little indication of the sound on this album, but some hint as to the mind that makes it. Like all ambient music, it's hard to pin down; the closest one can say is that it is serious, but not dark, and incorporates acoustic as well as electronic sources. This is aural wallpaper of an attractive, but rather different stripe. **JK**

RECORDING



MUSIC



Hamburg '72

Keith Jarrett, Charlie Haden, Paul Motian

ECM



This recording by German radio (NDR) captures Jarrett's first trio shortly after he had signed to ECM and prior to Dewey Redman's arrival to form the American Quartet. It's a powerful and dynamic performance that finds the trio expressing itself in a very physical style. They had made three albums together at this stage, and this meant that Jarrett, Haden, and Motion could combine mercurial playing with a freedom that only the truly synched can hope to hold down.

Hamburg '72 reminds me of *Eyes of the Heart*, made four years later with Redman on sax, which is a cleaner sounding release, but one that doesn't necessarily match the live intensity of this slightly bright cut. Actually, forget the 'slightly'; at times the cymbals can make you wince, but on a forgiving system, you can forget that and revel in the drive and spontaneity of the playing. It's fearless yet coherent stuff that is only let down on the occasions that Jarrett abandons the keys in favour of a saxophone or flute. He's good on wind instruments, for a pianist... but not that good. Overall, though, this is a thrilling performance by a band that sounds a heck of a lot better than it did on earlier releases. **JK**

RECORDING



MUSIC





**Casa De Trova
Cuba 50's**

180g 33 RPM

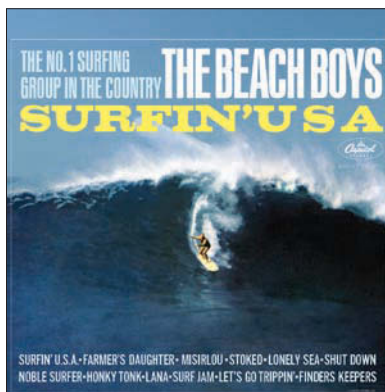
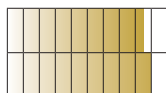
Alejandro Almenares

Pure Pleasure PPAN TUMI 228

Alejandro Almenares (born in 1937) is a Cuban treasure who still performs regularly at the Le Casa De Trova in Santiago de Cuba, the second largest city of Cuba, and a centre of Cuban cultural life. Le Casa De Trova was founded by Alejandro's father Angel, himself one of Cuba's legendary singer-songwriter *trovadores*. Tumi Music, a UK based record label specializing in Latin American and Caribbean music, made the fourteen-hour drive from Havana to Santiago de Cuba in late 2012 to record Almenares and his septet.

For most audiophiles, the extent of their Cuban music collection will be through the *Buena Vista Social Club* album. While Almenares' music shares some of the same roots as that album, it differs in many ways. The earlier double album is a studio recording employing a much larger force of musicians. The sound of the Almenares LP is excellent, no doubt far superior to what you would hear during an amplified live performance. Pure Pleasure's issue of Alejandro Almenares' album coincides with the historic thaw of relations between the United States and Cuba and will hopefully give a boost to this underappreciated music. A very enjoyable small group recording. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Surfin' USA

200g 33 RPM

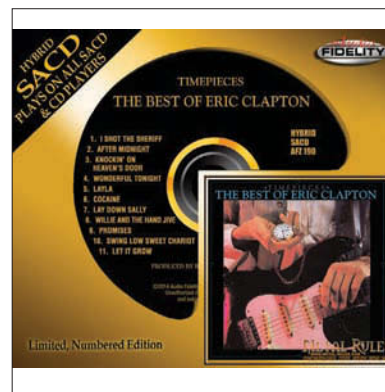
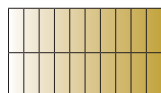
The Beach Boys

Capitol T 1890

Recently, we've been treated to long awaited audiophile vinyl reissues of some of the popular music giants of the twentieth century. The results have sometimes been better than I could have hoped for. Others were disappointments. But, Analogue Productions scored a coup by obtaining the rights to reissue fourteen Beach Boys albums, and if the first five releases in the series are any indication, The Beach Boys have received the kind of attention they deserve, as this is one of the best reissue series of the vinyl resurgence.

