

# hi-fi news

THE HOME OF REAL HI-FI

& Record Review

**Exclusive**

164 pages

# VINYL 'N TUBES

**Awesome 'analogue' with Yamaha's GT-5000 deck & EAT's E-Glo i amp**



**EISA AWARDS 2020-21**  
The year's best hi-fi revealed!

**BUDGET ESOTERICA**

**Bite-sized bits**  
The compact MX-DAC from Musical Fidelity  
**Massive Michi**  
1000W M8 monoblocks pump up the volume!  
**Melco S100**  
High-end digital switch

**Nordic network**  
Hegel's fully-featured, entry-level H95 amp  
**Beryllium beauties**  
Paradigm's standout Persona B standmounts

**PMC's new flagship**  
twenty5.26i tower on test

• **OPINION** 12 pages of letters & commentary • **VINYL RE-RELEASE** The Getz/Gilberto duo on 180g  
• **FROM THE VAULT** Koetsu's debut Urushi pick-up • **VINTAGE REVIEW** Harman Kardon PM650 amp  
• **HI-FI@HOME** We revisit HFN readers' systems • **READERS' CLASSIFIEDS** Hi-Fi bargains galore

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# SME

# CONTENTS

OCTOBER 20

## EISA AWARDS 2020-2021

### 72 EISA Awards

Across no fewer than 17 pages, *Hi-Fi News* reveals the very best products as voted for by over 60 specialist technology magazines/websites from 29 different countries



## VINYL & RECORD REVIEWS

### 92 Classical Companion

Christopher Breunig recommends recordings of Shostakovich's most celebrated work – Symphony No 5

### 94 Vinyl Release

Steve Sutherland hears the 180g reissue of *Getz/Gilberto* – one of the few jazz albums to be a pop hit

### 96 Vinyl Icon

It was the LP that saw Tom Waits' big risks and big ambitions pay off. Mike Barnes on *Blue Valentine*

### 104 Meet The Producers

'I just liked making mad noises...' Steve Sutherland traces the career of British producer Dave Stewart

### 112 Music Reviews

Our selection of audiophile LP and hi-res downloads reviewed by our specialists alongside the latest rock, jazz and classical albums

## DEFINITIVE PRODUCT REVIEWS

### 34 EAT E-Glo i

It's more valve magic as company debuts its first integrated amp, with a quartet of KT88 tubes on board



**ABOVE:** Paradigm's Persona B loudspeakers boast not one but two beryllium drivers, p56



### 40 Yamaha GT-5000

Flagship series gains the source it deserves – a belt-drive turntable with a straight, offset-free arm

### 44 PMC twenty5.26i

Premium three-way loudspeaker enjoys a refresh with a crossover upgrade and new Sonomex tweeter

### 48 T+A P 3100 HV

Meet the all-analogue preamp that sounds like a million dollars as we hear the P 3000 HV's replacement

### 52 Hegel H95

Entry-level network-attached amp offers trickle-down 'SynchroDAC' tech and a sound that's sure to impress

### 56 Paradigm Persona B

Routinely breathtaking... Will this two-way standmount with beryllium drivers find a place in your parlour?

### 60 Rotel Michi M8

Don't lay out money on a monoblock until you've read this... Why the M8 mono power amp is a bargain buy

### 64 Melco S100

We hear a 'dataswitch' built with audiophiles in mind, but will gains in sound quality be worth the big ticket?

### 66 Musical Fidelity MX-DAC

Company hopes to make its mark in the tough sub-£500 DAC market with this compact, flexible add-on USB unit

## VINTAGE

### 142 Vintage Review

How do the classics of yesteryear measure up today? We listen to the Harman Kardon PM650 amp from '82

### 148 From The Vault

We delve into the *HFN* archive and return to *HFN* April 1990 to find Ken Kessler dazzled by the sound of the first Koetsu Urushi MC cartridge

## NEWS AND OPINION

### 23 Welcome

A message from the editor, with a guide to what's inside this month's bumper 164-page issue, plus the inside track on the EISA Awards

### 24 News

SE versions of Marantz PM-12 amp and SA-12 SACD player for the UK, refresh for Linn's Majik DSM network player/amp, iFi Audio expands ZEN desktop series, Keith Monks' new Prodigy record cleaning machine

### 26 Hi-Fi @ Home revisited

We talk to a reader whose system first appeared in our pages back in 2008 to find out what changes he's made to it over the past 12 years

### 125 Opinion

Insider comment on the key audio topics of the day from Barry Fox, Tim Jarman, Jim Lesurf, Steve Harris and, from across the Pond, our US correspondent Barry Willis

### 136 Sound Off

Software solutions for digitising Dolby-encoded tapes, investigating a Mahler 'mystery', your tales of system-building, plus help with a new cartridge for an SME 309 arm

### 162 Off The Leash

Combining components effectively can be a challenge, says Ken Kessler, who has some advice on avoiding the stumbling blocks that lie ahead



**ABOVE:** We unveil the winners of the EISA Awards 2020-2021. See p72

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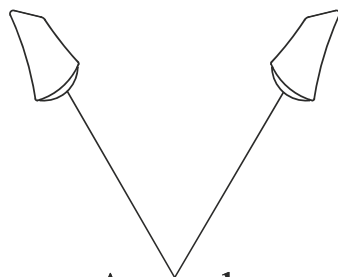
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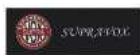


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# CELEBRATING THE YEAR'S BEST PRODUCTS



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visit [www.eisa.eu](http://www.eisa.eu) for the winners

EISA is the unique collaboration of 62 member magazines and websites from 29 countries, specialising in all aspects of consumer electronics from mobile devices, home theatre display and audio products, photography, hi-fi and in-car entertainment. Now truly international with members in Australia, India, Canada, the Far East and USA, and still growing, the EISA Awards and official logo are your guide to the best in global consumer technology!



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# System Audio

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**ABOVE:** Masters of understated Norwegian style, Hegel unveils its new, networked-attached integrated. First test of the H95 on p52



**ABOVE:** For when Rotel's Michi S5 power amp is just not enough, then why not raise the roof with the M8 monoblocks? In-depth review, p60



**MUSIC:** Tom Waits' fifth album, and slow burner, *Blue Valentine* is our Vinyl Icon (p96) while Steve Sutherland revisits the classic Getz/Gilberto duet, now re-released on 180g LP (p94)

**RIGHT:** *Hi-Fi News & RR* is the UK's representative of EISA's Hi-Fi Expert Group. Editor Paul Miller took over as EISA's President in June 2016

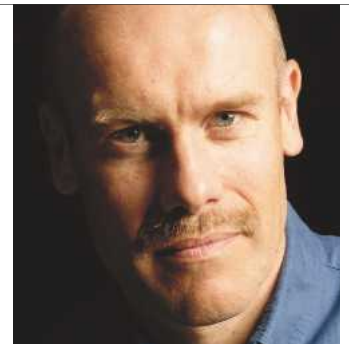


Once again, and despite the uncertainty of our times, your October issue of *Hi-Fi News* remains a bumper 164-page offering where, as the exclusive UK member of EISA's Hi-Fi Expert Group, we reveal the choicest components, as tested, judged and voted for by the best of the international audio press.

Over the last few years, EISA (the Expert Imaging and Sound Association) has reached outside of its European heartland to include the cream of global hi-fi publishing, also counting the most experienced 'influencers' among its ranks.

Enthusiast colleagues including John Darko (based in Germany) and Mikhail Borzenkov (Moscow) now offer their thoughts and opinions alongside *SoundStage! Hi-Fi* (Canada), *Audio Accessory* (Japan), *Stereophile* (USA) and *AudioTechnique* (Hong Kong) in addition to the host of longstanding EISA members from the greater EU community.

Alongside hi-fi, EISA's confederation of Expert Groups also specialise in home theatre and TV products (our sister title *Home Cinema Choice* is the UK member), photography (*Amateur Photographer* from these shores), in-car and mobile devices. That's over 60 publications, spanning no fewer than 29 countries.



It has been my great pleasure to lead and remould EISA as its President these last four years, my term extended by another year by popular vote so that I could navigate the Association through these turbulent times. And what times! With the EISA Convention, the Awards Meeting and even the Gala cancelled in 2020, the Association went 'virtual'.

## 'The last few years saw EISA go global – this year it went virtual'

With remarkable (surprising) ease, all EISA's Expert Groups of magazines and websites met on a weekly basis for over three months to discuss the pros and cons of the best equipment. We even arranged everything from new smartphones, 8K TVs, camera bodies and lenses, in-car subwoofers as well as the cream of hi-fi to be shipped between member countries. Intrigued? Turn to p72 for the full list of all 70+ Award winners.

**PAUL MILLER** GROUP EDITOR

### HI-FI NEWS' EXPERT LINE UP: THE FINEST MINDS IN AUDIO JOURNALISM BRING THEIR EXPERIENCE TO BEAR ON ALL AREAS OF HI-FI & MUSIC



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Investigative journalist supreme, Barry is the first with news of the latest developments in hi-fi and music technologies



**DAVID PRICE**  
An avid collector of audio treasures, and life-long hi-fi addict, DP lends his ears and experience from analogue to digital



**KEN KESSLER**  
is a long-serving contributor, luxury goods writer and champion for the renaissance in valves and 'vintage hi-fi'



**MARK CRAVEN**  
Editor of our sister title *Home Cinema Choice*, Mark's passion for music extends from stereo to multichannel and Dolby Atmos



**STEVE HARRIS**  
Former Editor of this very title from 1986 through to 2005. A lifetime in audio and a love of jazz makes Steve a goldmine



**ANDREW EVERARD**  
has reviewed hi-fi for over 30 years and is still effortlessly enthusiastic about new technology, kit and discovering new music



**STEVE SUTHERLAND**  
Editor of *Hi-Fi Choice*, Steve was at the helm of *NME* through the Britpop years. Steve brings a unique slant to our music features

# Marantz 12 Series SE

NEW SE DISC PLAYER AND AMP INSPIRED BY KI RUBY SEPARATES

Marantz's PM-12 integrated amplifier and SA-12 SACD player – models originally created for its Japanese market – are being upgraded to 'Special Edition' status for a UK and European launch this September. Priced £3300 a piece and available in black or silver-gold finishes, the new units are a collaboration between Marantz's Japanese 'in-house Sound Masters' and European sound engineering team, involving 'a more considered component selection, and tuning over countless listening sessions'. The PM-12 SE, rated at 2x100W/8ohm (2x200W/4ohm), is an all-analogue amplifier, with DAC functionality left to the new SA-12SE partner player.

The amp features separate PSUs for its pre and power stages, 'high-quality' input terminals and speaker connections, and utilises Marantz's 'Musical Premium Phono' EQ circuit for its MM/MC phono stage. The SA-12SE, meanwhile, features the brand's SACDM-3 disc mechanism, an asynchronous USB-B input supporting 384kHz/32-bit PCM (DSD to 11.2MHz), plus Marantz Musical Mastering invoked in its PCM-to-DSD and DSD-to-analogue conversion.

**Sound United/D&M Holdings, Kanagawa, Japan,  
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## Modular music

GRIMM AUDIO'S CUSTOM PLAYER

Grimm Audio's MU1 network bridge/server solution (£9495) claims to offer 'breakthrough performance levels in format conversion' via its proprietary Linux-based OS (running a Roon Core server), custom FPGA processor and ultra-low jitter clock. Designed to partner the company's LS1 playback systems, plus third-party DACs, it supports 'all sample rates and formats', with anti-aliasing filtering done in 'a single stage with extreme resolution'. Source and output connections (AES, coax and optical digital) are joined by Gigabit Ethernet and dual USB ports for external storage. The player can also be fitted with internal SSD storage (1TB, 2TB or 4TB), with its cost 'dependent on the market price for storage at the time'. Features include support for Tidal, Qobuz and Spotify Connect, and full-colour 3.5in display.

**Grimm Audio BV, The Netherlands,  
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[sounddesigndistribution.co.uk](http://sounddesigndistribution.co.uk)**



## HI-FI NEWS' NUGGETS

LUMIN EVOLUTION

Sound Design Distribution has inked a deal to become the exclusive UK partner of HK-based hi-res network audio specialist Lumin, as the latter prepares to launch new products this autumn. Lumin began its portfolio in 2012 with a DSD-capable network player, and its range now includes network players/transports, dedicated music servers, a dual mono power amplifier, and its just-add-speakers M1 streaming amp. [www.luminmusic.com](http://www.luminmusic.com)

KIMBER FOR VINYL

Kimber's new KS Phono tonearm cable is being distributed in the UK by Russ Andrews. Designed for 'high-end turntable-based systems', the KS Phono is available in copper, hybrid copper and pure silver variants, all based around four PTFE-insulated 24AWG conductors with silver-plated copper shielding. Pricing ranges from £2400 to £7650 for a 0.75m cable depending on termination and material, with other lengths also an option. [www.kimber.com](http://www.kimber.com)

## It's in the CAN

IFI AUDIO LAUNCHES STRIPPED-DOWN AMP



A new model in iFi Audio's ZEN desktop series adopts the same compact chassis design as its ZEN Blue and ZEN DAC siblings [HFN Jul '20], and the same commitment to making 'high-performance audio more accessible than ever'. An all-analogue headphone amp, the ZEN CAN (£149) features balanced dual mono circuitry, and leverages 'key elements' from the flagship Pro iCan headphone amp. Connections include RCA, 3.5mm and 4.4mm balanced ins, plus balanced preamp output, while front panel controls instigate 'XBass' and '3D' analogue processing modes. Power is rated at 1600mW/32ohm (single-ended) and 1890mW/64ohm (balanced).

**iFi Audio (Abingdon Global Group),  
01900 601954; [www.ifi-audio.com](http://www.ifi-audio.com)**





## Majik makeover

LINN'S MOST POPULAR ALL-IN-ONE STREAMER GETS REVAMP

Scottish hi-fi pioneer Linn has updated its Majik DSM do-it-all 'entertainment hub', with a new DAC regime derived from its fourth-generation Katalyst technology. There are also improvements to its Class D amplification, processing platform and digital volume control, plus the addition of a USB-B input for direct PC connection. As before, this networked player/integrated amplifier features a built-in phono stage and Linn's 'Space

Optimisation' processing to deal with adverse room conditions. Connections include coaxial/optical digital, RCA and a quartet of HDMI's. The black aluminium chassis now borrows design cues from the step-up Selekt DSM. Pricing is £2950 – Linn also offers a 'full' Majik System, comprising Majik DSM, Majik LP12 turntable and Majik 109 speakers, for £7650.

**Linn Products Ltd, Glasgow, 0141 307 7777; www.linn.co.uk**

## Sound of silence

NEW PRODIGY RECORD-CLEANING SYSTEM FROM KEITH MONKS

Prodigy, the latest record cleaning machine from Isle of Wight-based vinyl care specialist Keith Monks, is the company's most affordable (£795) and compact. It utilises a 'threadless' suction nozzle design for easier operation and 'more effective' results from its liquid on/liquid off cleaning process. Featuring a

sculpted sustainable bamboo chassis with integrated lighting effects, the Prodigy is claimed to clean both sides of an LP in approximately five minutes (plus CDs, Blu-rays and LaserDiscs), and be the company's quietest model yet. **Keith Monks Audio Works, IOW, 01983 857079; www.vinyldiscovery.com**



## Multichannel Eigentakt

NAD'S M28 POWER AMP HOSTS SEVEN PURIFI MODULES



Purifi's innovative and highly efficient Class D Eigentakt amplifier technology is making its first appearance in a multichannel power amp. Having previously featured in its M33 'smart amp' [see p81 and *HFN* Aug '20], NAD has now licensed the low-noise, low-distortion platform for its seven-channel M28 (£3999). Primarily intended for home theatre use with the M17 V2i surround processor (and featuring the same full-width

chassis design), the M28 replaces the Hypex nCore-based M27 – launched in 2014 – and claims a power output of 200W/8ohm into all channels at just 0.003% THD. Dynamic output is claimed to reach 7x280W/8ohm or 1x560W/4ohm. Inputs are on balanced XLRs and single-ended RCAs, plus there's a 12V trigger for system integration.

**Lenbrook Inc, Ontario, Canada, 01732 459555; http://nadelectronics.com**



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# Hi-Fi @ Home revisited

Steve Harris talks to a reader whose system we featured back in 2008. Before we find out what changes he's made, here's how things were...



**ABOVE:** Naim enthusiast and HFN reader Nigel pictured in 2008. He has developed his system over decades and it is now set up in a spacious room which he feels should be kept comfortable and inviting to visiting friends

The uninitiated might be shocked if they added up the cost of Nigel's current hi-fi system, but as he says: 'I didn't buy this all at once. It's been a 20-year hobby!'. And it's now well over 20 years since Nigel took his first steps on the Naim ladder.

'My first system, when I was at university, consisted of a Technics turntable, Technics amp and Mission 707 speakers. I got part of it for my 18th birthday present, and the rest I funded myself. The turntable was the first to go and that's when a Thorens 150 came in, which is an absolute classic. Then – and this would be around 1984 – I wanted to listen to a Mission Cyrus amplifier. I went over to Cam Audio in Cambridge because nobody locally stocked it. I was listening to it and I said, "Oh, what else is there around about that price range?". They got out this little thing called a Nait. They played that and I thought,

wow, that's fantastic! Then they played me a pre/power, which was the 42/110. And that's when I first got into Naim. It all started with that amplifier.

## A REMINDER

'The next thing was a Roksan Xerxes turntable, when that first came out. I went over to the Sound Factory in Loughborough, with the intention of buying the good old Linn LP12, like everybody wanted at that time. I then did the A-B comparison with the Linn and the Xerxes and the Xerxes just made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. It was that good. I bought the Xerxes with a Rega arm. I did get the Artemiz arm when it came out, but I ran an Audio-Technica MC cartridge for about five or six years before I got a Shiraz.'

*"I went on a quest to find the perfect speakers"*



By this time, Nigel had upgraded his speakers to the Linn Sara. 'That was a fantastic system. I kept that pretty stable for a long time, but in the mid '90s I went for a Naim 82/180 with Hi-Cap. Appreciating that the 42/110 wasn't really driving the speakers as people say it should, I jumped up to a much bigger amp. I also went up to a Naim CDX CD player, later adding an XPS power supply. My first CD player was actually a Philips 102, which I'd kept

for years and years. Then sadly, in 2000, I lost my parents. I used some of my inheritance to buy something that would remind me of them, which was what I'd always wanted, a top-flight Naim system.

'So I bought myself a CDS3 player with XPS2 power supply, 252 preamplifier and 300 power amp. By then I had replaced the Saras with Ruark Equinox speakers. I'd heard these at the Heathrow show, on the end of an Exposure system.

'I moved to a bungalow, which had a fantastic hi-fi room, and I thought it was an ideal opportunity to change the speakers again. That was when I went on the quest to try to find the perfect speakers.'

### ART HOUSE

Nigel started off with a pair of Naim SL2s. 'They were fantastic, but just didn't give me the size and scale I wanted,' he explains. 'After that I listened to Neat Ultimatum MF9s. I compared these to Naim NBLs and ended up with the MF9s.

'That's how I came across my current dealer, Pete Swain of Cymbiosis in Leicester. Before that I'd always bought off the Internet, show deals, that kind of thing.

'After this, the 252 preamp went up to a 552. A second 300 power amp came in, but then both got replaced by two NAP500s. All these were with the Neat speakers. The bigger the amp, the better with the Neats, they just responded! I have to say the Neat MF9 with two 500s was the best system that I had.'

However, then came another house move. 'I moved in here with



my girlfriend and, for domestic reasons, the MF9s went. Which was a shame! It had always been "my" system, that she wouldn't go near, until I gave her a say in the choice of the ART Emotion Signatures I have now. She said "Yes, we'll have them!" and it then became a whole system which she used.



'So it was a bit of a compromise to get using the system again. But there are things that the ARTs do that the Neats couldn't. They do dynamics and speed better than almost any other speaker I've heard. They've not quite got the range of a bigger speaker, but what they do they do extremely well.

'The only way to find out whether a pair of speakers will work in your system is to put them *in* your system – though I appreciate that dealers can't do that for everybody. It's only on the bigger stuff that they can. Because if you hear something at a show or at somebody else's house, it works differently from how you expect it to work in your own home.'

### BIGGEST UPGRADE

So the search for loudspeakers isn't really over, even though Nigel really enjoys listening to the ART designs. He'd like to try something larger.

'At some point I do want to listen to Naim DBLs here. I'm very happy with the ARTs, but I still hanker after bigger speakers. I think there is no substitute for size when it comes to loudspeakers. I think the Naim DBLs are fantastic, but I'm not quite sure that they'll work in my room.

'And there are bigger Emotions coming from ART soon, and I'd like to have a listen to those. I like the ART Impression, the big three-way. I think it's fantastic, but it needs a lot of space. What holds my room back is that it's a little bit narrow.'

When Naim introduced the 555 CD player, Nigel bought one, trading in one of the 500 amplifiers, as he'd found that with the ART speakers he didn't really need two. 'I think I was privileged to have the first 555 in the public domain.'

How would Nigel describe the improvements in moving up, for example, through the range of Naim CD players? 'That's a difficult question! They just seem to get better. But how do you define ↻

**ABOVE:** The two-way Emotion Signature from Scottish company ART Loudspeakers features an integral stand, which Nigel has mounted on Vertex cones

**TOP RIGHT:** All Naim electronics sit on Naim Fraim stands along one wall

**LEFT:** The Roksan TMS2 turntable, with its Artemiz tonearm and Dynavector Te Kaitora MC cartridge, sits on a Finite Element Signature turntable



# 33 Revelations Per Minute



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“better”? There’s always been this question: if you change X for Y, yes, it’s always going to be different, but what is actually better?

‘It’s certainly more enjoyable. Changing up through the amps, I think changing to the 552 is the biggest upgrade you can make. It just opens the door, and lets everything through. And as you go up the ladder, everything just seems to grow in size and scale, and get better and better and better.’

**ALL CHANGE**

While all this was happening, Nigel also progressed the vinyl side of his system, sticking with Roksan. ‘I

had a Xerxes deck until I came across a Roksan TMS1, on eBay. That was with an Artemiz, Shiraz and phono stage. But I was going from what was in effect a completely max’ed-out Xerxes, with every conceivable upgrade that Roksan did from the power supplies to the blobs to the spindle upgrade... it seemed like a backward step and I never really did get on with the TMS, which was supposed to be a better deck. I just didn’t enjoy it as much.

‘Then, through a dealer, I was fortunate enough to come across an ex-dem TMS2. So I changed the whole turntable and got a brand-new Artemiz 2, a brand-new Shiraz and a brand-new Artaxerxes Phono Reference. And that, with the change to a Dynavector Te Kaitora moving-coil cartridge recently, is what I am using now.

‘Whether I’ll go for the TMS3, I don’t really know. I don’t really use the turntable as much as the CD player. It’s more a convenience than anything else. It’s easy when you are doing something just to put a CD on, and then change it every 50 minutes. Whereas with a turntable, you have to get up, you have to turn the record over, dust it off. But get a good track on the TMS2 and it’s absolutely fantastic. One of the best turntables I’ve ever heard.’



“Get a good track on the TMS2 and it’s fantastic”



**ABOVE:** The Naim CD555 CD player for which Nigel traded in one of his Naim NAP500 amps and [inset] a view down into the room. The system is powered from a dedicated mains spur with sockets wired through the wall to the garage behind

**BELOW:** A Roksan Caspian DX2 Reference phono stage with matching PSU is sited below the TMS2 turntable

When it comes to AV sources, Nigel not only owns a Naim DVD5 player, he was also an early adopter of Blu-ray, and his Sony LCD TV is partnered by a Sony BDP-91E player as well as the usual Sky HD box.

‘I don’t really use it to full AV potential. I don’t really want to go 5.1 or 7.1, I think it’s too many boxes and too many speakers. I’m quite happy to play DVDs through the 552 and just have it two-channel. That, for me, is more than enough. I think

it gives you crystal-clear quality and the feel of scale that you need. You just don’t need the rear sound.’

**ROCK STEADY**

‘But I’m not that much into AV that it matters to me. I might get a bigger TV and mount it over the fireplace and get rid of some of the cabling. The TV set is a bit in the way at the moment, it’s affecting the sound quality of the left-hand speaker a little bit. But though it’s a listening room, it’s a living room as

well. And if I invite people round, it’s got to be comfortable for them.’

And it *is* a comfortable room, with a system which sounds great on all Nigel’s music. ‘I’ve always been a big rock fan,’ he says. ‘I was really into Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin back in the 1970s, and it’s grown from there. I’m not really a classical music fan, but anything else, from Snowy White to Pink Floyd, Diana Krall to Lisa Stansfield.’

Even if the loudspeakers may change sometime soon, it seems that the electronics won’t.

‘I’ve gone as far as I want to go with them. There is a question about Naim power cords, whether they really will be an improvement on what I’ve got. But realistically, black boxes-wise, I can’t see my buying any new CD players or amplifiers. Unless, of course, Naim is going to better what it has now!’ ☺



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**DYNAUDIO**

HI-FI @ HOME – CATCHING UP 12 YEARS LATER...



**LEFT:** Still with the same Naim electronics at its heart, Nigel's system now features Kudos Titan 808 speakers [inset]. The AV side has been tidied up with the TV screen now over the mantelpiece



**BELOW:** Naim CD player, tuner and amplification are unchanged though a Vertere pre/power interconnect is now used while [right] Nigel's TMS2 turntable has given way to a TMS3 with a Dynavector XV-1 cartridge

Twelve years on, Nigel's room looks much the same, but there have been some big changes, and he's now happily married to Karen. Fortunately, as a husband-and-wife team in their own business, they could keep their office going during the recent lockdown.

'We certainly work long hours and we tend to come back home and put the radio on,' he says. 'We listen to Smooth FM a lot, just relax and chill. Of course, when I sit and have a proper listen, it's still very much the Pink Floyd, the rock music, the Deep Purple...'

**SPECIAL TWEAKS**

Nigel listens through a cherished NAT 01 tuner and his CD555 player is still going strong. He's not really into music streaming. As for AV, the old DVD5 player got sold off long ago to a Naim enthusiast, and was supplanted by the Blu-ray player.

'Karen and I do watch football and films through the Naim system. But when you've got Netflix and Sky and so on, you don't tend to play so many Blu-ray discs.'

Now the TV screen is more happily sited over the mantelpiece. Also, Nigel's turntable has moved from its isolated position on the other side of the room.

'I've got the TMS3 now, which Roksan founder Touraj Moghaddam did for me with a number of special

tweaks, and the Artemiz tonearm', says Nigel. 'The Dynavector Te Kaitora Rua has been changed for a Dynavector XV-1, so the turntable has been upgraded quite substantially! It's fitted with Vertere cable all the way through.

'Amplification is exactly the same as it was, though now with a pair of Vertere Handmade XLR cables between the 500 and the 552. Very good cable, really opened it up.'

Back in 2008, Nigel told us that he was thinking of upgrading the loudspeakers, and he soon did so.

'I had the ART Emotions, but after that the company's owners Derek

and Ramsay Dunlop introduced the ART Deco, which is a much bigger speaker. I had a pair of bright red Deco 20s. I had Version 1, but then changed to Version 2, which had a better midrange unit.'

**HI-FI HERITAGE**

'But when Derek Gilligan from Kudos came up with the Titan, I was lucky enough to have a home dem of the original prototype, and I came very close to buying a pair. This then became the Titan 808, and it was even better.

'With the ART Decos, although they were a lovely pair of loudspeakers, I was always trying to force them to work in the room. Whereas with the Kudos Titans, I don't.

'Peter from Cymbiosis came over when I bought them, and they're still in exactly the same position where he put them. And I've had them for just over two years now.

'I've known Derek Gilligan for a long time, and of course he was involved with Bob Surgeoner going back many years at Neat Acoustics. You remember I used to have a pair of Neat Ultimatum MF9 loudspeakers? I look back on them with great fondness. So there's a little bit of heritage in there.

'When I had the Neat MF9s, they were so musical and they suited the room so much. They just seemed to paint a picture of the music in front of you, and that's what I like about the Kudos Titan 808 too.

'You just sit and listen to them, if that makes sense! You're listening to a piece of music – not to the hi-fi. And that's what it's all about.' ☺



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# EAT E-Glo i

The extension of EAT's E-Glo range of valve phono stages into something bigger was inevitable, but not hurried – enter EAT's first integrated all-tube amplifier, the E-Glo i  
 Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**R**egular readers will already know that I use two of EAT's cartridges [HFN Dec '18 and '19], two of its phono stages [HFN Mar '17 and Feb '19] and a B-Sharp turntable [HFN Jul '20]. The E-Glo i is thus among family members and there's every chance I was going to be predisposed...

At £9498, it's not cheap for an all-valve integrated rated at only 35W in ultralinear mode or 18W in triode, but the perceived value is self-evident, ameliorating the issue of watts-vs-worth. Recalling £100k 20W single-ended triode amps puts it into perspective. For £1000 more, you can fit a quartet of EAT-made KT88s in place of the already very fine Electro-Harmonix tubes in our review sample.

## EXUDES LUXURY

Care needs to be taken with the very sharp edges of the valve cover, particularly when lifting its 26kg bulk out of the packaging, but this is otherwise a beautifully made product. Owners of EAT phono stages will recognise the matte silver finish and contrasting glossy piano-black or Makassar wooden end-cheeks. This amplifier looks expensive rather than industrial – a good thing if hi-fi brands are to attract sane people to high-end audio.

Note that EAT started out not with turntables but with tube manufacturing [see PM's interview with founder Jozefina Lichtenegger on p37]. 'The E-Glo i is a recognition of the company's roots,' she says, 'everything that we do is about a love for tubes and for analogue, so the E-Glo i is a natural progression.'

And what a debut amp it is! A true heavyweight occupying 435x170x485mm (whd), the E-Glo i is substantial as well as handsome, which will please tyre kickers. With or without the (arguably perilous) valve cover, the unit exudes luxury, which

will please aesthetes, while the tactile elements please another of one's senses: EAT always fits positive, clicky toggle switches and smooth rotary controls.

But back to that cage. Unlike valve covers which snap into place, the E-Glo i's is held in position by four Torx screws and the necessary screwdriver is supplied. I am torn between the look of the amp with or *sans* cover, because EAT has housed the transformers in luxurious chrome boxes. Hiding them seems a pity.

Even the remote handset is jewel-like [see p39], with ten flush buttons for power-on, level up/down, mute and access to five line inputs. That only accounts for nine; the tenth, unlabelled button might cover a future function. I'd like to see this mystery button select ultralinear and triode modes, handy for A/B'ing the two if the unit is some distance from the listener. Attention to

detail involves the small valves being fitted with EAT 'Cool Dampers' – heatsinks and vibration control in one solution.

## HAND-NUMBERED

These dampers are worth around £20 apiece and were finished in red, which

provide eye-catching accents if you opt for the *al fresco*, no-cage look. They are also offered in natural metal or dark metallic grey should you find red just too garish.

Hand-numbered on their bases, the valves

sit in cut-outs in the packaging's foam top layer, with the remote and a spare battery. Two manuals are included for set-up and operation, along with the Torx driver, gloves and a mains cable. The amp is protected by a velvet pouch, a touch common to £1500-a-bottle cognac. Set-up is intuitive for seasoned audiophiles, and

“The E-Glo i is a recognition of our company's roots”



**RIGHT:** Overhead picture shows the seats for the pairs of 12AX7 and 12AT7 triodes and larger 'Kinkless Tetrode' KT88 pentodes. The latter may be configured for triode or ultralinear output modes, on-the-fly, via a toggle [lower right]



only the valve positions need checking. Remove the cover, fit the four KT88s and the 12AX7 and 12AT7 triodes according to the set-up guide, replace the lid and make your connections. EAT even supplies spare Torx screws should you lose any.

At the back are five pairs of RCA phono connectors, two sets of multi-way speaker binding posts with both 4ohm and 8ohm values, a mains socket and the on/off rocker working in conjunction with a standby toggle on the front of the amp and the power button on the remote. At the front, blue LEDs show the selected source. To their right, next to the remote sensor, an LED shows power-on, flickering during the 40-second muted warm-up period.

On top are the operating controls, power-on at the left, then the motorised rotary volume control and the triode/ultralinear selector. The E-Glo i mutes when you change this setting to avoid pops or

level changes and, lastly, there's the source selection toggle, scrolling up or down.

### ALL IN THE FAMILY

Unusually, and as described in my opening paragraph, the E-Glo i afforded a chance to listen to what is nearly a one-make system, bar cables and speakers. I also used other-make sources, including two open-reel decks and two CD/SACD players, but much time was spent with EAT's B-Sharp turntable and tonearm, Jo N°5 cartridge and E-Glo Petit phono stage.

Wiring throughout was Yter. Given the low power, loudspeakers included the Tannoy Autograph Mini and JBL 4312M II [HFN Sep '12], but ultimately the Falcon Acoustics LS3/5As [HFN Jan '19] were the final arbiter – a match made in heaven as

**ABOVE:** Protective cage removed from the massive chassis [see pic p37] exposes the tubes and custom PSU/output transformers. Input/line triodes feature custom tube coolers

LS3/5As only handle so much power before they die. A head-bangin' beast it is not, but, the higher the speaker sensitivity, the more fun you'll have with the E-Glo i.

One matter to dispense with as quickly as possible is triode vs ultralinear, so as not to obscure hearing what the E-Glo i does regardless. While obviously a desirable feature, it needn't be a source of agitation for audiophiles susceptible to the torment of choices. All it requires are a few favourite tracks and no distractions.

As it's just a matter of flicking a switch, triode vs ultralinear is not an either/or situation [see PM's boxout, adjacent].

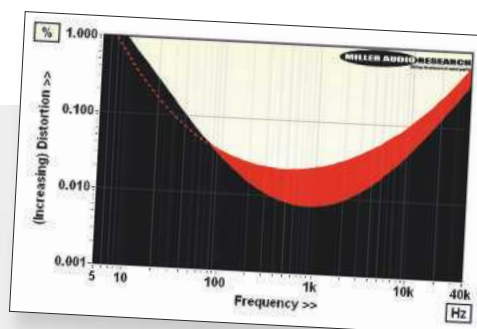
Both are available here at all times, so it's not like choosing solid-state or valve. You use either according to taste or whatever strikes your fancy, so note: I'll not offer a definitive choice.

### TRIODE OR ULTRALINEAR?

Tube amps are not only becoming more sophisticated, but also more user-friendly. Auto biasing keeps the output bottles in optimum fettle – also opening the door to tube rolling – while switching between ultralinear (UL) and triode modes is now often made available

'on the fly'. That's certainly the case with Primaluna's EVO 400 tube amp [HFN Apr '20] and also the physically much larger EAT E-Glo i featured on these pages.

Triode operation certainly has a cult fan base. Technically, distortion *can* be reduced by switching from an UL to triode configuration, but gain is almost halved so, in practice, negative feedback is typically reduced to boost gain at the *expense* of distortion. That's the case here where distortion is actually slightly higher, not lower, in triode mode [red, with UL in black, inset Graph]. So EAT has 'squared the circle' – there's only 1dB less gain in triode mode (so UL will also sound that bit louder if the volume knob is left untouched), and a 1dB improvement in S/N ratio, but power output drops from 35W to 19W. Levelling the field still further, neither is there a significant difference in output impedance or frequency response between modes. PM



### WALKING TALL

The reason for this is that I typically prefer the warmth of triode mode (though I am not convinced by single-ended triodes), even though I also worship a few vintage ultralinear classics. Instead, I will cite either where appropriate. If there's an overall problem with the triode vs ultralinear dilemma, it's that differences can be either too subtle to matter (in the case of the E-Glo i, the level change is minimal), or so drastic that one's preference is immediately determined.

What muddles this is that it's both a hardware issue, eg, the Tannoy speakers sounded smoother with the amp in ultralinear mode while the JBLs benefited from triode, and it varies from source-to-source and recording-to-recording. ☞



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## INTEGRATED TUBE AMP



**ABOVE:** EAT's all-alloy tube cage provides a stylish and secure 'bonnet' for the hot bottles within, but take care as, with our sample at least, the edges are very sharp indeed

How to deal with this variable aspect of the two modes? I played the open-reel tape of The Beatles' *Sgt Pepper* [Capitol L2653], the corresponding US vinyl version [SMAS 2653] and the new mixes on LP [Parlophone PCS7027] and CD [Parlophone 0255745532 8], ensuring level matching and comparing UK mix with US mix, and 2017 remastered LP with the same on CD.

First, let's portray the overall nature of the E-Glo i. Regardless of the position of the toggle, the immediate, stand-out qualities are inherent, undeniable warmth and truly vast soundstage properties. And these were constant regardless of source, material – or mode. This amplifier sounds both intimate *and* huge. How's that for seemingly incompatible virtues?

Repeatedly cited and patently impressive, too, was a rarely-noted element which never attains the importance of image specificity, bass control, transient attack or other qualities, and that was image height. Admittedly, this was enabled in no small part by playback through the

champions of that trait, the LS3/5As. The music always hovered above the speakers, topping a soundstage of cavernous depth and wall-to-wall boundaries.

### FLOAT ON

Revelations started with the crowd noises which open *Sgt Pepper*, carrying on through 'With A Little Help From My Friends', the latter's width bordering on the astounding, the former audibly floating in the room. Each instrument was so perfectly located that – especially with eyes closed – the experience defies you to identify the speaker as a box or a panel. Percussion was as crisp as a Frito, the E-Glo i being atypically precise for any valve design, and even in triode mode. The snap was as fast and clear-cut as I've heard from solid-state amps of ten times the power and five times the price.

Further trashed preconceptions came as the E-Glo i did not attempt to assuage the virulently spitty top-end of *Belafonte Returns To Carnegie Hall* [RCA FTO 6002] ↗

*'This tube amp sounds both intimate and huge'*

**RIGHT:** No KT120s or KT150s here as EAT reverts to the legacy KT88 'kinkless tetrode' for its first tube amplifier. Tubes are either sourced from Electro Harmonix or from EAT's own brand produced in the old Tesla tube factory in the Czech Republic



## JOZEFINA LICHTENEGGER

It is perhaps fitting, and not coincidental, that the classic KT88 tube that kicked-off Jozefina Lichtenegger's career in hi-fi some 20 years ago should be chosen as the heart of EAT's first integrated amplifier. Jozefina took over production of the KT88 in the iconic Prague factory, remaining faithful to the original 'recipe' of the legendary Golden Lion tube.

Now the owner & CEO of EAT (European Audio Team), Jozefina told *HFV* about this choice of tube. 'The output power of an amplifier does not necessarily indicate its musical quality. So there are amplifiers using the new style of KT88 with higher dissipation – the KT120 and KT150 – but for me, the KT88 offers the most "magical" tube sound, closely followed by the 300B triode.'

Jozefina has a disarmingly romantic view of tube engineering. 'The glow that radiates from the cathode's gold-plated tungsten-molybdenum wires', she begins, 'brings the light and resurrection to any thoughtfully-composed and well-recorded music.' But she also has an eye for quality, 'vinyl, tubes and the "analogue sound" are very fashionable now, so there have been many products on the market with cheap components. By contrast our amplifier is finely produced in Europe using the very best components, including milled PCBs'.

And the future? 'We have plans to make a tube pre/power amp and also a tube-loaded CD player/DAC combination. But we will also stay focused on our high-end turntable/phono preamp range.' PM



# NUCLEUS

by

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## INTEGRATED TUBE AMP



**ABOVE:** EAT already offers several separate phono preamps so the five single-ended line inputs on RCAs (no balanced XLRs, MM/MC phono or USB digital options here) are joined by separate 8ohm/4ohm speaker taps on gold-plated 4mm binding posts

as would a mushy valve amp of yore. An open-reel tape in RCA's Living Stereo range, it is the sequel to one of the most admired audiophile recordings of all time. I wondered if during the year between the first album and this follow-up, someone had fallen in love with the worst-sounding vocal mic then available. Despite this, the soundstage remained breathtaking, so all was not lost. But back to the Beatles.

### FINESSE AND FLUIDITY

What the contrasting formats offered was an opportunity which you, too, can replicate if, like me, you're a schmuck who buys both LP and CD... and tape as well. The ultralinear mode tightened up all-analogue recordings, while the triode mode increased the warmth of the digital versions. Digital material thus grew less likely to induce fatigue in this mode.

'She's Leaving Home' places Paul's vocals in front of massed strings, with John Lennon prominent among the group harmonies, making it easy to assess this using LP and CD. Textures – not levels – changed from mode to mode. They

are trade-offs, *not* mutual exclusion, simply differing in the way sound can vary subtly with moving-coil cartridge loading.

It was, however, the loopy 'Being For The Benefit Of Mr Kite' which

**LEFT:** Slim, elegant remote control governs (motorised) volume, mute, input selection and main power on/off



further exploited the dichotomy, a crowded recording which everyone knows is a masterclass in studio-created artifice. Calliope swirls, crisp cymbals, thumpingly hollow bass – rare are the occasions when I've heard such a glorious soundscape recreated from so compact a system. Remember: this amp only delivers between 18 and 35W per side [see PM's Lab Report, opposite], while the speakers are the same height as an LP sleeve. Yet it was monumental.

The E-Glo i was responsible for my indulging in four-hour sessions, night after night. Lou Rawls' and Dianne Reeves' vocals on 'At Last', loads of Keb' Mo' bottleneck – the E-Glo i demonstrates finesse and fluidity, refinement and detail. The bass defied logic, especially through small monitors, as revealed by the box set of The Band's second, eponymous album [Capitol 00602577842832].

It was a tonic after becoming injured to cost and size, a return to domestically-acceptable hardware and prices below that of a cottage in Wales. I was in love, and fell asleep dreaming... what could this beauty do with four KT150s? ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Having lived with EAT's E-Glo phono stage since 2013, I was familiar with the brand's characteristic sound, which the E-Glo i exhibits in spades. This is old-school, warm 'n' cuddly valve magic, more so in triode than ultralinear mode, while in either setting it especially complements both LP and tape – unsurprising given the founder's love for live classical events. Irresistible, so I bought the review sample.

