REE READER CLASSIFIED ADS IN THIS ISSUE!

THORENS TD550
ultimate turntable

NAIM NAIT XS
integrated amplifier

DALI LEKTOR 6
loudspeakers

ELECOMpanionet NEMO
monoblock amplifiers

> JELCO SA-750D & SUMIKO MMT TONEARMS
> ROBSON ACOUSTICS GREYSTOKE RIBBON 'SPEAKER &
KINGSOUND PRINCESS II HYBRID ELECTROSTATIC 'SPEAKER
> OLDE WORLD: QUAD ESL63 ELECTROSTATIC 'SPEAKERS

COMPETITION
WIN AN ARCAM AMP &
CHORD CO. CABLES
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9 PAGES OF YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED
Listening to Electrocompaniet’s massive Nemo monoblock power amplifiers (p10) this month caused me something of a headache. Not as a result of any harsh upper midband or screechy treble, but from trying to fathom out why I liked it despite it being so diametrically opposite in sonic character to what I normally enjoy. Basically, my brain was plunged into conceptual confusion!

Whereas we’ve measured nearly 600W RMS from Rotel’s compact Class D RB-1092 power amplifier, the near-Class A Nemos are huge and imposing monsters – with a razor-sharp visceral sound to suit. After the initial shock of their stunning detail and speed subsided, I found myself really enjoying them. Strange, as I am more used to the softer, sweeter tones of my World Audio Design K5881 valve power amplifier. The two products couldn’t be more different, my reference being considerably cheaper and with just one thirtyth of the on-paper power!

Although I’ve always thought it possible to enjoy both solid-state and vacuum tube powered amplifiers, I’d had a strong preference for the latter since I first heard a wonderful 300B power amplifier some fifteen years ago. But the sheer force, grip and effortless muscle of the Electrocompaniet reminded me quite how good solid-state can be, in its own particular way... I used to know what I like, but now I’m not so sure!

Still, I’ve always been something of a ‘pluralist’ with loudspeakers, finding it less easy to come to definitive positions. On p32 we test Robson Acoustics Greystokes and KingSound Princess IIs. Each is designed quite differently (one has a ribbon tweeter, the other an electrostatic panel), yet I found myself appreciating both speakers’ distinct presentations. Although superficially the sound is different, both boxes offer similar ‘connecte’dness to the music.

Isn’t it fascinating how hi-fi can use such diverse technologies yet provide equally high levels of listening pleasure? Even though the subjective experience feels quite different, it still provides real satisfaction. There’s a lesson to be learned here – we shouldn’t privilege any type of technology over one another, or make claims about the intrinsic accuracy of one compared to the other. In the final reckoning, all that really matters is whether the music moves you.

David Price, editor.

testing

To ensure the utmost accuracy in our product reviews, Hi-Fi World has extremely comprehensive in-house test facilities, and our test equipment - from big names like Rohde & Schwarz and Hewlett Packard - is amongst the most advanced in the world.

Loudspeakers are measured using a calibrated Bruel & Kjaer microphone feeding a Clio-based computer analyser, using pulsed and gated sinewaves, in a large room to eliminate the room’s influence. Pickup arm vibration is measured with a Bruel & Kjaer accelerometer. No other UK hi-fi magazine has in-house testing, and none has access to such advanced tests across all types of equipment. That’s why you can depend on Hi-Fi World reviews.
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Stereo Preamplifier

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World Radio History
BACK IN BLACK
The return of the Deltec Precision Audio name will surprise many, but the marque has just resurfaced with two new amplifiers. Said to be taking the design philosophy from the original Deltec, these are the first in a forthcoming range of high quality audiophile products, it is said, achieved through "radical design, engineering excellence and precision manufacturing". This range starts with the DPA-CA 1 Stereo Pre Amplifier and the DPA-MA 1 Mono Power Amplifier. The CA 1 is a minimalist stereo preamplifier with the signal handling circuitry as simple and direct as possible. It has six line level inputs for sources, two record monitor outputs and two play monitor inputs.

The DPA-MA 1 is a mono power amplifier with 60W RMS into 8 Ohms and 120W into half that, via a current coupled Class A output stage. At the heart of both amplifiers is the hybrid voltage amplifier, the DH-OA37. This thick film hybrid has been designed and developed by Deltec and offers many sonic advantages over conventional circuitry, they say. The hybrid circuit is physically much smaller than conventional PCB layout, which allows RF filtering and decoupling to be closer to active components for "smoother, sweeter sound quality". Front panels are sculpted by precision machining from a solid billet of aluminium. The surface part is mirror finished to a very high standard, which is then hand gloss painted and lacquered to a high lustre. The fabricated envelope and chassis are accurately laser cut and folded, and finished in a fine anodised satinwood black.

Prices are £2,300 for the DPA-CA 1 Stereo Pre Amplifier and £2,200 for the DPA-MA 1 Mono Power Amplifier. For more details, call +44 (0)1793 238 085 or visit www.deltecprecisionaudio.com.

EPOSTULATION
Epos's latest ELS8 loudspeaker features a 5 1/4 inch woofer with polypropylene cone and 1 inch voice coil. It has a steel chassis and shielded motor system, and the injection moulded trim ring is blended into the cabinet. The new speaker is designed to produce lower frequencies than the ELS 3, achieved in part by a bigger cabinet volume, Epos say. The all new Epos metal dome tweeter has a metal mesh grille and ferrite magnet, and is shielded. The multi element crossover has been engineered to extract the best possible performance from both drive units, it's claimed, while the internally braced cabinet is rear ported with a stylish curved front. A removable injection moulded curved cloth grille completes the picture. Priced to sell at £250, the ELS 8 follows on the success of the original ELS 3, the first in a line of lower cost Epos speakers. It is available in a choice of two finishes, maple or black, and its vital statistics are 310x180x215mm and 5.67kg per single speaker. For more information, click on www.epos.co.uk.

STUDIO LINE
Prince fans will be interested to learn that he has chosen a PMC BB5-XBD-A Reference Monitoring System for his Los Angeles-based Composing Facility. The artist has released several hundred songs both under his own name and with other artists, winning a total of six Grammy Awards and an Oscar for Best Music and his original song score for 'Purple Rain'. And now a PMC monitor system has been installed in his state-of-the-art Paisley Park recording complex in Minneapolis. Prince was said to be looking for a system that is powerful and, above all, had the ability to translate his music without compromise. He first heard the system at Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis' Flyte Time Studios in Santa Monica, and subsequently contacted Maurice Patist, PMC USA's President of Sales & Marketing, then arrangements were made to install a system. "We are very pleased with the new PMC BB5-XBD-A system," the studio manager states, "because of three main factors. Firstly, the BB5 sounds wonderful. Secondly, it doesn't hype the sound - frequency response is ultra flat across the entire frequency spectrum. And, thirdly, the system produces a full, large sound - just the way we like to work while tracking and mixing". For more information, see www.pmc-speakers.com.
HIGH LEEMAS

The new Leema Agena phono stage is designed to “extract hitherto unheard of levels of information from vinyl records and present it with transfixing musicality”, the company claims. It sports fully adjustable inputs, each with two separate ‘headshell settings’ to allow precise matching for up to six phono cartridges. In addition to the single-ended RCA and fully balanced XLR analogue outputs a reference quality analogue to digital converter feeds USB and S/PDIF digital outputs allowing broadcast quality archiving to computer hard-drive or other digital media.

User features include mono, mute, high and low frequency filters, and a sleep mode, which turns off all processing and display circuitry to ensure the very best fidelity when listening. Vital statistics are 440x110x320mm and 11kg, and price is £2,995.

The £3,995 Pyxis preamplifier is the first of a new Leema Reference Class of product. Designed to offer “absolute transparency, resolution and musicality” it also sports a comprehensive and customisable range of inputs including both single-ended and balanced analogue inputs, an optional phono stage and digital inputs (including USB and S/PDIF) for use with digital sources such as computer hard drives. Digital outputs are also included for archiving to computer. There’s even “non-intrusive, audiophile adjustment” of bass and treble. Size is 440x110x330mm and weight is 11kg.

The new flagship Altair mono power amplifier is said to bring “a new level of control, transparency, detail and speed”. The £8,495 beastie can produce peaks of over 2 kilowatts and 100 amps, and is described as “a technical tour-de-force, establishing new levels of detail, linearity and agility leading to a staggeringly real musical performance!” The headline power output figure is 550W RMS per channel into 8 ohms. Featuring LIPS (Leema Intelligent Protocol System), the Altair can be configured to receive a full level signal from a Leema preamplifier whilst the preamplifier sets the volume at the input stage of the Altair. Size is 440x390x335mm and it weighs 45kg. For more information, call +44(0)1938 811900 or click on www.leema-acoustics.com.

BLU FOR YOU

NAD’s new £850 T587 is an advanced Profile 2.0 Blu-ray player featuring BD Live and BD Java for a new level of interactivity with home entertainment media. BD Live enables Internet-connected users to access additional content, such as movie previews, alternate movie endings, and special features for Blu-ray viewers, from the studio that produced the movie being screened. BD Java is the interactive platform supporting advanced content for Blu-ray Discs.

Video and audio performance is said to be outstanding, and it is versatile enough to play Blu-ray discs in BD-ROM, BD-R and BD-RE formats, conventional DVDs in NTSC and PAL, and several other popular disc formats, including DVD-R/RW, DVD+R/RW, CD-R/RW and Audio CDs. With Blu-ray’s native resolution of 1080p and pure digital transmission via HDMI, the T587 supports 1080p at 24 frames per second for the most fluid motion available from film-based material, it is claimed. Most Blu-ray Discs offer true high-definition audio, up to 7.1 Linear PCM soundtrack with 24bit resolution, and the T587 supports this format via HDMI. The T587 also supports the new HD formats from Dolby and DTS that offer ‘lossless’ compression. They can be decoded in the T587 and sent as LPCM via HDMI or forwarded compressed to another component that supports decoding. It also supports Audio CDs and CD-Rs with MP3 or WMA decoding, Dolby Digital Plus, and the legacy formats of Dolby Digital and DTS, which it transmits as bitstreams via HDMI, coax or optical connections. Dolby Digital Plus is a new backward-compatible Dolby format that significantly increases the bit rate for improved fidelity, with support up to 10.2 channels.

For more details on the new T587 Blu-ray Disc player, see www.nadelectronics.com.

SPACE 2009

Moon’s new CD3.3 Disc Player is described as the companion source component for the i3.3 Integrated Amplifier, and “embodies many of the revolutionary technologies found in the highly acclaimed Moon CD players”, the company says. It features a digital input for use with a PC, music server or standalone transport, plus optional balanced analogue outputs, a fully customised CD transport mechanism, a bidirectional RS-232 port, an IR input for external control, and “luxurious industrial build quality”. It features discrete digital and analogue power supplies using a toroidal power transformer, ten stages of DC voltage regulation, a proprietary CD drive system with in-house developed hardware and software, mounted on Moon’s M-Quattro gel-based four-point floating suspension. The circuit board features pure copper tracings and gold plating. Internal upsampling with 24bit/1.411MHz processing is used, and BurrBrown PCM1798 24bit/192kHz DACs and 8x oversampling digital filter – all run by a very precise 25PPM digital clocking system. Fully balanced differential analogue outputs are optional. There’s an S/PDIF digital input, so the unit can be used as a digital-to-analogue converter with either a digital music server or external transport.

Available now for, details see www.simaudio.com.
**ART OF SOUND**

We're big fans of the Acoustic Arts range of high end CD players and DACs, so it's interesting to hear about the company's new CD transport - the Drive II - which is designed to partner the Tube DAC II in the company's high end reference series. Able to play CDs, CD-Rs, and CD-RWs "in uncompromised quality", as its core is a CD-Pro2LF mechanism with a solid diecast metal chassis providing excellent damping, stability and rigidity, the manufacturer says. This 3-beam laser assembly is fully decoupled by an elaborate subchassis mounted within a solid aluminium enclosure. Two large magnetically shielded transformers supply the voltage feed, and a custom designed filter removes interference from the incoming mains to ensure consistent performance. The mains filter may be switched off by means of a rear panel switch, useful if the unit is already connected to a filtered mains supply. Next to the mains filter switch is a mains polarity indicator and switch to ensure that the incoming mains is of the correct polarity. Motor control, laser control, digital signal processing, display control and display heating all have their own high performance power supplies.

The chassis is constructed from machined solid aluminium plates and chrome-plated lathe-turned solid brass. The solidity of the enclosure is important to make sure that the CD is read by the laser without any external interference. Airborne vibration is prevented from reaching the CD compartment by the 1.6 kg, acoustically damped, solid aluminium top cover, and the interior of the CD compartment is coated with Nextel to absorb any stray light, while the CD itself is exactly positioned within the drive by a magnetic clamp. Pure silver cable that connects the CD to the digital signal processor for better performance. Measuring up at 130x492x375mm and weighing in at 18 kg, the new Drive II costs £6,150. For more information, call Audio Reference on +44(0)1252 702705 or click on www.audiorference.co.uk.

**WEBWATCH: RADIO PARADISE**

[www.radioparadise.com](http://www.radioparadise.com)

One particularly interesting internet radio station we've come across of late is Radio Paradise. It seems a smallish operation, possibly even family run, but what they do well - besides playing great classic rock music - is give the listener a real sense of involvement. Their expansive, eclectic playlist links superbly with Amazon.com, making it very easy to find (and buy) the music they play, and there are no advertisements or inane DJ chit-chat. Essentially then, it's a great resource for lovers of its particular flavour of rock music. Even the sound quality is excellent (considering the genre!), with 128kbps AAC and 192kbps MP3 available.

**KIND OF BLU**

Onkyo's first Blu-ray player, the new £399.99 DV-BD606 comes in at a lower price than some rival manufacturers' first generation designs. Said to be capable of delivering richly detailed, lifelike video images with a full HD resolution of 1920 x 1080p and a film-like refresh rate option of 24 pictures per second, it runs the latest HDML version (1.3a) to support Deep Color (on appropriate discs) and render images with exceptional colour depth. In addition, the DV-BD606 (which complies with BD-ROM Profile 1, version 1.1 ) is BONUSVIEW compatible. This allows owners to take advantage of the picture-in-picture playback of interactive bonus material, such as video commentaries, where available. The player also natively decodes Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio formats, sending them as bi-streams via its HDMI port straight to the receiver. It can also play CD and MP3 music via its Burr-Brown PCM1782 192kHz/24bit DAC. The player also boasts a custom-specified power supply with high quality components. For more details, click on [www.onkyo.com](http://www.onkyo.com).

**BIG TIME**

The origins of PMC's massive MB2 XBD floorstanding loudspeaker can be found in the professional active version which is currently the reference for Emil Berliner/Deutsche Grammophon Berlin, no less. But the new passive version features the same PMC hand built 75mm midrange and twin twelve inch Radial bass units as the active but with the flexibility of choice of amplification due to its passive nature. The massively engineered handbuilt 32 element 24dB per octave crossover is housed in a dedicated enclosure and is mounted externally on the rear of the lower cabinet. The speaker has just undergone the series upgrade which includes a new Sonolex tweeter unit and dispersion plate, while the cabinets are constructed with a higher density grade Medite with a staggered jointing process that ensures greater integrity and a more homogenous, stable structure. The cabinet is balance veneered with both the internal and external faces trimmed in real wood veneers with the outer-in a sumptuous high sheen finish. The powerful 12 inch bass units sit in an extremely long, heavily damped Transmission Line producing low frequency extension that is flat down to 20Hz, PMC claim. Although a large scale monitor, the MB2XBD is highly efficient with a sensitivity of 91dB, making the choice of amplification very wide. For information, click on [www.pmc-speakers.com](http://www.pmc-speakers.com).
Power Points

With its gargantuan Nemo, Electrocompaniet is gunning for the high end monoblock power amplifier market. After a life with lower powered valve amps, Noel Keywood is in for a shock!

You didn't get one of these in your stocking at Christmas because of its size – and if it came down the chimney then you're sitting in a pile of rubble right now. Weighing 41kg (90lbs) each, we struggled to lift these power amplifiers; perhaps we have seen and lifted bigger, but not by much. Humongous power amplifiers like these usually have a suitably massive sound, and the Nemos didn't disappoint - everything about them is big, I found!

Although going under the official nomenclature of AW600, they've been given the 'Nemo' name because they're designed to drive Nautilus loudspeakers from B&W. Not that if you had a pair of these in your front room, you'd be worried about choice of speaker however, as they'll drive anything ever made - Heaven knows, they'll even get more than a squeak out of BBC LS3/5a! The AW 600 moniker gives some idea of the power these amps deliver: 600 Watts no less. Testing for power at these levels gets a little sticky but we found this is about right as a conservative figure. The output is heavily protected by a current sensing circuit to prevent the Nemo becoming an arc welder if its outputs are short circuited. There are two sets of parallel loudspeaker outputs and one balanced input, for which Electrocompaniet supply an adaptor that allows the use of an ordinary (unbalanced) phono lead.

The power switch is located in an awkward position on the rear panel, beneath the IEC terminated power lead. Claimed by Electrocompaniet to be substantially Class A, the Nemos run warm but not burning hot like 100% Class A. Switching on brings no noises other than the clatter of the protection relays. However, I did in my fiddlings with various matching components manage to touch a live signal lead accidentally and there was a fierce crack from the loudspeakers with the power of a lightning bolt!

Not only are the Nemos monstrously heavy, but they are large too (514mm wide, 288mm high and 470mm deep). Their quiescent power consumption is 230 Watts and, being Class A this changes little with an applied signal. They need ventilation of course and could not be shut away in cupboards. Electrocompaniet don't say they should be left switched on but they do specify a two hour warm up for optimum performance and, together with the awkwardly placed power switches this does suggest the Nemos be left on. They also need a seventy two hour running in period.
Build quality is good in a functional rather than lavish way. The case has black steel sleeves for protection, with a lot of venting to give warm air an exit. The front panel comprises a thick sheet of acrylic, again black but with gold lettering, gold holding studs and a natty blue light the shape of Electrocompaniet’s logo to warn the unit is on. The styling ‘does the job’, being suitably discreet and as unimposing as a massive lump of electronics in your listening room can be.

**SOUND QUALITY**

If you’re buying a solid state monoblock of this size and price, then you’re not going to be the sort of person who’d otherwise enjoy a 3W single-ended tube amplifier. As such, you want a big, powerful and ultra clean sound – without so much as a flaw from bottom to top – and that’s precisely what the Nemos give. Their delivery is dry and concise, with everything kept under an iron grip and supported by the ability to deliver seismic power, the sort that moves buildings.

That they work down to d.c. didn’t surprise me. All-direct-coupled amplifiers are nothing new and the ones I have heard in the past did have a wide open door to a peculiarly earth shaking sound that forces its way into the room with the unstoppable force of a bulldozer. The massive bass line in Sly and Robbie’s ‘Make ‘Em Move’ took on this form of unstoppable force, as if it could rearrange the room physically. Our Spendor S8e benchmark loudspeakers are underdamped and can sound plummy if not used with an amplifier possessing grip, but the Nemos grabbed them – and various other loudspeakers I used – by the neck as expected. They kept the bass cones in perfect control no matter what I threw at them. My preferred Angelique Kidjo test disc is a commercial recording, rather than a demo disc, with strong energy right down to 30Hz from the emphasised walking bass lines and the Nemos made the subsonic power of a track like ‘Fifa’ frighteningly obvious in a way I am not acquainted with. They appear to possess no constraint. Of course, the simple truth is that with 600 Watts and huge peak current available, claimed to be 150A, the AW 600s can in truth drive anything...