As expected, the LPs were mastered by Kevin Gray at Cohearant Audio and pressed on 200-gram vinyl by Quality Record Pressings. The record covers are manufactured by Stoughton Printing on heavy cardboard and are superlative. The sound is stunning. *Pet Sounds* aside, the balance of the catalogue has been pretty much ignored, until now. Original vinyl pressings, and even more, CD reissues, of the catalogue have ranged from 'not too bad' to 'dreadful'. *Surfin' USA* is the musical gem of the first batch and reveals layers of sound only hinted at in the original Capitol release. This mono release will be followed by a stereo release, but it's hard to imagine that it can sound better than this. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Timepieces

SA

Eric Clapton

Audio Fidelity AFZ 190

I once avoided greatest hits compilations like the plague, but I'm mellowing with age. There are times when nothing else will do and *Slowhand* or *461 Ocean Boulevard* must be heard from beginning to end. However, there are plenty of times where nothing beats hearing one hit after another. Like many greatest hits albums, RSO/Polydor created *Timepieces* when Clapton left the label in 1982. The album compiled eleven singles released on that label from recordings made between 1970 and 1978, most of which were also included on albums. Thus, it's really a best of 1970's Eric Clapton. Other cross-label compilations, covering several decades, sprouted like wildflowers on CD during the 1990s.

The original LP is widely available in used record bins, and Universal has released a new version on LP in its Back To Black series. But 'best of' albums and digital music seem made to fit together like hand and glove, and Audio Fidelity's new limited edition hybrid SACD fits the bill splendidly. Kevin Gray of Cohearant Audio mastered the set for SACD and as a result, the tunes on *Timepieces* have never sounded better in digital. The disc has become one of my go-to CDs for music to kick back to or pop into the deck when driving. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC





Chopin Preludes

180g 33 RPM

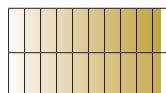
Ingrid Fliter

Linn CKH 575

Buenos Aires seems to be a breeding ground for pianists. The legendary Martha Argerich was born there in 1941, and 32 years later so was Ingrid Fliter. Fliter came to wide public attention in 2006 and released three widely admired recordings of Chopin and Beethoven. In 2014 she signed with Linn Records and this is her second release on that label, and the first one released on vinyl. Her Chopin work has been favorably compared to such legendary interpreters as Pollini, Lipatti, and Argerich, and this new release of the Chopin Preludes on Linn should enhance that reputation.

Chopin's music should never be reduced to a 'best' version. Instead, a music lover needs a range of performances to study and compare. Fliter's *Preludes* certainly stands in my handful of favourites, and only time will tell how it grows on me. Recorded at Potton Hall, Suffolk, UK in June of 2014, Linn has captured her piano sound splendidly. Compare it to, for example, DGG's recording of Argerich playing the Preludes on DGG 2530 721, to see just how threadbare the competition's piano sound was. Also surface noise, the special bane of piano recordings, is completely absent in the Linn pressing. Highest recommendation. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Love Forever Changes

SA

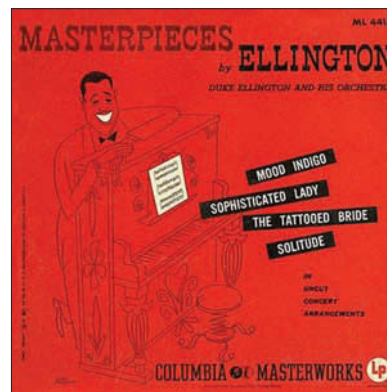
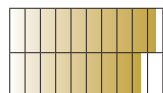
Love

Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2131

One of my favorite years of record releases is 1967. In addition to *Sgt. Pepper*, Hendrix released two of his best, The Doors and the Grateful Dead released their debut LPs, and *Surrealistic Pillow*, *Disraeli Gears*, and *John Wesley Harding* all made their appearance. Love's *Forever Changes* never quite hit its stride by comparison, but deserves its place among 1967's masterpieces all the same. Arthur Lee's Los Angeles group made music at once darker and more complex than the Northern California brand of psychedelia from the likes of Jefferson Airplane.