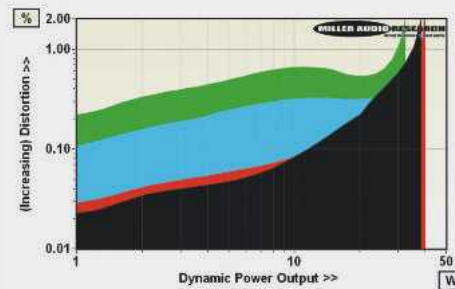
Sound Quality: 88%



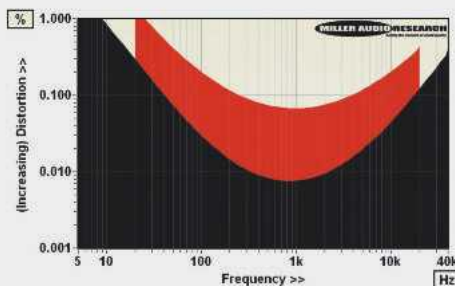
### EAT E-GLO I

I discuss the practical realities of ultralinear (UL) and triode operation in our boxout [p35] but the headline figures for EAT's first, and very substantial tube amplifier, are all very positive. EAT rates the E-Glo i at 2x35W into 8/4ohm loads (via the 8 and 4ohm taps) in UL mode and 2x18W into 8/4ohm in triode mode – conservative figures for a pair of KT88s but precisely met on the lab bench. Under dynamic conditions, and relaxing the distortion limit slightly from 1% to 2%, the E-Glo i marginally extends its reach to deliver 39W/8ohm and 41W/4ohm (via 8 and 4ohm taps, respectively) while still offering 41W/2ohm and 33W/1ohm via the 4ohm tap [see Graph 1, below]. Power output almost exactly halves in triode mode while overall gain is +30dB (+31dB in UL) and the A-wtd S/N is a very respectable 93.5dB (re. 0dBW) – so this is a very quiet tube amplifier, well suited to above-average sensitivity loudspeakers.

In common with almost all tube amps, THD is lowest through critical midband frequencies – a mere 0.012%/1kHz in UL mode at 1W/8ohm – before increasing at low frequency/higher power through transformer core saturation and high frequency/higher power as the influence of NF is reduced [see Graph 2, below]. For example, at 1W/8ohm THD is 0.2%/20Hz, increasing to 1.2%/20Hz at 10W. The damping factor at low bass frequencies is also boosted over some other tube amps thanks to its ~1ohm source impedance. This also reduces the variance in system response with speakers exhibiting swings in load. Into a 'flat' 8ohm load the response reaches down to +0.1dB/10Hz with a +1dB/1Hz 'bump', and up to ±0.04dB/20kHz and -0.9dB/100kHz. Triode mode is v. slightly (but inaudibly) different at -2.2dB/100kHz. PM



**ABOVE:** Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 5.75A



**ABOVE:** Dist. vs. freq., Ultralinear mode (5Hz-40kHz, 1W/8ohm, black; 20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm, red)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Continuous power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	35W / 34W (19W/19W Triode)
Dynamic power (<2% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	39W / 41W / 41W / 33W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz, UL/Triode)	1.09-1.15ohm / 1.03-1.08ohm
Frequency resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	+0.10 to -0.04dB / -0.85dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/rated o/p)	81mV / 505mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW, UL/Triode)	92.7dB / 93.5dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W, UL/Triode)	0.11-1.24% / 0.65-1.18%
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p)	230W / 255W
Dimensions (WHD / weight)	435x170x485mm / 26kg

# Yamaha GT-5000

The front-end to Yamaha's 'Gigantic and Tremendous' 5000 series is not a digital player or DAC but a turntable, and one whose controversial arm harks back to the '80s  
 Review: **Adam Smith** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**A**nd then there were four... We enjoyed the Yamaha NS-5000 loudspeakers [*HFN* Jun '17] and were bowled over by the C-5000 preamplifier and M-5000 power amp [*HFN* Aug '20]. Now we have the source with which Yamaha has chosen to front its flagship 5000 series. Not only is it a return to high-end turntable manufacturing for the company, it also sees the reappearance of what is possibly the greatest model number prefix ever, the 'GT' standing for 'Gigantic and Tremendous'!

The £7000 GT-5000 has much to live up to. The original GT-2000 from 1982, which provides the inspiration for this new turntable, was a huge success, even though it was only ever on sale in Japan. It now enjoys a cult following and I will happily admit to owning a GT-2000 myself. However, Yamaha is at pains to point out that, much like the re-birth of the Technics SL-1200 in 2016, this is no speedy cosmetic makeover of the GT-2000. Rather, the planning of a new flagship turntable actually began in 2014, the GT-5000 project commencing properly in 2017.

## DRIVE SURPRISE

The first step Yamaha took in realising the GT-5000 was to ask some of the designers of the original GT-2000 for their input. They then combined this historical know-how with a thorough back-to-basics evaluation of modern turntable design techniques. The driving force behind the new deck was always clarity of sound, and the end result is the fruit of many thousands of hours of critical listening.

One surprise is the use of a belt-drive system for the GT-5000. The GT-2000 was a direct-drive deck, but my experience of Japanese design over the years suggests that the final method will have been chosen for valid engineering reasons rather

than simplicity's sake. And the belt-drive implementation here is first class. It sees a 24-pole, 2-phase synchronous motor gently bringing the 2kg brass sub-platter and 5.2kg aluminium main platter up to speed in a controlled manner, with no vibration or belt slippage. Pitch adjustment of  $\pm 1.5\%$  is available, but as delivered the turntable was spot-on in this regard [see PM's Lab Report, p43].

As for the plinth, this is an impressive construction based around four layers of high-density particleboard, weighing in at 14.3kg. Four feet are pre-fitted to the base and were developed in conjunction with the Tokkyokiki Corporation – a Japanese company with over 50 years' experience in vibration control. The feet are not height adjustable, so a level surface for the GT-5000 is a must.

If a change from direct- to belt-drive doesn't upset the purists, then the tonearm found on the GT-5000 surely will. It's a straight design [see boxout, p41] with

a 223mm effective length and is based around a complex multi-layer armtube.

## FEELGOOD FACTOR

This armtube comprises an inner aluminium core that is copper plated both inside and outside. This is surrounded, in turn, by a sheet of carbon fibre, three layers of glass fibre and another top layer of silver-painted carbon fibre. Meanwhile, the arm's wiring features triple-shielded copper conductors and terminates in two sets of rear panel connectors.

One pair sports unbalanced RCA phono sockets and the other balanced XLRs, which are perfect for connection to the C-5000 preamplifier's balanced phono input.

Intriguingly, the arm will accept a standard SME-style bayonet-mount headshell though neither armtube nor headshell have any angular offset. Fit and finish of both arm and turntable is, frankly,

*'The impact of the drum strike made me jump in my seat'*



**RIGHT:** Top view reveals the straight arm/headshell in all its enigmatic glory. Large pushbuttons and controls for power on/off, speed select, pitch adjust and start/stop are exquisitely smooth in operation





nothing short of stunning. The deep piano black lacquer has that almost liquid look that one has come to expect from the manufacturer of some of the world's finest pianos. Everything feels solid yet silky to the touch and even the slow way in which the platter comes silently to life is a delight.

Better still, the feelgood factor begins when you unpack the GT-5000, as there's the sense that much thought has gone into how a top-flight turntable should be presented. Both rubber and felt platter mats are provided, plus two counterweights for a range of cartridge weights. There's also a pair of handles that screw into the platter, enabling it to be lifted onto the sub-platter without risk of marking the plinth's finish.

Best of all is a stroboscopic disc, plus a dedicated strobe lamp that plugs into a socket on the rear of the plinth to provide

accurate speed setting – the deck offers both 33.33rpm and 45rpm speeds – independent of mains frequency variations. Finally, the rear of the plinth has pre-drilled mounting holes (blacked off with glorious knurled screws) to take the hinges of the optional DCV-5000 lid, though this will set you back a rather eye-watering £849.

### FULL BODIED

Having established that the GT-5000 was 'Gigantic' in its presence, I was keen to discover if it could tick the 'Tremendous' box too. With my regular Clearaudio MC Essence cartridge fitted [*HFN* Aug '17], and the GT-5000 connected to an Anatek MC-1 phono stage, Naim Supernait amp and PMC Twenty5.24 loudspeakers [*HFN* May '17], the result was a resounding 'yes'.

The GT-5000 is one of those turntables that ever so gently works its way under

**ABOVE:** Substantial gloss black plinth is key to Yamaha's 5000 series aesthetic while the alloy platter, rubber mat, fine speed and other controls are all beautifully turned and finished

your skin until you realise you have become utterly bewitched. This is no bang-and-thump merchant but, then again, neither was its illustrious predecessor. Initially I even wondered if the deck was a little lightweight-sounding, which is ironic given its impressive girth and heft. However, when a full-bodied bass note comes along, the GT-5000 certainly lets you know, and without a second's hesitation.

One word of warning, though. The GT-5000 seemed sensitive to both dust and groove imperfections. Pops and clicks on older records that I would normally hear as a distant background effect were more prominent. I can only attribute this to the arm configuration here, as the same cartridge used in my regular SME 309 tonearm has much less of a problem in this regard. If you're planning on buying this deck then I suggest you make sure your record collection is well buffed, or budget for a record cleaning machine as well.

### PERFECT MATCH

Having reviewed the C-5000 and M-5000 and been present at part of the evaluation of the NS-5000s, I couldn't help being impressed by the way in which Yamaha has voiced the GT-5000 to match its partners perfectly. The top-end is nothing short of sublime, boasting a clarity, purity and precision that is eye-opening at times. Cymbals are crystal clear, without a trace of splash, while hi-hats, such as those on the title track from The Eagles' *Long Run* ➔

## STRAIGHT TALKING

The GT-5000's straight, underhung tonearm is very reminiscent of the classic YSA-2 – an upgrade option for the GT-2000 deck in the 1980s. Stax and Micro Seiki also experimented with similar designs, but the concept was not seen again until the late 1990s when Vestax reintroduced the idea on its DJ turntables as the ASTS (Anti-Skipping Tonearm System). Frankly, its deployment here was primarily focused on the arm's stability during 'scratch play' rather than boasting any audiophile pretension!

Fast forward to 2020 and Yamaha's decision to re-visit the straight arm is very much about offering 'better stability in the groove' than obsessing about tracking error. The former is notionally improved by eliminating bias correction and optimising the arm's 'lateral weight distribution'. Yamaha acknowledges that its arm's tracking error can be up to 10° at the inner/outermost area of the LP but a conventional 9in arm, with offset headshell, might still see errors of up to 5°. This difference in angular tracking distortion is less *subjectively* troublesome, Yamaha contends, than the distortion due to physical friction resulting from impaired tracking performance.



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# TURNTABLE

# LAB REPORT

## YAMAHA GT-5000



**ABOVE:** The large feet include a compliant in-fill but are otherwise not adjustable. The choice of both single-ended (RCA) and balanced (XLR) outputs is unusually versatile but matches the balanced ins fitted to the C-5000 preamp [HFN Aug '20]

LP [Asylum K52181] sounded utterly glorious. The GT-5000 brought them neatly forward within the soundstage and allowed them to propel the track along like few other turntables I can think of at the price.

The same was true at the end of Side 1 of The Eagles' album and the track 'King Of Hollywood'. While the entire song was expertly reproduced, again it was impossible not to be entranced by the sheer solidity of the percussion parts.

### DELICIOUSLY VIVID

This purity of upper midband and treble worked a similar magic on vocalists. The GT-5000 had an unerring knack of pulling the main performers forward of my loudspeakers in a manner that was effortless. Playing Jennifer Warnes' *Famous Blue Raincoat* LP [Impex Records IMP6021], she appeared to be standing in front of my equipment rack, singing the words 'There ain't no cure for love' directly at me, all the time her vocal underpinned by a rock solid bass line and deliciously vivid percussion.

And when it came to imaging, the unusual alignment of the stylus with respect to the groove caused absolutely no issues, the GT-5000 able to recreate images both wide and deep. In fact the way it highlighted the production of Jessie Ware on 'If You're Never Gonna Move' from her *Devotion* LP [Cherrytree/Interscope Records B0018230-01] was an absolute riot.

Here Ware's vocal is multi-tracked during the choruses so that she becomes her own backing singers. The GT-5000 snapped between her lone voice in the verses and these multiples with unerring precision while revealing the various textures captured in the different vocal takes.

At the bottom end, the GT-5000 pulls off the trick of being both deep and detailed. When a more subtle bass line is present, the deck locks onto it with ease, meaning tracks are driven along with each note expertly marshalled. Switching to 45rpm and dropping ABBA's 'Lay All Your Love On Me' 12in single onto the platter [Epic EPC A 13-1456] showcased this quality, the GT-5000 lapping up the beat.

The Avid Volvere SP turntable that we reviewed recently [HFN Sep '20], and which was still in residence, did offer an ever so slightly tighter grip in comparison, but the GT-5000 had the edge when it came to ultimate bass detail and slam. Indeed, the sheer impact of the first drum strike made me jump in my seat.

Finally, I also tried out both platter mats provided and found myself preferring the extra midband richness and top end smoothness provided by the rubber version. This was opposed to the slightly more exuberant nature of the felt alternative. Still, the option to be able to experiment is a nice touch. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

As suggested, the GT-5000 is indeed 'Gigantic' and boy is it 'Tremendous'. Not only a perfectly matched source for Yamaha's 5000 series but it's a superb turntable/arm combination in its own right. A delight to behold and operate, the deck's sonic performance is as glossy as its finish, and right up there with the best... even with that straight arm that bucks conventional wisdom!

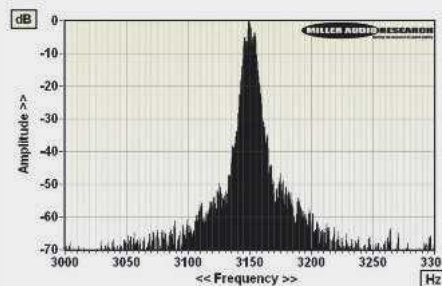
Sound Quality: 85%



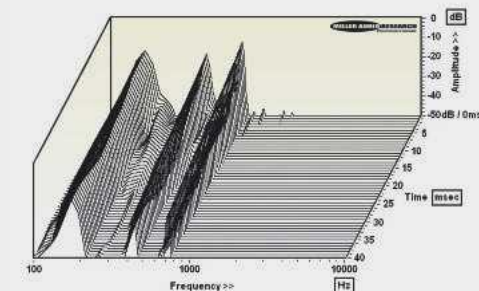
Rather than slip and strain the belt, Yamaha's 24-pole, 2-phase AC synchronous motor applies its torque progressively, bringing the GT-5000's 7.2kg aluminium platter/brass sub-platter up to speed within about 12 seconds. As supplied, absolute speed was bang-on 33.3rpm, requiring no fine pitch adjustment, although the peak-weighted W&F is moderate rather than especially low at 0.05% and 0.06%, respectively [see Graph 1, below]. The -69.2dB through-bearing rumble is optimally reduced via the rubber mat option, this yielding a figure of -70.6dB through-the-groove (or -70.2dB with the stiff felt mat, all re. 0dB/5cm/sec).

The straight, statically balanced tonearm has a 223mm effective length and no headshell offset, trading tracking accuracy (and a lack of side thrust compensation) for 'superior rigidity' and groove stability [see boxout, p41]. Rigid it most certainly is, with the bearing all but frictionless at ~5mg, but the tonearm – a carbon-clad copper-plated aluminium tube – exhibits a series of striking high-Q resonances [see Graph 2, below]. The main mode for the tapered tube is deferred to a high 172Hz and is accompanied by two potent harmonic/ twisting modes at 430Hz and 730Hz.

Erring on the side of caution, Yamaha's counterweight under-reads slightly, so dialling-up 1.0g yields a 1.08g tracking force and 2g gives 2.18g. Finally, whatever the various tonearm geometries (Baerwald, Lofgren and Stevenson most commonly quoted) might predict for the tracking error and distortion, in practice the THD from my test cartridge increased most steeply at the innermost grooves – from 0.65% (outermost) to 0.75% (middle) and 1.9% (end-of-side), all -8dB/1kHz re. 5cm/sec. PM



**ABOVE:** Wow and flutter re. 3150Hz tone at 5cm/sec (plotted ±150Hz, 5Hz per minor division)



**ABOVE:** Cumulative tonearm resonant decay spectrum, illustrating various bearing, pillar and 'tube' vibration modes spanning 100Hz-10kHz over 40msec

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Turntable speed error at 33.33rpm	33.31rpm (-0.07%)
Time to audible stabilisation	12sec
Peak Wow/Flutter (Peak wtd)	0.05% / 0.06%
Rumble (silent groove, DIN B wtd)	-70.6dB (-70.2dB with felt mat)
Rumble (through bearing, DIN B wtd)	-69.2dB
Hum & Noise (unwtd, rel. to 5cm/sec)	-53.9dB
Power Consumption	9W (0.5W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	546x221x411mm / 26.5kg

# PMC twenty5.26i

An unchanged exterior hides PMC's crossover and driver upgrades made to its premium three-way floorstander  
 Review: **Mark Craven** Lab: **Paul Miller**

In The Who's 'Won't Get Fooled Again', Roger Daltrey memorably sings 'Meet the new boss – same as the old boss'. It's a phrase that sprang to my mind when confronted by PMC's twenty5.26i, as this floorstanding speaker is, outwardly, identical to its twenty5.26 predecessor launched in 2016, with cabinet dimensions matching to the millimetre. Yet PMC describes its new twenty5i series as a 'substantial re-engineering', improving performance without moving away from the signature sound of its forbear.

Aptly, the twenty5.26i is the 'boss' of the new lineup, and the only three-way model. Below it are the twenty5.21i and twenty5.22i standmounts, along with two other two-way floorstanders (the twenty5.23i and twenty5.24i). There's also a new centre channel speaker for home cinema installations. Across the twenty5i series, buyers get a quartet of finish options. Walnut, Oak and a new White Silk all keep the same £8495-per-pair price point, while choosing Diamond Black adds a £500 premium.

## GOTTA ROLL WITH IT

New to the series is the high-frequency drive unit. This 19mm tweeter, designed in conjunction with SEAS, places a soft dome within a 34mm roll surround. This pairing, says PMC, delivers both the wide dispersion of a 19mm tweeter with the improved mid-frequency response of a larger driver. This has enabled a 1.7kHz crossover point to be used on the two-way twenty5i models, even if a higher 4kHz crossover is retained in this three-way design. The tweeter is mounted in a curved, fibre-glass 'HF dispersion plate' and protected by a grille.

Both the 50mm soft dome mid unit and 170mm 'g-weave' (woven glass fibre composite) bass driver – which cross over at 400Hz – are continuations from PMC's previous range. And once again, the latter feeds into PMC's take on transmission line bass-loading, with its 'ATL' chamber

terminating in two front-facing Laminair vents [see PM's boxout, p45].

With only one of its drive units a fresh invention, and the cabinet design unchanged (as before, it angles backwards, reducing internal standing waves and offering a degree of physical time alignment), much of the twenty5.26i's boosted performance, claims PMC, comes from a new crossover and vibration-reducing plinth stand.

## TAKE A STAND

The former incorporates 4th-order filters at each crossover point and uses hand-selected components mounted on 'military-grade' fibre-glass boards, all connected via pure copper tracks. The new stand, meanwhile, is borne from research conducted during the development of PMC's Fact Fenestria floorstander. This 'anti-vibration' plinth is threaded for the supplied stainless-steel spikes, with damping discs used to decouple the speaker from the floor. By targeting specific vibration frequencies, PMC believes it can radically improve performance.

When it comes to styling, the twenty5i series is quite domesticated, eschewing the industrial feel of PMC's SE series or towering aesthetic of the Fenestria. The look of the twenty5.26i isn't something that will set pulses racing, though, with hard lines and exposed driver fixings. Add the full-height magnetic cloth grille and you have a loudspeaker that's the definition of unflashy. The size is manageable enough – a modest 1040x192mm (hw).

PMC fits dual (or triple) binding post connections on its Fact series, and did the

**RIGHT:** A 19mm PMC/SEAS soft fabric dome tweeter crosses over at 4kHz to a 50mm soft-dome midrange and 400Hz to a 170mm long-throw 'g-weave'-coned bass/mid unit. Bass is reinforced via PMC's ATL (Advanced Transmission Line), tuned via 'Laminair' vents

'Mercury's rapid-fire verses fizzed from the centre stage'





## BETTER BASS?

Speakers with ports, ducts or other apertures in their cabinets are typically reflex designs, also known as 'vented boxes', and exploit the Helmholtz resonance to boost their low frequency output. This resonance, such as you might hear when blowing across the top of a champagne flute, offers the promise of better bass extension and sensitivity than might be achieved with a sealed box, but is traded against a steeper bass roll-off and poorer transient response. Transmission line bass loading is a variant of this technique first proposed by Arthur Bailey in *Wireless World*, 1965. Bailey's ingenious solution utilises the Helmholtz resonance while also damping any unwanted reflections or resonances within the enclosed air space by absorbing the rear radiation of the bass driver in a long (folded), damped and tapered duct. However, such a pipe has to be at least a quarter-wavelength in span to be effective, ie, 4.3m for 20Hz. This is rarely practical so in 'real world' designs the transmission line is cut short and vented, allowing some delayed, vestigial bass output to escape. PMC's ATL (Advanced Transmission Line) uses this technique, its claimed 3.3m effective length tuned to a notional 26Hz [see Lab Report, p47].

same on the 2014-era twenty.26 floorstander, but here a single set of connectors, coupled directly to the crossover board to reduce resistance and signal path, is provided. This arrangement is believed to outweigh the subjective benefits of a split crossover and bi-amping or bi-wiring.

Thanks to its controlled dispersion, tuned bass output and front-firing port, the twenty5.26i is 'more forgiving of difficult room conditions and placement constraints' than other loudspeakers, says PMC, and buyers 'will be able to achieve a superb sound throughout the room with little effort'.

I appreciate the optimism, but found it still took time with set-up to lock in a stereo image, not least because I felt the speaker's detailed delivery – more on this later – made it easier to detect less than optimal placement. Positioning close to a rear wall for a bass boost isn't discouraged, particularly as there's no rear port to contend with, but I tried to give them as much breathing room as possible.

### TIGHT AS A NUT


Realism, transparency and musicality. This is the three-pronged mission statement of the twenty5i series and with that in mind it's hard to consider the twenty5.26i as anything other than a success. This new-breed floorstander picks up the baton from previous PMC speakers, impressing with the clean, nuanced delivery, precise sense of rhythm and top-to-bottom balance the company's fans expect.

This clarity and timing was there to savour on the Queen track 'Another

One Bites The Dust' [*The Game*; Tidal Hi-Fi 44.1kHz/16-bit], one of the band's most disco-infused moments and so dry it sounds vacuum-packed. The big PMC speaker conveyed the tight-as-a-nut production and work of musicians at the top of their game. The punchy drum pattern and rhythm of the bassline were locked in perfect unison, while Freddie Mercury's rapid-fire verses fizzed from the centre stage yet retained a delicate reverb. His vocals are then layered during the chorus, and the interplay between them was scintillating.

### RAISE A GLASS

With the Queen recording there was an enjoyably taut and unmuddled feel to the twenty5.26i's handling of the bass, but with Faithless's dance tune 'We Come 1' [*Outrospective*; BMG 74321 850832] I got more of an impression of how much that 170mm driver punches above its weight. Given a physical leg-up by the cabinet and the ATL architecture, it managed to range impressively deep but still sound lightning-fast and responsive. This ability surfaced again and again throughout my audition, providing large scale, energetic footing to tracks that demanded it.

I could have happily fed the twenty5.26i a diet of electro-pop and dance music to savour its adroit handling of up-tempo music, and the slick manner in which it dots musical flourishes across its soundstage. But I changed the pace with Philip Glass's 'I. Opening', the first movement from his 1982 release *Glassworks* [Tidal Hi-Fi; 44.1kHz/16-bit]. Almost entirely a piano instrumental, with an unusual triple-note construction that gives it the air of falling forward, this let the delicacy of the twenty5.26i's mid and treble come to the 



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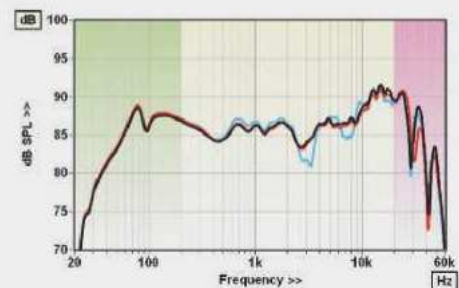


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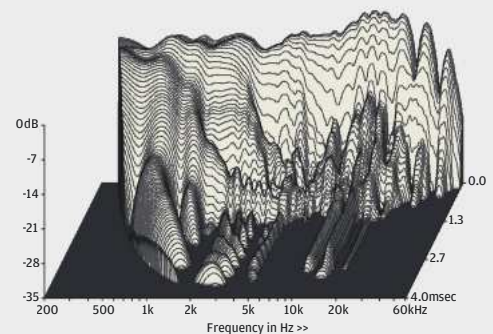
## PMC TWENTY5.26I

Despite enhancements to the crossover and change of tweeter, PMC has retained the conservative 86dB sensitivity rating of its previous twenty5 flagship and, refreshingly, this is bang on the money with 86.2dB/2.83V achieved at 1kHz and 85.7dB averaged across a representative 500Hz-8kHz. The resulting responses for the review pair [Graph 1, below] show a rising treble output, and minor resonances [Graph 2], though this can be 'tempered' by listening a little off-axis. We've also seen a dip in output at 2kHz-4kHz before, but the ~3dB loss at 2.7kHz is relatively minor in this revised floorstander, these two features resulting in response errors of ±5.1dB and ±4.6dB, respectively. Adding the grille brings further unevenness to the presence band [blue trace, Graph 1] but the pair matching between our two samples over the same 200Hz-20kHz was impressively tight at ±0.7dB. Bass extension is a useful 38Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz), the two 'Laminair' vents actually a single aperture for a transmission line that peaks at a high 86Hz - coinciding with a slight notch in the bass driver output [green shaded area, Graph 1]. Minor resonances in the line were detected at 160Hz and 260Hz.

The modest sensitivity is achieved via a slightly tougher load than might have been expected (or suggested by PMC's nominal 8ohm rating) thanks to dips of 3.9ohm/116Hz and 4.7ohm/3.1kHz although the phase angles are within ±20° here. The biggest swoops in phase angle of +34°/3.8kHz and a significant -69°/60Hz occur at 7.0ohm and 10.5ohm, respectively, but these should not cause any partnering amplifier, of comparable quality, pause for thought. PM



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w. grille, blue



ABOVE: Major modes decay quite quickly, with just a suggestion of mid and treble driver resonances

**LEFT:** All PMC's twenty5i loudspeakers feature the same matt silver-finish alloy back panel that supports the crossover and single 4mm binding posts

guitar parts enjoying a breadth that mirrors their on-stage setup.

There's a cohesive nature to the twenty5.26i's performance that's addictive. The effect is that you can lose the sense you're listening to a set of speakers, the sextet of drivers instead forming a balanced, even whole, from pure-sounding bass at the bottom to grit-free highs.

### PARTY PIECE

At the same time, the overall presentation favours transparency, insight and smoothness. You'd never consider these warm or rich, and occasionally the emphasis on midband precision seems to come at the expense of high-end sparkle. I can imagine some considering this speaker lacking in 'excitement', but counter to this is the pleasure you get listening to something that never seems to put a foot wrong. I also found it easy to drive with quite modest amplification, and tonally consistent with off-axis listening.

I finished my audition, as I knew I would, with 'Won't Get Fooled Again' [*The Ultimate Collection*; Polydor 065 234-2], which had me tapping my feet and air-drumming to Keith Moon's frantic rhythms. So for all the twenty5.26i's mature looks and neutral performance, that doesn't mean it's not suited to getting the party started. At one point Daltrey demanded I 'take a bow for the new revolution'. I'd doff my cap to this speaker. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

Those seeking a speaker that works with the music, rather than unduly adding to it, will cherish PMC's premium-priced floorstander. Dynamic and detailed, transparent and well-timed, the twenty5.26i doesn't resort to bass bluster or overt treble to impress. There are more eye-catching rivals out there, but park your superficiality and you'll discover PMC's from-the-studio aesthetic suits the performance.

Sound Quality: 85%



fore, and its talent for dynamics as the music ranged from soft to *forte*.

Listen to more straightforward material that's not so skilfully mastered and you may feel you're not tapping into the twenty5.26i's obvious full potential. Yet even as I ran through a variety of relatively low-fi recordings, I was never 'disappointed' by what I heard.

AC/DC's 'It's A Long Way To The Top (If You Wanna Rock 'N' Roll)' [*High Voltage*; EMI 494 67 12] does not have the holographic imaging of other compositions, but while the speaker did not have to dig deep, neither did its midrange driver gloss over the distorted guitar riffs, retaining the distinctive layering. The wide soundstage also stood out, with Malcolm and Angus Young's

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V - 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	86.2dB / 85.7dB / 84.0dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz-20kHz)	3.9ohm @ 116Hz 30ohm @ 48Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz-20kHz)	-69° @ 60Hz 34° @ 3.8kHz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz-20kHz)	0.7dB / ±5.1dB/±4.6dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	38Hz / 28.2kHz/29.9kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.2% / 0.8% / 0.6%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	1040x192x439mm / 25kg

# T+A P 3100 HV

With some sensible internal revisions, the German company has made its heavyweight preamplifier even more precise and detailed, without sacrificing any of the music's soul  
 Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**Y**ou can tell a lot about a company from the title it takes for itself – from the name of the founder to classical or musical allusions to the equivalent of go-faster stripes, every brand seems to set out its stall in a somewhat different way. German manufacturer T+A elektroakustik is no exception, except here the name – the initials stand for ‘Theorie und Anwendung’, Theory and Application – is saying ‘we’re no-nonsense, and led by engineering’. Or, as the company puts it in a brief bio, ‘Actually we’re scientists...’.

Part of the T+A thinking, apart from the ‘appliance of science’ thing, is to give its products long lifecycles, and build them in a modular manner, allowing facilities to be added to suit the user's needs, and that's the case with the P 3100 HV preamp we have here. It sells for £12,690, and is available in silver or titanium lacquer – or under the HV Individual programme, you can have it in ‘many special paint types, such as car finishing lacquers’.

## PURE PLEASURES

The P 3100 HV is all-analogue, and a line-only design. It may have separate digital and analogue power supplies, right back to requiring two mains cables, but the ‘digital’ section is purely there for display and control functions, the audio section being entirely analogue. Meanwhile the modular design seen across the company's range allows the buyer to add a phono section for £1088, in either moving-magnet or moving-coil flavours, while the parametric eq/tone module, designated APM, is included as standard.

At heart, however, the P 3100 HV is very simple, with seven unbalanced inputs on RCAs, four balanced on XLRs, and preamp outs on both RCAs and XLRs, the layout of the rear panel making clear the dual-mono construction of the unit, which uses identical circuitboards for both channels.

**RIGHT:** Inside the P 3100 HV preamp separate L/R channel analogue tone processor modules sit above the main audio PCB. The HV power supply is concealed below in a shielded chamber

In addition there's a single trigger-in socket for remote switching, an Ethernet port for remote control via the T+A app, and the company's Hlink remote control bus that enables an entire T+A system to be run from a single remote control.

Furthermore, the Ethernet port connects with the company's HVEQ software running on a PC, enabling room correction to be carried out. The headphone socket is powered by its own amplifier, and the only other ‘frill’ here is that one of the analogue inputs can be set in ‘bypass’ mode, allowing it to be used with an external surround processor. So this may be purist hi-fi, but there's no reason why it shouldn't be easy to use.

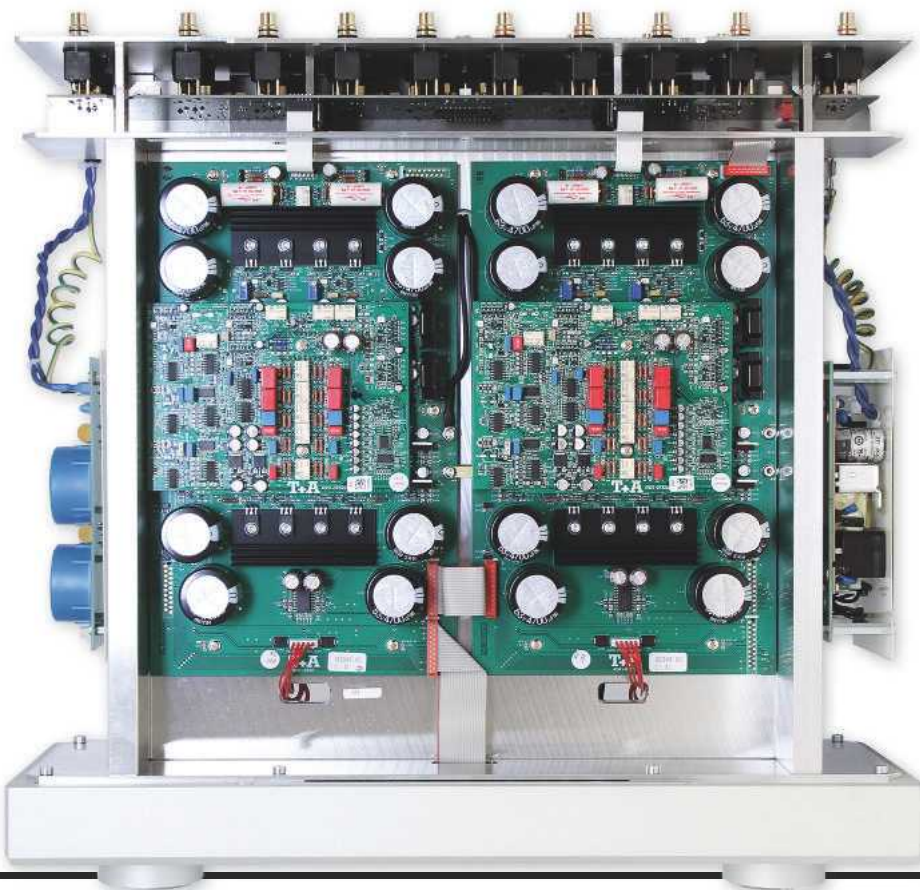
So far I could have been describing the P 3000 HV [HFN Sep '14] this preamp replaces, but while the P 3100 HV looks

identical and the ‘High Voltage’ topology is retained [see PM's boxout, p49], much has changed under the lid.

## CLASS ACT

For a start the power supplies have been completely redesigned, using a more powerful, ultra-low-flux density transformer with a greatly reduced electromagnetic field for the analogue stage, designed to diminish current spikes and suppress any residual mains frequency noise. The transformer for the digital control section is also new, more powerful and uses extra electromagnetic shielding, while there's improved filtering in both power supplies.

The main audio circuitry is also upgraded, using new Mundorf capacitors, precision Vishay resistors and even a completely different base material for







the circuitboards, designed for lower dissipation. This isn't a running tweak, despite outward appearances, but a complete redesign, along with the extensive DC-coupling of the preamp in order to remove as many capacitors from the signal path as possible.

Moreover, the volume control is the same superb relay-based design found in the P 3000 HV, giving the preamp superb channel-matching across its range. Anyone used to preamps in which the sound drifts a bit

to left or right at very low levels is going to be delighted, as there's none of that to be heard here [see PM's Lab Report, p51].

Above all, the P 3100 HV exudes class, and not just because it's big, solidly built – it weighs as much as some power amps at 28kg – and immaculately finished. The controls have wonderful precision, from that hefty volume control to the reworked front panel touch-buttons, which have been retuned for greater sensitivity, and the whole thing is a delight

*'The romantic sweep of the playing makes it simply fly by'*

to use. Even the metal-clad remote control [see p51] is a cut above the norm.

### TOP BRASS

In the absence of a matching T+A power amp, the P 3100 HV was used in editor PM's listening room with Constellation Inspiration Mono [HFN Oct '19] and Bricasti M25 power amps [full review next month], driving the Bowers & Wilkins 800 D3 speakers [HFN Oct '16], and with the usual Melco/dCS

Vivaldi One front end [HFN Feb '18]. It was immediately apparent that this preamp is very much in the T+A tradition of precision and detail, with an entirely open view of the music that grabs and holds the attention. But there's nothing 'technical',

**ABOVE:** Two huge rotaries flank T+A's familiar operational display, governing input and volume as well as navigating through the set-up menu. In this picture, T+A's media player is selected

mechanical or sterile here. After just a few hours of post-lab test warm-up (and aided by temperatures hitting well into the 30s outside), the P 3100 HV was in fine form from the very first track played.

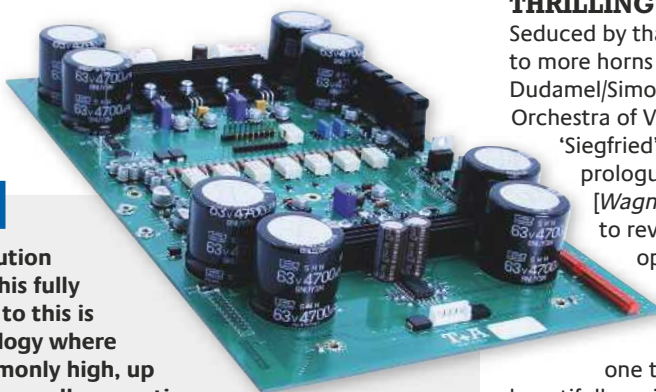
The swing, resolution and all-out brass power on Count Basie's classic 'Corner Pocket', from *Live At The Sands (Before Frank)* [MFSL UDSACD 2113] was suitably attention-grabbing, lush and tinglesome. There was no sense of coloration, but purely a big, warm sound of a band of master-musicians in action, captured wonderfully in this 1966 recording. If this was the warm-up session...

### THRILLING STUFF

Seduced by that brass sound, it was on to more horns in the form of the Gustavo Dudamel/Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela recording of 'Siegfried's Rhine Journey' from the prologue of *Götterdämmerung* [Wagner; n/a cat no], and a chance to revel in the finest detail in the opening, before unleashing the power with those great brass passages.

Thrilling stuff, and really one to have you turning up that beautifully-weighted volume control. Indeed, it's worth forgoing the remote and using the front-panel control, simply because it feels so good, enhancing the 'user-experience' along with the excellent soundstaging and three-dimensional depth.

That glorious scale of imaging is just as in evidence in the hushed tones and plucked strings of the opening to Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia On A Theme Of Thomas Tallis* [LSO/Simovic in DSD64 from LSO Live LSO0792]. The orchestra is laid before the listener, and the lovely romantic sweep of the playing makes the piece simply fly by. ☺



### PUMP UP THE VOLTAGE

While the P 3100 HV is clearly an evolution of the 3000 chassis, the 'genetics' of this fully discrete design remain unaltered. Key to this is the HV or 'High Voltage' preamp topology where specially selected J-FETs run at uncommonly high, up to 100V, PSU voltages. With only a very small proportion of this 'swing' used in practice, this allows T+A to operate the FETs in Class A over a limited but highly linear portion of their range. The result is distortion that's largely unchanging with either output or frequency [see Lab Report, p51] without employing anything more than the absolute minimum of corrective feedback. Achieving the desired complement of harmonic distortions – typically just 2nd-order – was as important to T+A's engineers as the level of THD itself, although at just 0.00005% through the critical midband, distortion can only be described as vanishingly low. T+A has also rid the P 3100 HV of some interstage coupling capacitors, moving to a DC-coupled design without falling back on DC-servo offset cancellation. Instead, the likelihood of DC drift is countered by precise thermal coupling of the FETs combined with painstaking manual adjustment of all stages. PM

# Heresy

Klipsch®  
**HERITAGE**  
LOUDSPEAKERS

Titanium Diaphragm Hi-Frequency Driver

Polyimide Diaphragm Midrange Compression Driver

12" Fibre Composite Cone Woofer

Stylish Magnetic Woven Grill

MDF Cabinet With Four Fine Veneer Finish Options

Tractrix Horn Ports for Improved Airflow



## *A little heresy is* good for the soul...

The Heresy IV offers unparalleled sound quality from a relatively small speaker. Utilizing Tractrix geometry, the all-new Heresy IV ports allow for the most efficient, fastest air transfer in their class, which reduces port noise for punchier low frequencies. In addition to delivering smooth, dynamic and low distortion sound, the Heresy IV is available in a high-quality Natural Cherry, Distressed Oak, American Walnut, or Satin Black Ash wood veneer finish. A removable slant riser base is included for ideal floor placement.



FINISH  
OPTIONS:



## T+A P 3100 HV



**ABOVE:** Separate IEC mains inlets for 'analogue' and 'digital' (switching/display) PSUs are fitted alongside six line inputs – four on balanced XLRs, one with a MM/MC phono option – a tape in/out, and balanced and single-ended preamp outputs

Nor is this ability limited to conveying wonderful orchestral music. With the snarly Texas boogie of ZZ Top's 'La Grange' [*Tres Hombres*; Warner Bros download, 192kHz/24-bit], the P 3100 HV just takes the music from the source and passes it through to the power amp in a manner that may be precise and focused, but is also a whole load of fun. The ZZ Top track may be dense and gritty but everything going on is easy to hear – and enjoy.

### SUPER VIBRANT

By this point I was trying all kinds of tracks, just to hear this super-vibrant presentation in action. The Barenaked Ladies' live version of 'Brian Wilson' [*Hits From Yesterday & The Day Before*; Rhino/Raisin' Warner 8122-79757-3] is nothing if not vivid, and I don't think I've ever heard quite as clearly that the audience singalong is word-perfect from the first notes. And neither have I ever experienced this track giving the Aerofoil bass drivers of the 800 D3s such a severe workout,

even at 'sensible' listening levels!