Across the midband the Nemos sound detailed and concise. They are crisp and fresh in presentation, quite evenly lit, with an ability to push out a mass of fine detail. Win so much force at their disposal there was a lively dynamic right across the sound stage. Even fairly mild pans across "Lovey’s 2CU" had a fierce strength and the pulsating bass of this track had conspicuously more power than usual; it was quite strange that other amplifiers subjectively lack power against the Nemos when compared...
Music is a reflection of life. A never-ending dance between your joys and sorrows, ups and downs and that all consuming can't-live-without-each-other love. Music is our reality.

Nothing added. Nothing subtracted.
David Says:
If you are rich enough to afford the Electrocompaniet Nemo monoblocks, then I would suggest you are rich enough to need them. How so? Simply because they are too enormous to fit anything except a large room - and a large room requires large loudspeakers and an amplifier that can drive them with intent! As such, valve amplifiers are the settee quivered. And the inevitable crash of the cymbals at climaxes was delivered with searing power. Generally, from the strings of the Emerson Trio playing Grieg to the sonic antics within large scale works like those from Wagner, the Nemos deliver with almighty gusto and a raw insight that is very revealing.

Deeply detailed, evenly balanced across the audio range with no undue light, in any one area, and disturbingly forceful, Electrocompaniet’s Nemo monoblock power amplifiers are a solid-state spectacular. If you want a power house that combines force with finesse then these are the amplifiers to choose. You will need a big pocket of course, bulging arm muscles and chunky floor joists to withstand their weight. They’ll work well with just about anything I can think of, but with BW’s Nautilus on the end of these monsters, I’ll wager you’d end up with oceanic force.

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MEASURED PERFORMANCE
The Nemo can swing no less than 80V on short term peaks our measurements showed, making it vastly powerful. With a steady sine wave test it gave 75V, or 700 Watts into 8 Ohms. A current limiting protection circuit operates to limit power into low loads and although we got a few cycles through it at 1100W in a burst test before the relay clattered in, it gives a steady 600 Watts or so. As most loudspeakers are effectively 4 Ohms it is then a 600 Watt amplifier able to give a little more on short term peaks. So the Nemo has vast headroom, but as such power is unusable on any sustained basis it is low level performance that counts.

Distortion was very low across the audio band our sweep shows, reaching just 0.012% into 4 Ohms at 1 Watt, 10kHz, rising to 0.05% maximum at high powers. Midband levels were much lower, down to 0.0015% at 1 Watt into 8 Ohms and 0.04% just below full power into 8 Ohms. So no matter how hard the Nemo was pushed it produced little distortion, and third harmonic dominated what was there.

Input is balanced via XLR and sensitivity unusually low at 2.8V for full output of 700 Watts, so the Nemo will need a high gain preamplifier, preferably with balanced outputs. Most preamps can swing 3V in, but x3 is a common gain figure and the Nemo needs x9 or more if it is to be matched to low output sources, like phone stages.

The Nemo is a hugely powerful amplifier that works substantially in Class A. It measures very well and should drive any load. NK

Power 700 Watts
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Distortion 0.012%
Sensitivity 2.8V
Damping factor 58

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Sound that only Angels could hear...

“Not just good, but stupifyingly good”
Hi-Fi News July 2008

Until now, Listen, and the Music will Engage You. DAC1 PRE.

Engineers and audiophiles have grown to rely on Benchmark for critical digital audio conversion for more than 10 years - consistently finding themselves engaged in the music in a way that is rarely achieved with digital converters. And it's the same story with the award-winning DAC1 PRE, a mastering-quality, 2-channel 192-kHz 24-bit digital-to-analog audio converter, preamp and headphone amp.

With the AdvancedUSB™ interface utilizing the UltraLock™ clock system to ensure that the performance of the USB input is equal to the performance of the other inputs, (regardless of the jitter present), and with such a pure, coherent and transparent sound, no wonder it's a HiFi News 'Outstanding Product'.
Different Strokes

The three systems featured in this month's system supertest show that David Price, Paul Rigby and Patrick Cleasby are very different folks! David Price is your host...

I'd venture that most Hi-Fi World readers have already got fairly tasty systems. As your letters flood in every month, we can tell that the starting point for most people is fairly high up the audio evolutionary scale; gone are the days of readers wanting advice on that all-important upgrade from their Fidelity music centre!

Still, if you weren't where you are already with your hi-fi, where would you start? That was the challenge I set the team this month. If we had to rip it up and start again with a system of modest budget — but not quite from a position of penury — where would we be?

Whereas a decade or so ago, we'd all be clamouring for a separate CD player, solid-state amplifier and (the then de rigeur) floorstanding speakers, now life isn't as simple. We have a number of things bubbling under in the background...

First, there's a vinyl revival in full swing. It's now perfectly possible to run a 'sustainable' vinyl collection — from the countless new audiophile reissues, the massive amount of second-hand stuff surfacing on eBay and all those lovely high street record libraries (sorry, 'charity shops'). As a testament to this fact, even Hi-Fi World's resident 'digiphile' Patrick Cleasby can now be found buying copies of the Human League's 'Dare' on vinyl for 50p at his local Sue Ryder. That's where my system comes in...

Second of course is the valve revival. A decade ago it was a mere glow in the eye of a few folk wishing the end of the evil transistor, but now though it's a perfectly normal purchasing choice available to any hi-fi buyer. Indeed, it's so run of the mill that you can even get valve powered iPod docks these days. This month sees Paul Rigby choosing a tube aspirated all-in-one 'style system' touting a massive 3W into horn loaded Klipsch loudspeakers — now that's something you wouldn't have been able to do a decade ago.

Finally, Patrick Cleasby has been prised from his Logitech Transporter hard disk based set-up, to run a conventional CD separates system just like he used to when he was sporting red braces and a Flock of Seagulls haircut back in the eighties. Exposure provides a superb solid-state silver disc spinner and integrated amplifier, to drive a pair of powerhouse KEF floorstanders.

So sit back, relax and enjoy the diverse new world of hi-fi system building, 2009-style!

SYSTEM SUPERTEST:
p16 REGA P3-24, MARANTZ PM8300, MONITOR AUDIO RADIUS 90HD
p18 SHANLING MC-30, KLIPSCH RB-61
p20 EXPOSURE 3010S CD, EXPOSURE 3010S INTEGRATED, KEF XQ30
I love about vinyl is that – assuming you’ve got the right combination of components – you can get a remarkably musical sound for a relatively small sum of money. And so it is with this, my weird but wonderful Rega, Marantz and Monitor Audio combination...

I’ve designed this system to be just as I would like it were I starting out on the hi-fi path afresh and wanted to take the vinyl route. First, Rega’s P3 turntable needs little introduction to vinylistas. For me it is one of hi-fi’s true classics. In its latest incarnation it’s called the P3-24 and comes with a fancy gloss finished plinth available in a wide range of colours, including what I like to call ‘Rega Racing Green’ you see here! Coming in at £586 (with 15% VAT, and my review sample also sports a £107 Elys 2 cartridge), the P3 is simply a beautifully finished slab of painted and lacquered phenolic resin laminates, into which is fitted a high quality bearing and a 24 pole AC synchronous motor (as used in the company’s more expensive P5 and P9 turntables, plus many more) with clever control circuitry to reduce vibration and an outboard power supply unit that conditions the electrical supply with a synthesised low distortion crystal controlled ac input, plus electronic speed control.

The P3-24’s plinth has one other important cut-out – the mounting for the new Rega RB301 tonearm. This is a modified version of the very famous RB300, which has been modified for superior sonics. An improved vertical bearing housing has been used, which gives improved rigidity in the tonearm’s mounting, reducing the stresses in the main 13mm bearings, say Rega. This assembly is topped off with the improved RB700 bias housing phono cable.

Second in the chain is the £630 Marantz PM8003 integrated. At its core is a large bespoke toroidal transformer, used to drive audiophile-grade circuitry inside, including the latest generation of Marantz HDAM (Hyper Dynamic Amplifier Module) op-amps. The current feedback amplifier features symmetrical circuit topology, a copper-plated chassis and rear-panel to reduce signal-degrading electromagnetic interference and offers the lowest impedance grounding to every section of the amp. An additional heavy bottom plate reduces vibration.

The result is a claimed 70W RMS per channel into 8 Ohms, which is just about enough for the partnering Monitor Audio Radius 90HD speakers. Usefully for some (but not for me), the Marantz has simple bass and treble controls, although I kept these at arm’s length, preferring to keep the Source Direct function switched in. There’s also an Amp Direct mode for operation as power amplifier only (for bi-amp mode or extension of A/V Receiver), and most importantly here – a good moving magnet phono stage.

Last but not least are Monitor Audio’s £350 Radius 90HD loudspeakers. At 198x125x140mm,
they're not that much taller than a CD jewel case, so don't be buying the MAs thinking you're going to get bass aplenty. Still, they take a great stab at giving you just enough — it heart out no less enjoyably...

Of course, you're not going to get the same sort of 'Royal Albert Hall scale', but still this system comfortably filled a small-to-medium sized room and went loud without either falling apart or annoying the neighbours (the latter being something that can't be said for my reference system). One of my major reservations with the previous pre-HD versions of the Monitor Audios with their propensity to clam up and compress and higher volumes, but I feel that the new versions are far less compromised in this respect. They're not going to blow the roof off your house you understand, but they're happier with power than the previous ones.

Freeze's 'Caribbean Winter' showed what a delight the system could be. A very tightly played slice of early eighties 'new jazz', the Monitor Audios loved it. Stopping and starting on the small edge of a sixpence, the music sounded dizzyingly enjoyable. What modest bass there was proved incredibly taut and tuneful, whereas the midband was open, uncoloured and expansive beyond all expectations. There's something very right about having speakers with treble and mid/bass units a matter of centimetres away from one another, in terms of the brilliant phase coherence it brings. There wasn't a hint of a box anywhere, or even a 'point source' — instead the music seemed to be coming from the wall in front of me, as if there was a pair of stacked Quad electrostatics behind an acoustically transparent curtain!

I was very impressed with this system's treatment of vocals — there was little of the 'cuppiness' you get from most other small speakers. Instead, I could hear a very clean, open and even sound that crossed over with the tweeters beautifully. And oh those tweeters! Monitor Audio naye a had lot of experience with metal domes, and these were a joy to listen to. True, they do still broadcast the merest hint of their construction material, but so do the best silk domes, and at least the MAs had speed, grip and insight in spades — without a hint of harshness. It's safe to say that I can't remember hearing a better treble performance from a pair of £350 loudspeakers.

CONCLUSION
An impressive collection of components this may be, but what's more important is the way the system plays together. As they say, the system that plays together stays together, and so it is with this! It is a delight to listen to, in a natural and unselfconsciously musical way. As I've said, it won't flap your flares or step in when your local metal band's PA goes south, but it still goes decently loud and does so with élan. Even at modest listening levels, you'll struggle to hear a more enjoyable and compact way of making music.

"what I love about vinyl is that you can get a remarkably musical sound for a relatively small sum of money..."

which the previous model was falling off the pace, it was speed stability, but the new '24' incarnation, with its electronic power supply gives it some much needed grip in the bass. It's nowhere up to a Technics SL1200 in this respect even now, but it pulls ahead in the midband, which has more focus and a wider tonal palette. Whereas the stock SL1200 can sound a bit well let across the upper mid, the Rega is the model of decorum, offering a very clean signal to the Marantz amplifier that's packed with dynamic inflection and detail.

Speaking of which, the PM8003 proved a truly capable listening partner. It is less 'showy' sounding than some, but not less enjoyable (indeed over long periods it is more so). It showed an expansive soundstage, real musicality and not a hint of the mechanical 'analysis paralysis' that can afflict some other Japanese amplifiers. Indeed I found myself quite beguiled by this product — it's very hard to remember you're sitting in front of a very modest £600 design with tone controls. The Marantz lacks out and out punch compared to some rivals, and even some detail, but what it does do, it does brilliantly and throws it all together in one lovely package. This made Steely Dan a joy to listen to — with a powerful, fluid bass line, striking syncopations and the ability to convey all of that dreamy, mesmeric quality the song has in its entirety.
Yin & Yang

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, so runs the saying, and that's what building a serious music system is all about. I cannot emphasise just how important synchronicity is when buying any hi-fi component - after all, if your system fails to work together, then it just fails full stop as far as I'm concerned.

This system is an interesting one - inasmuch as it will have the high end brigade tut-tutting and budget buyers looking on with bemusement. But still it works, and rather well at that!

The heart and soul of it is the rather wonderful Shanling MC-30. You might have seen this before in the pages of Hi-Fi World, but we loved it so much we simply had to try it again with a rather left-field approach to loudspeaker matching (more of which later). Of diminutive dimensions (266x143x385mm), you won't find a bank of Class D power amplifier chips under the hood, punching out the usual 60W or so this type of product has (i.e. Arcam's Solo Mini). Rather, the little Shanling sports a pair of 6P1 tetrode valves 'pushing' out a miserly 3W in single-ended mode. Not your average mini system, then...

Other aspects of the MC-30 are more conventional - there's a CD player sporting a quality Philips VAM-1202 laser transport and CD-7 II servo mechanism, feeding a Burr-Brown PCM-1738 DAC. There's an analogue tuner with twenty presets covering both AM and FM, plus MP3 player connection via a 3.5mm port with a cable supplied in the box. Emphasis needs to be placed on this point because it can cause confusion. The included MP3 player holder does not act as a 'dock' as Shanling want it to work with generic MP3 players, not just iPods.

Given the Shanling's meagre handful of Watts, you might be surprised to see a pair of bookshelf speakers sitting next to it. After all, small speakers invariably have low sensitivity, don't they? In our small speaker group test last month, many were hanging around the mid-late eighties in terms of the number of decibels per one Watt at one metre. Well, the Klipsch RB-61s claim no less than 95dB! This makes them - in theory - ideal to work with the low powered Shanling.

Available in either a cherry or
black finish, these little beauties are shelf or stand mountable, and biwirable. Treble and upper midrange duties are handled via the bespoke Tractrix horn — explaining the stratospherically high claimed efficiency, and behind it is a 1-inch tweeter made from titanium and powered by a ceramic motor structure. A bespoke Cerametallic cone woofer, made from a mixture of materials to create a stiff, responsive driver handles the lower midrange and bass, supported by a front-firing bass port to allow bookshelf mounting. Measuring 391x216x311mm, the RB-61s weigh a solid 10kg.

The look of the MC-30 is both stark and majestic. Full of towering space and strength. Stiff, I have reservations with the ergonomics. The side-fitting 'soft' on/off switch should in my opinion be positioned at the front or back of the chassis instead of the side where it can be accidentally knocked. Then there's the built-in joystick, used to control the CD player and to select the tuner radio band. After playing with this with a measure of Homer Simpson-like glee, I realised how impracticable it is — it is not there to allow you to progress to the next level in the latest PlayStation bear'em-up. It is supposed to be there to quickly process audio-based commands.

As for the aesthetics of the Klipsch speakers, was this a throwback to that H.R. Giger-themed documentary for extra-terrestrial family planning, 'Alien'? This is a speaker for boys — tough looking — so I endeavoured to approach it in my most obsequious fashion for fear of receiving a good kicking! Design is such an emotive area, and I can't say either were my cup of tea, but still at least they look different and both manufacturers have actually made an effort instead of giving us yet more generic black boxes.

**SOUND QUALITY**

Had the Shanling been wired up to most loudspeakers, I could comfortably have played it outside the bedroom window of my next door neighbour in the middle of the night without so much as a grumpy "shut up!" emanating from his general direction. Mouse squeaks would sound like volcanic eruptions compared to the MC-30 at full tilt. However, the cunning plan to partner it with a super-efficient pair of speakers worked a treat — and here is a system that really gels.

No, it's not going to threaten the Electrocompaniet Nemos in the decibel stakes, but actually this little three Watter goes surprisingly, erm, loud via the Klipsches. And it doesn't just make a noise, it makes a nice one too. Single ended valve operation is a very pleasant way of listening to music, and normally only heard from much more expensive valve kit, so it's amazing to get it from such a modestly priced little product. For example, the peak limited, R&B/pop album by The Sugababes, 'Angels With Dirty Faces' features offensive compression that, with other less sweet amps, would be screeching like a barn owl.

Although the Klipsches aren't the world's smoothest speakers — they are horn-loaded after all — the innate sonic cleanliness of the Shanling was such that it kept them under control. True, vocal crescendos were still a little shouty, but remember this isn't an ideal recording. Indeed, the MC-30 tamed the damage, allowing me to hear some excellent separation of instruments, vocal clarity and an almost surgical study of various bass timbres.

Shifting to a superior master and Carol Kidd's new jazz-vocal album, 'Dreamsville' (Linn Records). Singing 'A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square', the upper bass and lower-mids displayed devastating clarity and a double bass that was organic in its presentation. Again, upper midrange notes were 'well lit' but this was offset by Kidd's stunningly atmospheric and sensual vocal sound - the Klipsches even revealing the subtle effect of air passing through her throat.

Moving onto Black Dog's 'Parallel', a seminal early trance album which sports massive transient attack, and the MC-30 coped with ease, removing any rough edges and increasing the musicality of the performance. This tendency to combine the detail of the Klipsch speakers with the musicality of the MC-30 extended to the Sinfonia for Handel's 'Acis & Galatea', a new classical release via Linn Records, which not only followed the complexity of the performance but presented the music as an ensemble piece as opposed to merely a collection of detailed instruments. Most obvious however, was the real sense that this was a recital in a large auditorium — there was a tremendous sense of air around the music.

The MC30 sounded super through its built in CD player, but its tuner was a little veiled against my Sony ST-526 I budget reference. Still, sonically this was of course infinitely more preferable to DAB! I wasn't terribly impressed by the sound via my iPod Classic 80GB, which was hampered by low gain, although this is partly the fault of the iPod's own weedy analogue output stage. But combined with the poor sitting design (the portable sits in amongst the hot power supply and valves) and the lack of remote control, I have to say it's not an ideal implementation. Still, the sound reproduction was open and pleasantly transparent, as you'd expect from a single-ended valve amplifier! The difference between low quality lossy files was obviously marked against better quality FLAC and WAV files.

Finally, I couldn't resist plugging the Shanling MC-30 into my reference loudspeakers — a pair of One-Thing modded Quad ESL57 electrostatics. These proved rather more sensitive that I initially expected, and I was able to push the Quads to relatively high volumes before break-up occurred. The most revealing characteristic was a trademark valve warmth oozing through the Quads. Gone was the bracing nature of the Klipsches to be replaced by a more grown-up, broader, fuller sound. True it did lose a little insight and was perhaps not quite as detailed, but did offer a balanced and lusciously smooth response. So there's an idea to conjure with!

**CONCLUSION**

Unusual it may be, but for my money this is one of the most enjoyable ways of listening to music at the price...

"unusual it may be, but this is one of the most enjoyable ways of listening to music at the price..."
Okay, so David's gone for a weird looking green and black vinyl system and Paul's chosen the maddest mixture of miniature tube source and speakers I've seen for a long time — so now it's time to get down to business with this serious full size solid-state separates system. Forget your fancy turntables or quirky low power amps, this system needs no distractions — it's a straight down the line Compact Disc playing system, just like your dad used to have!