Listen carefully to the lyrics and you find that Lee's version of the hookah-smoking caterpillar was on a more paranoid trip than his friends from San Francisco wearing flowers in their hair. Yet for all this, *Forever Changes* looks forward to the 1970s and beyond, more than most music released in 1967. Mixed in with the psychedelic and baroque rock foreground are hints of country music, punk, and hip-hop. The original recording has always sounded a bit congested, no doubt a result of trying to do too much in the mixing room on a limited budget, but Mobile Fidelity has done an excellent job restoring some of the master tape magic lost in earlier releases. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Masterpieces by Ellington

200g 33 RPM

Duke Ellington And His Orchestra

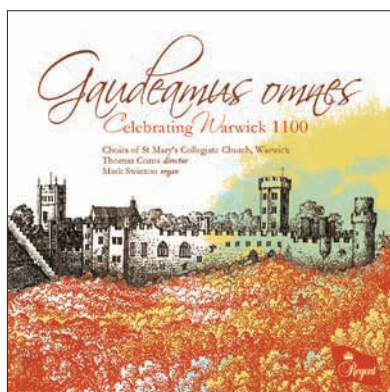
Analogue Productions APJ-4418

Ellington's *Masterpieces*, recorded in 1950, has long been one of the early mono recordings jazz collectors in the know sought out. It makes us wonder whether Columbia, and record companies in general, have followed an unwavering decline in recording technology since the early 1950s. The fact that both LPs were recorded at Columbia's 30th Street studio accounts for some of the magic. An equally important factor had to be the novelty of the LP medium and the sheer excitement that the players and engineers brought to the format.

Whatever the root cause, the music explodes from the record grooves with a dynamic range that has been largely abandoned in modern recording practice. Each of the four songs played by the Ellington band is a masterpiece and once heard, will tenaciously cling in your memory banks. Chad Kassem's Analogue Productions, in conjunction with Ryan Smith of Sterling Sound mastering studio have produced an LP that equals and in some way exceeds the sound of a pristine original pressing properly equalized. The perfectly quiet vinyl and exemplary packaging add up to one of the best reissues of the century. **DD**

RECORDING
MUSIC





Gaudeamus Omnes CD
Celebrating Warwick 1100

Choirs of St Mary's Collegiate Church, Warwick
 Thomas Corns director. Mark Swinton organ
 Regent Records – REGCD461

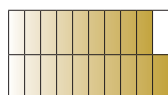
This disc is sublime! The choice of repertoire is well conceived and well suited for this choir of mixed voices. The opening piece is the magnificent 'Blessed city, Heavenly Salem' by Bairstow, and organist Mark Swinton makes great use of the 32ft pedals of organ where appropriate.

The disc features many great composers, including Vaughan Williams, Bairstow, Walton, Parry and some contemporary musicians such as Francis Jackson, Richard Shephard, and David Briggs.

Tracks six and seven are Canticles written by Philip Moore for St Mary's, Warwick, and exploit the top line and organ. Both the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis portray the essence of the words, the Nunc Dimittis being more somber and lamenting, in contrast with the joyful Magnificat.

Another piece commissioned by the choir is 'Gaudeamus' by Briggs. This is a complex piece, with aspects of music taken from the stained glass windows of the church and based along a form of plainchant. Briggs is a world renowned organist and this certainly comes across in the organ part! **PT**

RECORDING
 MUSIC



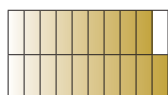
Georges Bizet 180g
Carmen

Horne, McCracken. Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. Leonard Bernstein (cond)
 Speakers Corner DGG 2709 043

Carmen has always struck me as among the most accessible of operas: the French libretto and credible plot play to an Anglo-Saxon audience, the tunes are memorable, and you don't have to wait too long for them to come along. But if you are in the re-issue game then where better to start? Speakers Corner has gone with DGG's 1973 recording of Bernstein's Metropolitan Opera production, captured at the Met itself. It's an interesting and unusual choice, not least because Bernstein chooses to use a score with considerable additional spoken dialogue.

Bernstein's reading is slower of tempo and overall pace than many well loved recordings of *Carmen*, ratcheting up the tension one notch at a time rather than dumping it in your lap. Nor is Horne a match for the sultry Leontyne Price or the more multi-dimensional Victoria De Los Angeles, but then this is much more an ensemble piece than a star vehicle, and in many ways it's all the better for it. An excellent introduction to *Carmen* beautifully pressed and presented by Speakers Corner, this should be welcomed (and thoroughly enjoyed) by opera debutants and aficionados alike. **RG**

RECORDING
 MUSIC



Carl Maria von Weber CD
Sonatas for piano & violin
Piano Quartet

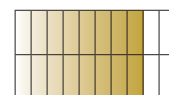
Alexander Melkinov – fortepiano,
 Isabelle Faust – violin,
 Boris Faust – viola,
 Wolfgang Emanuel Schmidt – cello
 Harmonia Mundi – HMC 902108

Weber was one of the first composers to define Romanticism, particularly with his operatic works. The musical expression and emotion were more important in this era than formal structure, and this collection of sonatas and quartet are overflowing with romance.