So confident was I by now of the abilities of the whole system, and the preamp at its heart that it was time to re-visit some old favourites. Dire Straits' 'Money For Nothing' [*Brothers In Arms*; Vertigo 9871498] had me thinking I'd never



**LEFT:** Full system remote governs input, volume, balance, mute and enables navigation of the P 3100 HV's configuration menu

noticed how Pink Floyd-esque is the track's 'I Want My MTV' opening, while Knopfler's signature riff has a truly visceral quality, all strings and guitar body and pick-ups and electronics – you can sense how every note is being created.

Similarly with The Beatles' 'While My Guitar Gently Weeps' [*White Album*; UMC download, 96kHz/24-bit] where it's intriguing to hear how much of the old 'left and right' production style still remained by 1968, but also how clearly every element of the mix is captured.

This was also apparent with what has become a one-riff cliché, Fleetwood Mac's 'The Chain' [*Rumours*; Rhino 96kHz/24-bit download]. OK, so I was listening on the weekend of the 70th anniversary Grand Prix, but still the clattery guitars and tight harmonies of the opening sounded enchanting, as did Mick Fleetwood's pattering then thumping drums under the growl of John McVie's celebrated bass line.

The same effect was in evidence with The Police's 'Spirits In A Material World' [*Every Breath You Take*; A&M 069 493 607-2], on which the tight rhythm section Sting and Copeland formed (at least when not fighting) is just as deliciously obvious. ⚡

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

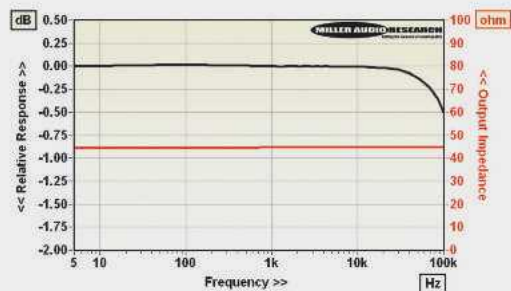
I had an absolute ball with this preamp, combining as it does a remarkably 'straight through' sound with quality throughout, from design to engineering to styling and finish. I might swerve the 'match my car' paint options, but otherwise there's nothing not to like here. It looks – and sounds – a million dollars, and is as much a pleasure to use as it is to listen to and with. Clearly the theory has been well applied here.

Sound Quality: 89%

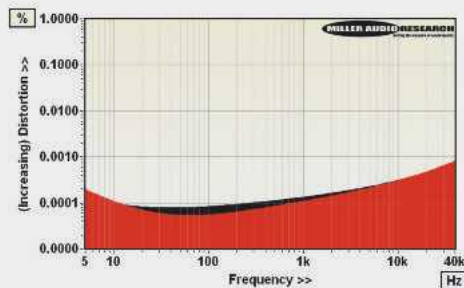


If the technical prowess of T+A's flagship preamplifier was never in doubt [*HFN Sep '14*] then this latest P 3100 HV iteration pushes and polishes the performance still further. Once again, it offers a maximum +14.3dB gain (balanced) with a custom volume control that acts in 1dB steps over a 60dB range with ±0.1dB overall accuracy, over an 80dB range with ±0.2dB accuracy and 90dB with just ±0.3dB variance – this is a very tight tolerance indeed and matched by very few other preamplifiers. Distortion, meanwhile, inches downwards further still from a minuscule 0.00007-0.00025% to 0.00005-0.00024% here [20Hz-20kHz re. 0dBV – see Graph 2, below] while maintaining its wide 102dB A-wtd S/N ratio and very low –99.1dBV (11µV) residual noise. Maximum output is a prodigious 17.5V – driving any power amp on the planet – while the input overload is >12V.

Arguably, the most significant change to the design of the 3000/3100 lies in the removal of all but one coupling capacitor [see boxout, p49] while stabilising the DC performance of the preamp without recourse to a servo. So, where the output impedance of the P 3000 HV 'increased' from 45ohm (100Hz-20kHz) to 47ohm at 20Hz, the P 3100 HV's source impedance remains flat to within ±0.1dB from 20Hz-100kHz. Moreover while the HF response of both preamps extends to –0.02dB/20kHz the 3000's 'dip' in low frequency response to –0.5dB/1Hz is absent in the P 3100 HV which is flat to below 1Hz [see Graph 1, below]. While this adaption in frequency response will not be audible *per se*, the elimination of DC-blocking caps and absence of a DC servo may well exert some subjective benefit at very high as well as very low frequencies. PM



**ABOVE:** Output impedance versus frequency (red) and frequency response (black) re. 0dBV, balanced output



**ABOVE:** Distortion versus extended frequency at 0dBV, balanced line input/output (left, black; right, red)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output/input (<1% THD)	17.5V (balanced)
Output imp. (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	44-45ohm / 45ohm
Frequency resp. (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	+0.00 to –0.02dB / –0.45dB
Input sensitivity (re. 0dBV)	190mV
Input overload	12.5V (balanced)
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBV)	101.8dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 0dBV)	0.00005–0.00024%
Power consumption	49W (analogue PSU) / 5W (dig)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	460x170x460mm / 28kg

# Hegel H95

The new entry-level model in the Norwegian company's amp range is a sensible mix of facilities and performance – or at least it would be, if the sound wasn't sensational!

Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Oslo-based Hegel has been enjoying something of a purple patch of late: not content with raising eyebrows with the sheer performance of its flagship H590 integrated amplifier [HFN Oct '18], it went on to get dangerously near that level with the much more affordable H390 model [HFN Aug '19], offering almost all of big brother's sound quality for not much more than half the price. Our HFN review concluded that it was 'sensationally good value, with a clean, powerful sound and bags of musicality, not to mention exceptional flexibility including onboard network streaming'. Unsurprisingly, it won the 2019-20 EISA Award for 'Best High-End Amplifier' [see this year's EISA Awards, p72].

## ENGINE FOR CHANGE

Now Hegel is tackling the other end of its product lineup, with a replacement for the entry-level H-Series model, the H90. The new H95 sells for £1500, making it a little more than the model it supersedes. The H90 was only launched three years ago, stepping up from the previous H90 by including Hegel's SoundEngine 2 regime, which uses local and adaptive feedforward – rather than global feedback – technology to tackle distortion within the amp stages. The design also promises a high damping factor, and even better speaker control, which has long been a Hegel strength.

Since the H90 was so fundamentally well-sorted, it may seem prudent to wonder why a replacement was needed so soon. The answer, as is usually the case with this enterprising manufacturer, is that nothing ever stands still. Since rolling out the H90, it has launched its H120 and H190 [HFN Jan '18] models – in addition to the aforementioned H590 and H390 – and realised the developments made for those models had something to offer lower

down the range. Or, to put it rather more prosaically, the world of digital music keeps moving on and the H90's streaming and DAC implementations were beginning to look a bit long in the tooth.

With improvements to the company's UPnP streaming solution, the addition of Spotify Connect and a forthcoming update to bring them AirPlay 2 capability, the H120 and H190 were already way ahead of the H90, so those features have been carried over to the new H95, along with the latest menu system that allows for those all-important 'over the air' updates and the potential for future upgrades.

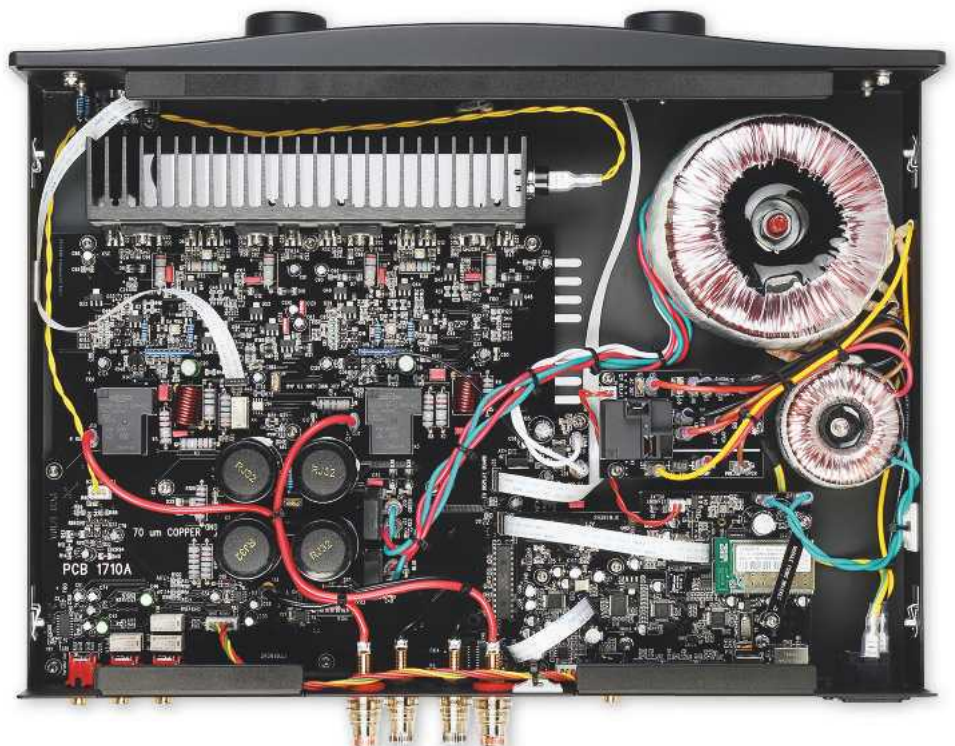
The network 'business end' of the H95 isn't quite the same as that offered further up the range, however. Something had to give in order to hit the intended price-point, so the new model lacks the extended 'custom installation' facilities of IP and Control4 remote operation, and neither will this model be upgradable to become a Roon endpoint. The RC10

remote handset provided with the H120 upwards is also missing – with H95 it's (perhaps appropriately) a £95 optional extra [see p55]. Apart from changing the volume from a distance, you probably won't need it, but it's a reassuringly chunky metal-clad device nonetheless.

## FLEXIBLE FRIEND

Building on the platform of the H90, Hegel's engineers have made only mild changes to the analogue section of the amplifier, with improvements to the power supplies, and also to the headphone output to reduce noise. The big change, however, is in the digital section here, which uses the same DAC as the H120 and H190. This is Hegel's in-house designed 'SynchroDAC' technology, using balanced signal processing throughout to, it claims, maintain dynamic range and reduce distortion [see PM's Lab Report, p55].

So, the H95 may be the least powerful of the company's H-Series amps, being



**RIGHT:** One pair of Sanken power transistors are deployed per channel [heatsinks, top left], fed from a toroidal transformer and linear PSU [right]. Libre-sourced digital board [lower right] offers USB and network access



specified at 60W/8ohm rather than the 75W of the H120, and may have a slightly simplified network interface – at least in terms of capability – but that doesn't stop it being a rather flexible little amplifier.

As well as its network connection via Ethernet, it has an asynchronous USB-B input, three optical digital inputs and a single coaxial (RCA) input. The balanced analogue inputs found further up the range are also missing here, but the H95 has two sets of line-ins on RCAs, plus a pair for its variable preamp output, allowing the amp to be connected to an external power amplifier either for biamping suitable loudspeakers or to facilitate a future system upgrade.

#### WAKE UP CALL

Any of the inputs can also be configured as a 'bypass' – fixed-level inputs for use with an external surround processor – and it's also possible to set the maximum volume level for both the amplifier's main output and the headphone socket. Finally, via the

optional remote control handset, the start-up volume can be set if required.

The H95 also offers 'wake on LAN', a neat touch allowing you to use Spotify or AirPlay from a portable device, so even when it's off the amp will come out of standby and start playing. It's a handy feature should you want to punt the output

from, say, the BBC Sounds app running on your phone to the 'big system'.

Note, however, that Hegel doesn't have a dedicated app to play UPnP music to the H95 – nor indeed any of its amps. Instead it suggests

Conversdigital's mconnect Player app as being the best choice for playing music from network stores to the amp. This app is available in a free 'Lite' version with ads, but the full version is hardly going to break the bank at \$5.99, and mconnect also has the benefit of bringing with it Qobuz and Tidal access – subject to the user having the appropriate subscriptions, of course.

However, I also tried the H95 with a range of UPnP/DLNA control apps, including

*'Her voice clear and forceful, but ready to slam with the band'*

**ABOVE:** Instantly recognisable – the H95 is an exemplar of Hegel's trademark simplicity. Source and volume controls flank the display and a power button is hidden under the fascia


Linn's Kinsky, PlugPlayer and Bubble UPnP, and it seemed to work just fine. Yes, it's limited to 96kHz/24-bit when streaming via UPnP, but I get the feeling that'll be more than adequate for most listeners.

#### REAL SNAP

Having had extremely positive experiences with the 'big bruisers' of the Hegel integrated amplifier range, I approached this baby model with anticipation and trepidation. I hoped it would offer some of the magic of the H390, but was unsure how that would be possible at around a third of the price. I needn't have worried...

Straight out of the blocks the Hegel H95 had my attention with the stripped-down instrumentation of The Steve Howe Trio's 'Fair Weather Friend' [*New Frontier*; Esoteric Antenna EANTCD1077], presenting the former Yes guitarist's instruments with real snap, son Dylan's drums with persuasive weight and drive, and revelling in the sound of Ross Stanley's Hammond.

Best of all, there's a completely smile-inducing sense of the musicians arrayed before the listener, especially with the H95 driving the equally magical Neat Iota Xplorer speakers [*HFN* Jul '18], with their ability to present a broad, high soundstage.

The amplifier instantly establishes itself as being controlled, detailed and refined, but at the same time entirely exuberant in the way it launches into music. For example with the Simphonie du Marais's period-instruments reading of Handel's *Water Music & Royal Fireworks* [*Musiques à la Chabotterie* 605017], directed by ensemble founder Hugo Reyne, the H95 sounds big and stately with the processional episodes. Moreover it also sounds fast and nimble with the dance tunes woven into the piece, all the while bringing out the 

#### HEGEL'S HERITAGE

**The secret of Hegel's success? It does things its own way, from the extensive in-house product engineering to its entertaining – yes really – instruction manuals, illustrated with colour pictures of Norwegian landscapes, flora and fauna. Though it seems almost like a newcomer on the hi-fi scene, due to the prominence it has achieved in recent years, the company traces its roots back to 1988, and founder Bent Holter's university thesis. The subject? A novel design for the transistors used in amplifiers, and a cure for the common problems of hi-fi systems. Nothing if not ambitious, but that thinking has informed the company's development ever since. Very soon the company's SoundEngine design was laid down, and through the 1990s Hegel struck out into CD players and DACs, hiring extra engineers to develop new technologies. Today the company – named not for the German philosopher but after a rock band in which Holter played during the '90s – has a range including multiple DACs, the Mohican CD player [*HFN* Oct '16], and amplifiers both integrated and pre/power. And Hegel likes to give its products statements of intent: in the case of the H95 amplifier, adapted from an Einstein quote – 'Intelligence is Change'.**

# THE CLASSIC EVO

**Pro-Ject**  
AUDIO SYSTEMS



## THE EVOLUTION OF A CLASSIC

The Classic Evo utilises a simple and elegant “frame” design, which bears a notable resemblance to some of the most famous turntables of the 1950’s, 60’s and 70’s. But the design is more than just aesthetically pleasing, it also combines proven hi-fi technologies with the ‘simple to set-up and own’ principles associated with Pro-Ject turntables, so you can just focus on enjoying your music.

The improved two-plinth design utilises Thermo Plastic Elastomers (TPE) to isolate the metal-finished inner-chassis, rather than the traditional method of a spring-loaded sub-chassis, but this construction effectively decouples the motor from the main bearing and the tone-arm, reducing unwanted interference between the components.

Available in:



**Diamond cut sub-platter**



**Electronic speed change**



**Carbon fibre 9” the classic tone-arm**



**Ortofon Quintet Red moving coil cartridge**

## NETWORK-ATTACHED AMP



**ABOVE:** Substantial 4mm speaker outlets, plus variable preamp outs [far left] are joined by two line inputs. No MM/MC phono input is offered. The row of digital ins [far right] includes three optical, one coaxial, USB-B and an Ethernet port

wonderful character of all those contrabasses and hautbois, set in a rich, reverberant church acoustic that really gives the music space to expand and breathe. And that's especially so in the final section of the 'Fireworks', in which the instruments – augmented with drums – have remarkable presence.

### READY TO SLAM

So there I was, all ready to say, 'very good, though it lacks...', but that simply didn't happen. Switching to Sarah Willis's infectious *Mozart y Mambo* set [Alpha 578], on which the horn player is joined by the wonderful Havana Lyceum Orchestra, I was just as impressed by the scale and power of the orchestra in the more obviously Mozart tracks as I was by the lightness and fleetfooted rendition of the mambo ones. Yes, even with the massed horns of 'Qué rico el mambo' – and when the two collide in a mambo based on 'Eine Kleine Nachtmusik', the effect may cause purist jaws to drop, but delivered with the

H95's brio and vitality, it's a total feelgood track.

With the somewhat bleak Americana of Jason Isbell & The 400 Unit's *Reunions* album [Southeastern Records SER992], with its reflections on the current uneasy times, the ability of the H95

**LEFT:** Hegel's RC10 system handset (a £95 option here) offers input, volume, mute and display adjust for the H95



to delve deep into harmonies and arrangements, making Isbell's vocals clear and forceful, while still be ready to slam when the band does, is effectively deployed. It's all about getting deep into the music, and that's just what this amplifier does.

And though one might expect this amp, with its comprehensive streaming capabilities, to have its competence slewed heavily in favour of music played in digitally, it's as impressive when fed via its analogue inputs. Yes, there's just the two of them, and as already mentioned the H95 forgoes the XLRs of its more upmarket brethren, but these analogue ins are no makeweight or a sop to 'legacy sources'.

Connecting my usual Naim network player to the analogue ins – and here we're talking a source playing through an amp less than a tenth of its price, the extra space, grunt and rhythmic acuity of the ND 555/555PS [HFN Apr '19] was clearly evident via the H95 – but the amp's onboard network facility wasn't that far off, and delivered similar qualities, just to a lesser extent. And considering all else this amp offers, that's pretty impressive. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The Hegel success story continues with this entry-level amplifier, combining a streaming capability with the company's usual simplicity of design and superb sound. This isn't quite a giant-killer in the mould of the H390, but it's still a remarkable amplifier for the money, with power, poise and above all a hugely involving presentation. If your budget will only stretch this far, you will not be disappointed.

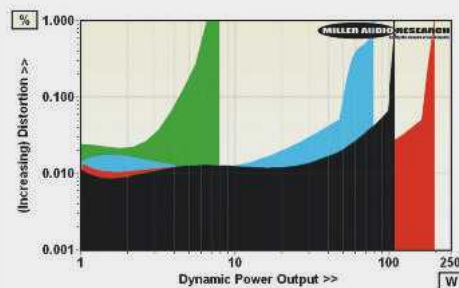
Sound Quality: 84%



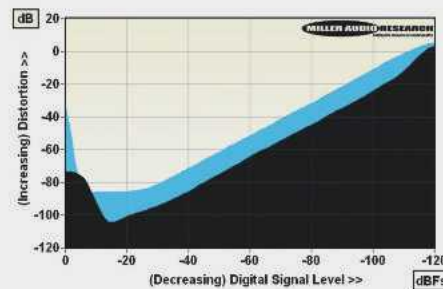
### HEGEL H95

If Hegel's mammoth H590 [HFN Oct '18] and H390 [HFN Aug '19] are both kilowatt-capable integrated amplifiers then the new baby of the range is necessarily more 'measured' in its, er, measurements. It's certainly very comfortable driving 8 and 4ohm loads where its 60W specification is bested to the tune of 2x73W and 2x106W, respectively, and there's a useful amount of headroom to sustain 108W/8ohm and 196W/4ohm under dynamic conditions (all <1% THD). But with just a pair of output devices per channel [see inside picture, p52], and modest power supply, current-limiting restricts its output to 79W/2ohm and just 6W/1ohm [see Graph 1, below]. Clearly, 8ohm nominal impedance speakers are the order of the day here. Otherwise the H95 is 'pure Hegel' with a sensible +31.5dB overall gain, an above-average 89dB A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW) and a frequency response tailored to ±1dB between 5Hz-45kHz (-3.5dB/100kHz). Distortion holds to <0.01% up to 10W/8ohm, increasing to 0.016% up to 50W (20Hz-1kHz), and to 0.04% at 20kHz/10W.

The Libra-sourced digital board features an AKM AK4490 DAC with its linear phase/fast roll-off filter. The preamp RCAs offer a 2.43V output from a high 778ohm source impedance, and 101dB A-wtd S/N ratio, but clips above 1V output (volume = 84) at 20kHz. The top 15dB of its digital/preamp dynamic range is sub-optimal in terms of distortion [see Graph 2] but below -15dBfs THD falls to as low as 0.001-0.0025% (20Hz-20kHz, -20dBfs) and boasts super-flat response limits of ±0.02dB/20kHz and ±0.02dB/45kHz with 48kHz and 96kHz media, respectively (192kHz inputs are downsampled to 96kHz). Jitter, meanwhile, is low at 30psec (48kHz/24-bit) and 135psec (96kHz/24-bit). PM



**ABOVE:** Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 7.0A



**ABOVE:** Distortion versus 24-bit digital signal level over a 120dB range at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Continuous power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	73W / 106W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	108W / 196W / 79W / 6W
Output impedance (20Hz-20kHz)	0.019-0.052ohm (778ohm, pre)
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	+0.0 to -0.26dB/-3.5dB
Digital jitter (S/PDIF at 48kHz/96kHz)	30psec / 135psec
A-wtd S/N ratio (re. 0dBW/0dBfs)	89.3dB (Analogue) / 100.9dB (Dig)
Dist. (20Hz-20kHz: 0dBW/-20dBfs)	0.006-0.03%/0.001-0.0025%
Power consumption (idle/rated o/p)	22W / 250W (2W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	430x100x350mm / 11kg

# Paradigm Persona B

The baby model in Paradigm's flagship loudspeaker range wants to prove good things can come in small packages  
 Review: **Mark Craven** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**W**ith its Persona series, Paradigm has taken the concept of a 'flagship' products to heart. This loudspeaker collection, launched in 2016, is not merely the Canadian manufacturer's most expensive, but one intended to represent 'the technological abilities of Paradigm engineering'. So what does that entail? Advanced driver and cabinet designs, a new-look aesthetic, and custom finish options across a range that drops from the £34,000-per-pair passive/active Persona 9H [HFN Dec '19], to the Persona B auditioned here.

This is the entry point to the series, and – on the face of it – a conventional two-way standmount. Yet at £8600 per pair it's comfortably more expensive than any model (including floorstanders) in Paradigm's step-down Prestige range, so the promise here is of something very special indeed.

## BERYLLIUM BASS

Key to the Persona's flagship status is the use of beryllium drivers. This ultra-lightweight and ultra-stiff metal – adapted to produce 'Truextent' beryllium foil – is favoured by a few other manufacturers of high-end loudspeakers [see PM's boxout, p57], but, unusually, Paradigm uses beryllium not just for its tweeters, but bass/mid and midrange units too.

The full Persona range features four floorstanders, a dedicated centre channel for home cinema systems, and the Persona Sub, a 53.6kg six-driver subwoofer with a claimed low-frequency extension of 12Hz. Compared to that model, the Persona B, with its 435x225x330 (hwd) enclosure, feels much more compact.

The Persona B's 25mm beryllium dome tweeter is the same unit found on all Persona speakers. Ferro-fluid damped and cooled, and internally isolated from the bass/mid driver below it, it sits behind Paradigm's 'Perforated Phase-Aligning'

(PPA) lens. This eye-catching addition works not only as a grille to protect the diaphragm but also as a precision phase plug, producing, says the company, a smoother, more detailed output.

## EASY DRIVE

A distinctive PPA lens also shrouds the 178mm bass/mid unit. This driver is unique to the Persona B – the floorstanders all feature separate bass and midrange units – and adds the tandem voice coil arrangement and 'Active Ridge Technology' surround found on Paradigm's woofers. The latter 'overmolds' the thermoplastic elastomer surround on to the driver cone for a more tenacious union between driver and chassis. Cabinet interference is reduced via Paradigm's 'Shock Mount Isolation' system.

The output of tweeter and bass/mid is integrated at 2kHz (rather than the 2.4kHz target of the 3F, 5F, 7F and 9H towers) via a third-order crossover employing, among other choice components, large custom polypropylene capacitors. The Persona B's specification suggests it should be an easy drive for 15-150W amplifiers, with its 92dB in-room sensitivity and a nominal 8ohm impedance [see PM's Lab Report, p59].

This speaker's gorgeous styling also makes it an elegant addition to modern rooms. On the baffle, the PPA-lensed drivers are mounted within a metal face plate, giving way to a gloss-finish cabinet that curves around to the rear, angling upward.

At the back, another metal insert houses the Persona B's bass reflex port and twin set of high-quality binding posts (supplied jumper bars allow you to choose between a single-amp, bi-amp or bi-wired installation). The upward angle of the

**RIGHT:** Stunningly-finished seven-layer cabinet houses two beryllium drivers, a 25mm dome tweeter and 178mm bass/midrange, both protected by a combination perforated grille/phase plate. Heavyweight stands are *de rigueur*

'It floated atop a sea of electronic bleeps and well-defined bass'







## GOING ULTRASONIC

Only the second metal in the periodic table after lithium, beryllium is a remarkable, if rare, expensive and very toxic element. So why, since Yamaha introduced the metal in the treble and midrange domes of its NS1000 speakers [HFN Oct 18] in 1974, has it subsequently achieved 'cult status' as *the* high-end driver material? It all boils down to beryllium's vital statistics – it has a higher modulus of elasticity than titanium or steel, a lower density than other 'light' metals like aluminium (comparable with magnesium) plus a velocity of sound several times that of any of these metals. Indeed, in this regard it is comparable only to boron carbide or, if we are talking 'exotic domes', vapour-deposited diamond.

These properties allow cones and domes fashioned from very thin sheets of beryllium to operate in a very linear fashion way beyond the passband of more 'ordinary' driver materials, pushing their primary breakup mode from the 20kHz+ of standard alloy domes up to high ultrasonic frequencies. In this instance, Paradigm's 25mm treble unit finally lets rip at an exceptionally high 51kHz [see Graph 1, Lab Report, p59], approached only by the carbon and diamond domes featured in B&W's 700 and 800-series speakers and other beryllium tweeters fashioned by Magico and TAD. PM

cabinet is replicated at its base, the main enclosure perched on two metal struts that lift it off its integrated plinth.

The cabinet is a moderately weighty 14kg and constructed from seven pressed layers of high-density hardboard. Internal bracing and acoustic damping material are used to reduce resonance, and the result is a speaker that sounds – if you give it a knuckle rap – impressively inert. Like every Persona model, the diminutive 'B' is available in five standard finishes – Vanta Black, Carbon Black and Harmony White in High Gloss, and Aria Blue [pictured] and Sonic Silver in Metallic Gloss. There's also a list of 'automotive' options and black variants of the PPA lenses and metal plates.

For installation, Paradigm sells its purpose-built B-29 stand, in black or silver, to raise the speaker's tweeter to ear-height. For set-up, I followed the recommendations of a minimum of 20cm from the rear wall, and as far from side walls as possible while maintaining an effective distance between them in relation to my listening position. Once toed-in to optimise imaging, I was ready.

## LOST IN SPACE

Some loudspeakers have an obvious star attribute from the moment you begin listening. Maybe it's speed or bass weight, or treble definition. This wasn't the case with Paradigm's Persona B, simply because its performance all-round was remarkable. There was rhythmic ability, dynamic attack and a fulsome bass and midrange to drive up-tempo pop and rock. With acoustic recordings and female vocals,

it won me over with its astonishingly open and articulate sound. Imaging was pin-point accurate. In fact, I often found myself 'suffering' from sensory overload.

Yello's 'Junior B' [The Eye; 44.1kHz/16-bit FLAC] requires a loudspeaker with resolution and soundstaging ability to do it justice. When Jade Davis sang 'Baby, I lost in space' the lyric couldn't have been more apt. The space created by this standmount pair was enthralling, with Yello's guest vocalist an almost ethereal presence in the centre, floating atop a sea of electronic bleeps and well-defined bass. I struggled to reconcile the size of the soundstage with the compact speakers in front of me.

## BLACK NIGHT

Low-end lovers might look suspiciously at the Persona B's 178mm bass/mid and expect it to come up short. After all, you can find bigger drivers on far more affordable standmounts. But while the little Paradigm has its limits in terms of ultimate low-end extension, there's still impressive bass weight, and an absolutely imperious performance across the frequencies it can muster. The 'Junior B' bassline sounded textured and meaty, and never drew attention to itself or felt out of step with the track as a whole.

With a stripped-down composition – Johnny Cash's cover of 'The First Time I Saw Your Face' [American IV: The Man Comes Around; American Recordings 063 339-2] – the Persona B had nowhere to hide. Apart from a gentle background of acoustic guitar and organ, this is all about the singer's legendary baritone, and here it was captivating, being ⇨

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## PARADIGM PERSONA B



**LEFT: Bass/mid driver is reflex-loaded through a chamfered rear port while the sophisticated split crossover enables bi-wiring/amping via two sets of substantial 4mm terminals**

elsewhere. And the soaring nature of its tweeter was particularly evident during Mike Oldfield's 'North Star/Platinum Finale' [*Platinum*; Virgin CDV 2 14 1], where his high-pitched guitar outro sounded sweet and thrillingly undistorted. The complexity of this four-track suite, both in terms of instrumentation and stereo imaging, posed the Persona B no problems either.

This speaker sounds superb with anything you care to throw at it. The Marshall Tucker Band's live recording of 'Everyday (I Have the Blues)' [*The Marshall Tucker Band*; 44.1kHz/16-bit FLAC] is ramshackle and riotous, the group at times clinging onto its blues rhythm with levels varying wildly. The Persona B conveyed it sublimely, placing crowd claps and whistles at the back of the soundstage, and capturing every half-pitch bend and leading edge of Toy Caldwell's guitar playing.

Changing tack entirely, Chase & Status's dance anthem 'All Goes Wrong' [*Tribe*; 44.1kHz/16-bit FLAC] benefited from the speaker's precision timing and bass handling. The continuous deep notes that carry the chorus had a purity that spoke of a cabinet and driver working in perfect harmony. Less all goes wrong, more all goes right... 🎧

clear and full-bodied, yet full of subtle inflections. The Persona Bs crafted a startlingly intimate performance that had me settling in for a long late-night listening session accompanied by The Man in Black.

Next up was Dire Straits' 'Money For Nothing' [*Brothers In Arms*; Vertigo 824 499-2], which provided an all-round showcase of the Persona B's talents. The introduction was light and fluid, with synthesiser effects and Sting's falsetto vocal both enjoying the spacious soundstage and rich delivery of those beryllium tweeters.

### PERFECT HARMONY

As the track built to a peak, there was a weighty, snappy energy to snare and bass drums. Knopfler's iconic riff came next, its complexity and harmonic flourishes laid bare. Then the band locked into a tight groove that was impossible not to nod along to, and the speaker was happy to oblige, subjectively free of any hint of breakup, as I raised the volume. Enter the old hi-fi trope about 'hearing new details'. I've listened to 'Money For Nothing' countless times, but on this occasion I had the sense I was hearing everything the track had to offer, perfectly presented and balanced.

The Persona B's high-frequency handling warrants specific praise. There's a crisp, distinct edge to both hi-hats and fret slides that's a perfect contrast to the velvety smoothness

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

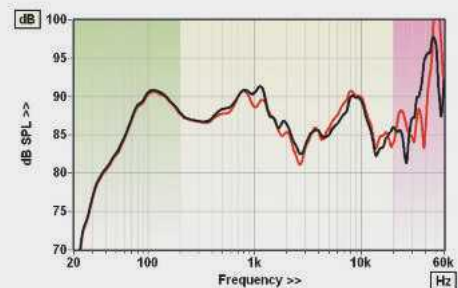
Definitely not *persona non grata*, this standmount speaker stands out as worthy of its flagship status. Yes, you'd expect superlative performance at the price, but the Persona B's blend of clarity and musicality with its vice-like control of the low-end and expansive presentation is routinely breathtaking. Finally, Paradigm's cabinet design and luxurious finish sends its appeal skyrocketing into orbit!

Sound Quality: 88%

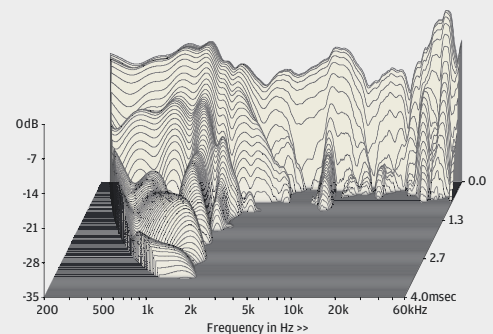


Measured on the treble axis, the Persona B has a distinctly lively-looking response [Graph 1] with peaks in the mid bass, midrange and treble allied to a presence band suckout that results in quite large response errors of  $\pm 4.6$ dB and  $\pm 4.8$ dB. Toeing the speakers a little off-axis will tame the perceived treble uplift but will not 'fill in' the loss of upper-mid while, as Graph 1 illustrates, our review speaker responses deviated from one another through this same region, resulting in a pair matching of just 2.2dB. But as recent high-end B&W loudspeakers have proved – an irregular response does not preclude exceptional subjective performance. Driver resonances are very well damped [see Graph 2] while the waterfall and extended response plots [pink shaded area, Graph 1] reveal the impressively extended 49-51kHz primary break-up of the tweeter, albeit at +10dB above the mean midband output.

However, the on-axis irregularity does complicate assessment of sensitivity (much as fixed, perforated grilles hamper nearfield bass measurement) but figures of 90.5dB (1kHz/1m/2.83V) and 87.2dB (500Hz-8kHz) accord well enough with Paradigm's 89dB (anechoic) and 92dB ('room') specifications. Similarly, the 42Hz bass extension (-6dB re. 200Hz) is generous for the speaker size and sensitivity, the output of the bass/mid driver peaking at 120Hz and the rear port tuned to 33Hz – all very 'clean' and free of spurious resonances. Finally, Paradigm's 'compatible with 8 ohms' impedance spec. is not entirely reflected in the 3.8ohm minima measured here at 45Hz and 160Hz – suggesting a 4ohm nominal rating – although with phase angles kept within a tight  $\pm 50^\circ$  limits the load is tough but not unduly challenging. PM



ABOVE: Response inc. nearfield summed driver/port [green], freefield corrected to 1m at 2.83V [yellow], ultrasonic [pink]. Left, black; right, red; w. grille, blue



ABOVE: There are mild driver resonances at 1.1kHz and 9kHz but the main dome mode is a high 51kHz

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83V – 1kHz/Mean/IEC)	90.5dB / 87.2dB / 84.9dB
Impedance modulus: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	3.8ohm @ 160Hz 23ohm @ 88Hz
Impedance phase: minimum & maximum (20Hz–20kHz)	-48° @ 100Hz 50° @ 25Hz
Pair matching/Resp. error (200Hz–20kHz)	2.2dB / $\pm 4.6$ dB/ $\pm 4.8$ dB
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	42Hz / 69kHz/66kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	0.8% / 0.6% / 0.1%
Dimensions (HWD) / Weight (each)	435x225x330mm / 14kg

# Rotel Michi M8

It looks like the S5 stereo power amp, both inside and out, but the Michi M8 monoblock is altogether more powerful and, as a result, offers a sound with a charm all its own  
 Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**Y**ou'll have to examine the £5399 Michi M8 monoblock power amp very closely to see how it differs from the company's S5 stereo model, reviewed previously alongside the £3299 P5 preamplifier [HFN May '20]. The two are the same price and size, look identical and have much the same 'ask a friend to help' mass. In fact, the M8 weighs marginally less than the S5, at 59.1kg – the difference presumably accounted for by the need for two-channel inputs on the stereo amp whereas the mono version has only single-channel connections, on both balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA sockets.

I use the term 'version' advisedly since, when one gets out the old toolbox and pops the lid – or should I say 'hefts' given the sheer solidity of this and every panel – off the amp you'd be hard pressed to see the differences there, too. Very much in evidence are the two in-house-wound transformers, in their substantial shielding 'cans', behind which sit four massive British-made custom smoothing capacitors, while at either side are placed the two fan-assisted heatsink 'tunnels' for the output devices. The fans are sufficiently muffled that the chances are you won't ever hear them running unless you go crawling round the back of the amp listening for them.

## MAJOR POWER

There's even the same multi-mode display on the M8's fascia, its various readouts and graphics selectable using the supplied remote handset [see p63], which can also be used to fire up the amp or put it into standby. I'll come back to that display panel later, if only because I didn't quite cover how comprehensive it was in our P5/S5 review a few months back.

So what actually does set the M8 apart from the S5? Well, apart from the mono input connections, with a switch

to select between RCAs and XLRs, you might be forgiven for thinking this is still a stereo amp, as it has two sets of substantial speaker terminals on the rear, good for banana plugs and chunky spade terminals or – if you're feeling brave, bare wires. In fact, the two are permanently powered when the amp is working, with not a sniff of a selector switch, so those with a penchant for bi-wiring their speakers will be happy.

The main differentiator is the power output, for the S5 stereo claims 500W/8ohm, rising to 800W/4ohm – figures PM's lab tests prove are very much on the conservative side, while the M8 is rated at 1050W/8ohm, and 1750W/4ohm. If the S5 could be said to deliver 'sufficient power', as the Rolls-Royce

saying used to go, the M8 goes way into 'more than you'll ever need' territory.

## ON DISPLAY

The interesting thing here is how the M8 achieves those prodigious power outputs into 8 and 4ohm at least [see PM's Lab Report, p63]. I've already mentioned the fact that it uses the same transformers, and that same quartet of slit foil, low-ESR bulk storage capacitors as the S5, so you won't be surprised to know that the other major feature of the amplifier, the 32 high current output transistors, are also shared with the stereo model.

Even the extra facilities on offer are the same, extending to an Ethernet port

*'The M8s describe things on an altogether grander scale'*



**RIGHT:** The M8 includes a pair of epoxy resin-filled transformers and four UK-sourced 47,000µF PSU reservoir caps. The Class A/B output stage has 16 pairs of high-current power transistors on two fan-assisted heat pipes



for firmware upgrades, an RS232 control port, and 12V trigger inputs and outputs to allow the amplifier to be switched in and out of standby by a remote device, including the P5 preamp. In addition, all Michi products react to the same on/off commands from the system handset.

With connections made and the main power switch on both amps set to 'on', the M8s can be fired up using either the main panel on/standby button or the remote handset. That done, and with the front panel LED changed from red (for standby) to white (on), the set-up menu can be accessed using the remote, allowing adjustment of the network connection for firmware updates and/or IP control in custom installation, and selection of the various display modes available.

The brightness of both the display and the front panel LED can be adjusted – both are set to maximum brightness as default,

but can be taken down through four steps of dimming. Then there are the display options where the panel can show either a dB peak power meter, or a spectrum analyser readout with a choice of 12-band as a default, or 8- or 16-band versions.

Personally, I think those readouts fly in the face of the minimal design of the Michi. I used the amplifiers with the illumination set to minimum, to dim the front panel LED right down, and the display set to off. Best basic black was the order of the day.

### COOKING ON GAS

Set up in editor PM's spacious listening room and connected to the *HFN* reference Bowers & Wilkins 800 D3 speakers [*HFN* Oct '16], with which the Michi amps have an obvious synergy given the close ties between the two brands (B&W is Rotel's international distributor), the P5 preamp and M8 monoblocks had been cooking for

**ABOVE:** Front panel of the M8 monoblock features a display that switches between 'VU meters' and 16-band bargraph spectrum. For an understated look, it can also be turned off...

a day or two by the time I started serious listening. Yet the power amps were running barely warm to the touch – nothing to trouble the cooling systems there.

From the off, there were recognisable traits from the S5 to be heard in the way the M8s delivered the music, but also something very different. For while the stereo amp is in no way lacking in power and dynamics, the monoblocks describe things on an altogether grander scale, and demonstrate all the levels in between silence and maximum level in much greater detail, and with far finer gradation. The result is not just an amplification system that sounds (understandably) much bigger and less restrained, but also one delivering more speed, more information and an even more natural view of the music.

And it only takes a few tracks to realise that the M8 power amp has better control of the music than I noted with the S5, all underpinned with a much greater sense of clout. This gives the whole enterprise an even more assured and mature feel.

### GUTS 'N' GLORY

To take just one example, play Big Audio Dynamite's 'A Party' from the band's 1985 album *This Is...* [CBS 462999 2] and, while this track is some way from being an exemplary recording, the P5 preamp and M8 monoblocks crash it out with no shortage of drive, a powerful low-end and remarkably taut, gutsy percussion. There's obviously more power on hand here, and the M8s deploy it adroitly to serve the music well – even at lower levels the sound is just bigger, and has greater impact. ➔

## MONO MICH

**With Rotel's diamond anniversary fast approaching in 2021, the brand began, and remains, as a family business underpinned by a team of long-serving engineers. The current MD, Peter Kao, joined Rotel founder Mr Tachikawa and his son, Bob Tachikawa, nearly 20 years ago and since taking the helm has pledged to 'follow the same philosophy and vision as they had for Rotel'.**

**So what of these new Michi-branded high-end amplifiers? It is tempting to think the M8 might simply be a bridged version of the stereo S5 model – after all they look almost identical inside [*HFN* May '20] and there's less than a kilo difference in weight. But Peter set the record straight. 'In fact, we started with the M8 as our top-of-the-line Michi product', he said, 'and from there we gave our engineers the task of creating a stereo version. From the M8, our engineers created a dual mono chassis that became the S5. There are differences in power supply and PCB layout in the M8 making it more efficient and allowing it to deliver the required amount of energy and control.'**

**As our tests prove [see Lab Report, p63] the M8 delivers almost exactly twice the power into 8/4ohm loads as the S5, but it offers little extra advantage into lower impedances. In many cases, price notwithstanding, the choice between S5 or M8 may be determined by your resident speakers and liking for loudness! PM**

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## ROTEL MICHI M8



**ABOVE:** The M8 power amp has balanced (XLR) and RCA ins, trigger, RS232 and network control ports plus two sets of substantial 4mm speaker cable binding posts

That's also the case with the brass-driven jazz of 'Blowin' The Blues Away' from Kyle Eastwood's *Time Pieces* set [Jazz Village JV 570034], which pelts from the speakers with full force, the twin brass leads sparkling and clearly shifting a lot of air, while the combination of Eastwood's bass and the drums and piano form a tight, agile rhythm section, despite no shortage of weight in the bass. Notable, too, is the stereo imaging and sense of soundstage depth here, combining with the dynamics to give a really vibrant, 'live' impression.