How quaint, you may say. After all, many are now having the realisation that vinyl can't really be beaten if you want to get as close as possible to the music, and even worse for CD we're realising that this remastering malarkey is very rarely actually a good thing. And then there's the fact that even in audiophile circles systems are rapidly becoming file-based, so why would anyone still need a common or garden Compact Disc spinning system anymore?

Well, it's not all doom and gloom. CD is cheap, accessible and there's a massive secondhand market. (If you don't like these new remasters, then just buy the original non-remastered album on Amazon or eBay for pennies, give the disc a wet clean and slip it in a new jewel case to give it that freshly minted look.) CD may not be perfect, but it is easy to use and ubiquitous — and as this system shows you can get mighty impressive results if you set it up properly...

The Exposure 3010S CD player (£1,200) is the business end of the system, and features a new custom-made Exposure-designed CD transport mechanism, servo unit and control mechanisms, plus twin Burr-Brown PCM 1704 mono 24 true multibit DACs, a discrete output stage and large toroidal power transformer with separate windings for CD transport and audio stages. A high stability crystal clock reference and dedicated power supply regulator for the transport and audio stages ensure very low jitter, says the company.

Partnering it is the new Exposure 3010S integrated amplifier (£1,000), which is a crisply styled unit sporting chunky power supplies, upgraded internal components and a hefty 110 Watts per channel claimed. A high capacity custom-made toroidal power transformer and power supply capacitors are used, plus uniquely tuned short signal and power supply path, bi-wiring compatibility and fast bipolar transistor output stage for dynamic and vivid performance. Aluminum is used for all the casework, and the extruded front panels are designed to control resonance and stray electromagnetic fields.

There is something genuinely nostalgic about these two Exposure boxes - their plain black look, simple display (on the CD player) and easy remote layout and functionality take me back a long way. Heck, I didn't even have a CD remote for the first five years of my CD life — and nowadays the AV products I often use are mind-numbingly complex by comparison! Oh for the innocent, uncomplicated life of the nineteen eighties audiophile — this is how we used to live.
In fairness to the KEF XQ30 loudspeakers I chose to partner the Exposure electronics, there’s nothing nineteen eighties about these tall, slender and elegant boxes. They pair — including Birdseye Maple, Khaya an elliptical dome tweeter and new middle and upper frequencies — a vital statistics are 860×190×247mm. which both control both machines. Mahogany or Piano Black.

The Exposure machines came in identical robust cartons, reassuringly sealed with ‘Made In Britain’ stickers. In both cases, all you get is the unit, manual, an IEC lead and identical Exposure HS101 remotes, which both control both machines. Similarly the KEF speakers are very securely packed, with a variety of feet/isolation options supplied. Exposure recommend that if you’re not using the coax or optical digital outputs of the CD player they should be defeated - for brave souls the relevant manual provides instructions on how to open the box and do it yourself.

One of the joys of the return to a network-free, non-surround, non-AV system is the ease of getting the system set up. In no time at all, with the aid of a pair of Chord interconnects and some Black Rhodium speaker cable, I was up and running. Noel recommended that the KEFs would function best firing straight down the room, and so it proved, with an attempt at toeing-in delivering no perceivable imaging benefit. Initially I tried the speakers close to the wall, but the bass felt very much stymied, and I did my testing with the ‘speakers standing an impractical, female-offending couple of feet from the wall. This gave a much more free-sounding bass, but in the real world a compromise might have to be reached...

**SOUND QUALITY**

Well, what I wanted was a very lively and upfront sound - almost exclusively for use with the singer/songwriter, rock and electronic music that I love. Accordingly, the urge to kick off with the exemplary rock of the new Kings of Leon was impossible to resist, even if their diametric opposite - late-period Leonard Cohen - was obliged to follow! The system served up all the gusto the modern compressed recording could allow. I established a reference listening volume of roughly 25% of the dial or around ‘nine o’clock’, but I found the system rewarded me edging the knob round a bit further, whereupon Leonard Cohen’s ‘Ten New Songs’ was a joy. Those tingly-bonk synths with the impressively rendered guttural growl of the maestro resulted in a very smooth, satisfying listen.

This system suits detailed recordings, ones that benefit from close analysis, as the Exposure pairing excelled with Eurythmics’ (non-remastered) ‘Touch Dance’, which had my foot tapping enthusiastically, particularly on the instrumental ‘Second Side’. The fantastic sound of Dean Garcia’s WAL bass funkiness on the dubby ‘The First Cut’ was a delight to listen to - a bass player’s bass player, done full justice to by this truly big boned musical system.

Another eighties excursion proved how very well suited to this type of electronic material this system is. Never the album of choice with Heaven 17, but key tracks ‘Sunset Now’ and ‘This Is Mine’ from ‘How Men Are’ (unfortunately the remastered version) were almost as enjoyable as the Eurythmics had been, with compelling rhythm and a confident if a little strident tonality. The same traits were evident on the Propellerheads’ ‘OHMSS’ from ‘Shaken And Stirred’, with the live horns sounding out well but getting a little bright thanks to the XQ30s’ upfront nature. On the other hand, the punishing dynamic bassline was rendered with ferocity and precision, particularly on the ‘Spybreak-ish’ outro. Once again, an enjoyable listen!

Neil Young’s ever improving analogue-to-digital set up is the reason he is one of the only people whose remasters are actually an improvement on previous digital transfers, and his Greatest Hits is testament to how good a great analogue recording should sound in CD, HDCD and 24/96 (on the accompanying DVD-V). On the 3010S ‘Down By The River’ sounded like a quality recording and transfer, crisp and open and detailed with great reserves of dynamic power. The electronics, I feel, have a really musical gait to them which digs deep into the recording and lets the flavour flood out.

However, I couldn’t help feeling frustration that the 3010S CD player doesn’t do HDCD. It strikes me that if you’re going to extend the lifetime of optical disc-based media, then it must be worth trying to include the HDCD decoding which enables the collector to get the best out of the (admittedly small in volume) cream of the format.

All the same, even ye olde CD was allowed to sparkle on this old skool separates system, and fortunately there were no major sound glitch niggles. The 3010S CD player is a well designed product, as I found out due to me having a girlfriend whose CDs are, shall we say, less than optimal in condition (well, actually I’ve never seen anything like it - cracks on the inside, cracks on the outside - another reason mine are going into storage!). I was afforded the opportunity to do some error correction testing, a moderately scuffed ‘The Miseducation of Lauren Hill’ being played back without noticeable impediment and fine fidelity.

**CONCLUSION**

Whereas DP went for a high quality, lowish price vinyl system and PR a quirky miniature tube thing, my third way was – as far as I’m concerned – the best way. This is a big, thumping, blustering separates system just as they used to be, No valves, no hard drives, Wi-Fi or iPods – just ye olde Compact Disc kicked out by a chunky integrated amplifier and seriously sized floorstanders. As such, I love its ease of use, directness and overall musicality. Flare-flapping bass, a detailed and well lit midband and crisp, spry treble were all on offer – although in fairness the wick really did need turning up to get things cooking, as the KEFs don’t sound particularly engaging at lower volumes.

This said, I can’t help wondering where mainstream systems like this can go next. I loved the immediacy of popping a little disc into a tray and sitting back and relaxing without so much as a multiple button press, but I did find myself thinking about its lack of hi res and the hassle of not having 3,000 CDs at the touch of a button via a hard disk music server. But if you’re convinced that the CD format still has legs, and/or use pre-remastered discs then this very musical system may be the solution for you.
perfect duo

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of the fascinating things about our hobby is watching fashions change. Just ten years ago, I’d wager that if three hi-fi reviewers were asked to assemble systems, you’d get three variations on precisely the same theme — that of a separate CD player as a source, a beefy integrated amplifier and a pair of large loudspeakers. In 2009 however, things are becoming altogether more eclectic, quirky and locked into people’s individual lifestyles.

These three systems aren’t three of a kind — they’re three quite different kinds. In my case, I chose a vinyl based system because that reflects how I listen to most (but not all) of my music. That in itself might be seen as scandalous to some, or quaint and eccentric to others, but to me it’s as natural as opening my mouth when chocolate travels in its general direction!

My chosen source, the Rega Planar 3 turntable, is an iconic product as far as I’m concerned. I’ve owned several over the years, and for me it is the minimum one should invest in a vinyl playing source. This is to say that, in my experience, spending anything less buys you a turntable that simply has too many downsides to make the experience of listening to LP records an unalloyed musical event. No disrespect to lesser Regas, Pros-jects, Duals, et al., but for me the P3 is just about ‘man enough’ for the job.

Whereas the previous P3-2000 incarnation was a fine machine, this new P3-24 variant provides superior speed stability. The previous one sounded just a little too soft and indistinct (albeit nicely smooth), but I’m happy to note that now the latest P3 offers a serious improvement in bass grip. And that Rega tonearm - now in RB301 guise - remains a masterstroke. I know it has its detractors, but for the price the level of detail and insight is breathtaking.

Still, the RB301 has a slightly dry tonality, and is less musically beguiling than some arms — and so I feel the Marantz PM8003 is a fine match. This is a rich, warmish sounding amplifier and has a lovely lifting quality. It’s not the world’s most detailed, but this isn’t what’s needed here, I was impressed by the way this mid-price Marantz doesn’t draw attention to itself; its sins are those of omission rather than adding its own character to the music. And what character it does have is wholly welcome in this context, as its fulsome musical sound is ideal for the Monitor Audio Radius 90HDs.

Of course, these are billed as rear speakers, or satellites in a sub/sat system — but with a super source like the Rega and a big hearted, warm natured amplifier with a decent amount of Watts like the Marantz, you can just about get away without adding an extra bass box. Indeed, Blu-tack them to your bookshelf or even window ledge and ram them up close to the rear wall, and they will sing. Suitably set up, they throw images into the room as confidently as Quad ESL57s and have a wonderfully clean, incisive yet musical nature. The result is a system that gets on with the job of playing LP records in an uncomplicated and direct style.

That’s also a good way of describing Paul Rigby’s Shanling/ Klipsch system. With an enormous CD collection, the important thing for him was for the system to cut to the musical chase, so to speak. With a meagre 3W on tap, the Shanling MC-30 isn’t going to be your average Motorhead fan’s first choice, but this isn’t the whole story. It isn’t Watts per channel that determine how strongly your speakers flay their cones, but the sensitivity. For example, a 100W integrated driving an old pair of Linn Kans with a low B3dB sensitivity will sound little louder than the 3W Shanling tickling the Klipsch RB-61s, with their ninety plus dB sensitivity. And so it transpires that in real life Paul’s system isn’t actually underpowered for his purposes - indeed, it is like the mouse that roared.

Better still, the single-ended valve powered Shanling amplifier section is so sweet that things stay musically enjoyable at all times. The essence of this system is the way you can take almost any recording, and it still finds the simple rhythms within - there’s a wonderfully matter of fact way it plays CDs of all generations and lets the flavour of the recording come shining through.

Patrick Cleasby’s Exposure/KEF system is the most conventional here, and a marked contrast to the others. It’s a simple unconstructed CD-based separates affair with punchy transistor amplification that relies on muscle to get the job done. The Exposure CD player is an impressive product with a liquid sound that is a perfect front end for the excellent Exposure 3010S integrated. This is another standout separate at the price, with real power and grip - but Exposure’s characteristically crisp but sweet tonality smooths out the lively KEF loudspeakers. Ever since the eighties, people have been coming to Exposure amplification to give a great mix of transistor wallop and tube subtlety, and the latest range still does the job.

I’d have reservations running the KEF XQ30 speakers with anything less smooth than the Exposures; these are very clean, dry and slightly analytical boxes that need a gently warm and smooth amplifier to drive them. Even the brightly lit Sugden

"in 2009, systems are becoming altogether more eclectic, quirky and locked into people’s individual lifestyles..."
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De-Lektor-ble!

Noel Keywood finds Dali's new Lektor 6 loudspeaker a delightful listening companion...

There are a dizzying number of variations on the same basic theme in loudspeakers and this alone favours models that stand out because they are innovative. Dali's new Lektor 6s do not sit in this category. They appear pretty conventional but have a very broad range of ability that comes from a balanced and well developed package. Making the most of the compact floorstanding loudspeaker, I came away very impressed. Refined yet exciting too, they trod a fine line between the two, not so refined as to be lifeless nor dynamically bloated for added excitement. Conspicuously capable, the Lektor 6s will do well in any showroom shoot out I suspect - and I believe our measurements suggest why...

Standing 929mm high, 207mm wide and 285mm deep the Lektors look pretty conventional and come weighing a liftable 14.2kgs, making them relatively easy to move around. They have a removable black grille, beneath which sits a pair of pressed wood fibre bass/midrange units, the lower one handling bass only, the next up bass and midrange. Above these units sits a 28mm cloth dome tweeter. Like most modern loudspeakers the Lektors are ported, so are a bass reflex design. Spikes are supplied for the base. The cabinets are made from Medium Density Fibreboard, or MDF, and are covered with a convincing artificial veneer. Single gold plated terminals are fitted that accept bare wire or 4mm. Priced at £684 the Lektor 6s sit in a group of quality floorstanders from the likes of KEF and B&W so they face quite serious competition, especially from Q Acoustics with their impressive 1050i.

SOUND QUALITY
What distinguished these loudspeakers is what they lacked. Today's metal cones have a characteristic signature, light and spry that's for certain, but a little too shiny to be truly described as neutral. Dali's fibre cone drivers had just about no distinguishing tonal colour at all. There wasn't the smallest zing that comes from metallic cones, yet nor were Dali's tinged by the warmth and softness - sometimes wooliness - that's common to fibrous cones. The Dali drivers totally lack such colour and were sparklingly clear across the midband. They also sounded nicely balanced tonally: I noticed that male voice in Mussorgsky's 'Bor's Godunov' was convincingly full bodied, yet crisply defined at the same time. The backing choir was well lit and I could pick out individual voices, but not at the expense of an easy smoothness that made the Lektors a satisfying listen. I was intrigued by the balance between a strongly lit presentation with plenty of treble, yet reasonably free from sharpness at the same time. Sometimes, with instruments like close miked cymbals in the Zutons 'Valerie' there was some obvious added zest and the Lektors don't need a bright sounding amplifier, yet they were relaxing with most material.

There was real bite to the strings of Steve Earle's chiming guitar at the start of 'Copperhead Road', but rich detailing too. That the Lektors have an unusually smooth lower midband made itself known here as a deliciously natural, full bodied delivery of Earle's vocals, making others seem a bit contorted by comparison. Quite how Dali have managed to get such a smooth coverage where others seem to run into difficulty I'm uncertain, but it was audible as a convincing sense of evenness. The crispness and underlying clarity of the Lektors...
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Noel Keywood tries Philips' expensive SRU8015 Universal remote control...

If you have remote controls sitting in ranks across your lounge coffee table, this smart universal unit from Philips might be an answer to a prayer. It was for me, not only because it clears the table but because it has a great high resolution screen I could read easily in low light.

My love of remote controls sits but one rung above that for mobile phones, and Philips don't make this the easiest one to set up - although it is a delight to use. It has onboard seemingly endless menus of manufacturers remote control codes, but it cannot be set to match specific models as there are just too many. So for an Onkyo TX-NR906 receiver in for review, I had to choose 'Receiver' then search under Onkyo for its code, found by running a scan. What you then get is a generalised code set, to which special functions like Pure Audio must be added.

This is quite a tedious process, with menus to wind through using a rotating ring and names to be typed in, mobile phone-style from the keypad. Long menus can be accessed at the start only, not at the end to work backwards, but Philips add the ability to enter the initial letter, like 's' for Sony to get you to the right area without a lot of tedious winding. Lack of a 'cancel' function meant that a menu branch accidentally entered could not be exited, which was frustrating. Confusingly, a 'Back Exit' button didn't perform this function.

More surprising was lack of a Blu-ray player 'Device' category. For a Samsung BD-F1500 Blu-ray player I loaded DVD controls for Samsung and re-named the DVD device as Blu-ray. Although this worked, the control set did not match the player well and there was no 'Power On' or 'Off' in the 'More' (controls) menu, so I could not use them in a Macro (called 'Activity') by Philips. The way around this was to add and name a 'Function' by reading the output of the Samsung remote into the Philips, in this case 'Power On' and 'Off'. It was tedious but at least do-able and the ability to type in a custom description made later use easy. So the SRU8015 is a little shaky in places; some omissions are surprising and procedures to cover them laborious. The formal logic of the handbook was little help and I never did fathom why the usual 'OK' function for entering a command is a key with a 'Tick'!

If you have lost a remote control or bought an item without one then the SRU8015 should contain at least a good set of basic functions from its built-in store of codes used by all manufacturers worldwide.

In contrast to the complication of setup, actually using the SRU8015 was easy - if not obvious at first glance. A small button at top right marked 'Home/Setup' is the starting point. This opens up a menu of devices on the clear, bright, screen, like 'TV', 'DVD', 'Receiver'. Select a device and then its roster of 'Functions' ('on', 'off', 'play', etc.) by pressing a 'More' button and you are off. Okay, it's a bit lengthier than using the dedicated remote, but only if you can understand the latter.

Complex remotes like those for an AV receiver are littered with buttons to directly access never used functions, lettering such as black on a grey background is difficult to read in any light let alone low light, and illumination - if it exists - is weak. All these hurdles to easy usage the SRU8015 overcomes so it can be faster, not slower, than a manufacturer's dedicated remote control.

There are few direct access buttons on the Philips, just 'volume', 'play' and suchlike, which keeps its face clear and simple. Because it puts most 'Functions' onto the illuminated screen, they are easy to find and select in bright or dim light. Nicely made and weighty in the hand, well illuminated, easily legible and straightforward to use, Philips SRU 8015 Universal remote control is worth its £99.99 asking price. Set up can be a tedious process if you own many complicated gadgets and want to access all their functions, but once set up this remote was simplicity it use.

VERDICT

Well built and easy to use universal remote control, but a chore to set up.

PHILIPS SRU8015 £99.99

FOR
- easy to use
- clear illuminated display
- all codes onboard

AGAINST
- tedious setup
- no Blu-ray category
- no Cancel button
REVIEW

Plane Speak

Noel Keywood auditions two unusual loudspeakers using planar drivers - a ribbon on Robson Acoustics' Greystoke and an electrostatic panel on Kingsound's Princess II...

Having lived with Quad's ELS63 electrostatic loudspeaker and Heybrook's Sextet with its Tonigen ribbon tweeter I learnt to appreciate the unique strengths of both loudspeakers. So I couldn't pass up an opportunity to pit a ribbon against an electrostatic once again by running two very unusual loudspeakers alongside each other: a Robson Acoustics Greystoke Opulus (yes, really!) fitted with a ribbon tweeter and a Kingsound Princess II, fitted with an electrostatic tweeter. Both are standmounters, but not budget designs by any means: the lavishly crafted Greystoke costs £1,600 and the Princess II £1,500. Would they bring back some of the glories of my audio past I wondered? Such delights have been swamped by a sea of metal cone and come equipped boxes that crowd today's marketplace - and our listening rooms!