Weber's ability to display passion and emotion within the music is well displayed in the sonatas, particularly in the Adagio of Opus 8, where the violin appears at times to be weeping. The composer is able to convey passion in both the slow movements such as in the Adagio's with their long flowing phrases, where Weber uses the full length of the strings' bows to emphasise the longing and sorrow. In contrast, the Allegro movements use arpeggioic techniques and fast flowing scales particularly within the piano parts.

The musicians on this disc are individuals who are not part of a regular quartet; this is very surprising, given their ability to play so well together and understand each other's parts and directions. It is a formidable album and I highly recommend it. **PT**

RECORDING
 MUSIC





Messiaen/Saariaho The Edge of Light

CD

Gloria Cheng – Piano
Calder Quartet

Harmonia Mundi – HMU 907578

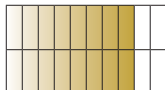
Nine tracks on this album feature the works of Olivier Messiaen. Each track is themed; for example, the opening track is entitled La Colombe (The Dove) and reflects his love of birds. As with much of Messiaen's music one can feel the sense emotion in his compositions, here.

Meanwhile, Kaija Saariaho, born in 1952, is featured on seven tracks on this disc. Similarly to Messiaen her works are deeply complex and emotional, and include some very complex phrasing that requires great dexterity on the part of the pianist.

Gloria Cheng steps up to the challenge posed by these two composers admirably. She is a Grammy award-winning pianist, renowned for her intrinsic ability to understand contemporary music, thus she is perfect for this disc. She also doubles up as a lecturer at UCLA in her 'spare' time.

The Calder Quartet was formed in 1998 and has been hugely successful. They musicians of the Calder are not outstanding with contemporary music, and can pass that understanding on to the listener through their instruments. They are in demand to work with many leading composers, and it's not hard to see why! **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC



The Lyrical Bassoon

SA

Per Hannisdal bassoon, Vebjørn
Anvik piano

2L 097-SACD

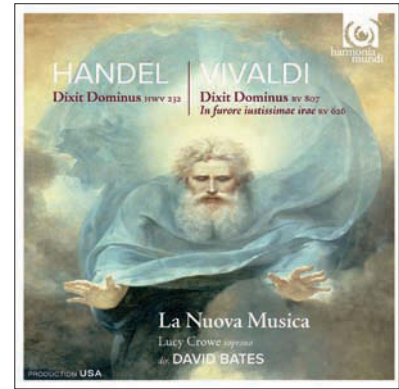
The bassoon is an instrument with a phenomenal range, which Hannisdal shows off with great ease. Of course, this SACD, with bassoon pieces from Saint-Saëns, Elgar, and lesser known composers such as the German born Hindemith and Polish Tansman, casts the instrument in a very good light.

2L has put together a juxtaposition of modern and contemporary music, but the 'oldest' composer here (Elgar) was born in the mid 19th Century, and the youngest (Dutilleux) passed away in 2013. I find it can be a romantic and passionate instrument, when played well!

Both the musicians are very accomplished in their own right. Hannisdal has been principal bassoonist of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra since 1978 and has played extensively around the world, making many recordings. Meanwhile, Anvik has gained an enviable reputation and awards for his performances. One of his most notable awards was the Levin prize, which is highly prestigious in Norway.

2L have yet again produced a high quality SACD, not just in terms of musical pieces; the recording is superb, as is the selection of tracks, and even their order and the placement of microphones. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Vivaldi/Handel Dixit Dominus

SA

Lucy Crowe – Soprano
La Nuova Musica

– Directed by David Bates

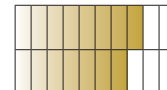
Harmonia Mundi HMU807587

This interesting CD includes both Handel and Vivaldi's version of Dixit Dominus. It works as a very interesting comparison. They both carry the trademarks of their writers; Vivaldi with his arpeggioc strings and Handel with his almost playful long, sustained phrases around one part.

Interestingly Handel's version only contains eight works as opposed to Vivaldi's eleven. Sandwiched in between is Vivaldi's In furore iustissimae irae and four works for soprano solo. Following this is a rather short yet evocative recitative, an aria, and finishing with an extraordinary Alleluia; a perfect example of Vivaldi's understanding of the limitations of the voice, and his quest to push those constraints as far as possible.