### THRILLING DYNAMICS

Like the S5, the M8s still have a hint of lushness in the bass, which is especially apparent with large scale orchestral recordings such as the Staatskapelle Berlin/Barenboim recording of Elgar's First Symphony [Decca 478 9353, 96kHz/24-bit]. Yet, arguably, this warmth suits well the romantic sweep of the piece and the fine-detailed performance. The M8s, driving the big B&W speakers,

present the music in a stately yet fluid manner, with great scale to the orchestral forces and thrilling dynamics when the score requires, thanks to the very apparent clout of the amplifiers. Instrumental timbres are honest and vibrant, there's excellent space in the sound despite that weight in the bass, and the overall impression is of total ease with no sense of the amps working hard.

**LEFT:** Rotel's slim Michi remote offers access and control over the M8's comprehensive on-screen menu system



But it's not just with classical big bands that the M8s shine – play 'Candy's Room' from The Boss's *Darkness On The Edge Of Town* [Columbia; 96kHz/24-bit download], and you'll want to go easy with the spoken intro section. When the band hits, it crashes in with amazing force, the amps unleashing a real hit of power and then maintaining that dynamic, clean drive without any sense of hardening up.

Whether with powering guitars and pounding bass and drums, or delicate solo and small-ensemble music, these amps are entirely in their element, as evident when falling back on an old audiophile favourite, the Antonio Forcione/Sabina Sciubba version of 'Why Can't We Live Together' [*Meet Me In London*; Naim cd021].

The sheer focus of the sound is breathtaking, from the openness of Sciubba's voice to each strike on string or tap on the body of Forcione's guitar, and the subtle additions of percussion. It has probably been demonstrated to death, but in the hands of the Michi P5 preamp and M8 monoblocks it still has the wherewithal to tingle and show what made it so special. ⚡

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

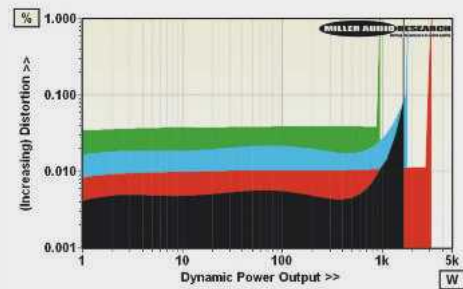
The Michi P5/S5 was a triumphant return for Rotel's high-end sub-brand, but using the preamp with the more powerful M8 monoblocks elevates the performance further, to striking effect. These chic black power amps combine fuss-free style and operation with an impact as deft as it can be devastating, allied to a natural musical flow. Big and hefty, the M8s are nothing short of a serious bargain.

Sound Quality: 88%

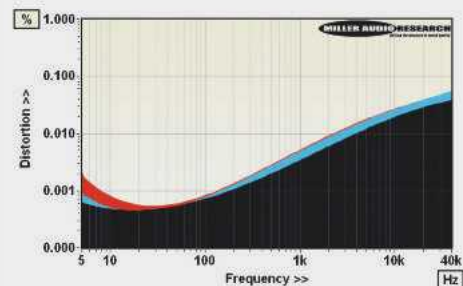


As we discovered when talking with Peter Kao, MD of Rotel Global [see boxout, p61], the M8 is not a bridged S5 but a very large, single-ended power amp in its own right. Indeed, the S5 was derived from the M8 (not the other way around) and so both amplifiers have comparable engineering and performance 'traits'. So, just as the S5 exceeded its 2x500W/8ohm and 2x800W/4ohm spec. at 2x670W and 2x1.17kW, the M8 bursts its 1.05kW/8ohm and 1.75kW/4ohm rating by delivering 1.32kW and 2.25kW, respectively. There's plenty of headroom to support dynamic power too, as the M8 stretches out to 1.64kW and 3.13kW into 8/4ohm, but there's precious additional *current* over the S5 (31A vs. 30A) so output into 2 and 1ohm falls back to 1.79kW and 960W [all <1% THD, see Graph 1 below]. So the M8 will drive 8ohm nominal speakers to higher levels than the S5, but it is no more tolerant of very tough loads.

Again, as we saw with the S5, THD climbs only very slightly with output, from 0.004%/1W to 0.0045%/10W, 0.005%/100W and 0.0055% at the rated 1050W/8ohm (all at 1kHz). THD climbs more markedly with frequency, however, from 0.0004%/20Hz to 0.005%/1kHz and 0.038%/20kHz [all at 10W, but compare THD vs freq with power on Graph 2, below]. This trend is a function of the Michi's limited HF feedback which is also reflected in the output impedance – increasing from 0.025ohm midband to 0.14ohm/20kHz and 1.05ohm/100kHz. The response follows the same pattern as it shelves down to reach -0.1dB/20kHz and -0.6dB/100kHz, the dip magnified into lower loads at -0.55dB/20kHz and -2.8dB/100kHz into 2ohm. Also, just like the S5, noise is low and the A-wtd S/N wide at 90dB (re. 0dBW). PM



**ABOVE:** Dynamic power output versus distortion into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (blue) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max. current is 31A



**ABOVE:** Distortion versus extended frequency from 5Hz-40kHz (1W/8ohm, black; 10W, blue; 100W, red)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Continuous power (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	1322W / 2250W
Dynamic power (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	1640W / 3130W / 1790W / 960W
Output imp. (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	0.024-0.14ohm / 1.05ohm
Freq. response (20Hz-20kHz/100kHz)	-0.22dB to -0.09dB/-0.65dB
Input sensitivity (for 0dBW/1.05kW)	95mV / 2930mV
A-wtd S/N ratio (0dBW/1.05kW)	90.5dB / 120.7dB
Distortion (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.0004-0.04%
Power consumption (Idle/rated o/p)	87W / 1.72kW (1W standby)
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	485x238x465mm / 59kg (each)

# Melco S100

One of a growing choice of ‘audiophile’ network switches, this one comes from Digital Music Library specialist Melco. Can this work magic in any networked system?

Review: **Andrew Everard** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**W**hen Japanese-based Melco launched its first ‘Digital Music Library’ [*HFN* Feb ’15], it more or less started a trend for audiophile music storage devices, and these days there’s no shortage of rivals out there, all claiming to deliver the best possible sound for your network audio. However, its first ‘Audiophile Dataswitch’ enters a somewhat different arena, where it’s not exactly a pioneer.

Recently there’s been an explosion in the availability of switches designed to go between your Internet connection, your music storage and your network audio player, with enthusiasts claiming ‘magic properties’ for particular existing IT-type network switches, and a variety of companies offering their own ‘audiophile-tuned’ offerings.

## CUT ABOVE

The S100, which made its debut at last year’s UK Hi-Fi Show *Live* held at Ascot, occupies its own position in this new market. It’s comfortably the most expensive unit of its kind, at £2000, easily lifting itself above rivals such as The Chord Company’s English Electric 8 Switch (£450) and the Russ Andrews Network Switch at just under £960, not to mention a raft of other switches claiming audiophile



credentials and available online at prices from US \$350 upwards. Clearly something is going on to have consumers spending many times the price of a perfectly functional ‘ordinary’ network switch, so what is Melco offering here?

The company already puts great store in optimised network connections, to the extent of providing a standard connection for all the usual network stuff on its hardware, plus a dedicated, isolated socket to serve the network player directly (assuming you’re not using the Melco server straight into a DAC via its similarly isolated USB output). So, the idea of the S100 is not just to complement the company’s range of digital music libraries,

**ABOVE:** Nothing to see here! Network switch has no more than a single blue LED on its ‘fascia’

but also upgrade any network set-up using Ethernet connectivity for audio.

The S100 is not a modified version of an existing IT-grade design, but a new solution that draws on the expertise of its parent company’s Buffalo division (as it does for the drives in its storage devices). This bespoke box includes its own processor, a 1.5MB packet buffer, plus audio-grade capacitors in its PSU, which is fed from an offboard power supply ‘brick’, used for isolation and to allow for future upgrades.

## SOUND-CRITICAL

It’s all mounted in a vibration-isolating steel chassis as used for the company’s N10 series music libraries [*HFN* Jun ’19], with shielding provided by external aluminium casework. The company says that ‘internal packet-traffic settings have been optimised for use with IT NAS drives, IT routers (for streaming services), Roon Core processor devices, Roon Bridges, and Melco’s N1, N10 and N100 digital music libraries’.

In practice, the S100 provides three means of connectivity: there are four 100Mb Ethernet ports, four 1Gb ports, and two SFP ports to connect fibre optic cables via suitable adapter modules, which will cost you around £20 apiece. The 100Mb ports are designed for sound-critical devices such as network players and NAS units (or a Melco library) and

## STEPPING UP YOUR NETWORK

**An eight-port Netgear unit, housed in a sturdy metal case, will set you back as little as £20 online. And, with the addition of a linear PSU (£15 or so) to replace the standard switching ‘wall wart’ in the quest for lower noise, this will do a reasonable enough job. Plug your music server into one port and your network player into another, and use a third port to connect to your Internet router to access streaming systems and the like, and chances are you’ll get a better sound than you would simply using your router for all the connections.**

**It’s also worth taking your ISP-provided ‘hub’ out of the routing equation completely, by switching it into ‘modem’ mode, and connecting it to a dedicated router. The latter could be as simple as an Apple Airport extreme, or one of the excellent models from the likes of Asus, DrayTek or Netgear, which will also give you extended Wi-Fi range – not for music playback, but for those vital control apps on which network music players rely. One final tip – avoid ‘PowerLine’ Ethernet solutions for, while convenient, they inject noise onto the mains. I’ve never heard a system that doesn’t sound worse with Ethernet over mains in use!**



also your Internet router if you're using streaming services. The 1Gb ports are designed for high-traffic connections to a Roon Core, or for control if you're not streaming from online services, while the optical connections offer an isolated link to compatible players, including Lumin's models [see *HFN* Jul '20 and PM's Lab Report, adjacent]

## POUNDBING BARGAIN

Before installing Melco's S100, I first rolled back my fibre optic links and modified Cisco switches to a simple budget Netgear switch between my QNAP servers and Naim ND555 [*HFN* Apr '19], and spent some time listening to the rather parched, bland and not very interesting sound, despite all the remedial processing going on inside the Naim network DAC.

Pulling out the Netgear and inserting the Melco S100 put things back on the right path, the music gaining body, detail and insight, and not in a subtle way. Even with a period recording such as David Bowie's Newleyesque 'Love You Till Tuesday', from his self-titled 1967 album [Deram/Universal UICY-25536], the complexities of the arrangements became much clearer, the thunderstorm of 'Please Mr Gravedigger' more ominous, and Bowie's intonation of the developing

'Gains in body, detail and insight were not subtle'

story all the more chilling. What sounds like a trite piece of music theatre now came unsettlingly alive.

How obvious you find the gains with the S100 in harness will depend on the quality – and in particular the resolution – of the player employed downstream. In my system it was clear cut, at least when compared with a basic switch configuration. With the excellent Linn compilation *A Bach Offering* [Linn Records OKD004; 192kHz/24-bit] the

S100 carried the depth, texture and expression, and well-captured acoustics of this familiar performance with aplomb. Similarly, even with the pounding 'Bargain'

from The Who's *Next* [Qobuz stream; 96kHz/24-bit], this 'audiophile dataswitch' brought greater insight into the component parts of the mix, from the rumbling bass and frenetic drumming to the strike and sustain of the lead guitar.

And so it goes on, with the Melco S100 simply revealing more of everything you play. I'll stick to my belief that one can obtain similar gains for less with some DIY network fettling, but if you want a simple plug 'n' play improvement for a high-end network music system, the S100 takes some beating. ☺

## HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

As ever, it's hard to give an absolute verdict on such a device where gains will depend as much on the rest of your network as on the ability of your network player to reveal what it does. But if you've invested heavily in network playback, and want a simple, easy to install upgrade for your system, the S100 has much to recommend it. It just works, and can bring major sonic gains to any Ethernet-based set-up.

Sound Quality: 87%



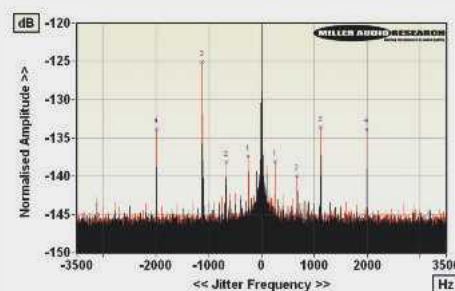
**ABOVE:** Ten ports populate the rear of the S100 – four each of 100Mb and 1000Mb (1Gb) and two optical fibre SFP (small form-factor pluggable). The 100Mb ports are recommended for 'straight' audio, the 1Gb links for PC/Roon Core applications

## LAB REPORT

### MELCO S100

Melco's custom dataswitch solution employs additional PSU smoothing, 1.5MB of FIFO buffering and a proprietary clocking system in its bid to deliver a low-noise, low-jitter Ethernet packet stream. Nevertheless, as the music data remains in the digital domain across the network (hubs, routers or switches notwithstanding) any uplift in subjective performance over a conventional NAS or other music library can only be inferred via a third-party DAC. Secondary re-clocking or jitter suppression within the network-attached DAC is also a factor here, so a DAC with excellent performance may not express a significant difference. Similarly, a DAC that incurs jitter at the chip level will not improve regardless of the S100's data signal conditioning.

Three very fine network-attached converters were tested with and without the S100 switch, using a 0.5m length of Melco's own CA1E cable – the Mytek Brooklyn Bridge [*HFN* Dec '19], Arcam CDS50 [*HFN* Jun '20] and Lumin D2 [*HFN* Jul '20]. The Mytek and Arcam DACs exhibit superb jitter rejection by default and the impact of the S100 was at the limits of measurement (~1psec). The Lumin D2 did resolve a repeatable difference, however, with correlated jitter reduced from 15psec to 10psec and uncorrelated noise squeezed by 0.4dB over a 146dB range [see Graph, below]. PM



**ABOVE:** 48kHz/24-bit jitter spectra from a network-attached Lumin D2 DAC (without Melco S100 switch, red; via the S100's 100Mb ports, black)

## HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Ethernet Ports (RJ45)	4x100Mb / 4x1Gb
Ethernet Ports (SFP/optical)	2x100Mb
Digital jitter (Arcam CDS50)	5psec (6psec without S100)
Digital jitter (Mytek Brooklyn Br.)	5psec (5psec without S100)
Digital jitter (Lumin D2)	10psec (15psec without S100)
Power consumption	6W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	215x61x269mm / 2.5kg



**ABOVE:** The 12V/4A external supply is routed through to additional regulation [bottom] while the mainboard processor is screened and cooled under a heatsink

# Musical Fidelity MX-DAC

One of a trio of small but substantial add-ons, the MX-DAC joins Musical Fidelity's partnering MX-HPA headphone amp and MX-Vynl phono stage. Is this another steal?  
Review: **Ken Kessler** Lab: **Paul Miller**

Imagine the dilemma when Pro-Ject acquired Musical Fidelity [see PM's boxout, p67]: the overlap with the former's Box range and the latter's MX models created an in-house rivalry in the 'affordable audiophile' sector. Both produce pint-sized ranges with matching phono stages, headphone amps and – of relevance here – beer-budget DACs. Musical Fidelity's MX-DAC, at £499, is a direct challenge to Pro-Ject's Pre Box DS2 Digital [HFN Nov '17] and a few others in the family, but the lineups are distinctive enough to cause no sleepless nights.

Let's dispense with the most important variance: sonic character. They are voiced slightly differently, so I anticipate numerous A/B comparisons between them and others from Cambridge Audio, Chord Electronics, iFi Audio and the like, as well as pocket-money USB DACs such as AudioQuest's DragonFly Cobalt [HFN Oct '19], which exceed any expectations relative to their price brackets. What the MX-DAC offers the music lover with a limited budget is a full complement of inputs, sufficient features, luxurious styling and feel... but above all, genuinely astonishing sound.

## CAPTAIN MARVEL

Before getting anywhere near to a conclusion, I must state that this is now my preferred DAC, cost-wise, between thumb-drive-encased USB DACs and circa-£1200 champions such as the Mytek Liberty. Thus it's best to tell you what the MX-DAC *doesn't* do, things which, for example, the Mytek Brooklyn DAC+ (my reference at, admittedly, more than 4x the price) offers.

The MX-DAC has no remote nor volume control to allow it to serve as a preamp, no cool display, no analogue input, no phono stage, and no headphone output. It is purely a DAC – and that's why it's so cost-effective. Thoughts of fiscal incentives soon disappear. You run your hand over

the matte silver finish, noting the clean lines, admiring the chamfering and the fluted sides of the extruded case. You flick the positive-feel on/off toggle, tap the buttons with their crisp action. You observe the high-quality hardware at the back, including XLR balanced outputs, and then you cannot but marvel that all this is delivered in a sub-£500 DAC.

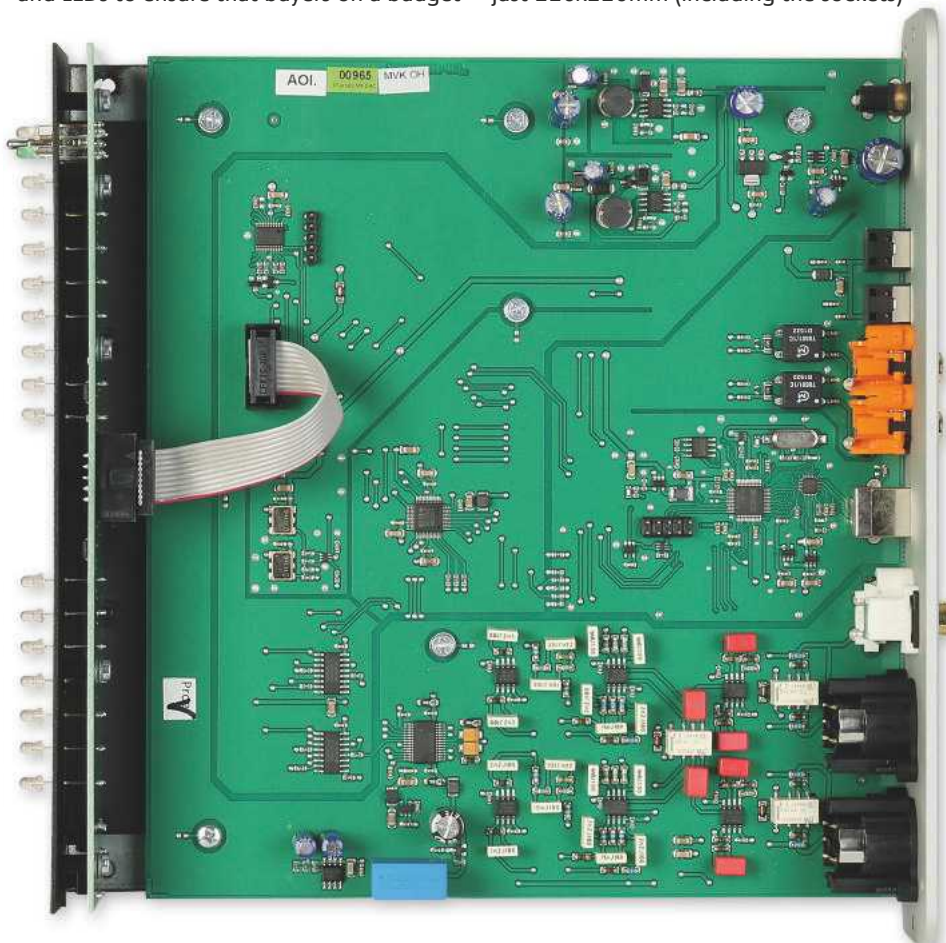
Because of this, the MX-DAC isn't just aspirational: it's actually an enabler for future upgrades elsewhere in one's system, moves that it will survive handily, as I found after inserting it into a system with significantly higher-end Audio Research and Wilson Audio elements.

Across the front are enough controls and LEDs to ensure that buyers-on-a-budget

never feel deprived. At the left you find the on/off toggle, below LEDs indicating power-on and signal lock. Next are six LEDs to identify sampling rates from 44.1kHz to 192kHz, followed by two for DSD activity. The right-hand half of the fascia contains LEDs to indicate which of two filters has been selected – and I found the effects barely discernible, so I did not spend too much time worrying about them [see PM's Lab Report, p69] – followed by five LEDs to identify the selected input. Last are buttons for choosing inputs and 'filters'.

## INPUTS AND SOURCES

Musical Fidelity has managed to fit every type of digital input into a unit measuring just 220x220mm (including the sockets)



**RIGHT:** Lifting bonnet and fascia reveals the indicator LEDs [left], XMOS USB receiver [centre right], sample rate converter [centre], PCM1795 DAC [lower left] and balanced out [lower right]



**ABOVE:** Squeezed into the same compact casework as the matching MX phono stage and headphone preamp, the MX-DAC has two small buttons for input and filter, indicated (with sample rate) by rows of miniature LEDs

bar I<sup>2</sup>S and Ethernet, the latter typically the preserve of costlier solutions. Arranged left-to-right are XLR balanced and RCA line level outputs, a USB-B input, two each of RCA coaxial and Toslink inputs, the latter with built-in flaps so no worrying about misplacing those awful plugs of yore. Last is the mains input for the 5V/2A wall-wart. As you can imagine, the MX-DAC can be up-and-running without getting near the instruction manual if it isn't your first (digital) rodeo.

For assessing USB, I fed it signals from a desktop Mac computer, using Fidelia and Audirvana Plus software, the in-built Apple players and, in deference to the increasing number of hi-fi enthusiasts who now 'stream' their content, my catalogue of music files stored in the vastness of the amazon.co.uk cloud. I also used a Samsung BD-H5100 Blu-ray player (bought for playing US Zone A discs), which has HDMI as its main output, but also offers coaxial digital. A Sony BDP-S370 BD player was employed too, but regardless of which source I used, the 192kHz LED on the front

*'The liquidity of the pedal steel guitar floored me'*

of the Musical Fidelity MX-DAC stayed on most of the time.

### KIND OF BLU

Using the Blu-ray audio disc from the anniversary box set of The Band's eponymous second album [Capitol 00602577842832], selecting the stereo 96kHz/24-bit PCM version, I was hit with one of those instant audio epiphanies. So natural, so ripe was the sound of the bass, so satiny the upper frequencies, and so warm were the vocals that I knew I had hit on a track which could sell the MX-DAC even to the most inveterate of hi-fi snobs. In fact it was all about as unnerving as a sonic surprise gets.

This was because 'Up On Cripple Creek' is a track I've known, loved and used as a sound arbiter for a half-century. What the MX-DAC delivered made me question DACs with five-figure price tags, but that would be to wear a particular *nouveau pauvre* hat I find dehumanising and unattractive. The point of astounding-value hardware is not

to undermine the existence of the extreme high-end, but to provide a taste of it for a fraction of the cost. Which this unit does.

Listening through Falcon Acoustics LS3/5As [HFN Dec '18], my choice for assessing vocals given the loudspeaker's original *raison d'être*, Levon Helm's slight nasality and inimitable drawl suffered no digital artefacts. They had presence and flow, and those who rank sibilance the most egregious of sins will revel in their absence. The smoothness of the 's' in the song title 'Unfaithful Servant' matched the 45rpm LPs in the same box set. This is one refined, 'grown-up' DAC.

### ON THE AIR

Before moving on to the streamed or downloaded high-res material, I listened to the new mix of The Grateful Dead's *Workingman's Dead* [Rhino 603497846986] but was unexpectedly drawn away from the first of its three CDs – the one with the original album – to the sound of the live bonus discs. 'Me And Bobby McGhee' had so much air and space that the sense of a real hall, filled with an audience and living, breathing musicians, was conveyed almost as convincingly as if it were a surround-sound disc.

(Note that this is no endorsement of surround sound. Not all multi-channel recordings, especially old material rendered as 5.1 mixes, work well. And if you were wondering, one of the two surround mixes in the aforementioned Band box set works fabulously, while the other sucks. And neither of them beats the original two-channel mix.)

Sadly, for those seeking out one of more of these gems, I am unable to identify catalogue numbers of sources for my ↪

## NEW BLOOD

With company founder Antony Michaelson on the cusp of retiring in 2018, the future of Musical Fidelity looked to be in the balance until Heinz Lichtenegger – CEO of Audio Tuning Vertriebs GmbH, parent company of Pro-Ject Audio Systems – stepped into the breach and saved the day. The two company directors had worked closely for many years as Audio Tuning Vertriebs GmbH was already Musical Fidelity's distributor in Austria. Perhaps, and with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, the outcome might have been predicted. Nevertheless the sale of the brand name and associated intellectual property was completed in May 2018, with MF's worldwide distribution, after-sales support and Far Eastern manufacturing left relatively unchanged. However, while 'Made in Wembley, England' is now replaced by 'Made in Austria' much of the new design thinking still originates from the UK and the pen of Simon Quarry. As the engineer behind some of MF's most iconic products of the past, Simon was persuaded to return and look afresh at what the 'new' Musical Fidelity might achieve. His debut product is the new M8xi integrated amplifier [HFN Jul '20] and winner of EISA's 'High-End Integrated Amplifier 2020-2021' [see p82]. PM

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## USB DAC



**ABOVE:** Powered via an external 5V/2A 'wall wart' supply, the MX-DAC offers one USB-B and four S/PDIF inputs (two coaxial/two optical). Analogue outputs are balanced (XLR) and single-ended (RCA)

hi-res downloads, most of which are bonuses that accompanied vinyl box sets from Marvin Gaye, Little Richard, The Rolling Stones, James Taylor, Paul McCartney and others whose LPs benefited from these perks. Suffice it to say, nearly all of the recordings, whether identified as FLAC or another format, triggered the MX-DAC's 192kHz LED. What surprised me was how 'musical' – if that's the right word – the USB input sounded when I compared these downloads with the equivalent CDs via either Toslink or coaxial inputs.

### AMAZING GRACE

This, too, proved revelatory, as I have never been bowled over by USB, which I find at its worst to be tolerable – rarely objectionable but also rarely dazzling. 'I Fall To Pieces' from *The Best Of Linda Ronstadt – The Capitol Years* was identified as 44.1kHz/24-bit by Audirvana Plus (I think this was an HDTracks download) and it had a delicious clarity which suited her mellifluous vocals, as distinctive a set of pipes as country rock has ever enjoyed. As with The Band's Blu-ray, it was sibilance-free and as natural-sounding as you could hope for, but it was the liquidity of the pedal steel guitar that floored me.

Whatever the origins of the recording, the MX-DAC behaved impeccably, revealing a gracefulness rarely associated with the rough-and-ready prospects of budget systems. Again, I am desperate not to sound like some granola-crunching Che Guevara worshipper, nor one spoiled by a life surrounded by high-end treasures, but such sophistication is normally the province of systems of a higher pedigree. Once the current craze for deplatforming and cancellation reaches hi-fi, I will no longer be able to make such observations, but

for the time being, note that the MX-DAC is, and stated in the most politically incorrect terms, operating 'way above its station'.

This track was a perfect showcase for the MX-DAC's admirable image specificity, stage width and even a hint of depth. What ultimately secured my love for this unassuming component, though, was the free download of Albert King's *Born Under A Bad Sign* [Stax 088807234344] which amazon.co.uk provides with many CD and LP purchases. (I am constantly and pleasantly surprised on the rare occasions when I log on to find stuff I didn't know had been added.)

'The Very Thought Of You' is one of my all-time references, thanks to moody saxes, tinkly piano stage right, late-night drumming and King in full-on crooner mode. It's mellow, seductive and soothing – cognac for the ears. The MX-DAC did not disturb that mood. In contrast was Sophie Madeleine's 'Bring Me Sunshine' – 1m 39s of ukulele-driven fun from a CD single, also via amazon. Gentle and sweet, the uke's resonance matching the uke next to my desk: she made me want an MX-DAC. ☺

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

DACs are the most vivid examples of price-plummeting due to trickle-down technology. Some 30 years after the first standalone models arrived, we're in a golden age, and somewhat used to being impressed by sub-£999 DACs – but I wasn't prepared for the leap that the MX-DAC achieves. The sound is satisfying, seductive and silky while the features and inputs ensure systemic flexibility. It is a no-brainer purchase.

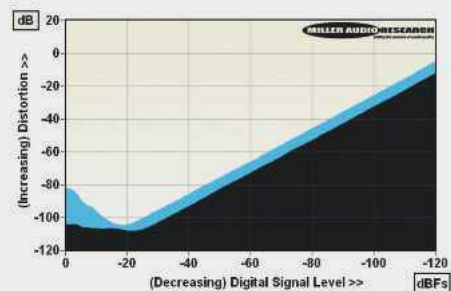
Sound Quality: 87%



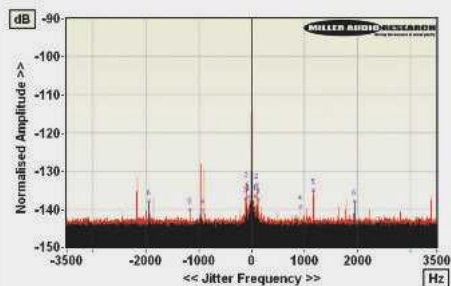
## MUSICAL FIDELITY MX-DAC

It's not uncommon for brands to claim their products are compatible with ultra high-resolution LPCM and DSD streams when the internal DAC only operates to 96kHz or 192kHz. In practice this means that, for example, DXD or DSD256 inputs are accepted but subsequently downsampled... So the fact Musical Fidelity is entirely up-front about the 192kHz and DSD128 handling of its DAC – the choice of PCM1795 complemented by an ARC (sample rate converter) and op-amps all from TI, née Burr-Brown – is very refreshing! The MX-DAC's balanced output offers a healthy 3.8V from a 45ohm source impedance and achieves a wide 111dB A-wtd S/N ratio, supporting an excellent low-level resolution of ±0.2dB over a full 110dB dynamic range. These figures are consistent regardless of USB or S/PDIF input, as is the superb jitter rejection down to <10psec across all sample rates [see Graph 2, below].

Distortion, over the top 20dB at least, is largely determined by MF's implementation of the OPA2134 op-amps which yield 0.001% at 0dBfs down to a low 0.0003% at -25dBfs through bass and midrange, increasing at HF only at the highest output levels [0.012% at 0dBfs/20kHz, see Graph 1]. MF also retains the 'Sharp' and 'Slow' digital filters built into the PCM1795 DAC, although they have no discernable effect with sample rates below 192kHz. Regardless of 'Filter' setting, the response reaches out to +0.08dB/20kHz with 48kHz inputs and peaks at +0.4dB/43kHz with 96kHz files. With 192kHz inputs, however, the response peaks up to +1.0dB/75kHz before dropping away to -1.2dB/90kHz (Steep filter) or peaks at +0.6dB/58kHz and rolls away to -5.1dB/90kHz (Slow filter). So if you think you can hear a difference with CD inputs, think again! PM



**ABOVE:** Distortion versus 24-bit digital signal level over a 120dB range at 1kHz (black) and 20kHz (blue)



**ABOVE:** High resolution jitter spectra using 24-bit data (48kHz, black; 96kHz, red with markers)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Maximum output level / Impedance	3.78Vrms / 45ohm (XLR)
A-wtd S/N ratio (S/PDIF / USB)	111.2dB / 111.1dB
Distortion (1kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.0014% / 0.00025%
Distortion & Noise (20kHz, 0dBfs/-30dBfs)	0.012% / 0.00045%
Freq. resp. (20Hz-20kHz/45kHz/90kHz)	+0.0 to +0.1dB/+0.4dB/+1.0dB
Digital jitter (LPCM / USB)	9psec / 9psec
Resolution @ -100dB/-110dB	±0.1dB / ±0.2dB
Power consumption	6W
Dimensions (WHD) / Weight	220x53x215mm / 1.9kg



PS AUDIO

Pioneering world class audio products

# PS Audio's Stellar range is affordable excellence

## Stellar Gain Cell Preamplifier/DAC

The Stellar Gain Cell™ combines the benefits of an exceptional analogue preamplifier and a full-featured DAC. Fully balanced analogue circuitry from input to output, the Stellar Gain Cell builds upon years of research and innovation in the art of Class A analogue amplification and state-of-the-art digital reproduction.



£1,550

## Stellar S300 Stereo Amplifier

Breathe new life into your loudspeakers with the Stellar™ S300. The S300 combines the slam, linearity, and toe-tapping pacing of a Class D output stage with the warmth, grace, and rich inner detail of Stellar's Class A proprietary Analog Cell.



£1,350



£2,700

## Stellar M700 Power Amplifier Monos (pair)

The Analog Cell is the heart of the M700's musicality, where richly overlaid layers of music's inner details are preserved even in the most complex orchestral crescendos. The Analog Cell is a proprietary, fully differential, zero feedback, discrete, Class A MOSFET circuit, hand-tuned to capture the smallest micro dynamics without sacrificing the loudest macro dynamics music has to offer.

## Stellar Phono Preamplifier

The new Stellar Phono Preamp has both fixed and variable loading for moving coil cartridges, fully adjustable from the remote control. The unit's ultra-low noise allows the use of MC cartridges with output as low as 0.15 mV. Two different tonearms can be selected via the remote, with either single-ended or balanced outputs. A massive, heavily-regulated power supply and full DC coupling allow the unit to provide up to 20V rms output for powerful bass and unrestricted headroom and dynamics. PS Audio's first product way back in 1974 was a phono preamplifier that outperformed and replaced far more expensive units. Since then, we've offered a number of excellent phono preamps, but the new Stellar Phono Preamplifier is the best we've ever made.

Redefining record collections, one LP at a time



£2,500

**"I recommend a listen to the Stellar to anyone in the market for a new phono preamp, regardless of price. I don't think I've ever written that before." Michael Fremer - Stereophile, Jan 2020**

## Stellar Power Plant P3

Built as an evolution from our renowned P12, P15, and P20 the P3 is our most affordable regenerator – perfect for powering sources and small to medium systems. Power Plants generate sine-wave-perfect, regulated, high current AC power from your home's AC. In the process of regeneration, problems on your power line such as low voltage, distorted waveforms, sagging power, and noise are eliminated and the power quality enhanced. The results are both audibly and visually stunning when powering either audio or video products.



£2,300

PS Audio Power Plants are regarded for their ability to reduce noise and THD to virtually zero while providing rock steady voltage output.

Traditional power conditioners can only affect a portion of incoming noise and are unable to compensate for over or under voltage. Furthermore, power conditioners raise the impedance of the power going to your system, which can bleach your sound and drain away dynamics. The P3 handles things completely differently. Through the P3's active regeneration process, it provides perfect power while also lowering the impedance, increasing the dynamics and openness of your system.

## PS Audio introduces the Stellar Strata integrated & M1200 Mono Power amplifiers

NEW  
Product Launch



£3,000

### Stellar Strata (full featured streaming amplifier)

The Stellar Strata combines the benefits of an exceptional analogue preamplifier, a full-featured state-of-the-art DAC, a stereo 150 watt per channel power amplifier, and a high-resolution streaming module in one gorgeous package.

### Stellar M1200 Mono Amplifier (pair)

The Stellar M1200 monoblock power amplifier combines the rich warmth and musicality of vacuum tubes with the jaw-dropping power and seemingly infinite headroom of a 1200 watt high-performance output stage. This extraordinary hybrid amplifier knows no limits.



£6,000

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**EISA**

EXPERT IMAGING AND  
SOUND ASSOCIATION

**EISA AWARDS 2020-2021**

**EISA**

EXPERT IMAGING AND  
SOUND ASSOCIATION

# EISA 2020-21

## HI-FI PRODUCTS OF THE YEAR

*Hi-Fi News* is the  
exclusive UK  
representative for the  
Hi-Fi Expert Group  
within EISA

The best sound, most advanced technology and desirable features, the ultimate expression of design and, of course, the greatest value for money. Every year the EISA Awards applaud those products that stand above the rest. So read on...

**W**elcome to the EISA Awards for 2020-2021. Now firmly rebranded as the *Expert Imaging and Sound Association* [see p23], the world's largest independent CE (consumer electronics) awards panel reflects the collective opinion of over 60 of the

most respected specialist magazine and web publications from the greater EU in addition to Canada, India, Australia, USA, Japan, Russia and Hong Kong.

Just as hi-fi and music-loving enthusiasts relish the discovery of new

equipment – everything from turntables to digital media hubs, big amplifiers to sophisticated wireless standmounts and all-in-one solutions – the members of EISA's growing Hi-Fi Expert Group collectively scour the globe for audiophile gems.

Similarly, and on an EISA-wide level, member magazines/websites pool their experience to inform the Association's

consensus of the very best in all home and mobile sound and vision products. This year, judging was extended over many months with numerous products shipped between EISA member countries, fuelling lengthy and highly informed discussions.

Once again, EISA proved that whatever else might be going on in the world, enthusiasts of every stripe can remain united in recognising the very best quality products, regardless of nationality or brand origin. *Hi-Fi News* always reflects the 'borderless' reality of our hobby so perhaps it's little surprise many of this year's EISA Award winners, including products from Rotel, Musical Fidelity, Focal, NAD and Monitor Audio, were originally premiered in our pages!



**BELOW:** *HFV* editor and President of EISA, Paul Miller, outlines (pre-pandemic) plans for the Association while on stage at last year's EISA Gala and Trophy ceremony in Berlin. This year the global EISA network coordinated very successfully via Skype and Zoom!



THE EISA AWARDS 2020-2021



## **EISA Best Value Turntable 2020-2021** **Pro-Ject T1**

Pro-Ject has been making turntables for almost three decades, starting with the original Pro-Ject 1 and, along with the later Debut models, it more or less reinvented the budget turntable market. The T1 is the latest version of that design – a budget audiophile record-playing package with excellent sound for the money. The company also offers versions including a built-in phono stage and Bluetooth transmitter! With its machined plinth, high precision bearing, glass platter and newly-designed one-piece aluminium tonearm, it offers a wonderfully weighty and detailed sound – and even the Ortofon OM 5E MM cartridge is pre-installed, making it completely plug-and-play.



BEST VALUE TURNTABLE



## **EISA Best Value DAC 2020-2021**

### **iFi Audio ZEN DAC**

The appeal of the iFi Audio ZEN DAC is simple: with eye-catching looks, flexibility, solid engineering within and a remarkably grown-up sound, this entry-level DAC is a conspicuous hi-fi bargain. It proves that desktop audio doesn't have to be the poor relation of 'proper' hi-fi, and is a real giant-killer, whether as a DAC/headphone amp or a simple digital preamp. Buy this to boost the sound of your computer, and you may well find you're listening to it most of the time. Best of all, it does all this at a very affordable price – this is amazing value for money.



## **EISA Best Value Bookshelf Speaker 2020-2021** **Monitor Audio Bronze 100**

Monitor Audio has built an enviable reputation for superb small speakers, winning the EISA Award for its bookshelf model last year and building on this performance for its latest, sixth-generation series in 2020. They're admirable performers across a wide range of musical styles, with a killer combination of bass weight and sweet treble from the brand's in-house-designed Ceramic-Coated Aluminium Magnesium (C-CAM) drivers, and a reflex port 'rifled' for smoother airflow. Their contemporary looks and easy-to-drive nature add to the appeal of these very sophisticated little speakers.



BEST VALUE BOOKSHELF LOUDSPEAKER



## EISA AWARDS 2020-2021

BEST VALUE FLOORSTANDING SPEAKER

### **EISA Best Value Floorstanding Loudspeaker 2020-2021 Focal Chora 826**

Drawing on its extensive expertise, from the manufacture of drive units to final assembly, Focal has developed an affordable floorstander able to sound great on demonstration and in the home. At the heart of the Chora 826 is a new 'Slatefibre' driver, for speed and bass extension, and the speaker has a sound that'll make you want to keep on listening, with both bass weight, treble clarity and sparkle. It's also easy to set up and position, will work with modest amplification, and sounds good in almost any room. However you look at it, this speaker offers a lot of performance for the money.



## **EISA Turntable 2020-2021**

### **Thorens TD 1601**

The Thorens name has been associated with turntables for almost 120 years, and while the TD 1601 has a look reflecting classic turntables of the past, under the skin it's all new. It retains the three-point sprung suspension of the TD150 of the 1960s, but brings the company's latest decoupled synchronous motor for speed accuracy, and an electric arm-lift and end of side stop for convenient playback. A fully manual version of the deck, the TD 1600, is also offered. All this plus a balanced audio output alongside the usual connections, for even lower noise, makes for a turntable that combines heritage with bang-up-to-date sound quality.





PHONO PREAMP

### **EISA Phono Preamp 2020-2021 Primare R15**

Housed in a compact case just 35cm wide, Primare's R15 phono amplifier offers two levels of gain for both moving-coil and magnet cartridges, with further adjustments of resistance and capacitance to optimise loading for the cartridge in use. Built with the same care the company brings to its main amplifiers, its low-noise design is informed by the flagship R35 model just as its sound is the familiar 'Primare' mix of weight and substance allied to detail and resolution. It's the ideal interface between a high-quality record player and the line input of your amplifier.