KINGSSOUND PRINCESS II

I'm going to start my comparison by looking at a strange to almost bizarre idea totally new to me and therefore an unknown quantity - the electrostatic panel tweeter of Kingsound's Princess II loudspeaker. When my eyes alighted on this little box of tricks at September's Hi-Fi Show at the Park Inn, Heathrow I knew I had to take a closer look. Never have I seen an electrostatic panel built into a box loudspeaker like this. Is that barmy, I wondered, a complicated Oriental contrivance as sensible as a motorised rickshaw? Or is it just that I have become accustomed to picturing electrostatics as Quads - big, open panels that are the very antithesis of small box loudspeakers. I make the distinction 'Oriental' because the Kingsounds hail from Kings Audio of Hong Kong (www.kingsaudio.com.hk) and if you look at their loudspeaker range - especially the extraordinary Emperor that looks like a Ming Dynasty room
divider - you'll see some fascinatingly different designs.

Most challenging to electrostatic orthodoxy however is the Princess II reviewed here, complete with side exhaust ports that remind me of tropical window slats. These allow rear sound from the panel to escape, as it were. Such output quite a lot of the rearward sound our measurement microphone showed, and the idea is that when bounced off a rear wall this will increase the sense of spaciousness, making the Princess II sound more like an open electrostatic panel than a closed box. With an internal rear cabinet wall there to reflect sound back to the panel and out toward listeners though, this will only be partially successful. The Princess II isn't a high power loudspeaker, being quoted as needing 60-120 Watts.

**ROBSON GREYSTOKE**

Hailing from Britain's Lake District, in the northern county of Northumbria that, I am told, is somewhere near Iceland but is more solvent, Robson Acoustics hand craft loudspeakers using traditional materials that better blend into expensively furnished modern homes than the bland, cheap looking artificial veneers on many loudspeakers. So our review samples came with deeply patterned and fissured Oak end pieces and a hide wrapped cabinet that will, I'm sure appeal to a great many proud homeowners unhappy with bland alternatives.

The Greystoke is a weighty (18kgs) but compact design featuring a ribbon tweeter, another interesting way of generating clean treble. The electrical signal is passed through a light metallic ribbon immersed in a strong magnetic field. The ribbon is very light, if not as light as a piece of Clingfilm, nor quite as sonically neutral. It is however much lighter than a dome tweeter and more evenly driven too. Ribbons measure superbly well and are known for their clean, incisive sound. If you want conspicuously fast, detailed treble a ribbon is the drive unit to go for.

Ribbons usually reach down to 4kHz or so, making them difficult to partner. The ribbon in this loudspeaker works from 3.5kHz upward, which should perceptibly alter handling of violins in particular, which invariably fall victim to phase and amplitude anomalies that beset most loudspeakers with their higher 3kHz crossover point. However, I must point out here that flat panels have their own unique problems and that these panels were directional, much like Martin Logan panels. All the same, providing they are listened to on-axis the sound balance remains pretty consistent.

The cabinet is a compact 207mm wide, 260mm deep and 401mm high, and weighs in at 7.8kgs, making it an easy life. The Princess II is a standmounter, as it's a bit large for most shelves, although it will fit a 12in deep shelf. Quality of finish is good, although the artificial veneer isn't especially alluring, nor the black grille cloth against it a fetching match. It's a sound, although the artificial veneer isn't especially alluring, nor the black grille cloth against it a fetching match. The Greystokes were...
but totally free from the hard and somewhat unnatural tonality today's metal dome tweeters impose on violin, and free from the contorted presentation caused by phase and amplitude problems at crossover between bass and treble unit. Nigel Kennedy suddenly became an easy and gratifying listen, his violin having a gentle and sweet tonal pallor quite unlike that I am used to from today's loudspeakers. There was some small sense of a softening of the sound, where the bow glided across a string perhaps just a bit too silkily, but this was to change.

Running through my usual torture tracks chosen to fully stress a loudspeaker I became aware that the Greystoke was more 'nice' than exciting. Vocals were projected well, metallic percussion tinkled beautifully at lower frequencies there was progressive lessening of the dynamic push, typically behind drums and bass guitar. So whilst the striding bass line of the Drums' was discernible it's an education to do so. They successfully challenge the field, with a lovely tonal pallor that seems natural to the ear, whilst at the same time being fast, incisive and deeply detailed, and free from sonic stripeness. I was drawn into listening to the finest drawings of breath, gentle tinkle of cymbals and bells all intensely described before me. It was superb to hear.

As measurement suggested the Greystokes don't go really low, yet at the same time with the MB845s at least they had acceptably vigorous bass lines. Listening in, Editor David Price immediately said they'd be perfect as a super high quality monitor for smaller rooms. Low frequencies would be brought up by room gain, without boom occurring.

Switching over to the Kingsound's brought a large change. With enthusiastic bass and, at times, searing highs, the Princess Ils brought emphasis to both ends of the audio spectrum and rather than sounding calm, svelte and composed like the MB845s or Quad II-eights - which I've had to resort to reading the lyrics of this song on the internet when listening via conventional loudspeakers, through the Princess Ils I could catch the words as O'Connor trilled the variables through this lament, through to the last dying phrase. I've had to hold my breath before with material like this, but only when listening to every last little nuance being conveyed by an electrostatic: first from Quad, recently Martin Logan and now I'm delighted to say, from Kingsound. This is a loudspeaker that literally takes your breath away, if not for the usual meanings of the expression. At times it had me on the edge of the seat, not daring to breathe.

Strong treble from the panel was also responsible for crystal clear imaging, tiny details in Dadawa's 'Cantoh Story' springing from the loudspeakers at far left and right, giving the sound stage a firm width. Bewitching with a lot of Rock and much Classical, there were times when the Princess Ils displayed limitations. Massed strings in The Planets 'Mars Bringer of War' had an overly bright shimmer to them, making their presence a little too obvious within the rest of the orchestra. Choral works like Beethoven's 'Missa Solemnis' were characterised by some edginess that the smoother Greystokes avoided. It wasn't overly annoying but at the same time the Princess Ils were a trifle edgy with strings and choirs. They lack the smoothness of Quads, but then these are single sided panels like the Martin Logans, not more linear push-pulls like the Quads.

Spinning Angelique Kidjo's 'The Sound of the Drums' showed the Princess Ils have surprisingly strong but supple bass, able to convey the walking bass lines and thunderous drums, as well as searing percussion. As you'd expect from the small cabinet size, deep bass is limited in level, but it was there all the same I found; the Princess Ils had much the same tidy bottom end behaviour as Usher's S-520s and should suit medium sized rooms well. In small rooms their treble might be overpowering even when switched to Flat, as I ran them.

I was surprised to find that imaging and tonal balance changed little as I moved my head both sideways, up and down, when listening four metres away, contrary to...
to the large changes seen by our measuring microphone close up (1m). So although flat electrostatic panels are known to suffer phase cancel-lation effects that result in a ragged forward response, the Princess IIs sounded quite even in use.

**CONCLUSION**

Although I wanted to capture the essence of two very unusual loudspeakers in this review rather than run a shoot out between them, there was one area where they seemed diametrically opposed. The Princess IIs worked best at lower listening levels; push them and the electrostatic panels harden up and get a little confused I found. By way of contrast the Greystokes enjoyed going loud, so smooth and composed were they. However, no small loudspeaker can be pushed too hard without bass distortion (doubling) becoming apparent as stodginess and muddle. Ultimately, neither loudspeaker is meant to shake the foundations of a large room.

I realise from what I have said that Robson’s Greystokes would seemingly suit Classical music played at high level whilst the Kingsound’s Princess IIs best suit Rock played at low levels, a decidedly contrary result. This is only partly the case. The Greystokes were lovely with all forms of music and it is quite obvious that they have been honed over a long period to produce a polished sound that is nothing other than pure class. You will not hear anything like them elsewhere I believe, at any price, they are sufficiently unique.

Kingsound’s Princess IIs are less sublime, that’s for sure, but their small electrostatic panels were at times sonically breathtaking. Imperfect perhaps, but also extraordinary at the price I feel. I would be tempted to re-wire the rear switch to give -2dB treble cut rather than lift - that would tweak them nicely! As they stand they have an edge to them, but it isn’t intolerable.

Both designs featured here are highly refreshing alternatives to more conventional stand mounters, especially when they carry high price tags that are sometimes difficult to justify. Both the Robson Acoustics Greystokes and the Kingsound Princess IIs are fine small loudspeakers that justify their prices, I believe. Amongst today’s metal domed hoards they were a breath of fresh air sonically, although both were difficult and demanding loads that need a good amplifier. Keep this in mind and either one could be just the tonic your system needs.

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**VERDICT**

Interesting loudspeaker with a svite, fast and detailed sound that’s ideal for smaller rooms.

**KINGSOUND PRINCESS II**

+ Into Price: £1,500

- Strong treble
- Slightly insightful
- Sharp imaging
- Supple bass

**AGAINST**

- Limited treble
- Limited volume
- Need mains power

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**ROBSON GREYSTOKE**

+ Price: £1,600

- Deeply insightful
- Elegant cabinet finish
- Superb treble
- Fresh tonality
- Insightful electrostatic panel with decent bass, but still a bright speaker.

**AGAINST**

- Difficult to drive
- Limited bass
- Need amplifier power

---

**PRINCESS II**

The bass unit and electrostatic panel of the Princess II meet at 800Hz and the need to match perceived energy levels results in what is a peak in the midrange, much like that of Martin Logan loudspeakers. The electrostatic panel works relatively smoothly across a very wide frequency range, from 800Hz up to 20kHz, eliminating the usual crossover phase problems suffered by conventional loudspeakers. Like any flat panel the Kingsound electrostatic panel is directional, high frequency output falling off to either side, or above and below the loudspeaker. This limits the listening position a little. Side vents emit the entire frequency range and this will bounce off walls to widen to enhance the sense of spaciousness. There are a few narrow band response effects at 4kHz, but otherwise the electrostatic panel offers smooth output over its operating range, and especially at high frequencies, so treble quality should be excellent.

The bass unit runs smoothly down to 65Hz and the port, tuned to 50Hz, has fairly broad output to provide support lower down. Our impedance trace shows the driver characteristic impedance of around 10 Ohms, so Kingsound have used an 8 Ohm bass unit with it, resulting in a high overall measured impedance of 8 Ohms. Impedance falls above 10kHz, but there is so little energy here most amplifiers suggested it will have little impact.

The Princess II is well developed, delivering a honed all round measured performance. NK

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**ROBSON GREYSTOKE**

The ribbon tweeter of the Greystoke runs smoothly from 4kHz up to 1kHz our frequency response shows. There’s a dip between it and the bass/midrange unit, which is a little peaky around 2kHz before its output rolls down above 3kHz. Third-octave analysis suggested it will have little impact.

There may well be a little extra vocal projection from the broad lift around 1kHz though; the Robson will not sound distant across the midband. Analysis of spectral decay (waterfall) shows the peaks are not associated with energy storage, decay looking relatively clean and even with time.

The bass unit covers the lower midrange nicely, suggesting instruments and vocals will have a good sense of body, the rise in output down to 150Hz ensuring there will be quite a strong sense of warmth to the lower midrange, especially as decay at this frequency is slow in the time domain.

Lower frequencies fall away steadily, as it to be expected from such a small cabinet and the Robson is best used on stands close to a rear wall. Port output peaks at 40Hz and provides some support for forward radiation, but the Robson does not go down low, reaching 60Hz or so within a small to medium sized room.

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**VERDICT**

Engaging loudspeaker with a svite, fast and detailed sound that’s ideal for smaller rooms.

**KINGSOUND PRINCESS II**

+ Price: £1,500

- Strong treble
- Slightly insightful
- Sharp imaging
- Supple bass

**AGAINST**

- Limited treble
- Limited volume
- Need mains power

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**ROBSON GREYSTOKE**

+ Price: £1,600

- Deeply insightful
- Elegant cabinet finish
- Superb treble
- Fresh tonality
- Insightful electrostatic panel with decent bass, but still a bright speaker.

**AGAINST**

- Difficult to drive
- Limited bass
- Need amplifier power

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People want affordable or ultra high end hi-fi. It's a split between those who are affected by the credit crunch and those who are not. Worried mortals in the mid-market are being careful with their cash right now and buying budget. With this in mind, Naim's entry level Nait range is expanding. The SuperNait has been a great success, and the Si remains very popular. However, there's been a gaping hole between the £750 price point of the '5 and the £2,500 of the SuperNait — and so here's where the new Nait XS at £1,250 fits in.

Fair enough, but what is the XS exactly? Lest we forget the Nait Si is a stripped-down, 'less is more' design that's not upgradeable, and the SuperNait is about as close as Naim come to an all-singing, all dancing do-it-all hi-fi product. What then of the new XS? Well I am happy to say it falls on the Si side of the fence here; whereas the SuperNait has serious onboard DACs (as well as all its other tricks), the Nait XS is — ostensibly — the SuperNait minus its digital bits, in a smaller Si style box with a slightly less beefy power supply. In essence then, you're getting much of the SuperNait, without the fripperies (at least if you're not a digiphile), for half the money.

It's a high quality, stripped-down, back-to-basics two channel analogue amplifier at an affordable price — in Naim terms at least. A clever selling proposition, and all the better because you can attach one of Naim's external power supplies and get recognisable performance improvements. This fits the Naim upgrading hierarchy very well, but does it deliver the sonic goods?

Down to the engineering nitty gritty, and it's easiest to conceive of the XS as a SuperNait in the series 5's smaller aluminium chassis and sleeve with zinc die-cast front panel. Inside is a larger-than-the-Si transformer, rated at 380VA with five separate windings, giving 60W RMS per channel. The preamp section is flexible, with six inputs, the facility to add FlatCap, HiCap or SuperCap power supplies, a switchable AV bypass, a stereo full bandwidth sub (effectively then it's a preamplifier output), programmable Auto Input Switching (AIS) and a front panel 3.5mm auxiliary input.

As such, it looks closer to the SuperNait than the Si under the hood, with very careful attention given to component layout and topography, along with vibration isolation. For example, the mains input socket is mounted in a 'floppy' way so that it doesn't directly send ground-borne vibration from the mains cable into the chassis — a clever touch. The two layer circuit board is optimised for size, and combines surface mount technology with thru-hole components. It too is decoupled, allowed to 'flap around' (for the want of a better term) so as not to carry the vibration from the case into it. Carefully hand aligned individual wiring runs to the ALPs Blue volume control, again to reduce microphony. The tape monitor loop has been removed, and the preamplifier is said to be the same as the SuperNait, but with its gain altered to improve sonic performance in this application. Adding a separate power supply improves performance by powering the preamp stage exclusively from the external power supply. The power amp uses the output devices of the NAP 200 power amplifier with a circuit based on the NAIT Si high efficiency amp.

SOUND QUALITY
If the Nait Si is a relatively light and tight sounding product and the SuperNait is altogether richer...
Chord Epic speaker cable
- 2mm diameter silver-plated oxygen free copper conductors
- Twisted pair configuration
- Silicone internal jacket
- High frequency effective dual foil and braid shielding system
- Vibration damping translucent PVC outer jacket

Chord Anthem 2
- Silver-plated multi-strand signal conductor
- Silver-plated combined shielding system
- Internal and external Teflon insulation
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tonally and if anything a little softer and more rounded (albeit with huge scale and punch), where then is the XS pegged? Well, just as its price is closer to the Si, so the XS's sound lies closer to that of the Si in its character, if not in its level.

Kicking off with Augustus Pablo's 'King Tubby Meets Rockers Uptown', a classic slice of early nineteen seventies dub music, and the Nait XS proved quite a performer. As ever, the defining characteristic of Naim amplifiers for me is the space between the notes - or how well the amp is able to stop playing one note before the next one starts. The new XS is no different to its family relations in this department, showing fleetfootedness and great control. The result was a beautifully timed rendition of the music, causing profuse tapping of the feet.

Despite its smaller casework, in the bass department the new Naim sounds very close to the larger SuperNait. It is considerably stronger and more animated than the Si, giving a visceral thump to the song's midband.1 can think of at £1,250 elsewhere in this respect. The upshot is that the XS was there or abouts in this respect. Not only did it underpinning to its midband. Whereas the Nait Si is good at the price, it's just a little muffled and electronic sounding in absolute terms. This new amplifier however, is a clear step forward in this respect. The stick work on Lou Donaldson's 'Alligator Bogaloo' was a joy; this 1967 BlueNote jazz recording was captured in all its glory, with all the air and space that the original crossed-pair of microphones imparted - and once again, there was not a trace of brightness.

CONCLUSION

I can think of few downsides to this amplifier; as a package it is superb and so any objections are more down to whether you actually like the the creamiest sounding thing you can buy at the price, but lacks 'gumption' compared to the new Nait. My advice is as ever - go and listen, what I can say is that I loved it, and for me it's the most complete and capable 'affordable' Naim amplifier I've come across - making it ideal for these troubled economic times.

Naïm Nait XS

£1,250

Naim Audio Ltd
+44 (0) 1722 426600

www.naimaudio.com

VERDICT

Super affordable integrated amplifier, with power, subtlety and sophistication in equal measure. Build, finish and upgradeability seal the deal.

REFEREE SYSTEM

Avid Acutus/SME V/vdH Frog turntable
Musical Fidelity's new A1 is just about

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Like a few amplifiers we have tested recently the XS produced an especially stable distortion pattern that held steady at all levels and frequencies - very unusual and difficult to achieve. Our analysis shows steadily declining harmonic level with rising frequency and this held stable at all frequencies, as the distortion sweep shows. The XS all but mimicked a valve amplifier in this respect, but that is not to say it would sound the same as sound quality differences are not attributable to distortion alone. Together with a rigidly imposed bandwidth limit of 20kHz (-1dB) the XS will sound smooth and should be an easy listen, lacking the uncorrelated distortion 'tune' many amps play.

Damping factor was typical of a Naim amplifier - at 15 low, if not very low, so bass will likely be 'obvious'. Power output measured 60 Watts into 8 Ohms and 90W into 4 Ohms, the latter being close to what will be delivered as most loudspeakers have 4 Ohm bass units. It's plenty enough for most situations. The XS measured very well. It will likely have a smooth sound, with obvious bass in the Naim style, and ameliorate today's bright sounding loudspeakers.

Against - nothing at the price
Andrew Harrison's head calculates that Audio Logic's Model 34MXL digital-to-analogue convertor is a very decent digital device, but can it win his heart?

When assembling the best sounding D/A converter for a digital front end, there are two principal schools of thought about how to achieve the best performance.

In simple terms, one seeks the most linear reconstruction of the digital audio bitstream, meaning that we must do our very best to maximise the actual digital conversion stage. This may involve finding novel techniques where necessary to ensure that the music's not mangled while it's still being manipulated in the digital realm. It often entails using custom digital signal processing rather than off-the-shelf silicon.

The other school of thought says that our current converters are doing just fine thanks, and it's how we apply them and then treat the raw analogue coming out the end of tried-and-tested converter chips that makes all the difference...

In the first school reside the digital pathfinders; companies like dCS, Chord Electronics, Meridian, MSB Technology and EMM Labs, while in the second lie the analogue experts like Audio Note, Bryston, Zanden and just about any CD player or DAC maker that uses a valve output stage. Audio Logic Co. is a small-scale audiophile manufacturer based in Westport, Connecticut, and one who falls squarely into the latter camp.

Audio Logic Co is one of the less well-known companies in the rarefied world of speciality hi-fi, with no web presence or any marketing behind it. It seems to be more a word-of-mouth placed company, debated on forums but rarely reviewed. The information we have is limited to an eleven-page manual and a close examination of the product itself.

So here we have the Audio Logic Co. Model 34MXL, a stereo DAC using two standard - but unspecified - DAC chips, along with a balanced valve output stage. In fact the chips' identity is obscured by what appears to be copper paint over the part numbers! Based on experience though, the DAC was happy to accept a digital input up to 24/96 specification.