La Nuova Musica is a recently formed ensemble that specialises in Baroque and European Renaissance. Their passion and understanding of the style of music that they are playing is clearly evident in their phrasing and dynamic approach to the various movements. A special mention should go to the countertenor Christopher Lowrey, who has an exceptional voice and whose upper range is extremely impressive. **PT**

RECORDING
MUSIC



Album of the Month: 'The Shape of Jazz to Come' Ornette Coleman by Alan Sircom

It's hard to pin-point the exact birth of Jazz, but it's at least around 100 years old. Jazz may be a live medium, but it's one that needed recordings to thrive, and the first widely available jazz recording ('Livery Stable Blues' by the Dixieland Jass Bands) dates back to 1917. Pundits are just as vague on whether jazz 'died' with John Coltrane, thanks to jazz-fusion, or even on its migration from its native America to Europe. But, there's one thing everyone in jazz can agree on; 1959 was a bloody good year for the genre!

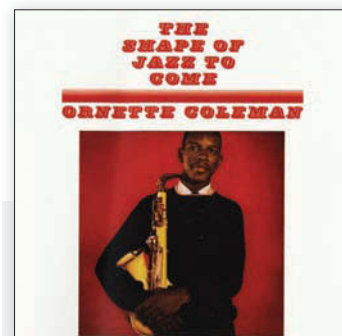
If you speak to practically anyone and ask them to name a famous jazz album, chances are the first one they will happen upon will have been released in 1959. Four out of the top five best-selling, and most highly regarded jazz albums in history were released that year. Which is why albums like *Kind Of Blue*, *Time Out*, *Mingus Ah Um*, and *Giant Steps* have never been out of print. In part, this is a meeting of technology and talent. Stereo was still very much a new thing in 1959 and record companies were keen to exploit this new stereophonic sound, while the enthusiasts who bought 'high fidelity' equipment were just as keen to put it to good use. Meanwhile, the post-war generation of musicians who experimented their way through be-bop had learned their craft thoroughly and put it to good use in the studios of Blue Note, Verve, and Columbia. While much of this music sounded edgy and fresh at the time, being repeatedly played for the last 56 years has made some of these 1959 recordings closer to jazz standards today.

There's a big exception to this – *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. Saxophonist Ornette Coleman had only been on the scene for a year, but had already cut two albums with Contemporary Records: *Something Else!!!!* and *Tomorrow Is The Question!* While these were more reminiscent of be-bop and more prepared to experiment with atonality than most (jazz at the time was moving toward Cool and Modal styles), these two albums can be retrospectively viewed as an artist clearing his throat, warming up for what comes next.

In 1959, Coleman, accompanied by trumpeter Don Cherry, bassist Charlie Haden, and drummer Billy Higgins moved from Contemporary to Atlantic Records, and on May 22 of that year a session was booked at the legendary Radio Recorders studio in Hollywood. Eight tracks were cut in a single day, six of which made it to the final cut of the album with a working title of *Focus on Sanity*, taking its name from the first track of side two. The tapes were wrangled by noted producer Neshui Ertegün, older brother of Atlantic's founder, Ahmet.

The Shape of Jazz to Come was finally released in October of 1959. Although arguably pioneers Sun Ra and Cecil Taylor got there first, Coleman's album was widely received as the first real public outing for avantgarde and free jazz. The public reaction was mixed; musicians at once praised the album for its innovative stance, and pilloried it for being completely free from harmonic structure; which was kind of the point! In fact, compared to subsequent free jazz offerings from the likes of Albert Ayler and Ornette Coleman himself, *Shape* is subdued and melodic; especially on 'Lonely Woman'.

At the time of writing, only Coleman survives from the 1959 quartet, bassist Charlie Haden having died last year. Coleman is also the only surviving band-leader from that golden harvest of jazz in 1959. But, perhaps more importantly, *The Shape of Jazz to Come* is maybe the only album from 1959 that sounds like it comes from tomorrow. It's still fresh, still relevant, and still inspiring musicians to strive for something beyond the mainstream. Jazz didn't die with Coltrane; Ornette Coleman had already brought it back to life in 1959. +



Recorded: May 22, 1959
Released: October 1959
Produced: Neshui Ertegün
Label: Atlantic Records

EarPlay



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