## **EISA Digital Source 2020-2021** **Volumio Primo**

This unassuming-looking little black box is a highly affordable solution to all your digital streaming needs, for not only will it play music stored on home network devices, it also allows you to access a huge range of online music services. With simple operation via web browsers or apps, and an on-screen GUI delivered over HDMI, the Primo includes digital outputs to feed any DAC while also playing music via USB stores. Compatible with music formats all the way up to DSD, via Ethernet or Wi-Fi, this small wonder is the perfect way to start your streaming adventure.



## EISA Amplifier 2020-2021 Arcam SA30

Arcam joins the 'all-in-one' streaming amplifier trend with its flagship integrated. Within the elegant but purposeful casework the SA30 combines the company's Class G amplification, for both finesse and power, with a raft of digital technologies. It will stream, and you can plug in everything from your TV to a turntable, while DIRAC room correction is offered to optimise the sound, using a computer and the supplied microphone. It's not just a technical tour de force, it's also a storming amplifier: Arcam may be streamlining its product range, but hasn't lost its focus.





## **EISA Smart Amplifier 2020-2021** **NAD Masters M33**

NAD won this category last year with its compact Masters M10 – not just an amplifier but also a complete ‘just add speakers’ streaming system. This year it has comprehensively evolved the concept with its Masters M33, combining state-of-the-art Class D amplifier technology from Purifi Audio with in-house streaming know-how. The result is just about all the amplifier anyone could need, combining massive power and beautiful clarity and finesse with broad connectivity, streaming and DIRAC room correction, all presented on a large front-panel touchscreen. It’s definitely an amp for the third decade of the 2000s.



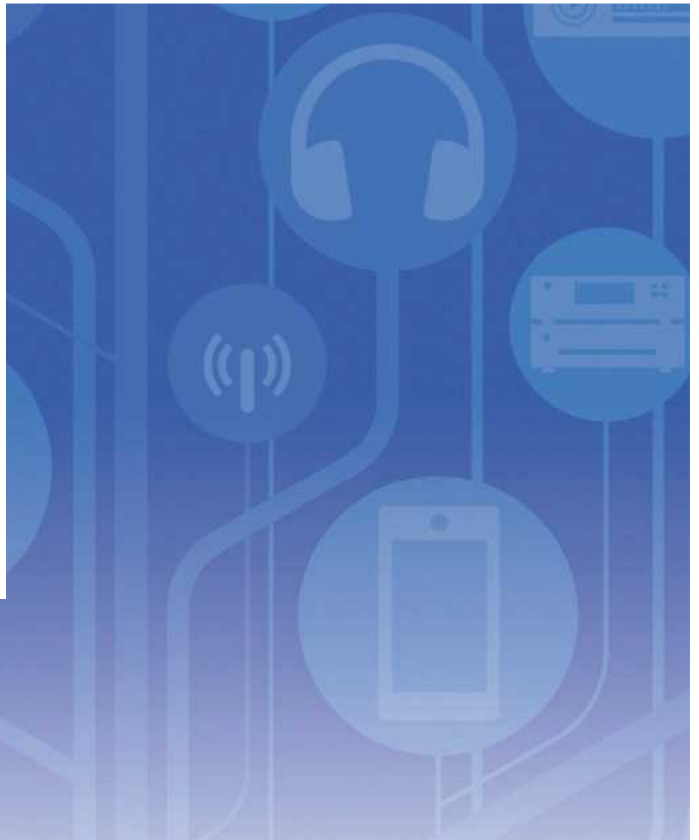


## EISA AWARDS 2020-2021

HIGH-END INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

### EISA High-End Integrated Amplifier 2020-2021 Musical Fidelity M8xi

Musical Fidelity has always designed fabulous big amplifiers, following its belief that you can never have too much power. Now under Austrian ownership, and sharing a stable with Pro-Ject Audio Systems, it's delivered the M8xi, offering a massive 550W – which it comfortably exceeds from its dual-mono construction. Inputs extend to both digital and analogue audio options, but this isn't just a big prize-fighter of an amp: it's also fast and nimble, delivering music with both speed and accuracy, not to mention masses of detail. If you want your amp all in one box, and superlative performance, this is the one to buy.



**EISA High-End Pre/Power Amplifier 2020-2021**  
**Michi P5/S5**

Rotel's high-end sub-brand is back, some three decades after its first appearance, and the Michi P5 control amplifier and S5 power amp bring a welcome breath of weight, scale and entirely natural music-making to the high-end arena. With cool black looks and stunning build quality, the duo displays a wide-ranging ability across a broad spectrum of musical genres. Michi is all about the emotion and spirit of the music, delivered on an entirely human scale. The amps are flexible too, the preamp offering a wide range of digital and analogue inputs, and the quality is assured by painstaking hand assembly, from the basic components upwards. It's a stunning return.



HIGH-END PRE/POWER AMPLIFIER





LOUDSPEAKER

**EISA Loudspeaker  
2020-2021  
SVS Prime Pinnacle**

Sitting at the top of the SVS Prime range, this classically-styled floorstanding model is of simple design and construction, yet delivers a clear, crowd-pleasing performance – not least due to its trio of 16.5cm bass drivers and rear-facing ports. The woofers are drawn from the company's Ultra Tower flagship model, and ensures music driven by bass and percussion is always thrilling, just as the midband and treble are crisp and sweet. In practice the Prime Pinnacles are svelte enough to slip into all but the smallest rooms, so if you crave a warm and a full-bodied sound, these towers will have your system glowing.



## **EISA Wireless Loudspeaker 2020-2021 System Audio legend 5 silverback**

Danish company System Audio took an entirely logical approach with the legend 5 silverback speakers: they're active, with dedicated amplification for each drive unit, and become wireless when you add the full function Stereo Hub or third-party transmitter. Operation using WISA technology to avoid interference and carrying sound up to 192kHz/24-bit, the system can connect to a wide range of sources, from a digital connection from a computer to TV sound. It also has multiple streaming options, from DLNA/UPnP to GoogleCast, AirPlay and Bluetooth. It's a beautifully elegant, and fine-sounding, wire-free music solution.



## **EISA Audio Accessory 2020-2021 Pro-Ject VC-E**

Having spearheaded the vinyl revival with its excellent – and very affordable – turntables, Pro-Ject has now turned its attention to looking after your precious LP collection with its compact VC-E record cleaning machine. Not only is it small, it's also very affordable and fast, spinning the disc at 30rpm to enable it to be cleaned in just a few rotations. In fact, Pro-Ject says one spin in each direction should be enough, while the clamp keeps the record label dry and the suction arm cleans the surface effectively. The result? Less noise, less stylus and vinyl wear, and even better sound from your favourite LPs.



**EISA Portable DAC/  
Headphone Amplifier 2020-2021  
AudioQuest DragonFly Cobalt**

The latest addition to AudioQuest’s DragonFly range is its best yet. The Cobalt model not only converts a huge range of audio formats from your computer, it also features a high-quality headphone amplifier, as well as being able to deliver great sound to a hi-fi system – and all in a package no bigger than a USB thumb-drive. It’s an ideal portable audio companion: simply pop it into a USB port on your computer or ‘smart device’ which will both power it and supply the music. Then just plug in your favourite headphones, and you have all you need for superb music wherever you happen to be.



**EISA Headphones 2020-2021  
DALI IO-6**

Many loudspeaker companies have diversified into headphones, but none has done so as spectacularly as Danish manufacturer DALI. Not only is the IO-6 a wireless design, it also incorporates excellent active noise cancelling, adding to its closed-back design three modes of cancellation. As if that wasn’t enough, it then adds best-in-class battery life to keep you listening longer – up to 30 hours between charges, in fact. Add to that a superbly powerful yet open and informative sound, and you have nothing less than a sensational début.

**EISA Mobile Audio Player 2020-2021  
FiiO M11 Pro**

This portable music player packs best-in-class functionality into a high-quality chassis with bezel-free touchscreen display. Format support and listening options are unrivalled – the M11 Pro can be used as both a Bluetooth receiver and transmitter, as a USB DAC and USB audio player (with native DSD output), or playing direct from its onboard storage (expandable to 2TB) or streaming apps. A Samsung Exynos hexa-core SoC ensures seamless music management and a responsive user experience. Two AK4497EQ DACs with Velvet Sound architecture, meanwhile, support hi-res audio to 384kHz/32-bit, plus MQA decoding. The player’s trio of headphone outputs benefit from powerful, low-distortion amplification. And that all-important sound quality? In a word: exceptional.



**HOME THEATRE AUDIO EXPERT GROUP**

EISA HOME THEATRE SPEAKER SYSTEM 2020-2021	Arendal Sound 1961 Series
EISA BEST BUY HOME THEATRE SPEAKER SYSTEM 2020-2021	Triangle Borea Series
EISA SMART SOUNDBAR 2020-2021	Harman Kardon Citation MultiBeam 700
EISA PREMIUM SOUNDBAR 2020-2021	Bang & Olufsen Beosound Stage
EISA HOME THEATRE RECEIVER 2020-2021	Denon AVC-X4700H
EISA HOME THEATRE SUBWOOFER 2020-2021	SVS SB-2000 Pro
EISA HOME THEATRE HIGH-END 2020-2021	Trinnov Altitude platform
EISA HOME THEATRE HEADPHONE 2020-2021	JVC EXOFIELD XP-EXT1
EISA HOME THEATRE AMPLIFIER 2020-2021	Emotiva XPA Gen3
EISA SOUNDBAR 2020-2021	LG SN8YG
EISA BEST BUY SOUNDBAR 2020-2021	TCL TS9030 RAY-DANZ
EISA HOME THEATRE MEDIA PLAYER 2020-2021	Zappiti Pro 4K HDR

**HOME THEATRE VIDEO & DISPLAY EXPERT GROUP**

EISA 8K TV 2020-2021	LG 75NANO99
EISA BEST PREMIUM OLED TV 2020-2021	LG OLED65GX
EISA LARGE SCREEN TV 2020-2021	Samsung QE75Q950TS
EISA BEST BUY TV 2020-2021	TCL 65C815K
EISA HOME THEATRE TV 2020-2021	Philips 65OLED935
EISA BEST BUY OLED TV 2020-2021	Philips 55OLED805
EISA PROJECTOR 2020-2021	Optoma CinemaX UHZ65UST

**PHOTOGRAPHY EXPERT GROUP**

EISA CAMERA OF THE YEAR 2020-2021	Fujifilm X-T4
EISA BEST BUY CAMERA 2020-2021	Nikon Z 50
EISA APS-C CAMERA 2020-2021	Canon EOS 90D
EISA FULL-FRAME CAMERA 2020-2021	Nikon D780
EISA ADVANCED FULL-FRAME CAMERA 2020-2021	Sony α7R IV
EISA PROFESSIONAL CAMERA 2020-2021	Canon EOS-1D X Mark III
EISA PHOTO/VIDEO CAMERA 2020-2021	Panasonic Lumix DC-S1H
EISA COMPACT CAMERA 2020-2021	Fujifilm X100 V
EISA VLOGGING CAMERA 2020-2021	Sony Vlog Camera ZV-1
EISA CAMERA INNOVATION 2020-2021	Canon EOS R5
EISA LENS OF THE YEAR 2020-2021	Canon RF 70-200mm F2.8L IS USM
EISA WIDEANGLE ZOOM LENS 2020-2021	Sigma 14-24mm F2.8 DG DN Art
EISA STANDARD ZOOM LENS 2020-2021	Canon RF 24-70mm F2.8L IS USM
EISA TELEPHOTO ZOOM LENS 2020-2021	Tamron 70-180mm F2.8 Di III VXD
EISA TRAVEL ZOOM LENS 2020-2021	Tamron 28-200mm F/2.8-5.6 Di III RXD
EISA SUPER TELEPHOTO ZOOM LENS 2020-2021	Sony FE 200-600mm F5.6-6.3 G OSS
EISA PROFESSIONAL TELEPHOTO ZOOM LENS 2020-2021	Nikon AF-S NIKKOR 120-300mm F2.8E FL ED SR VR
EISA WIDEANGLE LENS 2020-2021	Sony FE 20mm F1.8 G
EISA PORTRAIT LENS 2020-2021	Nikon NIKKOR Z 85mm F1.8 S
EISA LENS INNOVATION 2020-2021	Canon RF 600mm & 800mm F11 IS STM
EISA CAMERA DRONE 2020-2021	DJI Mavic AIR 2
EISA PHOTO SOFTWARE 2020-2021	Nik Collection 3 By DxO
EISA MONITOR 2020-2021	EIZO ColorEdge CS2740

**MOBILE DEVICES EXPERT GROUP**

EISA BEST SMARTPHONE 2020-2021	OnePlus 8 Pro
EISA ADVANCED SMARTPHONE 2020-2021	OPPO Find X2 Pro
EISA FOLDABLE SMARTPHONE 2020-2021	Samsung Galaxy Z Flip
EISA MULTIMEDIA SMARTPHONE 2020-2021	Sony Xperia 1 II
EISA SMARTPHONE CAMERA 2020-2021	Huawei P40 Pro
EISA IN-EAR HEADPHONES 2020-2021	Sennheiser Momentum True Wireless 2
EISA ON-EAR HEADPHONES 2020-2021	Bowers & Wilkins PX5
EISA MOBILE SPEAKER 2020-2021	LG XBOOM Go PL7
EISA BEST SMARTWATCH 2020-2021	Huawei Watch GT 2

**IN-CAR ELECTRONICS EXPERT GROUP**

EISA IN-CAR HEAD UNIT 2020-2021	Kenwood DMX9720XDS
EISA IN-CAR SOUND PROCESSOR 2020-2021	Helix DSP ULTRA
EISA IN-CAR BEST VALUE DSP 2020-2021	Ground Zero GZDSP 4-8XII
EISA IN-CAR AMPLIFIER 2020-2021	MOSCONI GLADEN ATOMO 2
EISA IN-CAR DSP AMPLIFIER 2020-2021	Eton Stealth 7.1 DSP
EISA IN-CAR SPEAKER SYSTEM 2020-2021	ESB 8.6K3U LE
EISA IN-CAR SUBWOOFER 2020-2021	Hifonics ZRX6D2
EISA IN-CAR HIGH END COMPONENT 2020-2021	Audison bit One HD Virtuoso
EISA IN-CAR DASHCAM 2020-2021	Kenwood DRV-A501W
EISA CAMPER VAN HEAD UNIT 2020-2021	Zenec Z-E3766





# SVS

For the first time ever, a single brand has won Best Loudspeaker and Best Subwoofer in the same year, as voted by EISA, the Expert Imaging & Sound Association of 55 AV magazines from around the world.



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

**karma**  
audio - visual



# SB-2000 PRO

“ While the sealed cabinet may be ‘small’, its performance is anything but - this is a polished performer that unearths both the nuance and scale of movie sound mixes, delivering dramatic, deep bass while simultaneously remaining controlled and speedy. ”

**EISA HOME THEATRE SUBWOOFER 2020-2021**



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





# PRIME PINNACLE

“

In practice the Prime Pinnacles are svelte enough to slip into all but the smallest rooms, so if you crave a warm and a full-bodied sound, these towers will have your system glowing.”

**EISA LOUDSPEAKER 2020-2021**



# Classical Companion

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

## Shostakovich *Symphony No 5*

Written under duress during four months in spring 1937, this would become his most popular work. **Christopher Breunig** sets out the background and suggests recordings

**N**ew pieces by composers Harrison Birtwistle or Peter Maxwell Davies, say, will have received polite applause and a few boos from the audience at their premieres. But no government response.

Things were very different in 1930s Soviet Russia under Stalin, when a knock at the door could lead to interrogation – or worse. Composer Dmitri Shostakovich was already in the doghouse after performances of his 1934 opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. And completing his *Symphony No 4* – a big brute of a work – he withdrew the planned Leningrad premiere in '36, after denunciation by the State. (This was not performed until 1961, during the Khrushchev era.)

Whether or not there was coercion, an article in a Nov 1937 Moscow newspaper credited to Shostakovich said the new work,

➔ The 1938 premiere recording of the *Symphony* by Mravinsky is in a Doremi 2CD set [DHR7810-11]

↙ The composer at the 1972 Abbey Road EMI recording of his *Violin Concerto No 1*, with Oistrakh and Maxim Shostakovich



his *Symphony No 5*, was 'a Soviet artist's creative response to justified criticism'. The premiere that month, on the 21st, was given by the Leningrad Philharmonic under Yevgeny Mravinsky, who raised the score aloft to tumultuous applause. Party officials claimed that the audience comprised only Shostakovich supporters but, at the same time, that it showed success in 'rehabilitating' the composer, now writing music for people to enjoy.

Years later, it was claimed that the triumphant finale was written with irony in mind – as Krzysztof Urbanski says in a video trailer for his NDR Elbphilharmonie Alpha recording, the music is like being repeatedly beaten about the head with the pronouncement

'Your business is rejoicing'. A tragic reflection of the prevalent terror.

A budget 'must have' CD, Vasily Petrenko's 2008 RLPO recording in his Naxos cycle [8.572167] stresses the revised view of that ending too. The coda also has tonic sol-fa coded references to a woman who had spurned him – like the DSCH motif in *Symphony No 10*.

A year after the premiere, Mravinsky made the first 78rpm

recording, Stokowski following at Philadelphia in April 1939. A detailed examination of the Mravinsky is set out at [dschjournal.com](http://dschjournal.com). And you can still hear the 1942 Rodzinski/Cleveland version with its crazily fast finale, now on Naxos.

My first encounter with the work came via our Ferguson AM radio, which I commandeered nightly to the irritation of my father, looking for classical concerts from foreign stations. It was the eerie *Largo*, with its concluding celesta, that most profoundly impressed me – slow music the like of which I'd never heard before. The conductor was Leonard Bernstein, with his New York Philharmonic Orchestra, performing in Paris (if I remember correctly).

### THE TEST OF TIME

In 1940-41 he'd seen Koussevitzky conduct it at Tanglewood, then did it himself in Boston, Detroit and San Francisco, three years later. He made his first recording in 1945 for RCA Victor. The *Symphony* was in the repertory for his 1959 NYPO European/Russian tour and recorded

promptly on their return to the States (it was made at Boston's Symphony Hall on 20th October, John McClure producing). As the sleeve shows, Shostakovich attended the concert to hear his

"It's like being beaten on the head repeatedly"

*Symphony No 5* – he and Bernstein were introduced at a 1949 World Peace Conference, along with Aaron Copland (thereby identified as 'commies' by the far right!).

It has stood the test of time, rather overshadowing Eugene Ormandy's no less committed interpretations on the same label. The set I highlighted in *Classical Companion* [HFN Sept '20] has his 1965 RCA recording, although –



PHOTO: REG WISLON/EMI RECORDS

exaggerated stereo separation apart – the later one was preferable [see Essential Recordings boxout, below].

We also had a CBS digital LP [35854] which was recorded in July 1979 by Bernstein/NYPO at two Tokyo concerts. Amazon UK lists the CD reissue as still available [SK94733]. The finale is much broader there, 10m 07s vs. 8m 59s, although the composer is said to have endorsed the earlier approach (Mravinsky's several recorded timings were around 11m.)

In 1966 the BBC televised Bernstein in No 5 with the LSO, an electrifying piece of film, and a Euroarts DVD has remastered this footage adding a short rehearsal excerpt [3081358; b/w, mono].

Engineered by James Lock, the first LSO recording with André Previn [RCA SB6651], along with their Walton No 1, confirmed that as a classical conductor he was to be taken very seriously indeed. This was a landmark release really deserving of a 180g vinyl reissue – or at least a decent high-res download option.



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The composer's son Maxim also recorded No 5 with the LSO [now an Alto budget CD], and – in terrible picture quality – there's a YouTube uploaded 1985 Barbican filmed concert performance. At least you can see how like his father he was, the grace of his podium gestures and sense a moving dedication to the score. At 48m 07s it's 4m shorter than Mravinsky live in 1984 [Erato]. EMI issued Maxim's USSR SO/ Melodiya LP recording in 1970 and the US had a 1996 RCA CD transfer [74321-32041-2].

Back in 1960 we had a really distinguished No 5 from DG, with Witold Rowicki and the Warsaw NAT PO, albeit in dim stereo sound. As an interpretation, though, it's well worth looking for as a CD [453 9882]. But this 'Galleria' reissue you

➔ **The Bernstein recording from 1959 is now available as a remastered 192kHz/24-bit Sony download**



can only buy as an MP3 download today. Rowicki's LSO/Philips remake was far less interesting.

### FREE TO CHOOSE

Incidentally, *Gramophone* has a website review by the late Michael Oliver of the second recording by Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, made with the Hallé Orchestra [now transferred to the orchestra's label CDHLD7511]. It's worth reading as a reminder of this perceptive writer.

Needless to say, we've had recordings from all the great Russians, including Ashkenazy, Barshai, Jansons, Kondrashin, Rostropovich (I'd skip his three efforts), Rozhdestvensky, Svetlanov and Temirkanov. Of these, I'd pick

the one by Rudolph Barshai, given with the WDR Orchestra [Brilliant Classics 6324; 11 CDs].

Then there's Kurt Sanderling – an 'honorary' Russian, as he spent from 1942 to '60 working with Mravinsky, and became a personal friend of Shostakovich. His No 5 is with the Berlin SO [Berlin Classics 0300750BC]. I vividly remember a Royal Festival Hall No 8 he conducted many years ago...

Khachaturian once queried Sanderling's opening tempo of (iv) but the composer said 'No – let him play it like that'. 'So, you see,' said the conductor, 'that he was open to various different interpretations of his works. He was not stuck with one tempo or one style.' ⤴

⬅ **Composers (l-r) Sergei Prokofiev, Dmitri Shostakovich and Aram Khachaturian pictured in 1940**

## ESSENTIAL RECORDINGS

### Boston SO/Andris Nelsons

DG 4795201 (two discs)  
Part of the 'Under Stalin's Shadow' series, this 2015 live recording is coupled with Symphonies Nos 8 and 9 [HFN review Nov '16].

### Concertgebouw/Bernard Haitink

Decca 478 4214  
This recording won the 1983 *Gramophone* award for sound/engineering quality. The coupling here is Symphony No 1 with the LPO.

### LSO/André Previn

RCA G0100040094107 (download only)  
Available at 44.1kHz/16-bit only, this first version is musically more satisfying than their 1977 EMI remake (now a Warner download).

### NDR Elbphilharmonie/Krzysztof Urbanski

Alpha ALPHA427  
The young Polish conductor pulls out all the stops but clearly understands the underlying intent of the music. Excellent sound here.

### NYPO/Leonard Bernstein

Sony G010003710797N (download only)  
Numerous reissues are listed – all download only, apart from the £97 'Symphony Edition' CDs, although Amazon may still have stock.

### Philadelphia Orch/Eugene Ormandy

Dutton 2CDLX7370 (two SACDs)  
This is the later, preferable recording from 1975. It was recorded for multichannel (as here) – the US had it as a quadraphonic LP.

# Vinyl Release

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

## Getz and Gilberto *Getz/Gilberto*

Stan botches his store raid and is briefly locked away. **Steve Sutherland** listens to the Bossa Nova sax maestro as this 1964 Verve album is reissued on 180g vinyl

Stan Getz may have been good at many things in 1954 but robbery sure wasn't one of them. Strung out on smack and desperate for a fix, the hot young jazz saxophonist found himself eight days into a tour, standing outside a drugstore in Seattle.

He took a deep breath and burst right in, shouting that he had a gun, and demanded they hand over all the narcotics the staff could lay their hands on. Mary Brewster, the lady behind the counter, looked Stan up and down. Then she laughed and turned to another customer. 'Does he look like he got a gun?' The customer gave Stan the once over. 'Lady,' he said, 'He ain't got no gun.'

### SIX MONTHS INSIDE

Stan freaked out and fled back to his hotel which just happened to be located right across the street. Mary and the other customers watched him go, clocked where he was staying and called the cops. Stan, back in his room, filled with remorse and muddled in the head, picked up the phone and rang the store.

When Mary picked up, he said: 'I'm sorry for the crazy thing I did. I've never done anything like that before in my

life. I'm not a stick-up man. I'm from a good family. I'm going to commit myself on Wednesday'. Mary said, 'Why don't you commit yourself today?'. Stan replied, 'I can't. If I don't get drugs, I'll kill'.

A cop arrives at the store and gets on the phone pretending to be a doctor. He asks if he can help, Stan starts blurting out his life story and crying. The 'doctor' says he's coming right over to help. Locked in his room, Stan tries to kill himself by swallowing 60 grains of barbiturates. The police bash in his door and run him in for booking. The barbs kick in, Stan collapses.

An emergency tracheotomy is carried out to save his life. He comes round from his coma three days later, lying on a hospital bed at the Harbor Haven County Hospital, with a breathing tube in his throat. This is not a great thing for a saxophone player – or anyone else for that matter.

Getz is eventually sentenced to six months in jail, and three years probation. In his summing-up, the judge tells him: 'You have talent, family and come from a good background, but despite an income of a thousand dollars a week, you are not only broke, but your family is living under deplorable conditions. They are sleeping on the floor while you travel in luxury spending money on yourself. You're a poor excuse for a man.'

'If you can't behave yourself, someone else is going to have to look after you... It's time that you grew up'.

### STEVE SUTHERLAND

Steve edited NME from 1992-2000, the Britpop years, launching NME.com and reviving the NME Awards. Previously he was Assistant Editor on Melody Maker. Among his many adventures he has been physically threatened by Axl Rose, hung out awhile with Jerry Garcia and had a drink or two with Keith Richards...



Getz is admitted to the jail ward at the LA General Hospital, where his detox begins. At the very moment he's being processed to the prison ward, his similarly addicted wife Beverly is downstairs, giving birth to their daughter, also called Beverly.

### BOSSA COOL JAZZ

Stanley Gayetski was born on the 2nd of February 1927 in Philadelphia. At the age of 13, his father bought him a sax and three years later he was so good that he joined, under-age, Jack Teagarden's band. Stints with legendary outfits led by Stan Kenton, Jimmy Dorsey and Benny Goodman rapidly followed, then a gig as a soloist with Woody Herman. Such was his reputation that he soon went his own way, leading bands that featured such luminaries as Oscar Peterson, Dizzy Gillespie and Max Roach. After his

bust, he fled for a while to Scandinavia, divorced his wife and remarried.

Returning to the USA, he became the gov'nor of what became known as 'Cool Jazz' and that became even cooler when, in 1962, he teamed up with guitarist Charlie Byrd and recorded *Jazz Samba*, an album that sold a million copies and is widely credited with introducing the Bossa Nova to the States.

Getz had gotten the idea when a neighbour, Don Payne, bassist with Tony Bennett's band had just returned from a Brazilian tour and brought back with him a bunch of Bossa Nova recordings, the very best of which featured a guitarist and crooner called João Gilberto and his pianist pal Antonio Carlos Jobim.

On the 21st of November 1962, these two performed alongside Sergio Mendes at the first North American concert of Bossa Nova – the New Brazilian Jazz as it was advertised – at Carnegie Hall and,

"It's time you grew up" the judge said at the hearing'



Stan Getz pictured in 1958 (far left), Astrud Gilberto on stage in 1966 and (far right) João Gilberto in 2006



➔ Priced £15.99, the 180g vinyl reissue of *Getz/Gilberto* on Verve is available to order online at [www.roughtrade.com](http://www.roughtrade.com)

hot on the heels of his Samba success, Getz attended and duly instigated the Getz/Gilberto project, the wonderful collaboration we're here to celebrate.

The recording took place on the 18th of March 1963 at New York's A&R Studios and took a mere 24 hours. Engineered by Phil Ramone [*HFN* Aug '20] and produced by Creed Taylor, *Getz/Gilberto* may sound like calmness incarnate but the session was, amazingly, anything but. Gilberto liked to play quiet and delicate, Getz a little more aggressively. They often disagreed on tempo and which was the best take, and at one point Gilberto, who did not speak English, said to Jobim: 'Tell this gringo he is an idiot'. Jobim then turned to Getz and said: 'Stan, João is saying that his dream always was to record with you'.

One fortuitous result of the language barrier was that the assembly was nervous that the album would suffer without at least some of the vocals being sung in English. Gilberto's wife, Astrud, was hanging out at the session and was persuaded to join her husband singing a classy little number called 'The Girl From Ipanema'. Astrud was no vocalist in the traditional sense of the word – she didn't



belt the words out, she almost spoke them – yet once the track became an international hit single, the sheer charm and naivety of her delivery became the stylistic template for any aspiring female beatnik singer worth her cappuccino.

**SUN SOAKED**

Her husband's vocals are also lovely, lazy yet precise, and the third 'voice' is dazzling too, Getz's sax adeptly continuing the musical conversation, never strident, always laid-back like he was sipping a pina colada at some sun-soaked, tropical bar.

Magnificent from start to finish, the majority of the tracks are Jobim creations, all poised, played with seemingly effortless grace and oozing dreamy romanticism. The album came wrapped in an appropriately abstract expressionist cover created by Puerto Rican artist Olga Albizu and, on its Verve release in March '64, it won the *Grammy* awards for Best Album, Best Jazz Instrumental Album and Best Engineered Recording, while 'The Girl From Ipanema' was awarded Record Of The Year.

Rarely has any album satisfied so fully both artistically and commercially. And today – even for those of us who are not deeply versed in the deep mysteries of jazz – it sits alongside Miles Davis's *Kind Of Blue*, Dave Brubeck's *Take Five* and John Coltrane's *Giant Steps* as key essentials in our vinyl collections.

Post *Getz/Gilberto*, there were other collaborations and some prominent concerts but none could match the LP's one-off chemistry. João and Astrud divorced in the mid '60s; João died broke in 2019; Astrud's still going strong, aged 80, an ardent campaigner for animal rights.

Getz continued to struggle on and off with heroin and the law – he was arrested for illegally possessing a firearm in the 1980s. Liver cancer carried him off in 1991. After cremation his ashes were poured from his saxophone case six miles off the coast of Marina Del Rey. ☹

**RE-RELEASE VERDICT**  
 This is the album which kicked off Astrud Gilberto's singing career, with the hit opener 'The Girl From Ipanema' – but she doesn't get front cover credit for this March '64 release on the prestigious Verve Label [V6-8545]. Six tracks were written by pianist Antonio Carlos Jobim while Milton Banana was drummer. If you're lucky you can catch the heavy black vinyl reissue of the album [5355156], at £3.00 below the regular list price of £15.99 by visiting the online Rough Trade site. *HFN*

Sound Quality: 90%

0 - - - - - 100



# Tom Waits *Blue Valentine*

Waits once joked he wrote only two kinds of songs, describing them as grim reapers and grand weepers. And while this 1978 album was not a best-seller, it saw him refine his beat poet balladry by drawing on the blues, resulting in some of his greatest tracks

Words: **Johnny Black**



Millions first encountered the name Tom Waits when he was listed as the composer of 'Ol' 55', one of the stand-out tracks on The Eagles' 1974 album *On The Border*. Anyone sufficiently smitten by that ultra-smooth slab of Californian country rock to wonder who this songwriter was, probably went on to discover that Waits resembled The Eagles about as much as Bob Dylan resembled Peter, Paul And Mary.

Indeed, Waits was quick to disassociate himself from The Eagles, at one point declaring their albums to be 'good for keeping the dust off your turntable and that's about all'. Yet there were clues in 'Ol' 55' – notably the lines 'Well my time went so quickly, I went lickety-splitly, out to my ol' 55' – that this man crafted words and rhymes with a skill that went way above and beyond that expected of the laid-back singer-songwriters at work in the mid '70s. Still, many who were curious enough to seek out and explore Waits' solo albums, often found themselves immediately put off by his half-croak, half-growl voice. But those who found that unique sound compelling were hooked for life.

### GROWING STATURE

*Blue Valentine*, released in 1978, was Waits' fifth studio album, and while not his best-known, best-loved or best-selling collection, it has



↑ Side 1 of the original LP on Asylum Records

↗ Tom Waits poses for the camera in 2011

↗ The LP rear sleeve with Rickie Lee Jones (in red)

↓ Early '70s press shot issued by Asylum



JESSE DYLAN

steadily grown in stature to the point where it has justly earned our coveted Vinyl Icon status while numerous multiplatinum albums have not – and may never...

### GUTTERAL GROAN

The album opens with the singer's first-ever cover version, a gorgeously orchestrated interpretation of the timeless Bernstein-Sondheim classic 'Somewhere', from *West Side Story*. Given Waits' guttural groan of a voice it should not work, but it's perfect, and it reveals how closely the desperate 1970s characters in Waits' songs mirror the 1950s kids in *West Side Story*. It feels like a song that Waits himself might have written, if Bernstein and Sondheim hadn't got there first.

Next up is 'Red Shoes By The Drugstore', an atmospheric Waits rap which functions mainly as a bridge between 'Somewhere' and the LP's first truly great song, 'Christmas Card From A Hooker In Minneapolis', easily among the saddest songs ever written.

Against a jazzy piano from George Duke, Waits dictates a letter from a prostitute which starts in an optimistic vein but eventually spirals down into the misery of her real life.

Waits' songs were always, effectively, short hard-boiled detective stories, and with this album he found the perfect setting for them, by moving away from rock more towards blues and jazz. It



was a change that suited producer Bones Howe, who had cut his teeth in the '50s working with Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald and Ornette Coleman.

### VIOLENT TALE

According to Howe, who rated Waits as his favourite among all the artists he had worked with, 'He wanted to

'Waits moved from rock towards blues and jazz'

do a blues record and that's about as close to a blues record as Waits can make. It was a lot of fun doing it'. Remember, though, that blues nowadays usually means electric guitar

Chicago blues, whereas for both Howe and Waits it was a much older style that inspired them.

'Christmas Card' is followed by 'Romeo Is Bleeding', a violent tale about a Mexican gang leader who dies with a bullet in his chest. This one splits the critics over whether it's the best track on the album or just a re-write of Waits' 1976 song 'Small Change (Got Rained On With



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## VINYL ICONS

### PRODUCTION NOTES

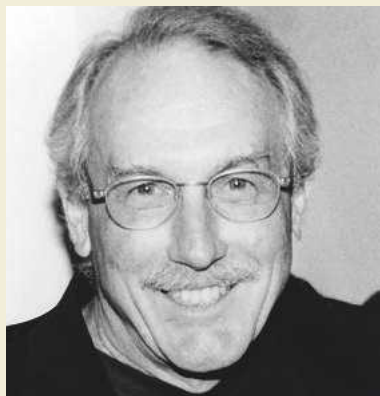
*Blue Valentine* was recorded to 2-track tape in Filmways/Heider studios in Hollywood, between July the 24th and August the 26th, 1978. It was made under the watchful eye of Bones Howe, a respected engineer and producer who had worked since the mid '50s with jazz-oriented artists of the calibre of Frank Sinatra, Mel Tormé, Ella Fitzgerald and Ornette Coleman. Then, in the '60s, he produced hits for The Turtles, The Association and 5th Dimension.

The pair first collaborated in 1974 on Waits' second album, *Heart Of Saturday Night*, going on to work together until 1981. Howe, having produced many of the all-time greatest popular singers, knew exactly how to get the best out of any voice – even one as bizarre as Waits'. To capture it, he chose the classic RCA 77 DX ribbon mic.

'The 77s have three cardioid settings,' he explained to *Sound On Sound*. 'V1 and V2 were different low-end cut-offs, and "M" was for music recording. The V1 setting had a high cut-off, which made it good for radio announcing. The V2 position left a lot more low-end in there and made it a great vocal microphone.'

Another reason why Howe reckoned the 77 DX was ideal, was because Waits, 'popped and spat a lot when he sang', but 'it's very hard to pop that microphone, so you didn't need a pop filter.

'Plus he liked to get right on the mic, so he would sit at the piano and I hung it from a boom so it would hang down in front of him.' On other tracks, Howe set the mic up directly in front of the band with Waits standing in front of the drums to sing. Usually this was done without requiring any overdubbing.



His Own .38'). I fall into the second camp here, as I see no reason why a songwriter shouldn't revisit his old songs if he feels he has something new to add to their story, which I believe Waits did in this instance.

### DRESSING DOWN

'There's more blood in this record, probably more detective-type stories,' Waits said at the time. 'It just comes from living in Los

Angeles, and hanging out where I hang out. I kind of feel like I'm a private eye sometimes.'

Side one ends with '\$29', a song which seems to illustrate those words perfectly. It was prompted – if we

can ever believe a word he speaks – when Waits was present during an argument between a pimp and a prostitute who wanted him to reimburse her for the \$29 dress she'd had torn by a client.

I was lucky enough to spend the best part of a day with Waits in the early '80s, and felt he was just about the smartest artist I'd ever interviewed. But by the end of the day I had no idea how much of what he'd told me was made up on the spur of the moment.

What I remember clearly is that at no point in the day did he touch a drink or smoke a cigarette, which left me wondering how much of

Tom Waits' public persona was a careful fabrication.

'Kentucky Avenue' is one of just a handful of songs on *Blue Valentine* that is built around Waits' piano, highlighting the extent to which he had moved away from his earlier keyboard-based archetypes to electric guitar-driven tales.

It's this track which probably reveals the most about Waits, populated as it is by characters from his childhood, including Mrs Storm who sat behind her kitchen

window with the barrel of a 12-gauge shotgun jutting out, and Kipper, a young friend trapped in a wheelchair after having caught polio.

But ultimately, although packed with emotional resonance, the narrative boils down to a parade of fleeting glimpses, wilfully obscured by Waits' freewheeling way with words. So maybe the question is really whether or not we should care if an artist is telling us the truth, so long as what we're told is compelling.

### CLICHÉD CLOSER

'Kentucky Avenue' is followed by 'A Sweet Little Bullet From A Pretty Blue Gun', said to be based on the suicide of a 15-year-old who jumped to her death from a 17th-floor window on Hollywood Boulevard. Rather than try to engage your sympathies, Waits narrates the story like an impartial observer, making the

← Waits in a shot taken in 2011 and issued by Anti Records in 2018 when the label released a remastered version of *Blue Valentine* on multiple formats

← Poster for the 1981 concert appearances by Waits at the Apollo Theatre in London and a 1977 ticket stub from the Michigan Theatre, Ann Arbor

← A 1996 shot of Bones Howe, who, in 1978, produced the *Blue Valentine* album at the Filmways/Heider Studios in Hollywood

"I kind of feel like I'm a private eye sometimes"

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# Alternate Format Discography



➔ Tom Waits on stage in Prague, 2008 (left), a mid '80s Island Records publicity shot (right), and (below) a 2009 portrait by Michael O'Brian

incident so matter of fact that it's you, the listener, who has to decide about the morality of the tale and characters who inhabit it.

The album closes with 'Blue Valentines', delivered in a voice as close to singing as Waits ever gets. It works well enough as a smoky, late-night closer to bring the collection to an end, but I've always felt it to be uncomfortably clichéd for Waits, stuffed with imagery that a dozen other '70s singer-songwriters might have knocked off. I do wonder if he hoped that echoing the

name of the track in the title of the LP might make listeners think it must be more significant than it is.

## TURNING POINT

Flawed moments like this, however, cannot detract from the impact of cuts such as 'Kentucky Avenue' or 'Christmas Card From A Hooker In Minneapolis', which not only set this album apart from every other singer-songwriter opus of the era but signified a turning point for Waits, after which period he not only seemed to be much more self-assured but also comfortable with his talents.

Herb Hardesty, the sax player who had been a core member of Fats Domino's band, later

spoke of the *Blue Valentine* sessions, saying, 'He specialises in musical freedom. If you feel like jazz you put it in. If you want to get a little bluesy you put that in too. There's complete freedom'.

The album was released by Asylum Records in September 1978, and critics at the time seemed unsure of what to make of it, most

of them concluding that it achieved little more than treading water. *Rolling Stone's* Don Shewey, for example, damned it with faint praise, calling it merely, 'as solid a

record as Tom Waits has made'.

Nor were sales particularly impressive. Waits had never been a big seller, never having achieved a Top 40 placing either on the US *Billboard* charts or UK albums charts, and *Blue Valentine* did nothing to change that. It's only time that has elevated the album, especially after the arrival of the Internet which has allowed some fresh young music lovers to re-assess it, one online review site describing it perceptively as 'a razor-sharp vision of Tinseltown and its dark, raging underbelly'.

For my money, Waits has never made a consistently wonderful album, probably because of the fact that his love of experimentation leads him to take musical chances that don't always work. But, at his best, as with most of *Blue Valentine*, nobody else comes close when he gets it right. ♪

'Nobody else comes close when Waits gets it right'

ALLEN MACQUEEN

Given that Waits' fifth LP *Blue Valentine* was never a huge seller, it's fascinating to find it's been manufactured in 98 versions worldwide. In 1978 alone, 38 versions were made available in the USA, Canada and Europe, NZ and Japan.

## ORIGINAL VINYL

Mastered by the redoubtable Terry Dunavan at Elektra Sound Recorders in Hollywood, the original 12in vinyl album [Asylum 6E-162] first appeared in a fairly sumptuous, full colour gatefold sleeve, suggesting that despite minimal sales, Asylum still felt Waits was worth lavishing some money



on. The uncredited woman on the rear and inside sleeves is Rickie Lee Jones with whom Waits was conducting a well-publicised romance (see p97).

## TAPE FORMATS

In 1978, Asylum also released *Blue Valentine* in 8-track cartridge format [ET-8162] with a dramatically different running order imposed by the ingenious if quirky endless tape loop mechanism. There was also a cassette version, which was manufactured in Germany [453 088]. This is highly thought of, though it's no match for the original vinyl release.

## FIRST CD RELEASE

Manufactured by Warner Music Japan in 1990, this version [WPCP-3587] was not re-edited from the original two-track master. It didn't sound bad, and boasted a nicely produced 20-page booklet featuring all the lyrics.