In line with similar such units, the designer has specified many high quality electronic components such as large audiophile-grade capacitors. The main deviation from the norm appears to be the unusual use of transformer coupling between the DAC output and the valve stage, so that the two dual-differential chips are direct coupled to transformer primaries, with the secondaries wired to the control grids of a pair of dual triodes. In the review sample, these were NOS Mullard E88CC types, comparable to the 6922 and designed as an improved version of the ECC88.

Two digital inputs are offered on the back, RCA coaxial and XLR balanced, although there's an option for a third input of the optical variety. For output, there's one pair of RCA phonois and another pair of XLR balanced sockets. The 34MXL is very solidly built into an all-metal case with thick alloy faceplate, all surfaces finished in a textured black paint. Two long horizontal slots on the 9mm-thick aluminium fascia allow blue light from within to seep through when the unit has a digital signal lock. And four chromed buttons here allow simple switching between the three inputs, and reverse signal phase.

Looking inside we have three small frame-transformer power supplies to the digital, analogue and valve heater stages. The circuit is built on a large glass-fibre PCB using thick tracks for best performance. And standing in the centre of the board are the unusual interstage coupling transformers.

SOUND QUALITY

Adding valves to digital electronics is often seen as a means to sweeten or soften the excesses of 16bit CD sound, and here the Model 34MXL did not disappoint in the least. Its sound was characterised as smooth and edge-free to a fault, and at no point in the extended listening did it stand forward as anything other than vice-free in this respect.

In frequency coverage the Model 34MXL didn't seem as well extended as most modern DACs - there was something of a 'vintage' tinge to its sound, as it seemed to trade on midband focus at the expense of bass slam and upper treble sparkle. At the low end for example, playing through the live take of Pink Floyd's 'The Wall', there was little conviction behind low bass guitar. Here a detuned bass E string underpins
Another Brick in the Wall Part 2’, a low D used alternately through the verse. Through the 34MXL, the low thrum was comparatively lost and light, taking away some of the impact of the performance.

In simple and sparse jazz pieces though, the 34MXL could really go to work and bring out the best of acoustic instruments. From Zakir Hussain’s ‘Making Music’ album, where flute, sax and acoustic guitar interplay with Hussain’s tabla and percussion, you could easily bring your attention on each line in its vinyl-like wholesomeness. Listen beyond the main lines however and you may realise that some of the air and space was being robbed...

The soaring flute and tubby tabla sound in ‘Water Girl’ could not be matched with the 34MXL, in place, where a Chord DAC 64 could let the instruments show off their respective and unique timbres that much more clearly.

When music got harmonically richer and more complex, the smooth and sanguine sound of the Model 34MXL had some difficulty in keeping up. Given the two concert grands of Rachmaninov’s ‘Suite No. 1 for Two Pianos’, and in particular the fourth ‘Paques’, played with gusto by Güher and Süher Pekinel, I had difficulty in making out the individual contributions of the four hands.

There was about as much stereo width to work with as the Chord for example, but a slightly duller effect that sounded like a screen between you and the playing. The brilliance of hammered piano strings was somehow overly smoothed, almost veiled in its one-step-removed presentation.

This was a theme found with most types of music – a dampening of upper frequencies and curtailing of the low end, which nevertheless did have a useful side effect in drawing me in to some midrange cut-off of upper frequencies and curtailment where it was difficult to discern where roles handed over, so too was there a hint of this broad spectrum smear underlying all music. Take the crisp-sounding and superbly played set of Zeppelin classics on Page and Plant’s ‘No Quarter’, where the rock gods join forces with the distinctly dusky sounding Egyptian Ensemble. With North African drums punctuating ‘Friends’, the 34MXL had a mildly monotonic flavour, slurring the percussive complexity, masking the droning Hammond and rounding off the string section’s incision. In its favour, the Audio Logic DAC could bring out the acoustic guitar strums and Plant’s throaty delivery, but ultimately I yearned to return to more honest converters, even if I did have to listen through some edginess...

mix. If you don’t need to know how a producer has worked with available colours in their palette, that’s not necessarily a problem. Yet I couldn’t help feeling I was missing something vital as it polished off the freshness of reproduced sound.

Despite a kind way with the human voice, I also found there was something missing in its expression of both large-scale dynamics – almost certainly related to its underperforming low frequency performance – and in the microdynamics and fine detailing that should flesh out a sound and bring it closer to life. In striving to make a naturally smooth digital converter devoid of the glare of bad binary, some element of the baby had been thrown out with the bathwater, methinks...

Inter-note blackness was another aspect of this, with the wide swing of contrasts between sound and no-sound seemingly blunted, such that dynamic shifts were not convincingly represented. As with the effect noted on four-hand piano, where it was difficult to discern where roles handed over, so too was there a hint of this broad spectrum smear underlying all music. Take the crisp-sounding and superbly played set of Zeppelin classics on Page and Plant’s ‘No Quarter’, where the rock gods join forces with the distinctly dusky sounding Egyptian Ensemble. With North African drums punctuating ‘Friends’, the 34MXL had a mildly monotonic flavour, slurring the percussive complexity, masking the droning Hammond and rounding off the string section’s incision. In its favour, the Audio Logic DAC could bring out the acoustic guitar strums and Plant’s throaty delivery, but ultimately I yearned to return to more honest converters, even if I did have to listen through some edginess...

CONCLUSION

Despite a warmth that never succumbed to simple bass bloom, the Model 34MXL never quite delivered for this listener in trying so hard to rein in the possibility of digital glare, it forgot to let the bright and dark contrasts of music show through, erring almost exclusively on the darker, smoother side. In straightforward stereo width and depth it fulfils, and has a calm and creamy tone which may seem a welcome relief from old-school digital dazzle. If this sounds tempting then by all means investigate further, but at this price point there are other contenders which can balance the virtues of revelation and musicality more capably, I feel.

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

Our analysis shows frequency response has a slight upward trend toward high frequencies, resulting in a high 21.2kHz upper limit. There is a small low bass roll down, placing the lower limit at 15Hz, compared to 2Hz of many CD players. I suspect this will not have much affect because valves usually bestow good low frequency dynamics and reclocking will reinforce this, as well as adding strong leading edges. Noise was a little higher than is common, again due to valves, but at -95dB it won’t be audible all the same.

Distortion was low at 0dB peak level as valves commonly give 0.3% or so of innocuous second harmonic. The Audiologic 34MXL is as linear as the amazing Edgar CD1 here. At low levels it was very linear, hence a fine reproduction. As with the effect noted on four-hand piano, where it was difficult to discern where roles handed over, so too was there a hint of this broad spectrum smear underlying all music. Take the crisp-sounding and superbly played set of Zeppelin classics on Page and Plant’s ‘No Quarter’, where the rock gods join forces with the distinctly dusky sounding Egyptian Ensemble. With North African drums punctuating ‘Friends’, the 34MXL had a mildly monotonic flavour, slurring the percussive complexity, masking the droning Hammond and rounding off the string section’s incision. In its favour, the Audio Logic DAC could bring out the acoustic guitar strums and Plant’s throaty delivery, but ultimately I yearned to return to more honest converters, even if I did have to listen through some edginess...

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**VERDICT**

- warm tonality
- gently beguiling sound
- build quality

**AGAINST**

- soft frequency extremes
- slightly opaque midband
- muddying dynamics
It is physics that determines the sound of a loudspeaker, not a marketing man’s spin. I don’t care if Albert Einstein was brought back from the dead, given a new brain ten times its previous power and was given an eternity to fill it — even he wouldn’t be able to design a small loudspeaker that sounded like a large one...

So, it was with some trepidation that I found myself auditioning this particular compact box. As with every other small cube shaped transducer I am asked to review, I was told how different and special it is — thanks to all manner of clever tricks. Said to “rewrite the rule book for compact loudspeakers”, this is “the world’s first truly full range mini monitor, producing accurate bass right down to the bottom octave with the dynamics of a multi way speaker ten times its size”, no less!

The product of “Swedish iconoclast” Ingvar Ohman, the QM10P is said to have been a cult product amongst the Scandinavian audiophile underground for a number of years. Ingvar founded his own institute and spent eleven years working with Swedish universities studying the intricacies of human hearing, researching psychoacoustics and how for instance the curvature of the ear and the damping effect of the shoulders and chest alter frequency response. Based on these studies, Ingvar developed the QM10P to deliver a flat frequency response in real world conditions at the ear drum, the story goes...

The Gurus are said to harness the listening room’s acoustics to enhance their performance, “by using the wall against which they are placed the QM10P’s couple the room and use it as an extension of their own enclosures to produce the stygian bass traditionally only associated with the largest behemoth loudspeakers”. Hmm, so they like a bit of rear wall reinforcement to give some extra thump — just like Wharfedale Diamonds — then?

Okay, enough of the hyperbole — let’s get down to specifics. They’re a 300x252x232mm box with a single 102mm reflex port loaded plastic covered paper/pulp mid-bass unit made by Tymphany in Denmark, and a 16mm modified Mylar tweeter from Visaton of Germany — weighting in at 6kg apiece. Very interestingly for this particular reviewer — and far more impressive than twenty pages of the purple prose the Guru comes with — is its wide front baffle. This runs counter to current loudspeaker engineering practice (i.e. fashion) — and is something I believe shows real independence of mind. With its width being its largest dimension, this speaker is in a gang of one in its physical dimensions.

The MDF box, covered with matte or gloss piano black finishes, also has a grey plasticky material on top and around the drive unit surrounds. Running along the bottom of the speaker is a ‘letter box’ type bass port, and the speaker sits on four small, stiff foam cylinders, giving secure location on to stand tops whilst decoupling the speakers in a controlled way. Round the back, it’s a return to the Flat Earth days with provision for banana plugs only — biwire enthusiasts or followers of the bare wire connection method can take a stroll.

SOUND QUALITY
Given the Guru’s Swedish DNA, I thought it best to start with my much played copy of Abba’s ‘The Album’, specifically ‘Eagle’. I’m sorry to say that — despite the claims of the odious press release — I didn’t hear tracts of deep bass flat down to the earth’s inner core, but fortunately what I did hear was particularly enjoyable — as was the Gurus’ handling of the rest of the frequency range...

These are distinctive sounding loudspeakers, but not necessarily for the reasons touted by the manufacturer. Whereas most modern small boxes try to be miniature high resolution monitors, utterly devoid...
The Gurus...
Dirty power can be upsetting.

Clean it up with the Z Powerbar™ from MIT.

The Z Powerbar makes clean AC uniquely possible, so you can enjoy “blacker” blacks, better color saturation, and increased shadow detail. Works equally well on video and audio components!

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FASHION VICTIM

I have just read Mr. Price's article on his friend's lust for a system that fashion forgot and it has inspired me to do the same, but there are some issues I need to address! Being only fifteen years of age and already a connoisseur of hi-fi, I'm always seeking to get the best sound for my buck. I have an Arcam FMJ & Linn Sondek system with Wharfedale EVO2-30 speakers at the moment and until a month ago, I was very content with it...

You see, whilst browsing the ever unavoidable internet auction site, something really did catch my eye - a 1979 JVC A-XS integrated amplifier in mint condition. Being a very 'spur-of-the-moment' guy, I engaged in a bidding war and emerged successful, with my pocket £80 lighter. After roaring 'yes!' for ten minutes, I sat down, recollected my thoughts and realised that I'd just wasted lots of my hard-earned cash on a metal box which was probably not worth its weight in wool. And then it hit me that I had to collect this thing somehow!

So the joys of e-bay were rather short lived, but as my supposedly 'mint-condition' amp' arrived home and I unpacked it from its box, I stared in amazement at the quality of this silver beauty. Everything was so logical; every intricate detail had been perfected with the utmost care and attention; the sleek, satin silver finish was exquisite and the air of quality that pervaded throughout this piece of vintage Japanese exotica was remarkable. It had something my Arcam didn't have. Its looks, put simply, were perfection.

I stopped drooling and told myself "the sound cannot be as good", but boy was I wrong! Here was an amplifier which played music, not sound. It delivered amazing grip thanks to its hugely oversized toroidal transformer, a honey-coated sweetness to the treble courtesy of the 'Super Class-A' design and a soundstage unlike anything I have heard to this date. To listen to it was like what hi-fi would sound on the Philadelphia Cheese advert; it was heavenly, saintly, pure bliss.

It therefore brings my attention to whether I should go retro with my speakers? My current Wharfedale EVO2-30s are very nice, but I remember being six years old and avidly reading your Olde Worlde article on the Wharfedale E70s and wishing for no other pair of transducers when I was older! Is it now time to fulfil my dreams, or will I be bitterly disappointed? Should I delve deep into a world twenty years before my time, or will I end up with a system that fashion and audiophiles both forgot?

Jake Hughes

Wharfedale E70 – not so much speakers as shrines for 1970s throwback Jake Hughes!

Hi Jake – good to see the younger generation are taking classic hi-fi seriously, and I hope that your JVC will spur you on to transforming your bedroom into a seventies 'show home', complete with brown curtains, a lava lamp and a copy of 'Razzie' on your glass coffee table, next to a chrome plated cigarette case full of Embassy No.6! Remember that when my generation has gone, you'll be there, all alone, flying the flag for the decade that fashion forgot!

This all said, actually, ermm, I wouldn't go for the E70s. Well, in truth it depends on the condition of the said loudspeakers. Put it this way, if they're more clapped out than a Morris Marina Super DeLuxe that did minicabbing from 1978 to 1985, then ended up in a field being
ONE THING YOU 'CAN' LOOK FORWARD TO IN JANUARY!

The return of an old friend and the addition of a new one.

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11am-6pm (Sat) and 10am-4pm (Sun)

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For the full and latest information, log onto www.chestergroup.org where you can also download your Concession Tickets, which will not only save you a considerable amount of money but also provide a number of unique benefits.

See you at the show!
driven around by juvenile delinquents, then I'd stay with the Evos. As with
everything classic, 'condition is everything'. There's no point in buying
a high end pig in a poke, or you'll just find it harder and/or more expensive
to repair. If the E70s are mint, then yes they would be worth investigating
– but look for a pair with the paper
woofers rebuilt otherwise the Es
wouldn't please.

Whilst the E70s are an
interesting and engaging speaker to
listen to – you should be aware that
they are not the world's smoothest
or more accurate. Now, being fifteen
years old, this may actually be an
advantage. Me being thirty nine and
three quarters (and a bit more),
they're a tad harsh for my tastes.
Actually they'd work well with
a modern, low power valve amp
– which would smooth them out but
still go loud thanks to their fantastic
sensitivity. I'm afraid the JVC wouldn't
be an ideal partner, tonally.

So find a good pair and enjoy the
sheer sense of nineteen seventies
about them – slack back and pretend
you're Burt Reynolds in 'Boogie Nights'. But don't expect them to be
the world's best sounding speakers
in your system. If you want a better
tonal match, the smoother and more
sophisticated KEF 104abs would do
the job – not quite as racy looking
but still as nineteen seventies as my
friend's aforementioned TR7, which
– shock horror – hasn't broken down
yet! DP

You were doing what at six?
Methinks you started life a little early
Jake; what happened to SpongeBob
Squarepants? Obviously David has
had a bad influence on you, as you
seem to share his fascination with
the sweet JVC A-X5 is one of them,
but I would caution against being too
over reaching in thinking that because
one item of the period works well
then perhaps all do. You may well
find the crystal clear Dale Lektor 6
loudspeakers I review in this issue are
to your taste as they are fast and
exciting. NK

GRUNGE MUSIC
I have been a big fan of Metallica
for years and like many others looked
forward to their latest release. You can
only imagine my disappointment when
reading your December edition of Hi-Fi
World, you state how bad a production
it is, and that the game console
version

sounds better (' Guitar Hero')! However
you also state in your vinyl section
that Metallica have a five LP 45 rpm
audiophile version. Do you know if this
sounds any good, or is this a remaster
or a copy of the Guitar Hero? Please
don't tell me they slapped the horrible
compressed version onto 5 LPs, this
would really be taking use on a ride!
Thanks for pointing out how bad this LP
sounds, as a proud owner of a system
in excess of £9,000 and my latest
purchase a Project RPM 10 turntable,
I really do expect much more from a
rich famous and experienced band like
Metallica. Please advise.

Jenny Johnson

I was told by Mercury that the mix
used to create the CD has, yes, been
used to create the vinyl version.
The downside is that the Metallica
45rpm vinyl will suffer from harsh
Peak Limiting effects. However, as
in my review of the new Primal
Scream vinyl version of their new
album release, 'Beautiful Future',
merely pushing the Metallica album
through a vinyl process will soften
those harsh edges. The vinyl offering

The good news, however, is that this
damaging effect may be reversible for
audiophile listeners in the future. Linn
Records, for example, is distributing
indie-rock outfit, The Aliens' new
album, 'Luna'. It's original CD issue
suffered from similar, excessive, Peak
Limiting effects. Linn requested a
'Studio Master', 24bit, 48kHz version
for download from their website
(www.linnrecords.com). Whereupon,
the engineer went back into the
studio, removed all the Peak Limiting
and presented a crystal clear FLAC/
WAV version to Linn for public
download. Increasing broadband
speeds present companies with an
opportunity for a marketing 'edge' -
 audiophile quality music... and it can't
come quickly enough for me. I want
to get out and push! PR

Oh what an interesting subject from
a hi-fi point of view! Best of all the
furore over Death Magnetic is - apart
from giving Metallica oodles of free
publicity - prompting producers and
mastering engineers to think again
about the issue of quality. Check
out what mastering engineer lan
Each year the European Imaging & Sound Association (EISA) assembles a panel of expert judges from some of the continent’s leading hi-fi press to investigate the world’s finest technology.

After rigorous evaluation they return to vote on one product in each category that they believe offers not only exceptional levels of performance but also provides incredible value. This year they chose the Cambridge Audio Azur 840A Class XD integrated amplifier.

“...a genuinely novel approach... a highly sophisticated, efficient and attractive-sounding amplifier”

Cambridge Audio

To find your nearest approved Cambridge Audio specialist, read extensive reviews and more, visit: www.cambridge-audio.com
Shepherd says at http://mastering-media.blogspot.com (there's no www in this url) and the very interesting Justice For Audio site (www.justice-foraudio.org) which I think is the best starting point for following this story on the internet.

In a nutshell, Metallica's producer Rick Rubin is cited for having chosen to make the mix as loud as possible, trashing sound quality for audio.org) which I think is the best

Shepherd says at http://mastering-com/petitionsI8,000 fans have

the schism in the music business

album and want it re-mixed. Ian

chosen to make the mix as loud

on the internet.

starting point for following this story

in this un) and the very interesting

faintest whispers before suddenly

This is worth checking out. Wide
dynamic range albums have real

punch through a decent hi-fi system and can be breathtaking; this is the sort of material used at hi-fi shows to demo systems, because it sounds so good.You just have to be aware that in a track like Dadawa's Canton

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of cartridges as I live in Singapore and

Ortofon 2M Red. There is a big choice

is mentioned - how could it possibly

to find a remote control for a player

transport — it was a fine product in

its day. Unfortunately however, trying

to find a remote control for a player

made over twenty years ago, by a

company that has changed beyond

recognition since, is as the Americans

would say, a big ask! There are several

ways of attacking the problem — buy

SINGAPORE FLING!

I'm in a quandary - what to do? My

amplification is valve based, pre and

power are self built. Pre is 6SN7 based

with a 100x MM circuit based on

the Marantz 5 with valve and chokel

regulated HT supplies. Power amplifiers

are either monoblock 6550 PPs with

transformer phase split/6N7 driver/

GZ37, or a 6V6 single ended with

have now invested in the Chord and it

has blown me away! This is even with

RCA/BNC adaptors at either end of my

Kimber Select 2020 cable. I think my

next step will be to get the balanced

2120 version so that I can make a
direct AES connection. Thanks for your

help!

Richard

Thanks Richard – we aim to please.

For those who weren't privy to this

query, I recommended he buy a

Chord QBD76, digital-to-analogue

converter for CD and it looks like it

hit the spot. DP

VERY REMOTE CONTROL

I've recently resurrected a Kenwood

DP-X9010 CD transport that's been

lying around for several years and

impressed with the sound that emerges in conjunction with an Assemblage 2.5

DAC. I'm trying to locate a remote control for it (RC-PX9010) without much success. I've tried the usual sources such as eBay and other RC suppliers but nothing so far. I believe

Kenwood pulled out of hi-fi several years ago; their spares supplier seems to deal mainly in domestic appliances rather than old hi-fi, understandably. I wondered if any of your reviewers would know a source where I could try to get this item or if there is any other Kenwood remote which would work with the DPX9010?

Ken Sharpe

Hi Ken – well I am not surprised you are happy with the DP-X9010 transport – it was a fine product in its day. Unfortunately however, trying to find a remote control for a player made over twenty years ago, by a company that has changed beyond recognition since, is as the Americans would say, a big ask! There are several ways of attacking the problem – buy

Philips

Universal remote control,

SRU8015, comes with a vast on-board
database of codes used

by products around the

world and this includes

Kenwood see Very

Remote Control.

struggling with the problem — buy

...
SALE LIST
Huge Reductions on new & used Linn Equipment

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The Audio Show '09 makes historic move

A major decision has been taken by the Organisers of the ‘Heathrow’ show, as it’s affectionately known, to move the show lock, stock and barrel to a brand new venue for 2009. This was always an ongoing option for the Chester Group and something which had been talked about extensively with the trade...but an unexpected and exciting opportunity arose on the exact dates that were required for 2009 so the decision was made.

The key to the decision really comes down to available space; the Audio Show has to expand and there were only two ways that could be achieved at the existing venue: deploying converted bedrooms that were some distance from the main body of the show or by returning to a two venue event. The latter has been universally rejected by the trade and having tried the former in 2007 – exhibitors felt very isolated, so the Chester Group had a show they simply wouldn’t be able to expand.

The new venue is located at Silverstone in Northants and is geographically perfect with its location being equidistant between two key arterial motorways (M40 & M11) and also equidistant from the M25 and South Midlands. Whittlebury Hall, built within the last 10 years, has free parking for up to 500 cars, over 65 suites of various sizes, the vast majority of which are one level, and a meaningful drop in venue hire will allow the organizers to lower exhibiting rates by a full 25%; it has several restaurants and bars, a superb support team, a whole range of exhibitor accommodation packages and a location that most people will enjoy driving to. For those that choose not to drive, shuttle buses will operate from Milton Keynes on a regular basis.

A whole range of onsite and offsite attractions will encourage visitors to stay the weekend. For the shopper Towcester, Buckingham and Bicester are all within easy reach, including the Internationally acclaimed Outlet Village. Milton Keynes is also only 20 minutes away. For the fitness enthusiast it has one of the biggest Leisure Clubs/Day Spas we have ever seen! For the active there is an adjacent 36 hole Golf Course, Clay Pigeon shooting, Skiing, Go Kart Racing at Silverstone, Helicopter Rides, Hot Air Balloon flights, Horse Racing and Riding, plus Stone Gardens - one of the finest Georgian Landscape Gardens in the country, and the list goes on...

Dates have been fixed as the 26 – 27 September which crucially ensures the show does not clash with any other International Audio event. Build up is on the 25th. A number of exhibitors have already seen the venue and echo the organisers enthusiasm and commitment and anyone else that wishes to do the same only has to contact them for this to be arranged. Whilst not the primary reason for the change, the show lock, stock and barrel to a brand new venue for 2009 made it inevitable.

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The Audio Show '09 makes historic move
another machine (with remote); you'll need a 'donor machine' for spares anyway if you intend to keep it. Fortunately these aren't as rare as hens' teeth - yet. Second, buy another Kenwood CD player of the same era (1987-88) and use its remote; the codes should be identical. Otherwise, buy a universal remote which has the codes in - these are available cheaply on the internet, as a Google search will confirm. DP

Happenstance put a new Philips Prestigo Universal remote control into my hand just before I read your letter. Normally I would greet a remote control with the same enthusiasm as a letter from the Inland Revenue, but I have a growing appreciation for something to reduce the height of the pile growing in my lounge and this, with its big illuminated screen, looked like it would fit the bill nicely - and is also what you need. I will review it soon, but in the meantime I can assure you that under CD, Kenwood (Trio in the UK) is listed, so it seems to have onboard the codes you need to control a Kenwood CD player. Alternatively, it can find the right code by churning through its onboard database of them until the right code is found.

Hi John - my taste would be to go for the Audio Technica AT-OC9ML II. To my ears, this is the best value moving coil around (£225 from www.SoundHiFi.com) Remember that this is the improved version of a late eighties cartridge that cost £400 twenty years ago - it is very fast, punchy and full of life, but has real subtlety and detail too, more so than ever in its latest incarnation. If it's a budget low output MC you're after, then this is a no brainer in your Rega-derived arm. DP

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RELIQS - SLIGHT REFRAIN
It has been two years since I wrote regarding upgrading options to my main Linn-Naim system. That particular correspondence made Letter of the Month and was entitled 'Relics' in the January 2007 edition of HFW - thank you, that was a very pleasant surprise! Whilst I have not totally followed your advice (mainly due to my not being able to justify the expense) I have taken on board some of your suggestions to very good effect. Noel and David maintained my OL modified R8300 and G1042 should comfortably see off the SME III/Shure M97XE pairing, so was it a pure coincidence a review of this cartridge appeared in the very same issue as my letter? I swapped turntables as suggested but was not convinced the sound was to my liking so I set about making myself a new subchassis for the LP12 and duly fitted the prototype, a constrained layer construction, but what a night and day difference! The LP12 boogie factor remains and bass was instantly improved, so too was imaging and sound staging - becoming much wider than with the old pressed steel subchassis.

SUBSONIC
I am a complete amateur regarding sound systems, therefore I would really appreciate some guidance. I have a Bose Acoustimass 5 speaker set coupled to a Denon AVR-1907 amplifier. I want to improve the sound quality and I have been told to add an active subwoofer. Can you please advise if this good advice and if so can you suggest a make and model, or an alternative? As I live in the Middle East there is not much reliable information to be had, I would greatly appreciate your advice.

Alistair Malcolm.

Q Acoustics 1020i - great as a small Full Range surround-sound loudspeaker, at a beer budget price.

Yes, and I will second that. At the price the AT-OC9 MLII really offers a superb sound. It does have a treble peak, so you will find treble 'obvious', but it is finely detailed and nicely finessed. It is probably best used with the dark sounding Icon Audio PS1.2 or 3 preamps. NK

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Alistair Malcolm.

The Bose Acoustimass 5 loudspeaker system is a subwoofer / satellite arrangement where the satellites do not handle the full audio range. Each satellite has a 2.5in "wide range" drive unit Bose say, which is not enough to go low, so a separate cabinet handles bass. Adding a subwoofer will just give more bass, not improve the sound.

The best upgrade is to use full range hi-fi loudspeakers instead, the biggest ones possible. At the very least consider using four Q Acoustics 1020is which, at £120 each, will set you back little more than your Bose system and give much better quality. Set the receiver for Full Range loudspeakers and select None as the Centre loudspeaker.

Alternatively get a dedicated surround-sound loudspeaker system from KEF, B&W or similar. You do not need a separate subwoofer for music. The 0.1 track of a 5.1 recording contains subsonics from explosions etc and is not strictly necessary with music.

If you want all the booming a subwoofer produces then do by all means get an active one to accompany the main 'speakers.

NK
"the singularly most addicting piece of gear I have ever heard"

10 AUDIO REVIEW

"A new benchmark for musical communication"
STEREO TIMES

"One of the truly special products I've reviewed in the past 18 years"
STEREOPHILE

Winner of Stereo Times magazine Most wanted component of 2005 award

"The best tonearm I've heard"
HI FI WORLD

Your cartridge can deliver vastly improved results if coupled with a high grade arm. Great tonearms of the past were recognised for what they contributed but we would suggest it's time to upgrade. Massive performance improvements are now possible, so why not advance your system to a new level? After all, a significant tonearm upgrade offers many times the improvements of those given by cartridge upgrades, and last a lot longer. Our multi-award winning arms are offered with a no risk, money back guarantee should you be anything other than delighted.

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"The LP12 remains a classic ...but upgrade kits by Origin Live can bring a vast improvement to its performance"
HI FI NEWS

UNIVERSAL TURNTABLE MOTOR KIT - No one would blame you for being sceptical of an easy to fit, inexpensive dc motor upgrade. Especially one that improves on the best of other power supplies costing over 4 times as much or your money back. It is simply impossible to imagine the level of improvement attained by eliminating the motor vibration that your stylus amplifies over 8,000 times! Our DC motor kit offers massive improvements to all versions of Linn Lingo / Valhalla, Rega, Systemdeck, Roksan, Rock etc. The kits consist of a drop in replacement high grade DC motor and off-board 2 speed control box. Why not order now? - see web site or phone.

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Linn Sondek – David and Roger discuss its relative merits!

Dear Mr Price, to write "the Linn makes every LP sound like it was recorded in the same studio on the same equipment" (page 55, Hi-Fi World December 08) is cavalier nonsense. It suggests both a poor critical faculty, and that you should take a serious listen to alternative amplification and speakers for your system. It also completely contradicts your publication's recent reviews of the latest LP12 variants.

In fact, it brings to mind the comment from the Michell dealer in York when we (wife and I) were choosing our current turntable. We had already auditioned the LP12 and the Pink Triangle side-by-side at another dealer, finding them with different presentations but each with more strengths than weaknesses. Listening to the same LPs, my wife's reply to the Michell dealer's, "what do you think?" was, "it's dragging, it's too slow". I knew exactly what she meant compared with the other two machines, the Gyro lacked flow and bounce; it didn't induce tapping of the feet. The dealer's retort was priceless, "there's something wrong with your ears, it sounds fine to me". Needless to say, that dealer wasn't patronised! I do agree with you, though, that the Michell seems to give a wider sound stage than many others.

As far as the Linn, I recall a public demonstration by Superfi in Leeds in the early 'eighties, when six turntables were fitted with identical, matched cartridges (Entrée moving coil) and hidden from view while a varied programme was repeated in turn. At the time we were using a Thorens TD 150 at home, and I immediately identified the Thorens TD 160 under test, which of course reinforced my trust in my discriminatory powers! But one table stood out for me as the most musical, and the least like the dreaded hi-fi sound, and that turned out to be the LP12. Which won? Well, I think it was a Technics model!

But it's also true that combinations are important. Thus the worst LP12 I've ever heard was as the front end of an all-Naim system, using the then Naim flagship speaker. The sound was painfully strident, almost literally hurting the eardrums, and nothing like the closest approach to the original sound. But as NK says, how can anyone testing equipment know what the original sound was, unless the recording is of unamplified instruments recorded in a well-known hall. I think this is what Peter Walker, who was a good amateur musician, remember, had in mind. Harry Pearson comes in here somewhere too!

One thing we can agree on, though, I too first heard the Quad electrostatic at Harrogate (and Quad were using an LP12 as it happens) and I was in no doubt it was the best reproduction of music I had then heard, and I've yet to hear a speaker since that I prefer to the Quad electrostatic range. And Walker himself embodied virtues that maybe are less prevalent today. One year the FM4 was a new model, so I asked Peter whether it was better than my FM3. His reply: "It may be a bit quieter re signal to noise, but otherwise you won't hear much difference, it's just got more features." How many present manufacturers would take such a principled attitude? Needless to say, I ended up with both tuners.

Roger Perry

Dear Roger — having condemned a Michell dealer for suggesting your wife had poor critical faculty when she disagreed with me, you duly accuse me of having, ermm, "poor critical faculty" when I disagree with

Garrard 301 and Michell Orbe turntables – both with a different flavour to the LP12.
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you! Oh the poetry of it all!

But seriously, if you can't hear the tonal 'homogeneity' of the LP12, I would suggest you look at the rest of your replay chain... Mine changes with time and the LP12 always sounds tonally 'samey'; can you say the same for the variety of your replay system? I think the LP12 is a lovely music maker with bounce (as you say) but neutral it is not; I don't think even Linn would claim that! DP

Dear David,

It sounds to me you're now playing a different tune. Your reply doesn't relate to what you wrote, i.e. the LP12 makes "every LP sound like it was recorded in the same studio on the same equipment". I interpret this to mean "you cannot hear the different soundstage/verberation attributes/miking arrangements of different concert halls/studios". For example, a recording from the Albert Hall sounds the same as one made in St Johns, Smith Square. This can't be true of just about any turntable, let alone a half-decent one. But you now criticise the LP12 for having "tonal homogeneity", irrespective of the other equipment used with it. If you mean all guitars, say, have the same timbre as I call it, I don't hear that. How can Neil Young be mistaken for Albert Lee?

If you mean the LP12 always has its own sound which you can identify, irrespective of other equipment, I agree. But so does every turntable I've ever heard, even the most neutral. I reckon if you live with say a 301 and an Orbe, you'll usually be able to identify which is playing whatever the amp/speaker. And if either sounds different to what you're used to, that'll be down to the amp/speaker, not the table. I should like to hear a "neutral" table, but how can any of us know when we hear it? The holy grail of the Absolute Sound, where's Harry Pearson when he's needed!

P.S. Is the SME range especially neutral?

Roger

Hi again Roger — it is letters like this which take me back to semiological first principles. Just as Roland Barthes liked to point out, the transmission of meaning from the 'sender' to the 'receiver' is a perilous one! All I am trying to say is that the Linn has a tonal 'flavour' of its own. It's kind of like having a cup of tea in a mug that's just had coffee in — you drink the tea but you can still get a 'whiff' of coffee all the same. And so it is with the LP12. It has its own, slightly woolly tonal colour. This is what I meant when I originally wrote what (woot?) I wrote, and so it remains. I can't be doing with fencing around, like to move my CDs over to a hard drive, preferably a NAS box elsewhere in the house and get music from that via preferably a cat5 cable or secondly a USB cable to a DAC and from there to my Almarro amplifier. So I have been looking to upgrade my DAC and my shortlist is Benchmark, Apogee and Linn Sneaky. I don't want to spend a fortune as that is reserved for LP. The Linn I was hoping would come out best as it is the only one that will work via cat5.

A long term reference used by yourselves and widely regarded DAC is the Chord DAC64, which I am also greatly familiar with having spent many hours listening to music at a friends who has an extremely good system. And so I was hoping to hear your impressions of how the Linn Sneaky compared to preferably the Chord DAC64 and failing that to perhaps other DACs within its price range such as the Benchmark. If you can shed some light on the Linn's performance relative to the DAC64 I would much appreciate it.

Jonathan Martin

With pleasure Jonathan! The Sneaky isn't a patch on the Chord DAC64, but nor would I expect it to be, as it's like comparing a Land Rover Discovery with a Ferrari F40 — you're not comparing like with like. Obviously, the Sneaky DS is an all-in-one network music player with DAC and amp built in, plus network connectivity. The DAC64 is an, erm, DAC and that's your lot — plus it was nearly three times the price.

Does that make the Sneaky unlistenable by comparison? Not at all. The little Linn box is a couth, even sounding design that is very good at rhythms and dynamics — it's an embracing and animated performer. However, it lacks inner detail, atmosphere and a sense of natural musicality that the Chord has — as you'd expect, being far cheaper.

Of course, the Sneaky is a self...
MAIL

Anon

glass or two of excellent Spanish plonk. my dear understanding wife as it is Christmas after all so I have to move my DV20x rolled over - I did manage and I do agree it is very good after

sneaky idea what you think of it as it — in the UK I had a large attic room for Acoustic Hayden when the wife is about expensive, as I am a pensioner.

TOAD SENSE

I am a happy subscriber to the best magazine in town. The wit and vast knowledge of your contributors is outstanding, and they seem to know more than a little bit about music and hi-fi. Anyway, I live in Spain near to Gibraltar, which is a virtual desert for hi-fi. In the four years of living here the only two shops within easy access have closed. I am in the market for a new tonearm to replace a twenty five year old Ittok, this to suit my Oracle Delphi 11.

The rest of my system consists of Naim 102 / HiCap 250 amplification (old style but serviced by Naim before coming to Spain). Speakers are Vienna Acoustic Hayden when the wife is about and Magneplanar 1.4s when she is out! They are a bit intrusive in the lounge — in the UK I had a large attic room for them.

There does seem to be a plethora of excellent arms about from £600, however I see you are about to review the Jelco 250T in the February edition. I am visiting Glasgow for New Year and the Jelco SA-750T is a honey of an arm, but is it as good as an Ittok? Good question, and having not done the A-B comparison I cannot say for sure, but I now have one in my system too and would guess not. That's assuming your Ittok is mint and as new though: if you've stuffed the bearings then even that NAD 5120 arm made from a printed circuit board would better it.

Personally, I would take it back to Linn and get it serviced, and get the new Linn tonearm cable instead. When funds permit, then go for an Audio Technica AT-OCA9MLVII cartridge as an upgrade to your Goldring MM.

CONTROL FREAKERY

I am searching for a good amplifier for my Celestion Ditton 44 loudspeakers. I wanted to know if you knew this model and you could advise me of a good amplifier to drive them with, with an accurate sound and tone controls? I'm ready to pay up to 1,000 euros.

Alex Gray

Spain

Hi Alex — without hesitation, if you must have tone controls then Onkyo's A-9755 is the automatic choice at this price (£700). It has oodles of power, which is what your ageing Ditton 44s need, and a lovely warm and expansive musical sound which should suit down to a tee.

Lyra Dorian MC cartridge - a crackingly musical, very finessed sounding MC, says David Price.

not needing a high output design, and having a budget way over my current budget fave rave (Audio Technica's £225 AT-OC9), then it's got to be the Lyra. This is a crackingly musical, very finessed sounding MC that's got a lively top end. Fortunately, your Technics has a lively bottom end and your KLP-P1 is very smooth too. So I think this will be a dream match — and your Technics will pull every last ounce of performance from this great MC.

PASSIVE ACTION

I noticed that Adam has used the Creek OBH-22 as his reference preamp in a few reviews of late. Can you tell me how good this unit is? I recently loaded more than I should have on a DPS-3 turntable, and I'm looking for a preamp to complement my Denson B-330 power amplifier and Epos M22 floorstanding loudspeakers. I emailed David Price a few months ago asking about the Melody Pure Black, and he was glowing...
in his praise, but unfortunately, that's a purchase for next year!

Ric, Australia

The OBH-22 is a superb little preamplifier, and one we regularly use at Hi-Fi World Towers. It is a giant killer, inasmuch as you'll have to spend over £1,000 to seriously better it -- it's only when you get to the likes of NuForce's P8 or Musical Fidelity's A1 I FB that there's any sort of comprehensive improvement. Obviously, by the time you've reached the Music First Audio Passive section of the market at £2,500 plus, things get dramatically better still.