## REMASTERED CD

Twenty years passed before *Blue Valentine* finally got



the digital remaster job it so obviously deserved, courtesy of Isao Kikuchi at the Tokyo-based Mixer's Lab, owners of the sub-label Warner Music Mastering. Issued in the appealing mini-cardboard sleeve style [see above] with the original album artwork, this edition included an obi-strip and an insert with notes, mostly in Japanese.

It was part of a limited edition album mid-price Waits reissue series featuring all of his albums up to and including *Heartattack And Vine*, and represented a considerable improvement over the 1990 CD. These have since become highly sought after.

## DOWNLOAD

The next development came in 2018 when Anti Records, LA, made a set of FLAC files [no cat no], also used to create hardware releases in various territories including CD [7570-2], gatefold CD [7570-2], gatefold CD [WPCR-18010], gatefold vinyl [87570-1], 180g vinyl [7570-1] and blue vinyl [7570-1].



Remastering for most of these was done at Infrasonic Sound in LA, but it's worth noting that 2018 also saw an intriguing Anti CD reissue [87570-2] 'supervised' by Waits, his wife and recording engineer Karl Derfler. Whether this implies that they were not entirely happy with previous digital versions, I do not know.

MICHAEL O'BRIAN



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# Meet the Producers

BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW

## Dave Stewart

Perhaps what distinguishes this British-born producer is that he's not only able to play a variety of instruments but is also a performer. And a hugely successful one too, having been one half of chart-topping duo Eurythmics. **Steve Sutherland** on Dave Stewart...

**B**ack in 1973, Dave Stewart was stuck in a hippie band called Longdancer. It wasn't a bad gig but Dave was restless. Then he met Erin Grace. She was this gorgeous American singer/songwriter who he bumped into in North London and the two hit it off.

They sneaked around a bit, made some sweet music together and called themselves Platinum Weird because Dave had said that he was going to hang his first platinum record over a hole in the wall of the squat they were crashing in.

Their debut gig was at Mick Jagger's birthday party. Elton John's Rocket label signed them up to make an album. All was rosy in the garden except Erin would often disappear for days, only to reappear at the studio as if nothing had happened.

### LAUNCH PARTY

Sometimes she'd bring in a song she'd written, sometimes not. Dave continued with the task in hand, producing what he could until finally the record was ready. Elton threw a big launch party but Erin scarpered again,



➔ Dave Stewart attending the 2020 MusiCares at the Los Angeles Convention Center on January the 24th, 2020

➔ Stewart poses for an RCA press shot issued in the late '80s to promote the Eurythmics



➔ One half of the Platinum Weird project – Emmy and Grammy-nominated hit song songwriter Kara Elizabeth DioGuardi, pictured here in 2007

this time for good. It's said she was distraught at the death of Nick Drake and made off with Elton's boyfriend to Los Angeles where she hung out with Don Henley of The Eagles who introduced her

to Lindsey Buckingham with whom she had an affair, sparking the idea for the *Rumours*-era Fleetwood Mac.

Platinum Weird was scuppered and the album was shelved. 'They could have been huge, I'm convinced of it', Elton said later on a VH1 documentary. Mick Jagger added that they were, 'the most famous band no one's ever heard of', and Stevie Nicks confessed: 'She was wispy and elusive... I wasn't

quite sure what she was about, but I kind of copied her look'.

Thing is, none of this is true...

### MAKE BELIEVE

Platinum Weird was, in fact, a hoax project concocted by Dave Stewart in 2004 in cahoots with a lady called Kara DioGuardi who wrote songs for Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, Gwen Stefani and Ashlee Simpson. The

two put their heads together and what came out was this fictitious fantasy about a long lost group. They pulled strings to get US TV broadcaster VH1 to air the star-studded

**"In the studio you're always made to feel like you're a dunce"**

*Behind The Music* mockumentary. Platinum Weird's debut LP, *Make Believe*, was released in 2006. Ringo Starr played on two tracks.

Why? Why, indeed. Welcome to the wacky world of Dave Stewart.



Best known as the geezer behind Eurythmics, the fabulously successful duo he formed with singer and one-time girlfriend Annie Lennox in 1980, Stewart didn't follow the familiar tea-boy-to-engineer-to-producer route when it came to developing his career behind the mixing desk. Rather, he was an active musician who learned on the job. He cites krautrock legend Conny Plank as his earliest mentor, the producer working on Eurythmics' debut LP, *In The Garden*, in Cologne in 1981. Can's Holger Czukay played on the album and the team's enthusiastic and experimental approach rubbed off on Stewart.

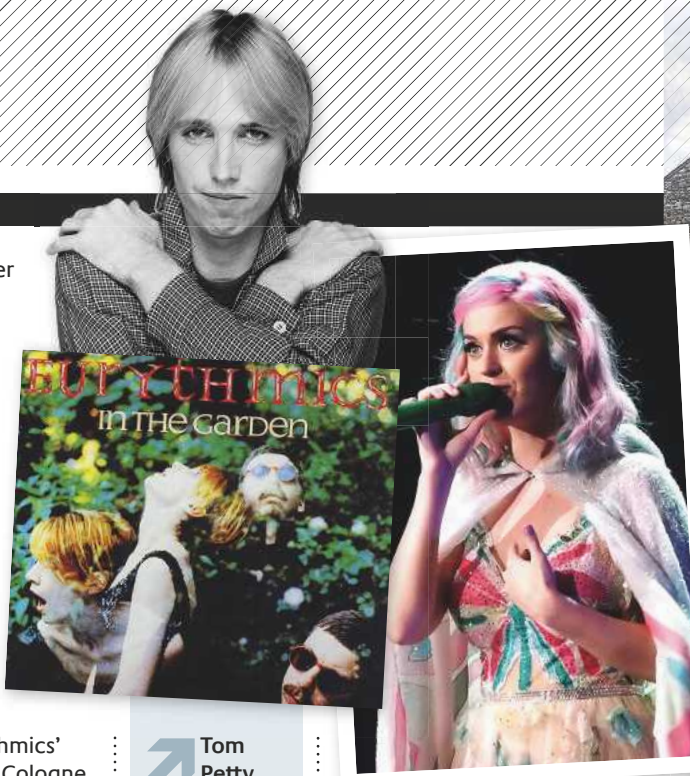
### MAD NOISES

'In studios you're always made to feel like you're a dunce by the engineer and you're not allowed to touch the board. They were the opposite: "Let's get the tape and cut it all up, stitch it backwards". I went back to England with the confidence of having an eight-track and making the *Sweet Dreams* album.'

*In The Garden* wasn't the commercial success Stewart had hoped but he hunkered down to the task, raising a bank loan, hiring an attic room above a picture framing factory in London's Chalk Farm and establishing an eight-track studio.

'We had one small TEAC 8-track recorder, a secondhand Revox 2-track to mix down to, one Bel noise reduction system, one Klark Technic spring reverb, a Soundcraft 16-input desk and a Roland Space Echo. That was about it.'

Unable to record Lennox's vocals on an open mic while the shop was operating downstairs, the duo



➔ Tom Petty (top), the Eurythmics' debut LP *In The Garden* from 1981 and Katy Perry in 2014

➔ The Church recording studio in Crouch End

➔ Stevie Nicks of Fleetwood Mac fame in 2013

➔ Annie Lennox with Dave Stewart

➔ Joss Stone on stage in 2009

made do. 'I would spend hours experimenting between the sessions, sometimes till four in the morning, making the weirdest tapes', Stewart says. 'They weren't anything that I meant to release; I just liked making mad noises. It was a great way to learn, though.'

'I started to really understand how the board worked and to not be afraid of it, to not mind overloading it or doing delays that went into feedback and started to distort. Dub records had all of that, so why shouldn't other records?'

### FAITH LIFT

Eurythmics moved their operation to the small entrance hall of a former church in Crouch End. When *Sweet Dreams* took off and the money started rolling in, Stewart bought the whole building and turned it into The Church Studios, recording most of the Eurythmics albums there until he sold it on to singer David Gray in 2004.

'We then got in a 24-track Soundcraft tape machine and a slightly larger desk, but we didn't ratchet up much else there



KRISTIN BURNS

gear-wise... It was just very exciting for us to have a lot more space to work in', he recalls. While he was away on tour, other artists such as Bob Dylan, Robert Plant, My Bloody Valentine and Radiohead took advantage of the space.

'What happened with me was, I was producing the Eurythmics records, and people started listening to them and going, "Hey, we like those a lot". Before you knew it, I was being asked to produce records for other artists. But that wasn't my plan.'

Planned or not, he began taking up the offers and soon found he brought something unique to the party. 'A lot of producers can play instruments, but they aren't performers,' he says. 'I know what it's like to go on stage with a band. I'm probably thinking like an artist when I produce somebody else's record. "What's this gonna be like live?". That kind of attitude can be very useful when you're trying to create excitement with a track.'

One such case is 'Don't Come Around Here No More' by Tom Petty And The Heartbreakers. Stewart co-wrote, produced and played on it: 'There's the part in the track where it explodes into this double-time thing, and the whole band



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# MEET THE PRODUCERS

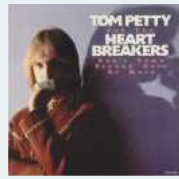
BEHIND THE MUSIC WITH HI-FI NEWS & RECORD REVIEW



**1983**  
A No 2 in the UK and No 1 in the US, the title track to Eurythmics' second album, *Sweet Dreams*, propels Dave Stewart and Annie Lennox to pop stardom



**1984**  
A shimmering synth pattern and lilting drum beat topped with a harmonica solo by Stevie Wonder gives Eurythmics a UK No 1 with 'There Must Be an Angel'



**1985**  
One of the first artists to work with Stewart, Tom Petty scores a hit with 'Don't Come Around Here No More', a song co-written and produced by Stewart



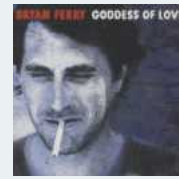
**1985**  
A radio-friendly feminist anthem was what was ordered by Annie Lennox and the track 'Sisters Are Doin' It For Themselves' with Aretha Franklin is a UK Top 10 hit



**1997**  
Stewart shares production credits on Bon Jovi's second solo album *Destination Anywhere*, which peaks at No 2 on the official UK albums chart



**2000**  
Co-written by Stewart, who also plays guitars on the track, 'Jealous' is the second single taken off Sinéad O'Connor's *Faith And Courage* studio album



**2002**  
'Goddess Of Love' is just one of the many songs Bryan Ferry writes with Stewart during the late 1990s. There are others, which remain unreleased so far

kicks in and it goes into a frenzy. It was good for the song, but I was probably also thinking, "Hey, this will really work live, too".'

## TENSE MEETING

How he came to work with Petty is a pretty good example of Stewart's serendipitous approach. He was working on a song for Stevie Nicks and was messing around in the studio with a sitar hook. Tom Petty then happened to drop by and immediately decided he wanted the song for himself.

'His band were like, "What's this?". It was all my backing track until the end; I had done all of that with a drum machine in a hotel room in San Francisco. There's a lot on the track. I did the guitars and the sitar, some cello and viola. Tom put his vocals on and then the band did their part at the end, playing in double time.

'Tom and I became great friends after this. I think he'd been having a crisis, a bit of a roadblock finishing the album. But Tom just said, "Oh, f\*\*\* it, let's make a record". It was kind of weird, though – the album is called *Southern Accents*, and there's me playing the sitar.

Here's an even weirder example of the way Stewart works. He rocked up to visit his ex-wife, Peg and who should be there but her new boyfriend. The conversation was understandably tense until the newbie mentioned he wrote string arrangements. As an ice-breaker

Stewart casually invited him to visit The Church to see if he could do anything with a song he was having trouble recording. The result? The sweeping strings that drive 'Here Comes The Rain Again'.

Over the years, Stewart has produced records by Aretha Franklin, Bon Jovi, Sinéad O'Connor, Bryan Ferry, Stevie Nicks, Katy Perry, Joss Stone, Marianne Faithfull, Mick Jagger and Ringo Starr to name but

a few. 'One of the secrets to my ability to collaborate with so many other talents is that I take all the pressure away...' says Stewart. 'When I come along and say, "Well, you know, it

doesn't really matter if you don't like it. Nobody will ever hear it. We'll just throw it away, burn it. It doesn't make a difference", suddenly it's a whole new world.

'There is no pressure, and you're allowed to make mistakes. You don't have to think everything is

"What I do, it's like being a dentist in some ways"



↑ In 2000 Stewart worked with singer Sinéad O'Connor on her album *Faith And Courage*

↓ Bryan Ferry pictured on stage in Australia in 2011

precious. When you're relaxed, great things happen, and you can capture something truly amazing. And this creates momentum, because you use that energy and it leads to more ideas and inspiration.'

## AGAINST THE WALL

There's also technique: 'I'm one of those old-fashioned record producers who likes to make music around the voice. People want to hear and feel the emotion in the human voice, and for me that's the most important thing to get right.

'There came a point when recording music when you could have 48 tracks, then 72 tracks or so, and just create a giant wall of music. And not a good wall of sound, like Phil Spector's – which was crafted always around the singer – but just a big wall with no dynamics that would overcome the voice. I believed in following the voice on its journey, and that's still my thing.

'In some ways, what I do is like being a dentist. I have to get something out of an artist.' ☺



EVA RINALDI

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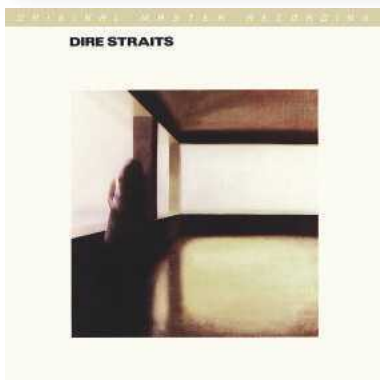
### B B KING & ERIC CLAPTON

#### Riding With The King

Reprise 093624895206 (two discs, 180g vinyl)

To mark this superb LP's 20th anniversary, it has been remastered and boosted by two unreleased tracks. This was something of a dream come true for Clapton, whose friendship with King went back decades: duets of starry-eyed British blues pioneers playing with the genuine article date to the birth of the revival, and Clapton was there on one of the very first of such pairings – backing Sonny Boy Williamson while in The Yardbirds in 1963. This features classics from both their repertoires, and the fun lies in guessing who is playing which guitar break. One bonus track is 'Rollin' And Tumblin'', which Clapton performed with Cream, while the high-point has to be the 6m 'Hold On I'm Coming'. KK

Sound Quality: 90%



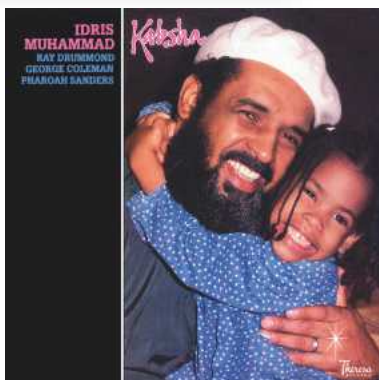
### DIRE STRAITS

#### Dire Straits

Mobile Fidelity MFSL2-466 (two 45rpm LPs)

Their eponymous debut, the last of MoFi's Dire Straits reissues, which for some might prove the most satisfying. For one thing, it predates the obsession with studio trickery which proved increasingly a Dire Straits feature, while it presages the alt-country and roots movements of the next few decades. No kidding: for a first LP it is nothing short of remarkable, and that's not even counting 'Sultans Of Swing' – Mark Knopfler was already a world-class guitarist back in 1978, his playing on 'Wild West End' and 'Water Of Love' still dazzling. They knocked me out at the Hammersmith Odeon when 'Sultans' was in the charts, and they did it again with this pressing. KK

Sound Quality: 80%



### IDRIS MUHAMMAD

#### Kabsha

Pure Pleasure TR110

Muhammad, a true journeyman jazz drummer, had a CV as long as your arm for working with others, so this 1980 title is a nice surprise as it's his name on the sleeve – and he produced only a dozen solo albums in 30 years. Joined here on bass by Ray Drummond and Pharoah Sanders or George Coleman on tenor saxes, with both of them playing on the opener, 'GCCG Blues', *Kabsha* is a cool set underscored by his R&B roots while sounding like a primer for the jazz styles of the late '50s. There are one or two screechy sax moments which will amuse those who find Sun Ra tame, but overall this is a gorgeous-sounding, late-night delight, with emphasis on the percussion. KK

Sound Quality: 85%



### CARLY SIMON

#### No Secrets

Speakers Corner ELEKTRA75049 (180g vinyl)

Like *Tapestry* or *Sweet Baby James*, this doesn't need its singer identified, and it still captivates after nearly a half-century. Simon differed from her distaff singer-songwriter contemporaries in that she was less the hippie and more the sophisticate, so the songs are less about protest, angst or political correctness and more about the personal. Few songs are as touching when dealing with nostalgia as 'The Carter Family' – Simon's take on The Beatles' 'In My Life' – in contrast to the LP's most famous number, 'You're So Vain', which could be grouped with that other ode to the louche, Peter Sarstedt's 'Where Do You Go To (My Lovely)?'. This is a real gem. KK

Sound Quality: 90%







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## EARTH WIND & FIRE

*Spirit & That's The Way Of The World*

Vocalion CDSML8574

Top-level disco-funk is overdue for reassessment: if you're too young to have experienced it first time around, this pair of chart-toppers is a good place to start. EW&F were one of the genre's top acts, ready to prove that dance music can be enjoyed without a glitter ball in the room. If it weren't for the *outré* stage-wear (*à la* The Isleys), this would be found under 'Funk', but the familiar material is too redolent of the era, like hearing anything from *Saturday Night Fever* – 'Shining Star', 'Getaway' and more. By the way, Vocalion continues maddeningly *not* to put paired releases in chronological order, so you get the 1976 title before the one from 1975. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%



## THE IDLE RACE

*The Birthday Party*

Grape Fruit QCRSEG065D (two discs; part mono)

OK, so they're but a footnote in the history of rock, but leader Jeff Lynne would go on to The Move, ELO and Traveling Wilburys. This expanded version of their debut album from 1968 gives you both the mono and stereo mixes, plenty of extra material and – for fans of The Move – a version of '(Here We Go Round) The Lemon Tree', from The Move's first LP. It's an early concept album that fits in with the era that gave us *Sgt Pepper*, The Kinks' *Arthur* and others of that ilk, so it oozes whimsical Britishness, which should have captivated those who were charmed by such projects. Alas, it failed (like *Arthur*) to do so, here and in the US, but it's a joy nonetheless. *KK*

Sound Quality: 85%



## VARIOUS

*The Love Revolution*

Teensville Records TV1036

Like power pop, 'sunshine pop' is a genre that you either adore for its lightness or you detest because (unlike the sassier power pop) it can veer toward the saccharine. This is all about harmonies as defined by The Beach Boys, and it reeks of California optimism, just as this 31-track collection's subtitle states: 'Soft Sunshine & Harmony Pop 1966-1971'. While few of the names are familiar – and this isn't where you'll find the genre's leading lights like The Association or Harpers Bizarre – it's a feast of rarities and surprises, like charming covers of Jerome Kern's 'They Didn't Believe Me' and The Youngbloods' 'All Over the World'. A blessing for archivists. *KK*

Sound Quality: 85%



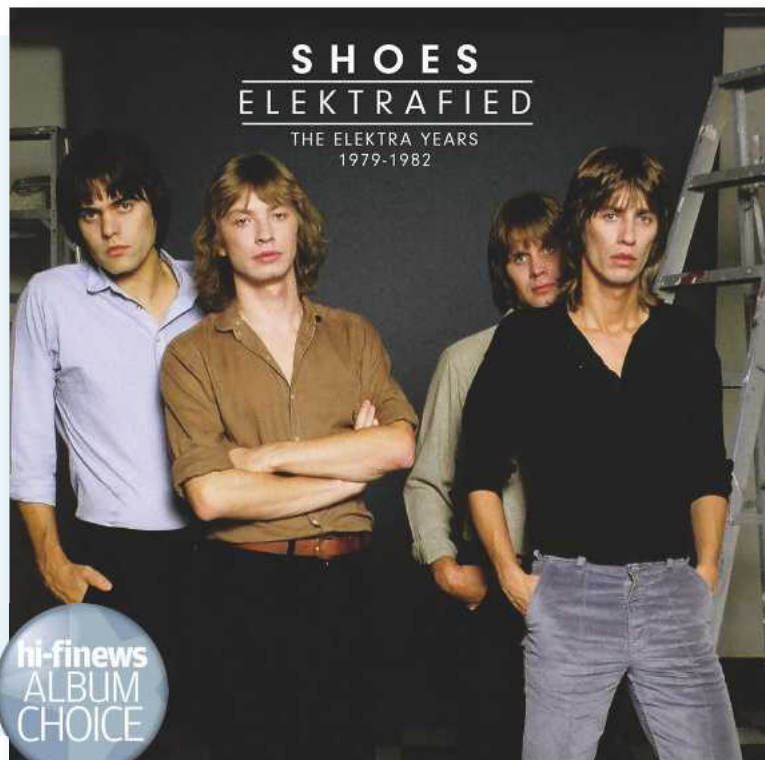
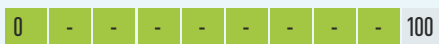
## SHOES

*Elektrafied*

Cherry Red QCRCDBOX91 (four discs)

Subtitled 'The Elektra Years 1979-1982', this chronicles one of the meanest injustices of the rock biz, for Shoes deserved to enjoy A-list success in The Beatles-inspired power pop milieu, instead of the cult status that cursed so many of them, *eg*, Badfinger, Raspberries and too many others. This is all about superb song craft, harmonies of Hollies/Everlys brilliance and production quality which exceeds what is expected of a band without star status. The detailed booklet explains why their lone shot at major-label glory failed them, the mystery being the inability of these hook-laden, mini-masterpieces to chart. This contains their three Elektra albums, each with bonus tracks, and a fourth CD of rarities. Exquisite. *KK*

Sound Quality: 90%



SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY

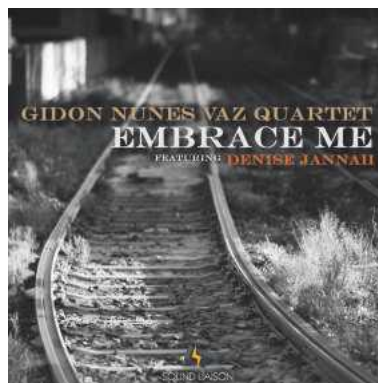
MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS

From the Diary of Anne Frank & Meditations on Rilke



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GIDON NUNES VAZ QUARTET  
Embrace Me (DXD; DSD64/128/256/512)

www.nativesd.com; Sound Liaison SL1039A

This is a typical Sound Liaison release, here captured live in Studio 2 at Hilversum's MCO with recording, mixing and mastering by Frans de Rond. However, *en route* to becoming a DXD (or DSD) master via a Digital Audio Workstation, the initial recording was transferred to a Studer A80 tape machine at 15ips. Why? The answer is that 'it gives us a bit of what they call "Mojo"'. Definitely an audiophile recording, then, but with a sense of humour, and the result is spectacular, with a warm, generous ambience you can almost reach out and touch, and each instrument – Vaz's trumpet and flugelhorn, Timothy Banchet's piano, Thomas Pol's bass and the drums of the splendidly-named Yoran Vroom – lovingly captured. And Denise Jannah's vocals on four of the tracks are simply glorious. The end result is a gentle, measured and totally appealing set. *AE*

Sound Quality: 90%



SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY/  
MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS

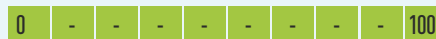
From The Diary Of Anne Frank; Meditations On Rilke (192kHz/24-bit, FLAC/MQA)

www.hiresaudio.com; SFS Media 2193600792

In May 1991, after the LSO's Barbican premiere of MTT's revised *From The Diary Of Anne Frank* Audrey Hepburn was sitting just one row ahead of me! She and Tilson Thomas had together chosen parts of the diary which he might set in a large-orchestra context – listening to a tape, he says, he was musically influenced by the intonation she used in reading the extracts. It serves the diary so well: the dark, percussion-heavy section after 'yellow

star...' mirrors the occupation horrors profoundly. Marking MTT's stepping-down from the SFS, this recording has Isabel Leonard as a beyond-criticism narrator and couples last year's settings of poems by Rilke, with Sasha Cooke (excellent) and Ryan McKinny (very musical, odd German diction). The bar-room piano relates to family history while the score echoes Mahler and Copland more so. Great sound. *CB*

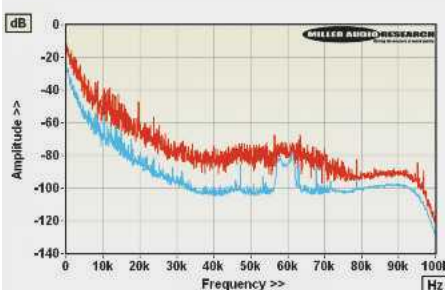
Sound Quality: 95%



OUR PROMISE

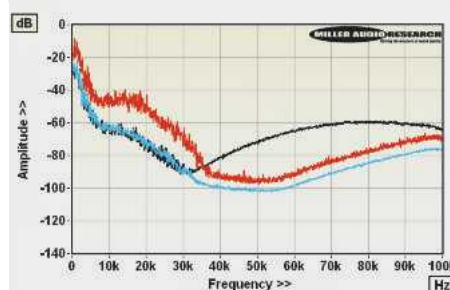
Following our Investigation feature [HFN, Jun '11] in which we examined the claimed quality of high-resolution downloads, *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* is now measuring the true sample rate and bit-depth of the HD music downloads reviewed on these pages. These unique reviews will be a regular source of information for those seeking new and re-mastered recordings offered at high sample rates and with the promise of delivering the very best sound quality. (Note: asterisk in headings denotes technical reservation explained below.) *PM*

LAB REPORT

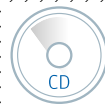


Recorded live at 192kHz/24-bit during performances at the Davies Symphony Hall, mean levels are typically between -20dBfs and -30dBfs but with true 0dB peaks in trks 1, 5, 6, 8 and 10. Note also the ultrasonic spurious at ~60kHz. *PM*

LAB REPORT



Tested in DSD guise, it's the trumpet and percussion that set the upper harmonics while the analogue tape sets the freq. resp. Thus DSD 128 offers little advantage over DSD64 [black trace] aside from pushing out the ultrasonic noise. *PM*



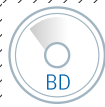
COMPACT DISC



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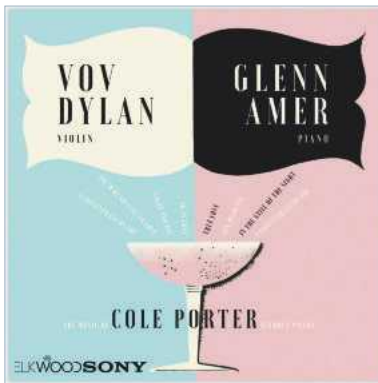
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### VOV DYLAN & GLENN AMER

The Music Of Cole Porter Without Words (DSD64/128/256/512)

[www.nativedsd.com](http://www.nativedsd.com); Elkwood Sony ELK00004

This set from violinist Vov Dylan and pianist Glenn Amer is unusual, not least for the whole concept of Cole Porter's songs delivered without lyrics. After all, Porter was one of those rare composers who wrote both words and music. The intention is to examine Porter's musicianship – something it does rather well, though I dare anyone familiar with the songs not to have the words of 'Night And Day' or 'I've Got You Under My Skin' buzzing in their head while listening. The recording, made in Sydney's Underwood Studios, is also very intimate – Dylan wanting the duo in the room with the listener, and that's just what you get, thanks to the crystal clear, no-frills sound. Yes the arrangements are a bit 'palm court' at times, but the effect of a private recital for the listener is highly persuasive – and really rather attractive. *AE*

Sound Quality: 85%



### HALLÉ ORCH/SIR JOHN BARBIROLI

Elgar: Symphony No 1; Cello Concerto (192kHz/24-bit, FLAC/MQA)

[www.highresaudio.com](http://www.highresaudio.com); Warner Classics 9029519597

Sir John made these two recordings towards the end of his contract with Pye, in December 1956 and, with the masterful French cellist André Navarra, in May '57. Moving to EMI Barbiroli re-recorded the Symphony in 1962 with the Philharmonia, perhaps because the Hallé players struggle a little in the finale. This earlier version was completed along with the *Introduction & Allegro* in just one day at Manchester's Free Trade Hall, with a resulting 'live' feel. It's one of the greatest of all Elgar recordings. But if you have the SJB Edition CD transfer, stay content – 192kHz mastering doesn't add much. The Concerto recording, long faded from memory with most collectors, is most notable for the fingerwork in the scherzo though marred for me – as the cellist is so closely balanced – by vibrato layered over the *Adagio*. *CB*

Sound Quality: 80%



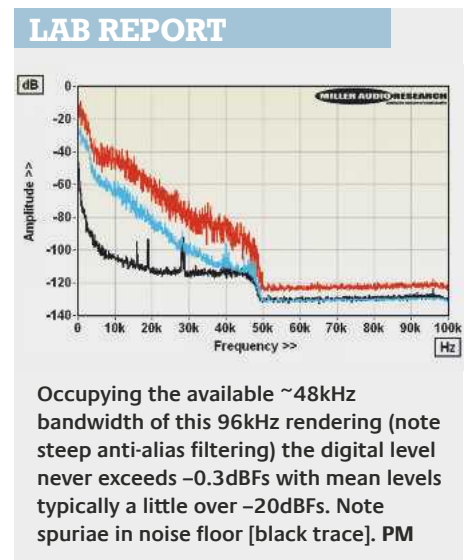
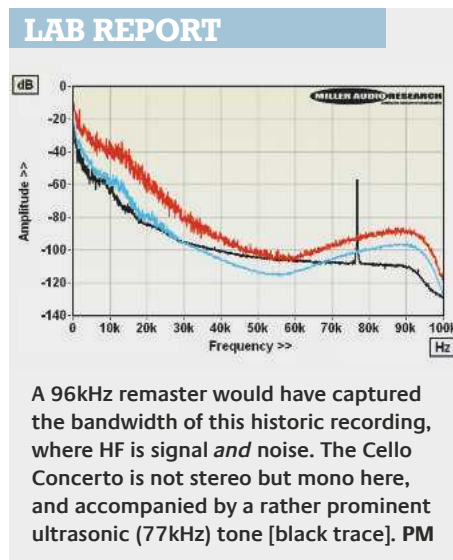
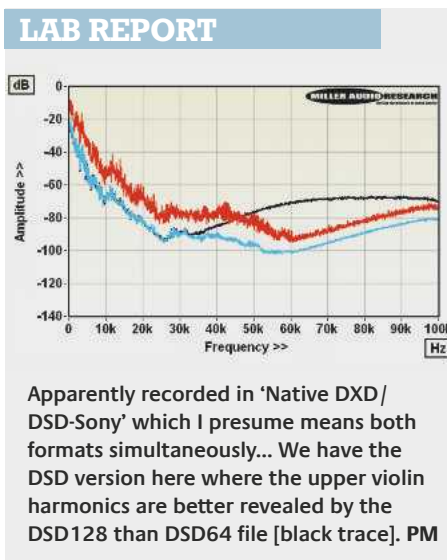
### JONAS KAUFMANN

Verdi: Otello (96kHz/24-bit, FLAC)

[www.highresaudio.com](http://www.highresaudio.com); Sony Classical 19439707932

For around three decades Plácido Domingo has been *the* Otello on stage, film and CDs. Does Kaufmann take the crown? Here, he's with the Santa Cecilia Orchestra, Rome, with Antonio Pappano conducting (This is, incidentally, the second Kaufmann Pappano *Otello* collaboration on disc). The two other principals are Federica Lombardi (Desdemona) and Carlos Álvarez (Iago). A hyperactive soundstaging, coming at you from all directions, and Pappano's driving energy make the first 15m exhausting. And soupy string playing introduces Lombardi – she's by far the most *musical* element here, for me. Álvarez is a good foil to Kaufmann and rather more interesting to follow. While totally efficient, Kaufmann never really *becomes* Otello except in his final scene of remorse. Synopsis but no libretto, track references relating to the 2CD format, and blurb about how wonderful it all is. *CB*

Sound Quality: 75%



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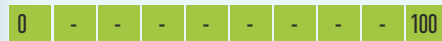
### THE FLAMING LIPS

American Head

Bella Union BELLA1052

Here, The Flaming Lips investigate their cultural identity through the disorientating prism of drug use. With its acoustic guitar, 'Mother I've Taken LSD' initially sounds like a warped take on Neil Young before the introduction of looming strings and rolling, Ringo-esque drums. If that title suggests that we're in for a bit of a laugh, it's actually a poignant collection, evoking a loss of both innocence and sanity, a feeling amplified by the reverby haze around Wayne Coyne's melancholic vocals. On 'When We Die When We're High' the restless drumming, chiming vibraphone, wah-wah guitar and ghostly vocodered voice shape one of the more impressionistic highlights of this disquieting and beautiful album. *MB*

Sound Quality: 95%



### HJALTALÍN

Hjaltalín

Self released HJALTALINCD004 (LP: HJALTALINLP004)

After a seven-year silence the highly rated Icelandic group return in grand style. Typically, their songs are melodic but with twisting, episodic structures reminiscent of Danish group Efterklang. On 'Chestmark', Högni Egilsson and Sigríður Thorlacious intone over twitchy drum patterns, which cut to brooding Bollywood style orchestrations, while on 'Row' they juxtapose electronics and synthetic percussion with sumptuous string arrangements. Hjaltalín's instrumentation is subtly deployed, with much use made of space, while on 'Love From '99' they show their rapport by smoothly gearshifting through unexpected time changes. *MB*

Sound Quality: 90%



### MY MORNING JACKET

The Waterfall II

ATO ATO0530

If the title sounds familiar, My Morning Jacket released *The Waterfall* back in 2015, but vocalist, guitarist and main songwriter Jim James insists that these songs, also from those sessions, are not left-overs, as it was initially conceived as a double or triple set. The sunny sound of this second serving again reflects the Californian rehearsal and recording location. The atmosphere is often languid with country inflections becoming more overt on 'Run It', but the mood changes on the funky 'Magic Bullet' with its punchy horns and burst of lead guitar, and the dramatic 'Wasted' allies this approach to transcendental vocal chorales to spectacular effect. *MB*

Sound Quality: 85%



### THE WOLFHOUSES

Electric Music

A Turntable Friend TURN76CD (LP: TURN76LP)

Vocalist and guitarist Dave Callahan has rather drolly described the group's third album since re-forming in 2005 as 'a dose of brash, bombastic misery'. Back in the mid '80s indie scene, The Wolfhounds were a tougher proposition than their jangle-pop peers and here they have achieved a thrilling synthesis of melodic hooks and adrenalised dual guitars – on 'Lightning' he and Andy Golding play like a cross between Television and Captain Beefheart's Magic Band. It's invigoratingly edgy throughout and full of ominous portents, but on 'Pointless Killing' Callahan's sweet vocal harmonies and his metaphorical escape from the world offer resolution. *MB*

Sound Quality: 90%



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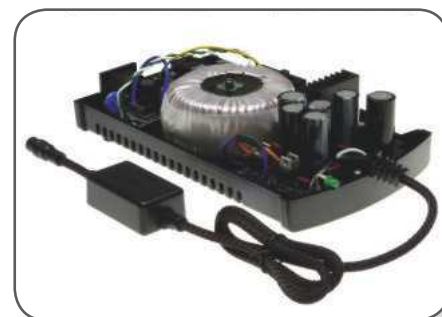
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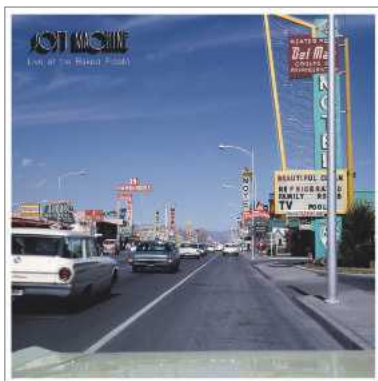
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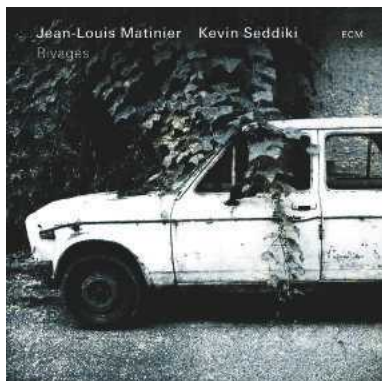
### SOFT MACHINE

Live At The Baked Potato

Dyad Records DY031

Here's a fine, clean recording of the band on top form, live in an LA club during the world tour that followed the release of *Hidden Details* in 2018. While guitarist John Etheridge, bassist Roy Babbington and drummer John Marshall were all members of Soft Machine in the 1970s, relative newcomer Theo Travis is as wild and astounding on keys as he is on flute and sax. As with the studio album, alongside more recent material they celebrate the early days with 'Out Bloody Rageous' and 'The Man Who Waved At Trains', but here you also get 'Hazard Profile' and 'The Tale Of Taliesin', where Etheridge lets fly as only he can. Essential for jazz-rock headbangers. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%



### JEAN-LOUIS MATINIER/KEVIN SEDDIKI

Rivages

ECM 086 4800

Accordionist Matinier and guitarist Seddiki have both worked in many genres but their partnership seems to be a perfect fit, both using their instrumental resources in telling interpretation rather than flaunted display. Most of these jewel-like pieces are originals, but 'Schumannsko' weaves a theme of Schumann around a Bulgarian folk tune while 'Les Berceaux' interprets a sea song by Fauré, Seddiki's guitar conjuring the rippling waves. This duo even brings something fresh to 'Greensleeves', stripping down the melody and fully exploiting the harmony. Nothing goes on too long, and in fact you'll get to the end wishing there were more. Short and sweet. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%



### JO HARROP & JAMIE MCCREDIE

Weathering The Storm

Lateralize Records LR07CD

Though busy touring her Peggy Lee show, fronting a big band Anita O'Day tribute and covering UK songbook classics with *British Standard Time*, Jo Harrop still found time to record as a duo with guitarist Jamie McCredie in his London studio. He gives her just the right support, on standards old and not so old. Taking a cue from Tony Bennett and Bill Evans they start with 'My Foolish Heart', then bring warmth to 'Tenderly' and subtlety to 'Early Autumn', before moving on to Randy Newman's 'Guilty', for example. As a singer, Harrop has everything, warm and effortless, putting every song over with perfect intonation, perfect diction and impeccable taste. A joy. *SH*

Sound Quality: 85%



### MISHA MULLOV-ABBADO

Dream Circus

Edition Records EDN1156

Misha, gifted son of violinist Viktoria Mullova and conductor Claudio Abbado, made a splash as bassist and composer with *New Ansonia* in 2015. By the time he followed up with *Cross Platform Interchange*, in 2017, he'd assembled the loyal group of talented London musicians that are still his *Dream Circus* here. As before, the septet includes the forthright trumpet of James Davison, the contrasting saxes of altoist Matthew Herd and tenorist Sam Rapley, the piano of Liam Dunachie and the drums of Scott Chapman. All are fine soloists, yet above all they play Abbado's finely-structured pieces with verve. Multi-influenced yet stylistically coherent, accessible but never merely obvious, this is an inviting and rewarding album. *SH*

Sound Quality: 90%





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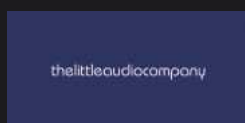
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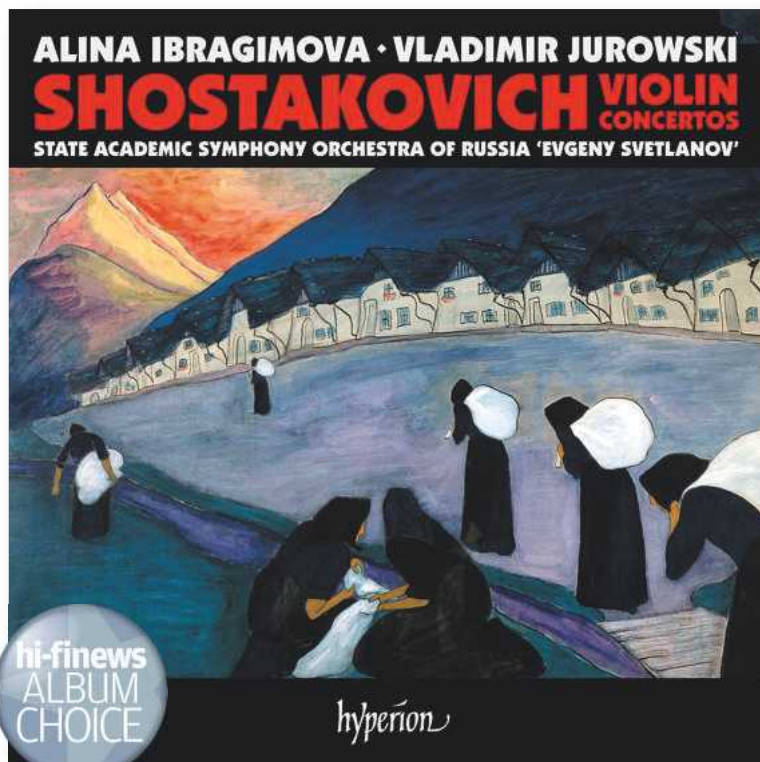
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**SHOSTAKOVICH**

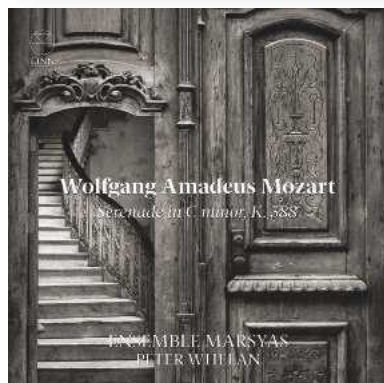
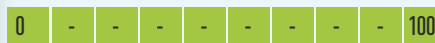
Violin Concertos Nos 1 and 2

Alina Ibragimova, State Academic SO Russia 'Evgeny Svetlanov'/ Vladimir Jurowski

Hyperion CDA 68313 (downloads to 96kHz/24-bit resolution)

In 2011 the violinist and conductor recorded the two Mendelssohn Concertos together with the OAE, while for this coupling Jurowski suggested his Moscow Orchestra. Two venues were involved and in No 1, after the demanding cadenza, Ibragimova has opted to revert to the original soloist's opening of the *Burlesque* finale – Oistrakh had requested a brief respite, and Shostakovich complied. Light-toned and alert to every detail (not unlike the Mullova/ Philips) she is perfectly integrated with Jurowski's powerful accompaniment. The later work is less public, maybe an Oistrakh 'portrait', and emerges strongly here. Fine sound too. *CB*

Sound Quality: 95%



**MOZART**

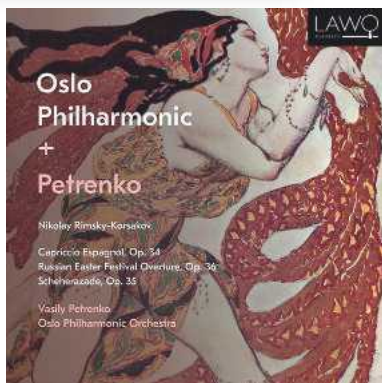
Serenade in C minor, K388

Ensemble Marsyas/Peter Whelan

Linn CKD (downloads to 192kHz/24-bit resolution)

Bassoonist Peter Whelan formed this flexible period instrument group in 2011 to reflect his passion for neglected 18th century repertoire – not that K388 falls into this category! Here, he's added double-bass to Mozart's six winds – although not once did I hear it. As the playing time is only 22m, Linn has issued this Edinburgh parish church recording (made last June by Philip Hobbs) as a download only at a low price – albeit with no note on either the instruments used or the music itself. The horns especially make a grand sound in this wholly enjoyable account, with the variations finale a bright highlight. *CB*

Sound Quality: 90%



**RIMSKY-KORSAKOV**

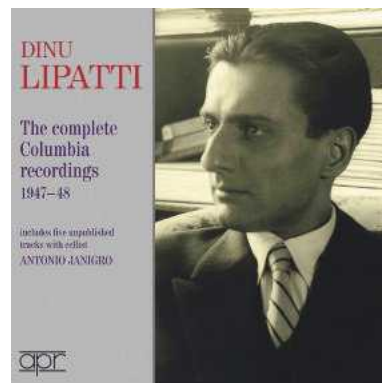
Scheherazade; Capriccio Espagnol; Russian Easter Festival Overture

Oslo PO/Vasily Petrenko

Lawo Classics LWC1198 (downloads to 96kHz/24-bit resolution)

Petrenko recorded these three popular pieces last May at the Oslo Concert Hall after giving concert performances of the two longer works. The violin solos here are all engagingly taken by the leader, Elise Båtnes. The disc starts briskly with the two *Capriccio* 'Alboradas', though the sandwiched 'Variazione' is perhaps a little slow (identical timings with Petrenko, Jansons and Kondrashin; Markevitch 20s less). Castanets clinking, the finale is played at full tilt, but Petrenko's *Scheherazade* is curiously lacking in magic. The overture is the most consistent item here. *CB*

Sound Quality: 75%



**DINU LIPATTI**

The complete Columbia recordings, 1947/48 inc.

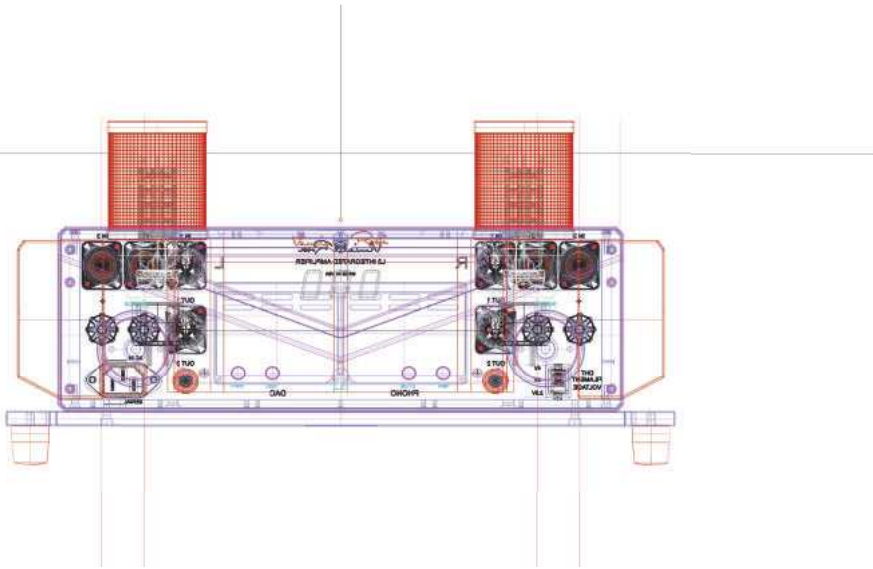
Bach, Chopin, Grieg, Ravel, Scarlatti, Schumann, etc with Philharmonia/Galliera/Karajan; Antonio Janigro

APR APR6032 (two discs, mono; downloads to 44.1kHz/24-bit res)

An exhaustive booklet note censures Lipatti myths generated by producer Walter Legge – while he died from leukaemia aged 30 he wasn't too weak to tackle long pieces, and projects with Janigro (test discs here include part of Beethoven's Op.69) became shelved. Transfers are from mint 78s, APR seeking to optimise the Steinway sound but allowing a little more disc noise than EMI might have countenanced. The playing here, unique in character, reconfirms Lipatti as a musician with a mercurial technique and consummate taste. The Grieg Piano Concerto is surely unsurpassed! *CB*

Sound Quality: 75%





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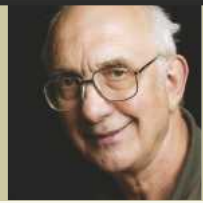
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## Barry Fox Technology journalist

Barry Fox trained in electronics with the RAF and worked as a patent agent, but he gave that up to enter journalism. He is one of the world's top technology writers

# Lessons for the future

You might have a big collection of old software and near-redundant playback gear. But, says **Barry Fox**, it's best to translate it all to identifiable digital physical media – rather than the cloud!

**L**ike many music and audio lovers, I am a hoarder. Books, tapes, discs and hardware have accumulated over the years. Sorting through it all recently has taught me some valuable lessons, which it may help to share.

First off, there is no point in collecting stuff if you can't find it and then use it. I have Betamax cassette video tapes of digitally recorded music that I can never play because – although I still have a working Beta deck – I don't have the PCM adapter needed to decode the digits coming from the analogue tape.

### STRIKE WHILE THE IRON'S...

I'll never even know what I can't play because, stupidly, I didn't always write a clear label description. And I was equally stupid with bog-standard audio cassette tapes as I did not clearly label some of these either. Luckily I still have a couple of working cassette decks, so I can play the tapes to hear what is on them. But playing is a tedious and time-consuming task, and dubbing off to digits (as I described in my Opinion column last month) has to be done in real time.

Yes, some cassette decks can be run at double speed for half-time copying, but this takes an axe to the high end – and the high end is already compromised because (as I also wrote last month) some are Dolby-encoded, some not, and even Dolby Labs cannot point to a system which would let us dub old tapes without Dolby decoding and then optimise in the digital domain.

Third-party market opportunity here? There was very little patent protection on Dolby B and, of course, it has long since expired. Moral: if you have important recordings on old formats, including MiniDisc, DCC or open-reel tape, dub them off to digits while your equipment still works. This is why the British Library

**RIGHT: Used by the British Library to copy source material to Sony Betamax VCRs, the Sony PCM-F1 processor from 1981 can be switched from 14-bit to 16-bit recording and uses Sony's own ADC and DAC chips**



embarked on a buying spree ten years ago, amassing available Betamax machines and PCM-F1 processors, even non-working units, because they could still be used for spares.

We can only hope that the current custodians of those wonderful digital recordings made by Tony Griffiths and his team at now-defunct Decca have had adequate access to some still-working IVC 1in open reel video recorders, since the IVC format is very long dead.

When to acknowledge that obsolete equipment is near end of life, so it's time to copy off? That's a tricky one which reminds of what historian AJP Taylor once said to an acquaintance of mine, 'I do

wish I knew when I was going to die, because I have this cellar full of really good wine and I would like to drink it all'.

As with making computer backups, tomorrow may be too late to dub off. So do it now.

And label the computer file dubs with an easily searchable title. Although software such as Shazam does a good job at recognising music as it plays, by using a centralised database of audio fingerprints, and although graphics software can now search for visual content like 'dogs' or 'cats', I know of no software that can yet search a digital store for music that identifies unpublished music by bit-structure.

'Remember that not all cloud services will be forever'

I'll stick my neck out and predict that it will always be possible to accurately decode music stored as raw un-doctored PCM, which can now be thought of as the audio equivalent of ASCII text, recoverable by word-processing software. I'll also predict that for the foreseeable future it will be possible to recover PCM from hard discs and solid-state stores.

But physical formats are certainly not ever-lasting, and can fade away just like old thermal fax printouts. Hard discs all too often fail mechanically and optical discs, especially burned copies, can degrade. Tapes stretch, go sticky and shed their coatings.

### HEAD IN THE CLOUDS?

So, if you have anything that you want to be able to play in the future, make backup copies. Maybe also store the data 'in the cloud'. But be aware that not all cloud services will be forever. Remember UltraViolet, the Digital Entertainment Content Ecosystem (DECE) 'locker' cloud that stored digital copies of bought movies? Or the Kodak Gallery photo store? Both now gone. These shutdowns were well-handled, with warnings. Other services may just go bust.

The upside is that published music recordings will always be available, one way or another, at a price. The music industry thrives on reissues. What you will never get back are the bootleg recordings you made at concerts, or baby's first words, or your budgie's singsong. ☹



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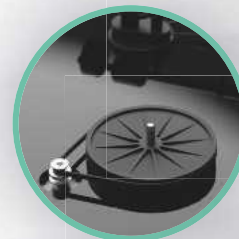
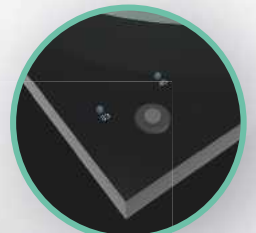
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## Barry Willis

Journalist for top American audio-video publications

While his main interest is high-end audio, Barry Willis also writes about the culinary industry, visual art and theatre for a huge variety of US newspapers and magazines

# Enforced holiday

It seemed a golden opportunity to get things done. **Barry Willis** contemplated some serious writing besides a CD collection tidyup and endless music. Instead he mostly watched TV comedies

**L**ike many this past spring, I was of the belief that sheltering at home during the pandemic would mean that I would at least be able to tackle a number of projects that, frankly, I'd been avoiding for years.

This proved to be a delusion. While I enjoyed extended slack time in March and April, it wasn't a whirlwind of personal achievement. Among the things that I hoped to do and did not complete were reorganizing a massive CD collection – the LPs are no problem, now down to fewer than 50 – and examining and if necessary repairing an ever-growing collection of old audio gear with an eye toward finding new homes for it.

### EMOTIONAL DAMPER

The photo here shows how far I got with at least one project – a good start, but hardly as planned. They *will* get finished, I keep promising myself, because I can't hide from the insistent evidence throughout the house. I had also imagined that with unlimited free time I would embark on a couple of ambitious writing projects that have long lingered in the background. I did not get so far as making notes or sketching an outline.

Then there was the fantasy that I would spend tons of time listening to music. What better circumstances for a solo

music lover than temporarily-guaranteed income, a huge music library, everything on earth available online, and three great systems on which to hear it?

Of course I did listen to plenty of music, but my heart wasn't in it. The first iteration of the pandemic put an emotional damper on everything. It was a very non-musical period. While I fully believe that 'music hath power to sooth a savage breast' I didn't need solace from heartbreak as much as I needed

**RIGHT: Plans to refurbish his collection of old hi-fi components went awry although the author did manage to repair a friend's Thorens TD-160 (right) and a Nakamichi receiver**



social interaction. I'm content to spend long stretches of time alone, but am also socially gregarious – three or more live theatre productions per week, art events, dinners with friends. That all went away in short order. Which is not to say I was in solitary confinement. I wasn't

quarantined at home, unlike many who live in tight quarters in cities.

I got out on my bike for an hour each day and punched away at a few projects under-the-table: an old Nakamichi RE-10 receiver, along with a Thorens TD-160

turntable repaired for a friend. The Nak' had cracked solder-joints in its regulated power supply circuit (not unusual for a piece of its vintage), and all its controls and switches got the standard cleaning treatment. For the Thorens, it was a new 0.33µF motor-start capacitor, drive belt, and a couple drops of lubricant – all of it normal servicing, nothing monumental.

Apart from shopping for groceries, cooking, and solving the world's problems with like-minded friends online, what I

did mostly was watch television – endless news, equally fascinating, enraging, and depressing – counter-balanced by binging on favourite comedies such as *Frasier* (the long-running sitcom starring Kelsey Grammar and David Hyde Pierce). And films such as *Bedazzled*, the Brendan Fraser/Frances O'Connor/Elizabeth Hurley romantic comedy. I revisited the entire box set of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* – all seven seasons – and the still-mysterious *Carnivale*, HBO's metaphysical soap opera set in a travelling carnival during the Great Depression of the '30s.

### NO PANACEA

I was lucky enough to view three times the film adaptation of Ann Patchett's novel *Bel Canto*, a masterpiece of magical realism based on real events. Julianne Moore stars as a fictional superstar operatic soprano, her singing dubbed by Renée Fleming. Its tragic theme is most in sync with the current zeitgeist.

But was the combination of having unrestricted time on my hands and almost unlimited musical resources the panacea that I imagined it would be? I'm sorry to report that it wasn't. ☹

'I did not even get so far as making notes or an outline'

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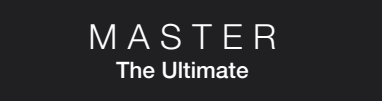







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## Tim Jarman Electronics Engineer

Tim Jarman has been repairing and collecting vintage hi-fi for over 20 years. He is an authority on both classic B&O equipment and the Sony Walkman series

# Buried treasure

A new trend in collecting vintage equipment has its drawbacks for the more experienced enthusiast. **Tim Jarman** ponders the future of it all but looks with optimism at the scene today

The 30-year rule, whereby yesterday's everyday objects become today's desirable collectables, is a subject that I've discussed in these pages in the past [*HFN* Jul '19]. The current interest in old hi-fi fits the basic premise of this idea perfectly – the time-scales are spot on and the market is vibrant at the moment.

Of course, to the long-term enthusiast this is all a bit of a nuisance. Having to compete financially for components that people were once grateful to be able to give away is galling. Yet the old state of affairs was not conducive to the preservation of vintage equipment.

If you were into old valve amplifiers in the '80s and the one you were using stopped working you didn't restore it, you just threw it out and found another. They were so plentiful that there was little point in doing anything else.

### BELTING UP

The same thing happened to cassette decks and early CD players in more recent times, but that phase too seems to have passed. I can't be the only one who is less than delighted at the return of tasks like the many hours of struggle necessary to fit a new set of belts to an Aiwa AD-6900 cassette deck. But now they are back in favour you can't just bin them when the pitch goes wobbly and the rewind stops working.

The question is what happens *after* 30 years – is there a 40-year rule and an ever-extending sequence after that? Logic suggests that there isn't. The generation that cruised up and down London's Tottenham Court Road drooling over NS-1000s and SP-10s has had its fun, but the following generation didn't appear – why should *they* be interested?

A key problem with the vintage hi-fi scene is that it's been a largely private



**ABOVE:** Will Quad II preamps and associated valve amps be turning up in restored condition at future audio jumble sales? And will the present generation of audiophiles even remember them?

affair and hasn't spread out into popular culture in the way classic cars have. One may occasionally see an old turntable or amplifier used in an advertisement as a way of promoting a generically aspirational lifestyle, but without any more detail who will know what it is?

This is not to say that there isn't intrinsic value in old hi-fi beyond nostalgia, just that it's difficult to communicate this to someone who isn't

already aware of it. The diminishing visibility of some of the key players of the vintage era also imposes a kind of barrier. In a world where Apple and Beats are seen as major names in audio, who is going to be searching for an old

Philips CD player or Sony amplifier – great names from the past which to the next generation will have no resonance at all?

In this context the 30-year rule can be seen as a second, but final, chance. It would be nice to think that all the hi-fi which has been lovingly restored in the past few years has been saved forever, but it may be that the clock has simply


been turned back without the decline having been arrested. Will the same Quad IIs, albeit with newer valves and capacitors in them, be turning up at jumble sales again, when their current owners no longer want them? Remember, they were just as shiny and expensive before it happened the first time round...

### LEGAL TENDER

There are reasons to be hopeful, however. Unlike, say, the situation with classic car models, there is no possibility that old hi-fi components could be legislated out of usefulness. As long as the electricity stays on, the records and tapes don't crumble and someone can keep finding ways to keep these things working they can still be enjoyed as they were originally intended to.

Recent events have shown that your favourite artists are only ever one ill-judged comment away from disappearing from streaming services forever, so holding your favourite music on physical media is beginning to look essential once more. With physical media of course, the collector needs something to play it on, and as every vintage hi-fi fan knows 'they don't make 'em like they used to'. ☹

'Vintage audio hasn't spread into popular culture'



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**Jim Lesurf**  
**Science Journalist**

Jim Lesurf has spent a lifetime in audio, both as an engineer at UK hi-fi company Armstrong and reader in Physics and Electronics at St Andrew's University

# A life on tape

As Warner celebrates the lifetime's work of an English conductor **Jim Lesurf** is reminded of his recording the life of his father on tape. Listening, he welcomes that 'being there' sensation

**M**ost of the music I enjoy is classical or 'acoustic' of one kind or another. And, for me, the key virtue of using a hi-fi system is its ability to invoke the feeling of 'being there' when I listen to the sounds it can (re-)create. For obvious reasons, hi-fi enthusiasts tend to seek out and enjoy examples of recordings that offer superb sound quality. Hence the emphasis often tends to be on modern examples which have been able to take advantage of improvements in microphones, studio mixing, etc. However, recently I've been appreciating just what a good audio system can do when listening to much older – ie, historic – recordings.

**COMING CLEAN**

It is now 50 years since the great British conductor Sir John Barbirolli died. I'm a member of the Barbirolli Society and have long admired his work. Indeed, many decades ago I built the Society's first website. To mark the anniversary, Warner has released a box set of over a hundred CDs of his work. These have been remastered from the best sources it could find using the latest methods.

A real delight for me has been the many 78rpm-era recordings included in the box set. I've been astonished at just how well some of these have been 'cleaned up'. Although you wouldn't mistake them for modern stereo recordings the processing has reduced flaws such as the noise levels, speed variations, and horn resonances to the point that the music just flows though.

Purely by chance the Barbirolli box set appeared when I was working on some old recordings of my own. Back in the 1980s I made a series of tape recordings of my parents, recollecting their lives. In the case of my father these extend back to before WW1, his early life in

'Back then I had no easy way to process the tapes'



**ABOVE:** Warner Classics has put all its John Barbirolli recordings into a 109 remastered CD set to mark 50 years since his death on the 29th of July 1970 [9029538608]

London's East End, then the army, then through the city's Blitz in WW2. I had no real knowledge then of making audio recordings and used a small portable level adjustments with no off-tape monitoring.

I experimented using different mics, etc, and even built my own preamp for these mics as I continued to refine my technique. As a result, the quality varies from one recording to another as I learnt from experience. Back then I had no easy way to edit or process the results. But 40 years on I was able to make digital transfers and then employ the free Audacity software to tweak the sound. This allowed me to significantly improve even the worst-quality recordings and render them easier to listen to.

I'm certain a professional could have done a better job, but as with the Barbirolli 78s most of them now give me that magical 'being there' sensation when I listen. If you're interested in such early history, or what can be done

using Audacity, you can check out the results at [jcgl.orpheusweb.co.uk/history/people/Tapes/Tapes.html](http://jcgl.orpheusweb.co.uk/history/people/Tapes/Tapes.html) but note that the content is not hi-fi related. However, what's interesting from an audio point of view is that in some cases the material has come to life from being submerged under a stormy sea of noise!

**TIME TRAVEL**

The versions you will find there are only low-rate (mp3) files to keep down the file sizes, but given the type of content, the results are close to the source quality albeit not in any way 'high fidelity'. However, they demonstrate how a good set-up can still recreate a sense of reality obtainable from this historic material.

My next task has been to rescue a similar set of recordings of my mother's recollections – in this case made with a better cassette recorder, but still lacking decent real-time monitoring. And hence infected with buzz from a dodgy ground connection. Repeated use of a notch filter seems to clean this up quite well, and for me the results can become like a trip in a time machine. Which perhaps also sums up what a good audio system provides. ☺

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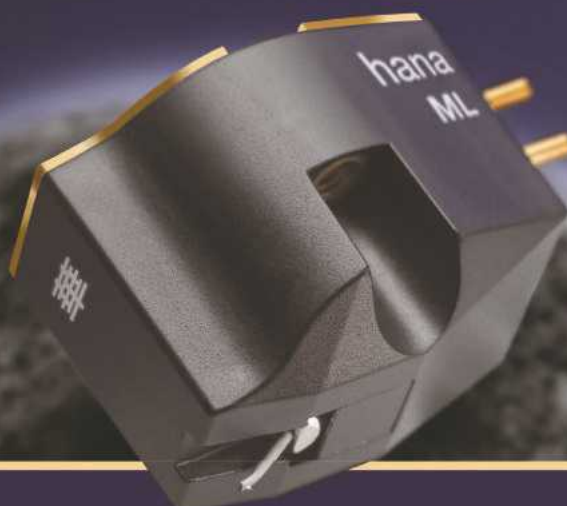
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HI>FI+ ISSUE 172 REVIEW, HANA ML/MH



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## Steve Harris Contributor

Steve Harris edited *Hi-Fi News* between 1986 and 2005. He loves jazz, blues music, vinyl and vintage hi-fi and anything that makes good music come to life

# Out of the can

As listening figures swing to Classic FM from Radio 3, **Steve Harris** gets a varied experience from the Beeb's relays of old recordings, missing the sense of expectation with live broadcasts

Over the years I've developed a fascination with the quarterly reports of the Radio Joint Audience Research organisation (RAJAR), and particularly with the audience figures for Radio 3 and Classic FM. I just can't help trying to read into them some vindication of my ideas of what the BBC is getting wrong or – occasionally – right.

There's always a slight problem with airing the quarterly figures in this column. We work so far ahead that by the time anyone reads them here, the next quarter's report is imminent or even published. But this year RAJAR said it wouldn't offer the usual full report for the second quarter, as Covid 19 restrictions have made it impossible to collect data.

### NO SURPRISES

Anyway, RAJAR's statistics for January to March 2020 were unsurprising: Radio 3's audience showed a very slight dip to 1.98 million, from the 2019 first-quarter's 2.04 million, while Classic FM's was up from 5.288 million to 5.484 million.

And although every season brings new irritations for a crusty old Radio 3 listener, for me this time they were minor. For instance, in their pursuit of younger ears on Saturday, the programme planners trampled on tradition by shoving *Jazz Record Requests* over to Sunday.

Of course, I can go to BBC Sounds and listen to *Jazz Record Requests* online on any day I like. But it's not the same! Choosing an item from the schedule and coldly pressing 'play' just doesn't do it – there's no thrill of anticipation when you're in control.

Which brings us to the difference between a recorded experience and a live one. A difference that sadly, took on an overwhelming new dimension this year. As I was writing this, Radio 3 had only just



**ABOVE:** Recitals from London's Wigmore Hall in June (left) marked a return to live classical music broadcasting for Radio 3 while Sarah Walker presented a Handel piece recorded in May 2018

announced the first steps to the return of live music broadcasting, with a June series of lunchtime recitals to be given in an empty Wigmore Hall.

As for orchestral music, in mid-May we were given a great week of evenings with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra playing all nine Beethoven symphonies. Conductor Thomas Dausgaard included works by many other composers to

show 'how Beethoven's music emerged amidst the influence of his predecessors and contemporaries', and gave illuminating explanations of his choices. The performances themselves were from 2017.

Why should this matter? If you listen to a live relay, you're hearing a signal that's been sent down a line, processed and buffered, so in reality it has been 'recorded' anyway. It just hasn't been stored for very long.

But much as I admired and enjoyed the Beethoven programmes, I felt that presenter Kate Molleson couldn't really create a sense of occasion. This was, I think, because the presentation was not



part of the original recordings, but had been put together afterwards.

By contrast, a few evenings later came a broadcast of Handel's 'Music For Royal Occasions', recorded in May 2018 by the BBC Singers and St James's Baroque with Sarah Walker as presenter. Her enthusiasm and joy in the music actually did make you forget that this was only an old recording of a live event.

### PROM SELECTIONS

So what about the 2020 Proms? With the Albert Hall in silent darkness, the schedule could only be filled by 'best of the Proms' broadcasts from the archives of previous years. But for the last two weeks of the Proms season, the BBC planned an audience-less return to live orchestral music, which should be happening by the time you read this.

Those last pre-lockdown listening figures from RAJAR showed that Radio 3, with all its massive commitment to live music, was barely holding its own, while Classic FM – which mainly, but not exclusively, just plays records – continued to gain ground. But perhaps, if and when Radio 3's orchestras and live relay events get back to normal, we'll appreciate the output all the more. ☺

'The presenter  
couldn't create  
any sense  
of occasion'



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Reviewed: August 2019 issue

**A**s its name suggests the Icon Audio 40MkIV is capable of producing 40 Watts of power from its KT88 valves – although pushed hard we managed 50 Watts. There's also three feedback settings (high, low and zero) and the ability to run it in ultralinear or triode mode, as well as fixed bias. So there's wide room for experiment here, including the rare zero feedback option. It means users can find the set-up that suits them best.

And what a sound it is! Used with our Martin Logan electrostatics it was both vividly dynamic and spacious. The output transformers give clean powerful bass – a world away from the occasional softness of some other valve amplifiers. With its huge soundstage and thunderous dynamics the Icon Audio is a long way away from valve amplifiers of yore. Truly a modern classic.



## YOUR VIEWS

# Sound Off!

Correspondents express their own opinions, not those of *Hi-Fi News*. We reserve the right to edit letters for publication. Correspondents using e-mail are asked to give their full postal address (which won't be published). Letters seeking advice will be answered in print on our Sound Off pages, but due to time constraints we regret we're unable to answer questions on buying items of hi-fi or any other hi-fi queries by telephone, post or via e-mail.

## STRONG ARM TACTICS HELP WITH A CARTRIDGE TO SUIT AN SME 309

I have a Thorens TD550 deck [*HFN* Jul '09] with an SME 309 tonearm that feeds a Naim Superline phono stage with HiCap DR power supply. My preamp is a VTL 5.5 Series II hooked up to a GamuT D200i amplifier which drives MartinLogan Expression ESL 13A speakers [*HFN* Feb '18] via Transparent Reference XL Series 5 cables.

My problem is that having installed a Koetsu Rosewood cartridge on the SME 309 I have found it not to be the best of matches due to compliance issues.



**LEFT: Smooth highs – the Ortofon Windfeld Ti pickup sports a nude Replicant 100 stylus**

Would one of your reviewers be able to recommend a cartridge that would suit the SME 309? It needs to be sweet-sounding because the MartinLogan loudspeakers are extremely revealing and can sound a little bright at times.

*Suheil Atallah, via email*

Adam Smith replies: Your experiences are interesting as I have always found the SME V and Koetsu cartridges to be one of those theoretical slight mismatches that actually turns out to work incredibly well. The SME 309's effective mass is just 1g or so different from that of the SME V, so I would have thought there would be few issues. However, you're quite right that the numbers do not add up on paper.

There are plenty of options that satisfy the arm-resonance calculation in your case, but I would be reluctant to recommend most of them due to your preference for something that sounds 'sweet' and not too revealing. Koetsus are very smooth performers and most have a gentle treble roll-off, so pick-ups like those from Sumiko, Lyra or even Audio-Technica may not suit, as all tend to have an upward lift in output towards the top end.

Assuming you are seeking a cartridge that costs around the same as the Koetsu Rosewood I would say that your best bet would be the £3100 Ortofon MC Windfeld Ti [*HFN* Jan '18]. This has a decently flat response, but also a smooth and detailed top end. It is also a perfect compliance match for your SME 309 tonearm.



**ABOVE: MartinLogan's Expression 13A is a hybrid electrostatic with active bass**

## Dream machines

STREAMING, SHOWS AND BRAND NEW CASSETTE DECKS...

In his August 'Off The Leash' column Ken Kessler said he has a burning desire to live another 50 years in order to listen to his huge collection of LPs and CDs. I feel the same way, but also want a 40-hour day, simply due to the sheer amount of music now available on Qobuz, Tidal and Spotify. I'm 61 years old and time is running out!

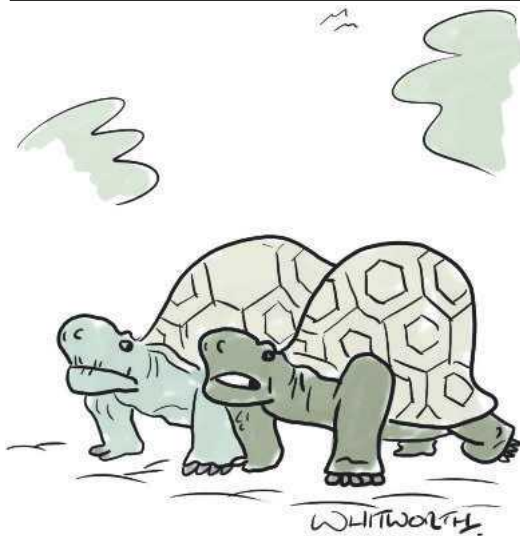
Then there's next year's Hi-Fi Show *Live* at Ascot and the fact that my system needs to be upgraded – Spondor D9.2 speakers, a Yamaha AS 3200 amp and Naim NDS X2 streamer still to buy. I also dream of brand new cassette decks from our friends in The Land of the Rising Sun – Technics, Pioneer, Yamaha and Sony. Yes, I do miss my Pioneer CT-4040 cassette deck.

*Christopher Smith, via email*

Ken Kessler replies: I'm not sure that the last part of your dreams will be answered, as it is unlikely that the cassette revival will match the power of the return of the LP. Technics, Audio-Technica, Denon and others re-introduced turntables when they saw the numbers of companies like Pro-Ject, but cassette decks? Naaah. But there is good news: TEAC still offers the W-1200 twin cassette deck while TASCAM has the dual-well 202MKVII with USB output. Each of these designs sells for under £400, and both look like winners.

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# Digitising Dolby tapes

READERS RIDE TO THE RESCUE WITH A CHOICE OF SOFTWARE SOLUTIONS

Barry Fox complains about the lack of support from Dolby when it comes to software that will allow him to digitise his old Dolby C and B cassette tapes [HFN Sep '20]. In Dolby's defence, it doesn't have a commercial interest in supporting technologies that have become outdated and is more focused on new areas, such as Atmos.

However, I have good news for Barry, and anyone else digitising old cassettes. There are now several software options available for the Mac, notably DDi Codec, which can be found at [www.anaxwaves.com/DDiCodec](http://www.anaxwaves.com/DDiCodec). According to the developer's website 'DDi Codec is a precise digital equivalent of the classical Dolby-B/C analogue tape noise reduction system. It is the world's first dedicated software capable of decoding or encoding Dolby-C formatted audio in the digital domain, along with full backward compatibility to Dolby-B'. As well as a link to the Mac App Store there is also a link to the Microsoft Store.

*Anthony Dell, Dubai*

In the September issue Barry Fox asks for software that is capable of mimicking Dolby noise reduction. Fortunately, there are at least two such programs, both of which I have tested and used. DDi Codec is a program for both Mac and Windows operating systems. Its adjustable input level supports precise calibration (with tapes that feature a Dolby Tone, such as open-reel tapes duplicated by Barclay-Crocker) or subjective estimation (the vast majority, which will lack a Dolby Tone).

Meanwhile, Stereo Lab Audiophile is Mac-only software offering its own version of Dolby B decoding, though not C. Though input level is not adjustable in this case, it's claimed that the software's volume normalisation allows it to provide good results. Although off-topic, I should add that the more expensive Stereo Lab Audiophile program has many other features I greatly enjoy, such as being able to create multichannel FLAC files from SQ, QS, and Ambisonic source files, among others. Documentation



**ABOVE: The DDi Codec costs £14.99 on the Mac App Store and £12.49 if downloaded from the Microsoft Store**

for the software on the author's website, which can be found at [www.pspatialaudio.com](http://www.pspatialaudio.com), is sparse. But experimentation is very rewarding!

*Jonathan Angel, California*

Barry Fox replies: Many thanks for the feedback, which I am sure readers will find very useful. But what I'm still hoping for is a free open source bolt-on to the excellent free open source do-almost anything audio software Audacity [see [www.audacityteam.org](http://www.audacityteam.org)], with an acceptable compromise workaround for the problem that few people will have access to Dolby level calibration tapes.

Of course I understand why Dolby Labs is now concentrating on Atmos as a way of creating new sales opportunities for the AV hardware companies and loudspeaker manufacturers, and generating revenue from new licences and services for the movie industry. Whether Atmos does anything good for music in the home is a matter of opinion.

And I can't help being disappointed that the company now (after founder Ray Dolby's death and corporate re-structure) has so little interest in Ray's work that I have to ask it three times about software decoding and get only a monumentally unhelpful answer. It's always sad when a company loses interest in its origins.

# JITTERBUG

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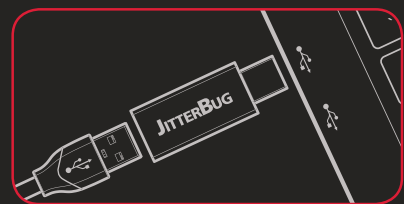
**Noise** is the problem. Real noise—the kind you can't hear directly. Most often, the word "noise" is used to describe tape hiss or a scratch on a record, but these sounds aren't noise; they are properly reproduced sounds that we wish weren't there.

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While a JitterBug helps MP3s sound a lot more like music, high-sample-rate files have the most noise vulnerability. Try a JitterBug or two on all your equipment, but never more than two per USB bus. There is such a thing as too much of a good thing.



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# MUSICAL FIDELITY



## M8 Xi

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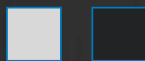


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Finishes Available:



## Blumin' mystery

THE MISSING MAHLER AND A WORLD RECORD MOZART

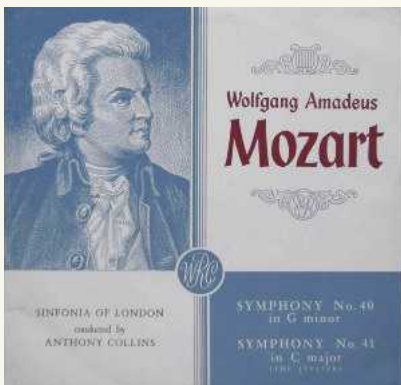
Towards the end of his Classical Companion piece about the Japanese conductor Seiji Ozawa [*HFN* Jul '20] Christopher Breunig mentions the earlier Boston version of Mahler's First Symphony, suggesting it had the (later discarded) 'Blumine' movement. I came across a German LP pressing of this in a charity shop [DG 2530 993] and it's just the normal four-movement symphony. Mr Ozawa's 1987 Philips remake was only four movements too. Did Christopher Breunig make a mistake?

*Jack Handford, via email*

I read Christopher Breunig's piece on the last three Mozart Symphonies in the August 2020 issue, and his preferences and recommendations. I am familiar with several of the versions he mentions – Karl Böhm, Colin Davis, Karajan and Neville Marriner and St Martin in the Fields – I have those as part of Complete Mozart Edition on Philips boxed sets.

From the versions of Symphonies 40 and 41 that I own and have heard in the past, I always go back to an old World Record Club recording with the Sinfonia of London under Anthony Collins. It seems to embody the right sense of gravitas and thrust in the first and last movements, as well as lightness in the minuets.

The speeds seem to be just right too. They hint at a sense of the trouble and grief in his life at that time, whereas earlier works were often lighter and written to please and delight. The recordings are a



ABOVE: Mozart Symphonies 40 and 41 conducted by Andrew Collins [WRC TP 26]



ABOVE: Gustav Mahler's Symphony No 1 with Boston SO/Ozawa [DG 2530 993]

little dense in comparison to what we expect today, but do convey the weightiness of the writing. The stereo LPs show no date of when they were recorded, but I bought them in 1965 and would assume they're from the early '60s as WRC releases were always reissues from another source.

*John Winterbottom, via email*

Christopher Breunig replies: Yes, I have that same LP, where the side lengths are 23m 08s/31m 01s. When it was reissued as a 'Galleria' mid-priced CD the Blumine, 'Flowers', movement had suddenly appeared – Ozawa's account timed at 5m 52s. I don't have that CD and would be very interested to know if the booklet gave full recording dates, *ie*, was the track done at the same sessions? (Please email *HFN*!) The MusicBrainz website says it's all Oct '77. And according to Discogs, the LP was reissued in Germany in 1984 in the company's 'Signature' vinyl series with all five movements. Japan, unsurprisingly, has this version as CD, SHM-CD and SACD, all with the original cover.

It's not surprising the Anthony Collins Mozart was so good. I never heard the WRC LP and note there was a Classics for Pleasure reissue later [CFP127] and a Beulah CD [2PD26]. He was especially noted for his Sibelius Symphonies with the LSO [Decca]. The provenance of the WRC issue is unclear – often they came from originals not previously issued in the UK. Collins, of course, also wrote many film scores, and came to conducting after ten years as principal viola in the LSO.

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## Putting my trust in Quad

ELECTRONICS FROM THREE ERAS AS READER EXPLAINS HOW HE ASSEMBLED A TRIO OF QUAD SYSTEMS

When I was nine years old my family borrowed an electric 78rpm record player for a day, and I was hooked. My parents then promised me a record player if I passed my 11 plus. I failed and was so upset. But they bought me one anyway! Eventually I was at last able to take the stylus into the record library in Cardiff to be checked under their microscope and was allowed to borrow one stereo LP a week (a piece of red tape across one corner denoting stereo).

When I started work someone gave me a B&O record deck. I needed an amplifier and after hearing a friend's system I was determined to get the same. So a Cambridge Audio P50 amp with a set of Koss headphones was added, later supplemented with a pair of Acoustic Research AR7 loudspeakers. I now decided the turntable needed replacing and ordered a Thorens TD150.

I then moved to Cheltenham Spa for six years and took the big decision to replace the tonearm with an SME Model 3009 Series II Improved with fixed headshell. For this I travelled to Watford where I purchased it from Bailey's And Herts Hi-Fi for the sum of £40 which I paid in cash (yes, I still have the box and receipt!). I finally tracked down the mounting board and, to my amazement, managed to install it myself! I was now finally able to upgrade the cartridge to the Shure V15 Mk III elliptical.

It was when I moved to London with all my equipment that things went *big*. A really large work bonus enabled me to purchase a Quad 44 preamp, FM4 tuner and 405 MkII amplifier – what a difference. Eventually I bought Quad ESL63s, which were delivered one evening to the amazement of my lodger.

We sat listening in rapture for half an hour until he said 'There's not much in the way of stereo spread'. I double-checked only to find that the amplifier had been accidentally set to mono. Things were fine after this. However, I was never truly happy with the bass reproduction. Having sung in the London Philharmonic Choir and having recordings I could play back, I knew it should be better.

**RIGHT: Quad 34 preamp, FM4 tuner with 306 power amplifier [inset] and Thorens TD150 deck with SME arm**



**ABOVE: Robert's Quad ESL63 speakers flank his fireplace while his Quad electronics are racked up on a facing wall. Robert is Concerts/Stage Manager for The London Symphony Chorus**

A friend in the chorus had invited me to his house and a whole day was spent listening to his Quad ESL57s with a subwoofer. He recommended I go to Thomas Heinitz in Moscow Road, Bayswater. Tom gave me an impressive demonstration using the recording of *Belshazzar's Feast* with Previn both with the subwoofer and without it. What a difference the sub made when it came

to the organ pedal notes. I was sold, and ordered the Audio Pro Model B1-45. Wow! Of course I wanted more!

As the years progressed I managed to buy a Quad FM4 tuner, Quad 34 preamp and Quad 306 power amp, and a secondhand pair of BBC LS3a speakers via an ad I saw in the Marketplace section of *Hi-Fi News*. I then decided to put together a system in the dining room. I felt that Quad equipment from each era would be nice and so bought a Quad FM3 tuner, Quad 303 amp and Quad 33 preamp for £250 from Billy Vee in London. Amazingly the units came with an envelope containing documentation detailing their entire history. From the original owner's purchase receipt to all the Quad service sheets – quite a find!

And one final surprise... I wanted a good pair of loudspeakers to go with the Quad kit and decided on Rogers LS3as.

But Rogers had ceased trading. So a friend and I drove to the company's last known address and I pushed a detailed note through the door. A few weeks later, I received a phone call from a man who said he had a few pairs of Rogers speakers in his garage and would I still like a pair? Of course! He quoted a price of £400 for the speakers and AV1 subwoofers together in rosewood. They were delivered and installed by him the following Saturday, and are still here.