In essence, the Creek is a clean and tight performer, with a fine grip on the music, excellent timing, good dynamics and flow. Essentially, it doesn't obstruct things too much, but in absolute terms there's a slight lack of air and space, a slightly curtailed stereo image and compressed depth perspective. Also, it has a subtlety dry tonality -- it doesn't let the 'flavour' of the recording flood out. However, these observations are all relative to products costing ten times its £295 price. I would recommend one as being ideal for your predicament!

A "discussion" broke out about this at Hi-Fi World Towers. Adam didn't much like the Creek. nor did Peter Comeau, both preferring active preamps. However, I do like the Creek. It is a "quiet" device with little character of its own, but it does lack any injection of sparkle and it is at the opposite end of the subjective spectrum to the amazing Melody 101d. I find the Creek completely unintrusive, much like the Van den Hul carbon sheathed cables I prefer, but being passive it allows other components to make their presence known.

Preamps are very curious devices though; I have come across few that can improve sound quality; most degrade it and some of the more ambitious solid-state designs can strangle a system in my experience. I prefer passive or valve - and nothing in-between! NK

BIT ISSUE

After all the format wars, during which I have held off investing in SACD, HDCD and goodness knows what other formats, I must congratulate 'Reference Recordings' and 'Linn' for spotting the obvious. If you produce high resolution digital recordings in a format that has already been established as a standard that everybody can use and nobody can monopolise then you will sell more recordings and we will all benefit.

"Reference Recordings" in particular have answered the one dissatisfaction I have with downloads, the CD booklet that I really miss, by supplying the data on a disc that doubles as a backup, with a booklet that brings that feeling of 'possession' you don't get with downloads.

The 'Reference Recordings' stuff has very high resolution which brings me to the main point which is the hopeless state of affairs when it comes to knowing what digital gear is doing. You yourselves even admitted to 'leaving out' matters of bit rates in a recent reply to a reader's letter. The RR sound, down sampled to the 24bit 96k that my sound card can manage (feeding into a Lyngdorf all digital amp) made me crave for the full resolution of 24bit 196k that was offered. I bought an E-MU 0404 USB sound card that offered up to 24bit 196k. It had ADC DAC on board (that I can't use without two lots of conversion with the Lyngdorf) plus optical and coax S/PDIF in and out.

Simple! Or so I thought. No amount of fiddling could get the signal through; it kept greying out (on the computer control panel). The reason was deep down in the small print. A sort of 'by the way', as a margin note. 176 and 196k is NOT available through the S/PDIF. Misleading don't you think?

My question then is: how can I get 196k out of my computer and into my Lyngdorf? Many sound cards boast the ability but when it comes to delivery a politician would be more reliable.

with best regards

Paul Williamson
Nottingham

I understand your frustration. Generally, with any sound-card those headline data rate figures refer only to Digital-to-Analogue Conversion, because DACs are cheap and plentiful these days, and because getting analogue audio out of a digital computer is the primary purpose of a sound card.

Limitations often exist on getting sound in, because Analogue-to-Digital Converters are a more difficult and expensive technology. These days 24/96 input resolution comes fairly cheap however and is the minimum needed for LP, because cartridges have output to 30kHz and because at low levels LP is very linear, so 24bit resolution is needed to retain this property for those serious about recording their LPs.

On piping raw digital out from sound cards, or anything else, we move into new difficulties. S/PDIF (Sony/Philips Digital Interface) was specified long ago for low data rates, usually up to 48kHz sample rate, unless the material is compressed (e.g. Dolby Digital surround-sound - a 'bitstream' in AV parlance) to reduce data rate. However, both Meridian and Chord circumvent this limitation by using an S/PDIF link for each channel, making two links necessary for stereo.

Because of this historical limitation, S/PDIF receivers usually work to 48kHz only, so transmitting a higher rate is pointless, except within 'closed environments' such
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as proprietary preamp-power links and transport-DAC links. HDMI was developed to overcome data rate limitations, now and in the future. I hope this clears the mists a little.

Your Lyngdorf query can only be answered by them and here is their reply:

"On the standard TDAI-2200 we have three different digital inputs. AES/EBU, Coaxial and Optical. HDMI is not available. He can use any of the three available inputs and if his soundcard has an AES/EBU output we recommend he uses that. We recommend AES/EBU because of higher resistance to outside interference. With AES/EBU the quality of the cable — materials etc. is much less important.

With that said, it is important to understand also that many high-end products have poorly designed digital transmitters and receivers — this can make people believe that there are huge differences between cables, simply because the digital design is flawed. A few of our guys come from the pro side where they understand these things very well, so all of our inputs and outputs are designed for the most robust performance. The TDAI-2200 only supports a bitrate up to 24/192, so he will have to downsample the 196kHz."

Per Klausen, Lyngdorf, Denmark

GET THE BALANCE RIGHT

Over the years I have created what is to my ears a well balanced and musical system, comprising Sonus Faber Electa Amator II loudspeakers augmented by Sonus Faber Gravis I subwoofer, driven by Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300 power amplifiers. These are fed by either my analogue source of Michell Gyro SE/Origin Live modded Rega RB300 turntable, a Graham Slee Era Gold v5 phono stage, with Ortofon Black MM cartridge, or a digital source of Chord Blu/DAC64 II. This is all hooked up with Musical Fidelity X-Link or Nu-Vista interconnects and AlphaCore Goertz MI2 speaker cable.

Over the years I have learned that upgrades don’t necessarily deliver long term sonic improvements. The core of components of speakers, turntable and power amplification haven’t changed for a considerable time, and I have no plans to unless they fail. My last upgrade was to my digital front end, and the Chords have given years of genuine musical pleasure, with an added connection to the music, my tastes being classic Jazz! Soul and Funk, so a dynamic, rhythmic sound with soundstage is essential.

With the current fiscal climate I’m not looking for major expenditure, and my system is pretty well sorted, so I’m looking for genuine improvements at reasonable cost. I read your very favourable review of the Chord QBD76, how much of an improvement over the DAC64 is it?

My speaker cables are in dire need of replacement as the Goertz MI2 construction makes them susceptible to damage. The Townshend Audio Isolda EDCT speaker cable appears to follow the same design principle as the Goertz, low impedance/skin effect, with the added benefit of cryogenic treatment. What’s the verdict on these cables, as whilst not cheap they aren’t asking the earth, and should fit my system?

Last but not least, my preamplification needs upgrading as I have been using a Musical Fidelity X-Pre v3 as a stop gap and have been looking for a suitable replacement. I am interested in the Musical Fidelity A1 FBP, as I have experience of the brand, like the house sound, and your favourable review seems to match my musical taste.

David Waterman

Hi David — well, what a good question! I have done extensive comparisons between the old Chord DAC64 and the new QBD76, and am in two minds. Let me say that the former was — and still is — one of my favourite DACs. It is so good, in fact, that it finally got me into digital properly, meaning I would happily sit down and listen to an entire CD album with relish, not thinking about its 'CDness' anymore. The QBD76 is a surprisingly different beastie — it is a lot more focused, showing its predecessor up as a little vague and perhaps ponderous in some ways. There’s considerably more low level detail, incision and atmosphere. I’d also say it is faster, tighter and rarer too. But is it better? Well there’s a question! I am not sure it is. It is certainly more neutral and so I suppose it is superior in absolute terms, but in my system I have to say I rather enjoyed listening to the DAC64. I think the ’64 has a rather Linn LP12-like quality to it — it is simply very nice to listen to, almost regardless of what it’s asked to play. The ’76 tells you more about the recording, warts and all.

If you’re after a Musical Fidelity preamplifier specifically — as a visual match for your system — then the A1 FBP is an impressive bit of kit. It’s not the last word in preamps — being a little well lit in the upper midband and loose in the bottom end in absolute terms — but it is nevertheless nicely propulsive and enjoyable, and still carries a good degree of the recording through. You’ll have to spend over £1,000 more on an MF Audio Passive Pre to really do better, in my opinion.

As for speaker cables, I have found Black Rhodium’s Tango (£15/m) to be excellent — don’t let the low price put you off. In my system, they seem to work better than Townshend Isolda DCTs, with a smoother and more atmospheric sound that suits my preferred balance better. DP

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The relationship between the world of studio monitoring loudspeakers and the home hi-fi market has never been a truly happy one. Many people see this as a reasonable thing, after all the two end users require different things from their loudspeakers — the home listener wants to hear their music reproduced in the nicest way possible, sometimes even forgoing a smidgen of accuracy if the result takes the edges off poor recordings. On the other hand, the studio engineer wants to hear exactly how the recording sounds, warts and all, so that corrections can be made in order to make the result sound palatable through that domestic hi-fi system.

The problem is that these two worlds need not be quite so mutually exclusive. After all, isn't it fair to assume that a pair of loudspeakers that pinpoint recording and mastering issues might then reproduce the corrected and final result rather well? It seems that I am not the only person who has explored this point of view and, as a result, there are more than a few loudspeakers that have successfully made the break from the studio and into the living room. Let us not forget that the classic Rogers LS3/5As originated in this way, as well as Spendor BC1s, B&W 80Is, Yamaha NS1000Ms and also the Ferrograph SIs that I use myself — mine started out as the semi-professional version, finished in a hideous shade of grey, instead of a hideous shade of teak!

Furthermore, there are many loudspeaker companies that successfully straddle the professional and domestic environments. The likes of PMC and B&W are well known, but Germany's ADAM Audio are a relative newcomer to this side of the mixing desk, and are gradually establishing a strong presence. Last year I took a listen to one of the models in ADAM's top Tensor Range, the Gammas, and they left a very strong impression on me.

Now the more affordable Home Monitor range is here, derived from the active 'S' series, and fitting in at the other end of the scale from the Tensor models. The first step on the ADAM ladder, they share technology with their bigger brothers, namely ADAM's ART tweeter, based on the Heil Air Motion Transformer principle, and the Hexacone material used as the basis of the twin seven inch bass drivers. The HM3s actually look like centre channel designs, as they are styled and designed to be used horizontally, but they can be used vertically — best keep the grilles on, though, as the 'ADAM' logos look a bit odd oriented sideways!

The HM3s are a full three way design, with one woofer only coming in below 150Hz. As a result, the loudspeakers are 'handed', although ADAM state that you can experiment with placing the low end woofer to the inside or outside as you prefer.
For vertical operation the speakers need to be positioned so that the lowest drivers are at the bottom, but this leaves one terminal panel at the top of the rear face of one loudspeaker and at the bottom of the other, which is a little odd!

Another tip that ADAM Audio passed on was that, when using them vertically, it pays to unscrew the tweeter and rotate it through ninety degrees so that the diffuser on the front of it is aligned horizontally, which is how the unit was designed. Bi-wiring terminals are fitted and a three position switch offers the option of running the tweeter flat, boosted by 1.5dB or cut by the same amount. The HM3s are available in gloss black or silver, tip the tape measure at 370x220x320mm and weigh a sturdy 14kg each.

**SOUND QUALITY**

Well run in, I commenced listening and straight away realised that there is a definite family sound, as I could hear echoes of the Tensor Gammas in the HM3’s performance. Initially however, I felt that they slightly lacked focus across the centre of the soundstage, despite being very spacious and detailed. However, remembering ADAM’s advice, I duly popped the tweeters out, rotated them and sat back down again. This was more like it; the central image had now gained improved stability and everything had snapped nicely into focus – much better! The other thing I noticed during setup is that the HM3s are quite amplifier-sensitive. They never sound unpleasant, but one or two units I put through them left them slumbering along rather disinterested. Luckily, my Naim SuperNait tickled them into life perfectly.

It was interesting to take a wander through my record collection with the HM3s, as they really let you hear into the secrets of the recording studio or concert hall that somehow don’t quite seem to make it through other loudspeakers. I found myself shutting my eyes and looking at the aural picture they painted as well as listening to the music, as the HM3s seem just as capable as their bigger brothers at setting up the kind of image you feel you could get up and walk around in, without any trickery like stretching things off to the sides or into the distance unrealistically. After a little experimentation I settled on the -1.5dB setting for the tweeter, as the 0dB was just a fraction too glaring at times, and a brief play with the 1.5dB setting had the cat running from the room! Luckily I had the remote control in my hand to bring things to a rapid halt, otherwise I wouldn’t have been far behind him...

As a result of their intricate nature, the HM3s are quite different to many domestic loudspeakers. Their balance is forward without a doubt, but they are not hard or splashy, just incredibly detailed, focused and forthright. Intriguingly, they almost sound rather bass light on first encounter, but as I listened more, I realised that once again, ADAM have engineered such a solid cabinet and populated it with well designed drivers that you are hearing what you are supposed to without anything playing along. Bass guitars were astoundingly taut, fast and life with a swift rhythmic nature that almost had me holding my breath as my ears tried to keep up. For anyone who still thinks that a loudspeaker with a hole or two in the box cannot start and stop on a sixpence, then they need to check these out - do you hear me DP? [beg pardon! Ed.]

However, when a synth bass line came thundering along, or a kick drum pounded out, the HM3s were well up to the task of passing this event to my ears though the air, and also my derriere via the sofa. I suspect real bassheads might still feel the need for a subwoofer (ADAM sell a matching one), but for most of us the HM3s go as low as we could ever need; certainly I never felt short-changed, even though my Ferrographs do go noticeably lower.

Their monitor nature proved adept at detailing all kinds of instruments, and picking up those cheating artists who try and pass off an electronic facsimile as the real thing. This could be something of a mixed blessing at times, however; spinning some Antonio Forcione and Charlie Haden was a delight in terms of capturing the real essence of every single note they played, and pulled everything perfectly together in a lovely musical parcel. Changing to Ravel’s Bolero however, again gave stunning clarity to each of the players but somehow the essential emotion of the piece seemed to take a slight backseat as the HM3s strove to tell you what each individual instrument was doing, seemingly slightly glossing over why they were doing it. Other than this however, the ADAMs romped through dance, rock and some proper Kenny Ball style jazz with alacrity and never failed to put a big smile on my face when the occasion demanded.

**CONCLUSION**

The ADAM HM3s are an intriguing loudspeaker prospect. They are not as forgiving as their bigger Tensor brothers in terms of partnering equipment, and they can occasionally lack warmth, but they offer detail, insight and stunning fleet-footedness when fed with a good rhythm. Like good old Marmite, they really will not be for everyone – I suspect the valves ‘n’ horns brigade will hate them - but I thought they were superb. Audition comprehensively and partner carefully, and you could be wondering how you ever listened without them.

---

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

As per their larger brothers, the Adam HM3s have a generally even trend to their frequency response, with just a few undulations in the upper registers. For vertical operation the speakers need to be positioned so that the lowest drivers are at the bottom, but this leaves one terminal panel at the top of the rear face of one loudspeaker and at the bottom of the other, which is a little odd!

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**VERDICT**

Proper monitors for the home, the HM3s are unobtrusive, beautifully built and capable of revealing things you didn’t know your music contained.

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**REFERENCE SYSTEM**

- Garrard 301 turntable/Cartridge wired Alphason HR-100S arm
- Audio Technica AT-OC9MLII cartridge
- Anatek MC1 phono stage
- Marantz CD94 CD player
- Naim SuperNait amplifier

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**ADAM HM3**

**£1,999**

**FOR**

- Excellent bass response
- Broad frequency response
- Well-balanced soundstage
- High-quality construction

**AGAINST**

- Limited warmth
- Need careful partnering

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**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

As per their larger brothers, the Adam HM3s have a generally even trend to their frequency response, with just a few undulations in the upper registers. None of these are larger than a couple of dB however, so should not give you an audiophile unpleasant result. The rear panel tweeter adjustment switch introduces a treble lift or cut of 1.5dB in two of its positions and it can be seen that this comes into effect above 2kHz or so. This will allow subtle fine-tuning for rooms or partnering equipment that are a touch too bright or soft, without unduly altering the balance of the loudspeaker.

At the low end, the lower driver commences roll off around 80Hz and is reinforced by the twin ports that operate over a broad area down to their tuning frequency of around 35Hz. Port output is clean, and the HM3s should have good weight for their size, although the dip of 1dB or so from 300-600Hz may reduce the impact of the upper bass a little. Electrically, the HM3s have an even response with little to upset a fragile amplifier. Their overall impedance is low, coming in at an average of 4.7 Ohms, and dropping down to a minimum of around 3.5 Ohms, fortunately at higher frequencies where current draw is less of an issue. Their sensitivity is good however at 90dB, so they will not require huge amounts of watts to sing enthusiastically. AS
Northern Light

Mikal Dreggevik is one hi-fi’s rising stars right now, with a passion that shines through when you talk to him. David Price meets Electrocompaniet’s main man in his native Norway...

In today’s austere economic climate, there’s little good news emanating from manufacturing industry – and this picture seems to be universally bad across the whole of western Europe. Right now, no one making hi-fi is having fun...

Well, maybe Mikal Dreggevik is the exception that proves the rule. As the head of Electrocompaniet, for the past five years, he has presided over one of hi-fi’s few recent success stories – and all from the high wage, high tax, high cost economy of Norway. Running counter to the current fashion, he has not outsourced his production to China or the Far East; instead he’s skillfully grown the business up to one hundred plus employees, and won all number of prizes along the way...

Like all successful captains of industry, he is an energetic soul – smiling and positive - yet he exudes a sense of inner calm too. Whilst the mid November weather in Stavanger [pictured below left] on Norway’s beautiful South West coast was icy, the tall blond Dreggevik is not. Indeed he displays a childlike enthusiasm for what he’s doing...

“As a kid I had older brothers that owned their own hi-fi systems,” he tells me, “and it soon became a dream of mine to have my own. As my brothers upgraded their systems I would inherit their old and outdated components. I also built my own loudspeakers. But it wasn’t until my (Lutheran church) confirmation at the age of fifteen that I had the means to buy my own real stereo. Indeed, my parents were a bit frustrated that I spent all gift money on a hi-fi. It has been a passion ever since.”

Well quite, because Mikal’s passion for audio was so enduring that, nearly three decades later, it saw him buying his country’s most illustrious hi-fi brand. In 2004 he became owner of Electrocompaniet, and injected a new sense of focus and purpose into what was a respected if rather sedentary hi-fi marque. And amusingly, he bought the company itself as a direct result of buying the company’s top system!

Thanks to his love of music from an early age, he had been – like many reading this – on his own personal odyssey to get the sound he craved. “I started playing various instruments at an early age”, says Mikal. That brought me through many different types of music, from classical to rock. Today, I don’t play any more, but have learned to enjoy a wide range of music. My favourite changes through the year, and also after my personal mode. Typically, in the weeks before Christmas, Handel’s Messiah is my favourite. But if you want me to give you just one name, then without question it is Pink Floyd. And for me, Roger Waters or David Gilmour doing their own version of Pink Floyd has the same standing or is even better.”

His purchase of Electrocompaniet didn’t come by accident, but by having made his fortune with Westcontrol [pictured above right] – an avionics defence contractor, supplying a number of militaries including Britain’s Royal Air Force. He started this company by himself, back in 1994.

“In the beginning it was just me, doing everything from design, electronics, programming, and paperwork. Now, Westcontrol is ostensibly a research and development company with its own factory for production and assembling. We like to use the phrase ‘system house’, which in Norwegian terms is a company doing everything from idea to product. So we do development, prototype, beta series and volume production in the same company. We cover a wide range of analogue and digital electronics. Examples include radio communication systems used in helicopters – the RAF has several products installed in their own choppers. We do different types of sensors, vision
there was a perfect synergy with the product, and also because ways, this product is the foundation of Electrocompaniet, and had the 2004, simply because I loved the style of the company:’ slogan for many years, and for me it the master’ has been the company’s forty countries worldwide.