*Robert Garbolinski, via email*



# Switched onto valves

FAULTS, FALSE STARTS AND MY FORTY-YEAR JOURNEY TO SONIC BLISS

My journey in hi-fi started in 1979 when I was 16, with a turntable I'd seen at the Harrogate Hi-Fi Fair. It was a Strathearn SM2000 and I'd been seduced by its design, if not its price. Strathearn then went under and the decks become available cheaply at Comet, so I bought one. My parents funded a NAD 3030 amp and Marantz HD440 loudspeakers. I still regard the SM2000 as one of the most stylish turntables ever produced, though it certainly had a few quirks, such as the platter spinning anticlockwise when you first turned it on!

This system lasted for over ten years until I upgraded to a Musical Fidelity B200 amplifier and Tannoy 609 speakers. A great improvement, but I knew it still wasn't what I was looking for. An Arcam Alpha 5 CD player was added. The B200 then developed a fault and was replaced by a Musical Fidelity A308. This brought greater dynamics to the show and so impressed me that I bought the matching A308cr CD player.

Next came Spondor S8es speakers followed by Castle Howard S3s. Then I discovered Ken Kessler! He got me thinking about valves. I believed them to be under-powered, soft and flabby-sounding. So I decided to hedge my bets and go hybrid, buying a Pathos Logos amp – beautiful to behold and

with a sound much closer to my goal. I then hankered after a fully valve amp and finally settled upon a Unison Research S6 [HFN Feb '11]. What a revelation. This prompted a change of speakers to Quintas from sister brand Opera. Again, beautiful Italian design and a wonderful, dynamic sound.

By now I had ditched CD players, bought a Linn Akurate DS and had ripped my CDs to a QNAP NAS. I never abandoned vinyl, my record deck now upgraded to a Roksan Xerxes 20+. Eventually I bought an EAR 834P phono stage and was so impressed by this that my next purchase was an EAR 834 amplifier. I had finally found the sound I had spent 40 years looking for.

It will be a long time, if ever, before I change anything, though the recent review of the EAR PhonoBox phono stage [HFN Dec '19] has me thinking!

*Jeremy Mayes, via email*

Paul Miller replies: Thank you Robert and Jeremy for two great 'hi-fi histories', and despite Jeremy's protestations I suspect there is more yet to be written! I also lived with ESL63s for about six months in the year of their release and through the mid-'80s was turned-on to tubes courtesy of Bill Beard and, in particular, David Manley's VTL amplifiers. Things certainly seemed much simpler back then...



ABOVE: Roksan Xerxes 20+ turntable with EAR 834P phono stage and 834 tube amp



## EXTREME?

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# Harman Kardon PM650

The sweet spot in a three-strong series of late '80s amps, this high current integrated promised to handle low impedance speakers without breaking a sweat. We listen...

Review: **Tim Jarman** Lab: **Paul Miller**

**M**ost hi-fi enthusiasts know how many watts their amplifier can produce, but does that figure tell the whole story? In the early '80s, Harman Kardon's HCC (High Current Capability) range of integrated amplifiers gave listeners another number to think about, which was how much current an amplifier was able to source.

The PM650 of 1982 reviewed here was one of a three-part series of integrated amps produced in Japan. Rated at 50W per channel, the amp offered greater power and more facilities than the basic 35W PM640 model in the lineup, while for those wanting a little extra, the range-topping PM660 offered 80W per channel and a few more knobs and buttons to fiddle with.

## CARRY THAT LOAD

The purpose of the high current output capability of the PM650 is difficult to fathom at first. Schoolboy mathematics suggest that the peak current drawn by an 8ohm load at 50W will be 3.5A, so why go to the trouble of supplying more? The answer lies in the true nature of loudspeakers, which do not present a load that is equivalent to a perfect 8ohm resistor. The impedance profile of a typical



**ABOVE:** Variable cartridge loading and the ability to work with MCs showed that Harman Kardon was serious about sound quality from records with the PM650

speaker can vary widely over the audio frequency range, from perhaps only a couple of ohms up to many tens. The more exaggerated these deviations are from the loudspeaker's nominal impedance the more taxing it is for the amplifier to drive.

Amps like the PM650 were designed to be as close as possible to an ideal voltage source, eg, the output voltage

is an exact multiple of the input voltage regardless of the current that is drawn by the loudspeakers. This can clearly only be the case if sufficient current is available to satisfy this condition, hence the generous allowances made in the PM650 circuit.

What would the effect of running out of current be? In a moderate case, a non-uniformity of response would result, the amp being unable to provide enough drive at a particular frequency (eg, that corresponding to a low impedance point of the loudspeaker) and elsewhere in the spectrum. In extreme cases distortion, operation of protection circuits or the failure of the amp's output devices might occur, though this is rare in practice.

## HEAVY METAL

The design of a high current amplifier isn't greatly different to that of a conventional one at first sight. The first requirement is that the output impedance must be low, but that is not the complete story. The tiny amplifiers found in the servo systems of CD players also have a very low output

**LEFT:** With plenty of current available the PM650 was easily capable of driving two pairs of loudspeakers simultaneously, and each pair could be switched individually via push-buttons





impedance by virtue of the negative feedback loops that surround them. But in practice this is a theoretical position only as they cannot supply any real power into the sensitive loads they drive.

As well as a low output impedance generated by negative feedback, a high current amplifier also requires a high current power supply, output devices that are sturdy and minimum circuit resistance between the output devices and speaker terminals. All these factors were engineered into the PM650, which had a large mains transformer and dual rectifier/reservoir sets – one per channel. This latter approach was something of an HK trademark at the time and was also seen in the 'twin powered' HK505 amplifier [*HFN* Oct '16]. To keep the output resistance low one finds thick PCB tracks, heavy wiring and big speaker binding posts inside the

'It was as close to an ideal voltage source as possible'

PM650, along with the absence of the usual speaker protection relay. In its place are two thermal cutouts, but these are slow acting and may not be fast enough to save your speakers if something goes awry.

#### FEATURE PACKED

The modest speaker switches seem to be at odds with HK's high current principles, but tests undertaken at the time suggested that a remarkable  $\pm 39A$  (peak) might be obtained from the PM650 [see PM's Lab Report, p147]. High current circuitry aside, the PM650 was a typical middleweight amplifier of the immediately pre-CD era. Three inputs and two tape loops with cross-dubbing options were provided, the turntable input being switchable between MM and MC cartridges. This facility was particularly well engineered, with separate input sockets

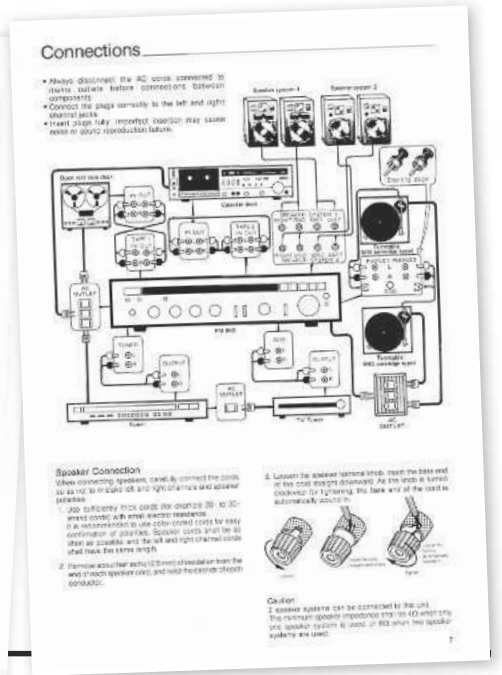
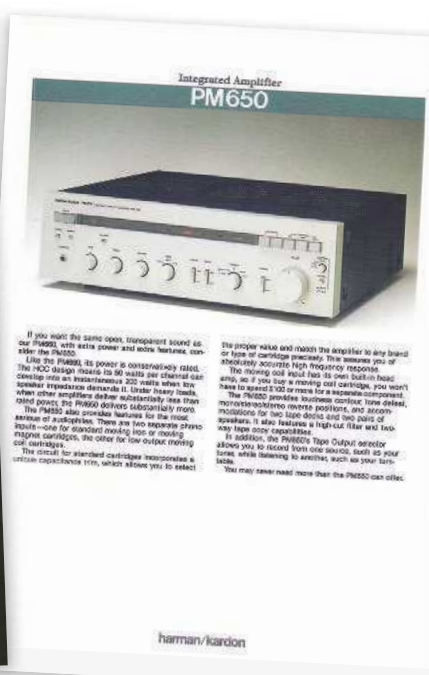
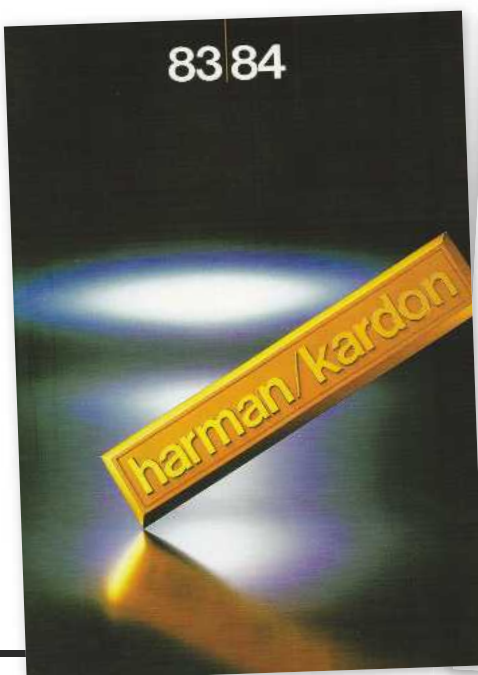
**ABOVE:** The styling of the PM650 is so neat it could still pass as a new model, though the lack of a dedicated CD player input reveals its age

for the two different types of cartridge loading for the MM input. No fewer than 30 transistors were employed in the RIAA preamplifier alone, a far from penny-pinching specification for an integrated amplifier in its class.

Meanwhile, high and low cut filters, a loudness circuit and the ability to play in mono or with the two stereo channels reversed were also included in the design, although a well planned fascia meant that the PM650 was still an attractive product that was simple to operate.

It was also possible to route the tuner output through to the recording outputs while listening to another source so that

**BELOW:** A simple and elegant brochure cover contrasts with a rather frantic-looking system wiring diagram found in the user manual



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a radio broadcast could be taped without disrupting other listening. And with plenty of current available it comes as no surprise that two pairs of loudspeakers could be used, both at the same time if required.

### SIMPLE SET-UP

Despite being a nearly 40-year-old design the Harman Kardon PM650 doesn't feel particularly 'vintage'. The styling is still fresh and there isn't anything missing from the feature list – in fact it's perhaps a bit too generous for modern tastes! Things such as a built-in phono stage, tone controls (which can be bypassed if desired) and a headphone socket are no longer standard fare, but the PM650 has the lot.

Set-up is therefore simplicity itself as modern cables fit into the sockets and modern sources still match the input sensitivities. Operationally too there is little difference between the PM650 and a quality modern amplifier, the controls are all instantly familiar and there are no ergonomic quirks to battle with.

Although the purists may sneer, I found the PM650's tone controls to be particularly well thought out and useful. Both the turnover frequencies and operating ranges are well chosen, making the controls easy to use for simple loudspeaker/room interface corrections and for the rebalancing of less than ideal recordings. The loudness compensation

# HIGH END AMPS

MARTIN COLLINGS

**F**OLLOWING the highs and lows of responsible music, these great amplifiers working under the £200 mark, a lot of money has been spent on the Harman Kardon PM650. The Harman Kardon PM650 is a high-end amplifier, and it's not just the name that makes it so. The Harman Kardon PM650 is a high-end amplifier, and it's not just the name that makes it so. The Harman Kardon PM650 is a high-end amplifier, and it's not just the name that makes it so.



For reference, the PM650 power level is approximately 100W RMS, with 200W at the nominal 1000 pulses per second (PPS) rate. It's a high-end amplifier, and it's not just the name that makes it so. The Harman Kardon PM650 is a high-end amplifier, and it's not just the name that makes it so.



**Technical details**  
The amplifier's internal components are of high quality, and the build quality is excellent. The PM650 is a high-end amplifier, and it's not just the name that makes it so. The Harman Kardon PM650 is a high-end amplifier, and it's not just the name that makes it so.

**ABOVE: 'No ordinary integrated amplifier and an impressive product at the price...' was the conclusion when the Harman Kardon PM650 was originally reviewed in HFN Oct '83**

arrangements were less successful, there being little influence at the lowest settings of the volume control where, arguably, the effect is of the greatest value.

### TIM LISTENS

The PM650 is a book that can easily be judged by its cover. It's a big amp with a big sound, and there's nothing effete or delicate about it. Fifty watts isn't an especially large figure, but the sound does not even begin to approach chaos until the volume is very, very loud indeed.

The design's overall tonal balance is difficult to pigeonhole. It appears to have a slightly soft top end, but that could well be a result of the copious amounts of bass power it generates. That's not to say the sound is thick and ponderous but neither is there a tendency towards the 'lean' sound some amplifiers exhibit. I noticed that the PM650 became more fluid and natural-sounding the louder it was played. Yes, the presentation was enjoyable at low volumes, but it improved noticeably every time the volume knob was advanced clockwise.

The usefulness of this characteristic depends largely on your listening habits. If you like to relax to chamber music well into the small hours then this is probably not the optimal amplifier for your system. However, if you relish the opportunity to 'rock out' the moment the house is empty then the PM650 is required listening and (probably) an essential purchase.

### LIFE ENHANCING

Of course, this amp isn't just about making a lot of noise. The PM650 shares all the usual virtues of a well developed DC-coupled Japanese amplifier, such as the ability to produce a solid, widely spread soundstage and an essentially silent background between tracks. Level 42's *World Machine* [Polydor 827 487-2] is an album to enjoy when a robust-sounding

**LEFT: Unusually for a powerful amplifier of this era the PM650 has an internal heatsink. Note the large mains transformer and dual power supplies necessary for high current operation**



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## HARMAN KARDON PM650 (Vintage)



**ABOVE:** Rear panel sports sturdy binding posts for the speaker connections while the inputs are all standard RCAs, well spaced to suit modern cables. Note the US-type mains outlets above the captured lead – most manufacturers chose to blank them off

amplifier is available as anything too weedy will make it sound bright, strident and hard. Putting the weight of the PM650 behind tracks such as ‘Physical Presence’ and ‘Dream Crazy’ really brought them to life in a way other amplifiers with higher headline ratings cannot always manage. Again a marginally soft tonal balance was noted, but at no point was this sufficient to dull the treble sparkle in the percussion.

Big orchestral pieces also benefited from the PM650’s muscle and its ability to produce a near silent background, even when the volume control was well advanced. The overture to Rossini’s *La Gazza Ladra* conducted by Claudio Abbado [Deutsche Grammophon 431 653-2] was thrillingly vibrant when played at realistic levels through the PM650. If there was a shortcoming it was that the amp’s slightly muted treble tended to rob the music of some of its immediacy. To be surrounded by and immersed in this much sound did make for a realistic concert experience though, which is surely what hi-fi is all about.

### KEY TRADE-OFF

So what happens when you don’t thrash it? Playing the stereo 16-bit layer of the 2002 SACD release of Diana Krall’s album *The Look Of Love* [Verve 314 589 597-2] revealed a subtle veiling of vocal texture as the key trade-off against having all that power available. With material like this the PM650’s character came across as fairly neutral, although some coloration in the upper registers was still evident.

Overall this is an easy amplifier to live with, being complete in facility terms and easy to listen to even in extended sessions. It isn’t really a collector’s piece, but as a component to be used every day it

has a lot to recommend it, though your neighbours may not agree.

### BUYING SECONDHAND

Large, powerful amplifiers can often prove more troublesome in their later lives than their more modest counterparts, but the PM650 lies just on the right side of the line.

Build quality was not at the Sony/Pioneer/Technics level so a well used example will probably look scruffy by now, and the slightly roughened fascia is difficult to clean once it gets marked or dirty. Internally, the main

source of trouble is the quality of the soldering which can lead to all manner of intermittent problems. The legs of some of the transistor types used were too small

for the holes in the PCB they went through, causing problems for the automatic soldering machines in the factory. Blanket re-soldering is sometimes the only cure.

There are a lot of switch contacts in the PM650 too and erratic operation can occur as they tarnish with age. A carefully applied dose of a suitable contact cleaner will usually solve this problem though. ☺

‘The overture was thrillingly vibrant at realistic levels’

### HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

High current amplifiers may not have caught the public’s imagination, but the PM650 shows that there may be some validity in the idea. This is a comprehensively equipped integrated that works well in most respects, is well made and which still looks good. Playing loud is its forte, so if you are seeking an amp able to deliver on that score then this is a model worthy of your attention.

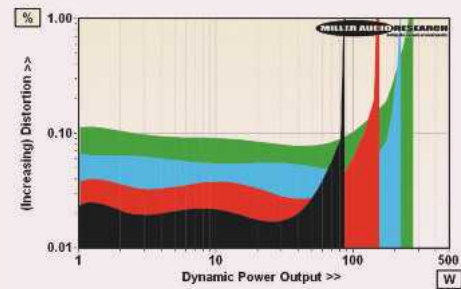
Sound Quality: 75%



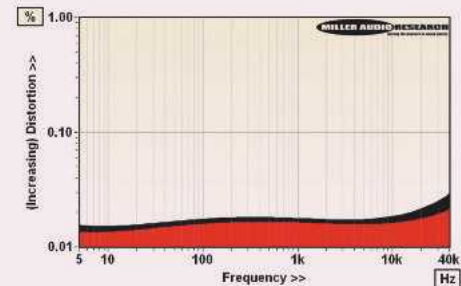
HCC or ‘High Current Capacity’ was the watchword of Harman’s amplifiers throughout the 1980s, almost all of which were designed to offer very generous dynamic headroom and above-average dynamic current to support very high power into low impedance loads. The PM650 is no exception. Rated at a conservative 50W/8ohm, in practice it delivers 2x75W/8ohm and 2x113W/4ohm with sufficient reserve to maintain 87W and 150W into 8/4ohm loads under dynamic conditions before increasing to 220W/2ohm and a full 255W/1ohm – equivalent to 16.0A at <1% THD for 10msec [see Graph 1, below]. Not only was this impressive 35 years ago, it’s still got the jump on ‘equivalent’ amplifiers fresh out of the box in 2020 [see p55].

Modest levels of feedback mean that distortion is low but not vanishingly so. More importantly, at 0.015-0.020% over the full 50W bandwidth, distortion is impressively consistent, only increasing at high frequencies above 10kHz to 0.025%/20kHz [see Graph 2, below]. With the tone defeat button pressed, the PM650’s response is very flat and extended, showing –1dB points at <1Hz–96kHz. With the tone controls in-circuit, but set to 12 o’clock, there’s a –0.28dB dip at 200-300Hz and +0.3dB lift at 20Hz. Meanwhile the subsonic filter offers a gentle –2dB/20Hz to –6dB/1Hz roll-off and the ‘high cut’ a similar roll-off acting at –3dB/5.5kHz, –6dB/8.5kHz to –16dB/20kHz.

Overall line-in gain is higher than necessary at +45dB and the A-wtd S/N ratio slightly below-average at 80dB (re. 0dBW) but stereo separation is good at >70dB through the midrange (down to 50dB/20kHz). In short, the PM650 integrated amplifier could still hold its own today. PM



**ABOVE:** Dynamic power output vs. distortion up to 1% THD into 8ohm (black trace), 4ohm (red), 2ohm (cyan) and 1ohm (green) speaker loads. Max current is 16.0A



**ABOVE:** Distortion vs. extended frequency from 5Hz-40kHz at 10W/8ohm (left ch, black; right ch, red)

### HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

<b>Power output</b> (<1% THD, 8/4ohm)	75W   113W
<b>Dynamic power</b> (<1% THD, 8/4/2/1ohm)	87W   150W   220W   255W
<b>Output imp.</b> (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz)	0.063–0.084ohm   0.56ohm
<b>Freq. resp.</b> (20Hz–20kHz/100kHz, 0dBW)	+0.00dB to –0.09dB/–1.07dB
<b>Input sensitivity</b> (for 0dBW/50W)	16mV   116mV
<b>A-wtd S/N ratio</b> (re. 0dBW/50W)	79.3dB   96.3dB
<b>Distortion</b> (20Hz-20kHz, 10W/8ohm)	0.014–0.017%
<b>Power consumption</b> (Idle/rated output)	46W   217W
<b>Dimensions (WHD) / Weight</b>	440x122x360mm   10.5kg

# This Koetsu's for keeps...

Koetsu enters the 1990s with a new standard-bearer in the shape of the hand-made Urushi moving-coil cartridge. **Ken Kessler** is smitten...

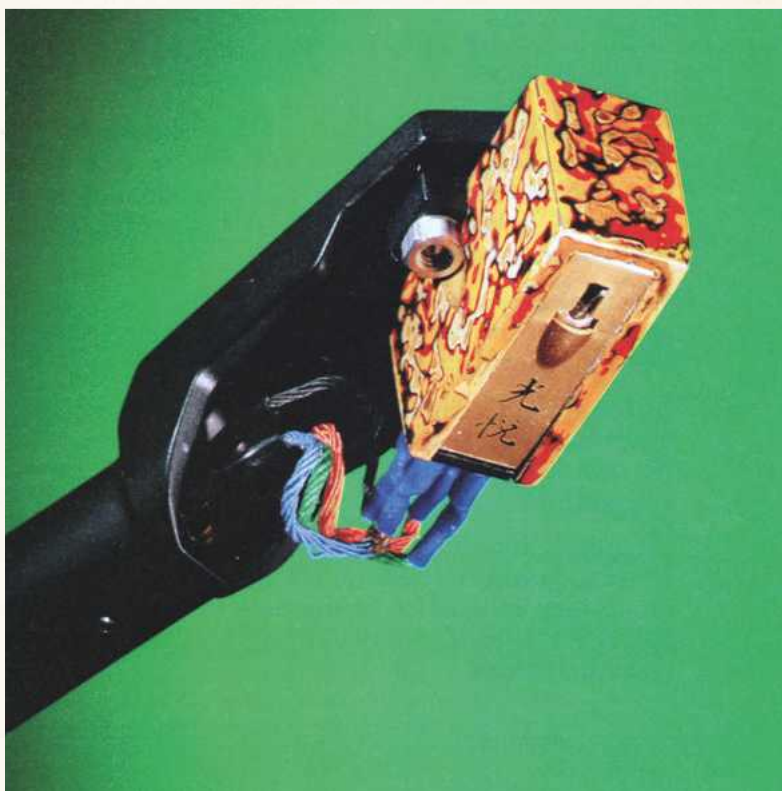
Hi-Fi  
News  
April  
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**A**s I sat back and listened I thought, maybe it's the particular recording, perhaps it's my frame of mind but no – it can only be the cartridge. All I know is that my smooth and steady progress in coming to terms with CD has been set back to its 1985 level. Why? Because I was in peril of missing an important fact of hi-fi life, which is that just as CD hardware and software has been getting better and better, so has analogue.

## JAPANESE WHISPERS

The turntable, arm, and cartridge makers haven't stopped producing even finer methods of extracting the music from the grooves, but the prerequisite for charting the maturity of CD has diverted attention. For me, the past month has been an education. I can no longer accept that CD and analogue are so firmly set in their relationship



**ABOVE:** The Koetsu Urushi MC with its striking lacquer finish and fine line stylus

to one another that CD should be accepted as a *fait accompli*.

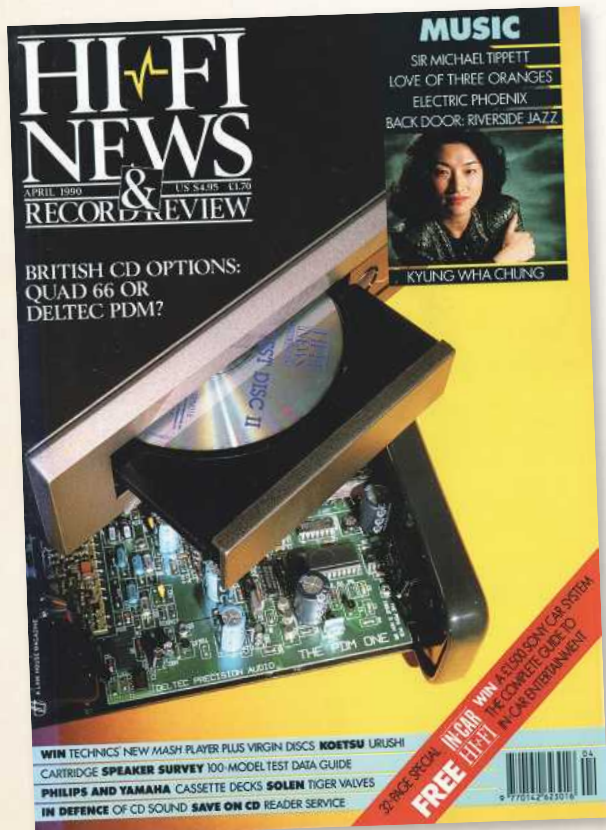
No, this isn't a show of supreme naivety. It is now certain that CD will emerge within the next two years (at the most) as the number two sound storage medium – in terms of sales figures – after cassettes. And this is not merely a voluble show of allegiance to a format I had never abandoned anyway. But I can no longer accept the improvements in CD playback as some form of miracle, to be accompanied by an 'I told you so' from that format's supporters. And that's because the new Koetsu cartridge has shown how wide the gap remains.

I'd heard whispers of the new Koetsu a few weeks before attending the Las Vegas CES, my initial reaction being nothing more than a sigh of relief. It meant little more to me than a demonstration of Koetsu founder Yoshiaki Sugano's continued well-being, in itself enough of a reason to be grateful. But busy as

I have been since October with a hectic survey of a half-dozen cartridges so good that it's hard to grade them, I didn't respond to the news with other than mild interest. And why should I? I've been using a Rosewood Signature for a few years and feel no need to look for an alternative. My contentment was becoming complacency...

## CROWN JEWEL

As luck would have it, I ran into Nakanishi-San, the worldwide distributor of Koetsu, at CES. I suddenly remembered the rumour, and asked for details. Nakanishi-San disappeared into another room for a few moments, reappearing with a small cedar box. He handed it to me and told me that it was the new Urushi: a cartridge described by Koetsu's Sugano as the finest he is capable of producing.



I opened the box and saw what struck me as the most beautiful cartridge I'd ever seen: a jewel of a model which suggested hand-made construction, craftsmanship, artistry. Nakanishi-San explained that the unusual finish was the source of the cartridge's name, 'urushi' being a lacquer made from the sap of the tree by that name.

### OUT OF THE BOX...

The cartridge body itself was made from solid aluminium in standard Koetsu shape: a slab-sided rectangle designed by someone who knew all about the lunacy of trying to align a cartridge without parallel sides.

But the colours! Gold

and rust, red and copper, in splashes which looked like the heart-stopping patterns seen only through microscopes.

It looked organic: the paintwork showing

brushstrokes and texture to remind one that man, and not machine, did the finishing. I also learned that the urushi lacquer had a function other than aesthetic. It would continue to harden over time, enhancing the strength of the already rigid body and so eliminating further any vestiges of resonance.

The Urushi takes its position at the top of the Koetsu line, in a way a replacement for the less-expensive onyx-bodied (Silver) Signature. Indeed, it sports that cartridge's boron cantilever and fine line stylus, but the motor has been changed to incorporate materials regarded as the state-of-the-art for moving-coil cartridge design in Japan.

The first new ingredient is a platinum-core magnet. A material employed not so much for magnetic strength but for control of eddy currents and overall behaviour. The other new ingredients are iron in the magnet of 99.999% purity and copper wiring of '4N' purity. This may seem a rather old-fashioned sales technique – creative decimalisation as it were – but the effects are audible. If anything, Koetsu is being conservative, as other manufacturers are talking of '5N' and even '6N' purity.

Frankly, my talk with Nakanishi-San instilled much anxiety. I was afraid to handle this precious

device, a creation which deserved to be placed on a black velvet cushion in the window of Tiffany's as much as it warranted fitting to a tonearm. Ordinarily, I hold no fear when handling cartridges. This one, though, wasn't just expensive: it was rare, one of very few samples outside of Japan in the weeks before it would go on sale.

Set-up is similar to that of every other Koetsu I've handled. Only its 12g weight might cause problems for certain tonearms.

The standard counterweight on the SME V that I used was enough to balance the cartridge, and

with the counterweight still some distance from the end of the arm. As mentioned before, the body shape makes alignment an easy task, and the cartridge tracks beautifully with the top of the

body absolutely parallel to the LP. A tracking force of 1.8g was ideal in my system, set only by ear as Koetsu handles the owner's manual problem in the simplest way of all: none is provided.

Amplifier matching was also straightforward, the Urushi driving the Audio Research SP-14's 47kohm phono input with ease. Again, the dearth of literature suggests that Sugano expects the owners of his products to be experienced enough to set them up by ear. I'm just glad that he favours medium-to-high output and non-quirky behaviour!

### ...AND INTO YOUR EARS

Life as a reviewer can mean a lot of visitors, something I mind only when a deadline approaches. One such visitor, whose products compete directly with those of Koetsu's UK agent, was present the day after I fitted the Urushi, and he stayed longer than he normally would have.

The reason is that he wanted to hear more and more through the Urushi. He visits me often enough to know the sound of my system, so we both knew that it was the Urushi (the only change since his last visit) doing something utterly remarkable. I'd been reeling since the day before and welcomed a second opinion, if only just to make certain that I wasn't imagining things.

'The first new ingredient is a platinum-core magnet'

**RIGHT: Yoshiaki Sugano founded Koetsu in the mid '70s, naming the company in honour of the Japanese artist Honami Koetsu. Sugano would pioneer the use of high purity metals and exotic bodies in his pursuit of the highest quality sound from cartridges, many of which bore equally exotic price tags**



My guest's reaction (unprompted I might add) was the same as mine: what glorious bass! Switching from CD to Koetsu and back made it perfectly clear that neither of a pair of CD players (the less expensive costing more than the £1612 Urushi, by the way) fed with CDs known to be among the finest sounding available today could deliver bass so deep, so rich, or so natural. It was a foundation for the music unlike anything I'd heard before in my system, enough – at first – to prejudice the review with the bottom octaves alone.

Drawn to the Ace records reissue of Isaac Hayes' soundtrack for *Shaft*, I experienced an unravelling of upper-bass lower-midband layering which not only made the component

sounds easier to follow but had the added benefit of improving imaging and openness. Note that the cartridges I'd been auditioning for the forthcoming survey are all ones I could live with quite contentedly once the Urushi is returned. The Urushi though made them seem sluggish and thick by comparison.

If you ever have the opportunity to hear an Urushi and can supply your own 'demo' LPs, make certain that you have something like a Stanley Clarke title, some classical with phalanxes of timpani, or some cluttered funk. And bring along the CD as well for a direct comparison.

The rock-solid and truly three-dimensional portrayal established by the bass instruments remained consistent through the frequency spectrum; the Urushi being the ➤



# FROM THE VAULT

first moving-coil I've ever tried which actually surpassed a (working) London Decca in this particular respect. Images were spaced in such a way as to offer far more of those 'Ha! I fooled you!' reveries than I can recall ever experiencing.

With better recordings, including the uncannily lifelike *The Saints Meet The Sinners, With George Melly* [C5 Records], the sensation of being in the venue is enough to silence anyone who ever thought you mad for indulging in high-end audio.

## FRESH EARS

Where the Urushi was most familiar was in the midband: the 'clarity-with-warmth' feeling reminding me of my all-time fave – the Koetsu Red Signature. But the still-amazing Red Siggie cannot match the Urushi at the extremities, the aforementioned bass being only half the argument. The trebles, too, are of a whole magnitude better than anything I can recall, being sweet yet precise, and utterly devoid of 'spit' if you set the SRA with precision.

The Red Signature is softer, sweeter and therefore of greater appeal for certain installations. The Urushi is designed for systems free of the anomalies which will compromise its performance rather than benefit from its superior retrieval capabilities.

I keep to hand some 50 'old faithfuls': LPs that I know intimately and which make easier the path to discovery. It's like a crash course in learning about a component, the familiarity making it far simpler to home-in on specific characteristics.

With the Urushi the tables were turned and it became a session in learning about recordings I thought I knew. The revelations come thick and fast, the flood of previously unrevealed details making each recording sound like a new one.

The effect is not unlike hearing for the first time an unfamiliar version of a song you've heard a hundred times before. It's disconcerting because the new sound eliminates the sense of familiarity which allows one to listen to the music in a relaxed state. Instead, one ends up approaching old standbys with the kind of



attention usually reserved for the initial exposure to a fresh recording. Only I'm talking about old friends here, a selection of Beatles LPs, the first David Crosby solo LP, and other records which I believed could hold no more surprises.

Ortofon said it first in its ads which promised a new record collection just by upgrading to a new cartridge. With the Urushi I now feel compelled to listen again – with 'new ears' – to the thousands of cherished performances in my record library.

*'The treble is better than anything that I can recall'*

More to the point, I no longer feel any compulsion to make allowance for CD – no more dual standards in which one tends

to go easy on CD because it's new technology relative to a mechanical system which has long-passed its first century. The best CD – and in the last two years alone it has advanced in easily identifiable stages – is so far behind the Urushi that it would be comical if the Urushi were affordable. Koetsu has pushed analogue even further ahead of CD.

### WHAT'S YOUR BEEF?

Don't get me wrong. I could live with a fine CD player if that was the only way I could have music of audiophile quality. And, yes, you can get fantastic performance out of the world's best CD players. But compared with a system using the Urushi, that's like saying that you can get a brilliant hamburger, next door to a restaurant that's selling *filet mignon*. In less culinary terms, the Koetsu Urushi is the best cartridge I've ever heard. ☺

**TOP: Original pages from the April 1990 issue of HFN in which Ken Kessler reviewed the first Koetsu Urushi cartridge. The cover shows Quad's CD66 CD player above the innards of a Deltac PDM One outboard DAC which in contrast to the Quad used Philips Bit Stream technology. Also pictured is violinist Kyung-Wha Chung, who talks to Sorrel Breunig**



Also in *HFN* this month in 1990

**DIGITAL DISCOURSE**  
Malcolm Hawksford deals with amplitude quantisation and the application of dither.

**MARKING THE BOUNDARY**  
Roy Allison explains how room boundaries affect speakers, and what can be done about it.

**CD SOUND**  
Ian Shaw suggests that CD's diehard detractors should be blaming factors other than the medium itself.

**QUAD CD66 CD PLAYER**  
Martin Colloms tests a production-model Quad CD66 while three *HFN/RR* staffers add their subjective impressions.

**DELTEC'S BOLT-ON BITSTREAM**  
The company's PDM One offers Bit Stream for the enthusiast.

**SENIOR MONITORS**  
The US Allison CD9 speaker reviewed by Martin Colloms alongside the British B&W Matrix 1 S2 and Harbeth HL5.

**TIGER BURNING BRIGHT**  
Ken Kessler reviews the Solen Tiger line-level valve amplifier.

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Yamaha KX-630 and Philips FC870 three-head cassette decks are tested by Chris Bryant.



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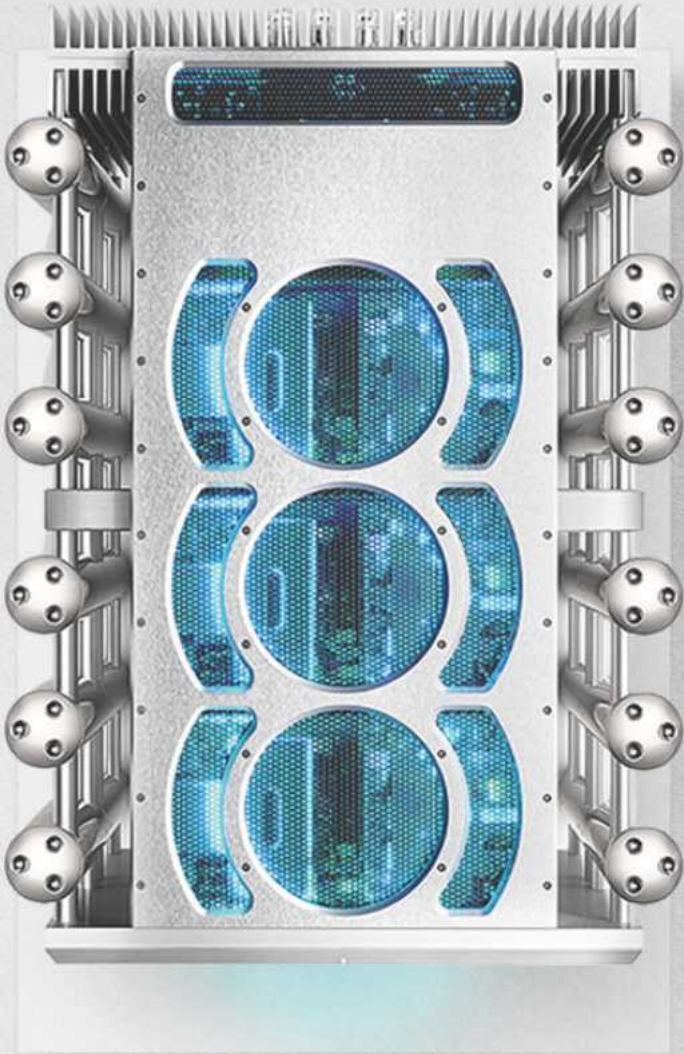


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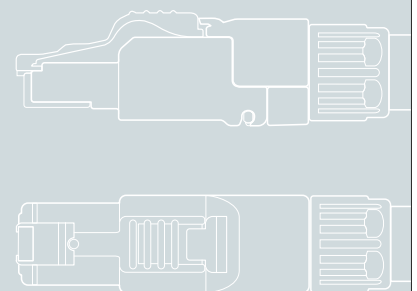
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# OFF THE LEASH!

KEN KESSLER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS...

Shopping for hi-fi now involves new disciplines but **Ken Kessler** plans to give us a helping hand



Anybody involved with hi-fi for more than ten years will know that this passion of ours is susceptible to fashion and whims. They are like sine waves: one year a hot topic, the next year forgotten. The better ones – or should that be the more valid ones? – return more frequently, and if they really do make sense, they become part of our regimen.

## HI-FI HOMEWORK

Obvious trends which we now accept as mandatory elements in hi-fi behaviour include using rigid stands for small monitors, proper hygiene for plugs and sockets when making connections, stylus care, tape-head cleaning and countless others. Few would argue against their efficacy, logic or worth. Among those which have adherents but require a more Kierkegaardian leap of faith include bi-wiring, polarity inversion, green edges on CDs, and other dubious tweaks.

What I have alluded to in recent reviews is something that has sometimes fallen by the wayside as far as magazine coverage goes – possibly because of sheer practicality. The practice which once so preoccupied both retailers and the audio press (and in specific cases, certain manufacturers) is that of system building. Of late, it seems to be simply left to fate, or to legacy equipment found in the home which is too good to throw away or trade in.

'Quad made fewer than 50 models in a 60-year span'

In 2020, the negatives affecting system assemblage are two-fold, the first being the ever-decreasing number of hi-fi specialist shops where you can actually hear likely combinations before buying. This reduction in bricks-and-mortar stores predates social distancing and other issues that will make hi-fi buying in the future even more of a challenge as far as demos are concerned.

One day, hi-fi shows will return, but, as useful as they are for introducing you to new hardware, shows are not the place for you to decide which cartridge or preamp to buy. Exhibitors cannot afford you the opportunity of occupying their expensive display space

for a private demo, clearing out other visitors while you spend an hour or so A/B'ing speakers, as you would by appointment in a shop.

As for the near future, any retailing that requires some level of intercourse between vendor and client – be it

shoe sales, watches, clothing or anything else where face-to-face selling and physical contact with goods are unavoidable – will potentially have to undergo radical changes. And hi-fi shops in the future will have to be just as vigilant. Even high street charity shops have now considered the need to sequester donated goods for 72 hours.

Many shops, regardless of the wares being sold will be putting items into temporary storage after being handled, if returned by a customer or even touched in

passing. Watch and jewellery stores, in addition to the widespread practise of providing hand-sanitisers, have to then sanitise any items that have been tried on by a customer. Luckily, ultrasonic devices on the market can do this in under one minute for, say, sunglasses or bracelets – as opposed to 72 hours because someone put a sports jacket back on the rack.

## PICKING AND CHOOSING

This month's column is a preamble to a series of observations over the next few issues, born of lockdown, but likely to be just as apt as we make a slow return to something approximating normal life. In readying for 'the new normal', I'm hoping that dealing with my own 'accidents' (or, perhaps 'discoveries') in system building will prove useful to you – even if you already have a fine system but might be considering a single new purchase or upgrade.

Before getting anywhere near narrowing down the choices, and certainly prior to the point where you've assembled 80% or more of your system and are choosing between two or three final items on your shortlist, you have to face the daunting task of dealing with all of your available options and permutations. This is, as any mathematician might confirm, a very big number. After the dearth of available shops to help in your quest, this is the second challenge to be faced in putting together your dream set-up.

At this stage, I've no idea how many different hi-fi models have been made over the past 70 years – roughly the period of 'separates' which now defines proper hi-fi. To convey the sheer scale of all the hi-fi components ever manufactured, at one time Quad was one of the most revered yet least prolific brands one could name, creating fewer than 50 individual models over its first 60 years. Today, some brands have this number in their current catalogues.

Simply put, for a system of just CD player, integrated amp and speakers, with no item costing more than £1000 and all in current production, by my estimate, the possible combinations exceed seven figures. Let that sink in while you ponder the best way to negotiate this particular minefield. Who said this was gonna be easy? ☹

Nov Issue  
on sale 25<sup>th</sup> SEP

### EXCLUSIVE TESTS:

- D'Agostino Progression Integrated
- Audio Analogue AADAC
- Thorens TD 1601 turntable
- Bricasti M20/M25 pre/power amplifiers
- Klipch Heresy IV horn-loaded speakers

### PLUS:

- Vintage Review: Yamaha C-2a/M-2 pre/power
- Investigation: The 2020 Record Store Day(s)
- Classical Companion: Sir Malcolm Sargent
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