After this early success, the company failed to capitalise on the momentum, and it wasn’t until Dreggevik got involved five years ago that things started pushing forward again, allied with its powerful sister company Westcontrol. Mikal takes up the story. “Electrocompaniet started from the simple idea that it was possible to make a better sounding amplifier than was available on the market, back in the mid nineteen seventies. ‘Close the gap to the master’ has been the company’s slogan for many years, and for me it encapsulates both the spirit and the style of the company.”

Asked to describe the most important early Electrocompaniet product, he’s convinced it is the iconic 25W amplifier launched in 1977. “A lot of people still talk about this, as one of the most significant in the history of high end. It was a technical breakthrough, and the sound was marvellous. In many ways, this product is the foundation of the brand name Electrocompaniet. I bought the company in December 2004, simply because I loved the product, and also because there was a perfect synergy with Westcontrol. I had been a customer of Electrocompaniet, and had the products in my living room, in use every day!”

The association with Westcontrol is what really gives Electrocompaniet an edge, he tells me. “It works very well, because the former has a strong R&D department covering analogue and digital techniques at an advanced level, along with a modern factory. This of course is allied to over thirty years experience on the audiophile engineering side from the latter. It’s very difficult for many high end companies to have all the necessary resources available on a daily basis, so by combining the two companies’ research and development centre, we can have a lot more engineers employed than if Electrocompaniet was a separate unit. Westcontrol has a reputation as one of the most innovative companies of its type in Norway, with all types of qualification standards, covering ISO900, Aviation and military specification.”

Electrocompaniet is based in the Stavanger area of Norway, known locally as its ‘petro-capital’ thanks to the country’s highly lucrative oil industry. Although an industrial area, in typically Norwegian style it’s very tidy and the city itself, the country’s third largest, is very pretty. Anyone who’s been to the Highlands of Scotland will get a familiar feeling – expansive 360 panoramic views, crisp air and a sense of wonder at the great outdoors. Set just a few kilometres out from Stavanger town is the factory, a fairly conventional looking affair but with one key difference. When I visited, there were heavy earth movers at work outside, cutting their way through the rock behind the factory to make a massive extension. Electrocompaniet is growing...

Given the prevailing economic circumstances, isn’t it surprising that a high end hi-fi company can succeed — especially with the high wages and high taxes he has to pay? Mikal disagrees. “When you want production in Northern Europe, you need a modern factory, with robots doing most of the work. At our factory we have for the last ten years focused and worked hard with this. This type of production is less influenced by the labour cost. We find that with modern construction in a modern factory we are able to compete with the cost from the east, including China. But we have the benefit of in-house quality control. All our products are made in Norway and this is in fact a more and more valuable situation for us. There is less and less product made in the West today, and we use ‘Made in Norway’ as part of the product’s very identity.”

Electrocompaniet now has two main focuses. It is pushing hard to update its high end range. Whilst some amplifiers have been in production, largely unchanged for a great many years — underlining the basic rightness of the design — there’s a need for other new products which Mikal is working on now. But he’s also very excited by what he calls “an exclusive new lifestyle series”. These more accessible, ‘plug and play’ products are striking visually yet show great engineering depth and imagination. “With these in place, we will be competing in different areas of the market against new rivals — but I don’t want to wake them up by giving out their name! By and large, they are makers of terrible sounding systems, sold to people that have never had the chance to listen to high end systems. Our goal is to get customers from this market, rather than just take ever more from the limited number of customers ‘inside’ the high end arena”, he tells me.

Although something of an Anglophile (he spends much of his time in the UK and for some unfathomable reason is a lifetime supporter of Leeds United football club), I can sense that Mikal is very proud of his Norwegian roots. The country has staged something of a renaissance in recent years, and I think he’s happy that the return of Electrocompaniet is one part of it. Not just to show his Scandinavian neighbours that Denmark isn’t the sole superpower in consumer audio electronics (he has a watchful eye on the output of Bang & Olufsen), but to show the world that the country has a place in international high end hi-fi.

With over one hundred employees and a growing factory, plus a range of impressive new products coming up, Electrocompaniet doesn’t look set to easily give up its status as Norway’s largest hi-fi maker. Dreggevik is ambitious for Electrocompaniet, and senses the changing market. “The synergy with Westcontrol means we have a far bigger development team than is normal for a high end company the same size as Electrocompaniet. We want to be one of the major actors in the high end market — this is the goal and we will continue to focus on the best product, with the best quality, with the best possible service.”

www.electrocompaniet.no
Quad's ESL57 are iconic designs that need no introduction the world over, whilst its modern ESL988/989s and 2805/2905s are popular modern products with a big following. What then of the ESL63, asks Haden Boardman — as whichever way you look at it, this has become somewhat unloved and overlooked?

Introduced for the princely sum of £1,000 (which very quickly rose to £1,200) the ESL63 was a vastly different beast to the original Quad ESL57. Still, there was so much right about the '57 (the line source imaging, the clean, fast and open bass) that Quad had an uphill struggle popularising the '63. The new design addressed the oldster's problems, namely the rattle and the limited bass output, and it required some different thinking.

As is well documented, the model number refers to the year Peter Walker started work on the 'new' ESL - 1963. Seventeen years is a long time to develop a product! Whatever I think about the sonic qualities of the delay line, the technology used is very clever. Colour TVs of the 1970s may have helped simplify development, as a similar delay line is used in PAL TV decoding. All the electronics are a major upgrade from the original, and are fitted with a pretty sophisticated protection circuit, one that is not too kind to amplifiers!

The electrostatic panels themselves are more rigidly held in plastic open frames, bespoke for the speaker. The ESL panel consists of two fixed "stators" formed more like a printed circuit board, than in the original. The diaphragm itself is made from Mylar, three microns thick [or is that thin! Ed.] and is sandwiched in between the stators in a gap of around three millimetres. The voltage applied across the gap is around 6,000 Volts.

The ESL panel consists as a series of rings (the original was a line source tweeter panel in the middle flanked by two bass panels), and the delay line aims to position the sound image thirty centimetres behind the speaker. The idea is to produce a true point source, from what is, after all, a large, one-piece plastic diaphragm. As a desired side effect this bends the sound dispersion across diaphragm making it less directional in listening. Having said that, like all electrostatics, in comparison to conventional moving coil designs, these speakers are very directional, you really do need to sit on axis to fully enjoy and appreciate the sound.

THE 63 TODAY

It's quite a revelation to see how cheaply ESL63s are selling for today. This is for two reasons. First, the new ones are such bargain prices so why bother with second-hand. Second are the service costs. It can cost more to re-panel a set of ESL63s than to buy them! Remember the oldest sets date from 1981. The set shown here, were purchased out of the back of our very own Classified section, after being advertised several times. Luckily enough, they did not need much work.

Quad are totally happy to fully refurbish ESL63s. For around £1,300 you get what can only be described as a 'new' pair of speakers, with new panels throughout, and fully serviced. Of course parts are available on an individual basis. I am not saying DIY on this speaker is a no go area, but in comparison to the original models, it is much more sophisticated, and there are more than a few little pitfalls; just pulling the speaker apart.

In all honesty, I would leave this one to the experts.

Sound wise, for comparison I had the latest 2805 and original ESL to hand. Amplification used was my EL84 PPP pentode monoblock design, EARS09/11 monoblocks and original QUAD IIs. A mix of digital sources (Marantz CD/D/A12 as usual) and Technics SP/011/11 Alphason Xenon/Ortofon MC30/11 home brew active RIAA valve phono stage were deployed.

Like all electrostatics, as much sound output comes out of the back as at the front; the speakers were positioned just under one third of the way down a five and a half metre long room, listening position about three metres back.
again. All the speakers raised up twenty centimetres from the floor, and pointed precisely towards the listening position. Good stands are recommended.

It was pretty immediate just how good the ‘63 is. It is no powerhouse, sound output levels are really no better than the little BBC LS3/5a, but the level of clarity and sheer openness to the sound is in a different class from the vast majority of moving coil designs. Vocals and stereo image are just amazing with this speaker. Even the much criticised bass is simply awesome by most people’s standards. What seriously lets this speaker down in the bass is the limited output level; below 100Hz it really cannot handle any serious amount of power past about twenty watts. That combined with a fairly miserable 84dB sensitivity, and none too kind a load, results in good clean low level bass of tantalising quality but with no real grunt.

ABBA’s ‘The Day Before You Came’ was truly gripping, with Agnetha’s vocals positioned precisely between the two loudspeakers, and the massive soundstage rising all around it. Playing the triple sax album ‘In a Mellow Tone’ by Ben Webster and Associates proved that the ESL63 is not just for digital; this classic 1959 album really punched the saxophones into the room with gusto. A little light opera courtesy of DG vinyl, Gioachino Rossini’s ‘Overtures’, again was a real delight; however it was on small scale quartets and quintets that this speaker truly came alive. The freedom from distortion and phase coherence made the two loudspeakers disappear into my room. The most amazing sounds were to be had from the ECM recording ‘The Dowland Project’, a collection of mid-seventeenth century stuff. This is not the normal ‘fayre’ around these parts I admit, but the track ‘Accenti Queruli’ just held the listener’s attention to such a degree that even visitors more accustomed to drum and bass, and with an inbuilt hate of electrostatics, had to sit down and listen. It was totally compelling.

Indeed, playing a little drum and bass courtesy of Kruder & Dorfmeister proved the speaker can produce bass, but certainly not at the levels required for realistic playing of the K&D Sessions CD! I am no fan of subwoofers, but the poor old 63 struggled with this one. This was a shame, because again, the speaker tantalised with what could be on offer. And this is where the new ‘05 models win out. An increase in sensitivity, better construction and totally new electronics revealed a big jump in bass performance, and lack of rattles. In fact, the mid and treble was a substantial and worthwhile improvement over the older ‘63 as well. But then at some cost - from £4,500.

Going back to the original nineteen fifties ESL57, I feel this has a certain quality to the upper midrange and treble that is better than any of the newer speakers. There is a very mellow sound to the time-delayed panels that just colours the upper vocals and strings in comparison to the original. Bass is frankly not really that different to the ‘63, they both rattle when presented with too much signal; just in different places. The ESL63 goes down lower in the bass, allowing the low level playing of cathedral organs.

But of course it is simply not possible to stack the newer ‘63, something that transforms the original ESL from a great speaker to something fantastic: two pairs of original electrostatics is an amazing combo; a triple stack of original electrostatics is simply divine, if a little bit of a monster on the domestic front.

Having said that, for most domestic environments I would say the newer ESL63 is the easier speaker to service and accommodate, the fact Quad are more than happy to sort them out for you, gives them a cast iron mandate. The older ‘speaker’ is one for tweakers and specialists; the newer ‘63 may well suit those after an easier life! Price wise, they now cost the same. I have seen ESL63s, claimed working, sell for a little as £300, and serviced sets up to £1,500. I would advise buying as low as you can, and sending to Quad for a full service. Then, for well under two grand, you are getting a virtually new set of loudspeakers.

Amplification wise, none of the electrostatics are easy loads, and all need to be matched quite closely to good quality electronics. Everyone knows my preference for valves; in this case I would not recommend low power single ended or triode, but higher feedback pentode/tetrode designs; the impedance of these speakers varies quite wildly.

Lots of ESL63s have been sold, including a more rigid PRO version. There is plenty of choice, bide your time, and buy at the right price. The 988 replaced the ESL63 some years back, it may look similar but only shares ten percent of the internal parts. Think of the ESL63 as the starting Quad model, a ‘new’ Quad speaker for under £2,000. If you can afford the extra for the 988/989 or even the 2805/2905 then go for it. If not, the ESL63 is a true bargain.

**NOEL KEYWOOD SAYS -**

I used ESL63s for many years and there are a few aspects to note. One major revision occurred in the model’s lifetime, to the protection circuits. Before Serial No 29005 a crude electronic compressor circuit powered from the audio (!) introduced progressive muddle to the sound as volume was turned up. After 29005 high tension breakdown diodes were fitted to the audio transformer secondary circuit - a much better arrangement. If you buy an early model Quad can retro fit the later circuit.

Basically, the ESL63 has very even output, with slightly falling high frequency content, so it sounds easy on the ear, but it is very clean and smooth, especially with violin. As a true point source it images well too.

Bass reaches down to 90Hz and there’s not much below this, so a subwoofer helps, but subjective integration can be difficult.

The ESL63s were best raised up 12in or so on low, open stands. Ideally, they need plenty of rear space (3ft min.) to lose rear radiation, but I used a curtain of heavy carpet felt suspended 6in behind. Long narrow rooms suit, with the Quad situated close to and at right angles to side walls. This increases panel area and improves bass.

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This month, we’re delighted to be able to give away Arcam’s super new FMJ A18 integrated amplifier (worth £500) and a matching bundle of top quality Chord Company cabling — comprising two runs of Chord’s Epic Super Twin speaker cable (£78/m), a one metre long Power Chord mains cable (£130) and a metre run of Anthem 2 interconnect (£325). Just add speakers and CD player for a great sounding system!

Arcam’s new £500 FMJ A18 amplifier is rated at 50 Watts per channel. It is based around a logic-controlled preamplifier and a toroid based power supply, all mounted in a case that uses Arcam’s ‘Mask of Silence’ and ‘Stealth Mat’ SDS (Sound Dead Steel) based damped chassis to reduce both resonance and EMC problems; hence the FMJ moniker — it stands for ‘Full Metal Jacket’. The A18 offers six line level inputs, plus an MM phono stage and auxiliary 3.5mm jack socket for MP3 players. Vital statistics are 85x430x275mm and it weighs a sturdy 7.2kg.

Chord’s Epic Super Twin loudspeaker cable sports two conductors, each made up of nineteen heavy gauge strands of silver-plated oxygen free copper conductors, 2.5mm in diameter, twisted together, insulated by Teflon and then surrounded by a silicone jacket. It gets Odyssey-style dual shielding, and it is then surrounded with a special PVC jacket to further improve mechanical damping. The pearl grey PVC jacket is highly pliable and acoustically inert. Overall diameter is 15mm for the Epic Super Twin. The lucky winner will get a stereo pair up to 5m in length (worth £849), with the terminations of their choice (i.e. bi-wire, single wire, banana plugs, spade connectors, etc.)

Chord’s PowerChord is said to enhance the stereo image and improve the space around individual voices and instruments with hi-fi systems, and can even improve the picture quality of plasma TVs, LCD panels or projectors. A high frequency dual layer shielding system is used to reduce noise pick up, and there’s a high density vibration damping outer jacket to reduce transmission of ground borne resonance into the hi-fi components. The cable itself uses high purity copper conductors and it comes with a special 13 amp mains plug, with great attention paid to the routing and configuration of the internal wiring. A 1m lead is being given away, worth £130.

The lucky winner will also receive a one metre stereo pair of Chord Anthem 2 interconnects with RCA connectors, worth £325. This superb cable features silver-plated multi-strand signal conductors and a silver-plated combined shielding system which extends the bandwidth that the cable will carry. The Anthem 2 also features internal and external Teflon insulation, resonance reducing ultra low mass silver-plated non-compression RCA/phono plugs, and an isolated signal return path that reduces microphony. The Chord Company says the Anthem 2 will allow seriously low levels of musical detail to be heard, which adds immeasurably to the feeling and enjoyment of any type of music.

To win this superb Arcam/Chord bundle, all you have to do is answer the following four easy questions. Send your entries on a postcard only by 31st January 2009 to: February Competition, Hi-Fi World magazine, Unit G4, Argo House, The Park Business Centre, Kilburn Park Rd, London NW6 5LF.

QUESTIONS

1. What does the FMJ moniker stand for on Arcam’s A18?
   [a] Full Metal Jacket
   [b] Full Micro Jacket
   [c] Full Microcomputer Jackplug
   [d] Full Metal Jackplug

2. What colour is the PVC jacket of the Epic Super Twin?
   [a] pearl grey
   [b] jet black
   [c] pastel green
   [d] matt mauve

3. What type of conductors does the Power Chord use?
   [a] high purity copper
   [b] low loss silver
   [c] high mass lead
   [d] low capacitance carbon

4. What shielding system is used on the Anthem 2?
   [a] silver plated
   [b] copper plated
   [c] tin plated
   [d] zinc plated

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NOVEMBER 2008 CYRUS CD8 SE CD PLAYER WINNER:
Sue-Ying Lee of East Sussex
Encouraged by listener’s responses to my lecture demo of the Wharfedale SFB/3 at the autumn Heathrow Show I decided, rightly or wrongly, to get as close to the performance of the Gilbert Briggs bass and midrange section as I could.

Not surprisingly there are few bass units currently available that have the necessary specifications for a 12 inch or 15 inch moving coil unit that works in an open baffle. Bear with me while I go over the ideal requirements briefly.

The SFB/3 had a fundamental resonance in the 30 – 35 Hz region and a powerful magnet to keep sensitivity high. In addition the voice coil was engineered to give a long throw so that bass lift could be applied at the amplifier without “bottoming” the bass unit. (Bottoming is where the voice coil movement exceeds its maximum travel (Xmax) and hits the suspension limits or batters itself to death against the back of the magnet!) Of course the SFB/3 was around when the majority of amplifiers had tone controls fitted and Gilbert Briggs was particularly thinking of the QUAD 22 which enabled the user to apply a judicious amount of bass lift without muddying the midrange too much.

Nowadays, with tone controls being considered something of an anathema to good sound, we don’t have the ready opportunity to leave it to the user to apply a modicum of bass boost. Of course there are ways round this, for example we could supply a passive, or active, equalisation circuit to put in the tape loop circuit of the user’s amplifier, much like Bose did with the 901. However I can’t see this going down too well with the purist users of our open baffle speaker (and I can’t say I much like this level of complexity either)!

So, for the WD Open Baffle, I settled on a bass performance which was naturally balanced with the midrange without any amplifier boosting of low frequencies. This means that we have to add one more factor in the drive unit specification, namely a relatively high Qts. By experiment I’d already discovered that a Qts in the region of 0.5 – 0.6 would deliver the required bass performance in normal living rooms. The difficulty is in delivering this from a bass unit designed along the lines of the one in the SFB/3.

Put simply the standard way of achieving a high Qts is to either: 1. Reduce the electrical damping. 2. Increase the suspension compliance. 3. Increase the moving mass.

Of course you can use a combination of all three of these factors to achieve the desired end but let’s look at the problems endemic in each:

1. Reducing electrical damping requires a reduction in magnetic force, with a subsequent loss of sensitivity.
2. Increasing suspension compliance runs the risk of the bass unit suspension becoming unstable either allowing the voice coil to ‘rub’ in the magnet gap and/or being more prone to ‘bottoming’.
3. Increasing cone mass reduces sensitivity and adds to the inertia of the moving system, again being more prone to ‘bottoming’.

I hope that you can see, from this, that it is no simple task to balance these factors into the drive unit makeup in order to achieve our objective. Yes, it’s fairly simple to
Loudspeakers

make a robust drive unit with an Fs of 30Hz, a sensitivity of 96dB and a Qts of 0.23. It's also pretty easy to make one with a Qts of 0.8 and still keep the sensitivity at 96dB but with the Fs at 85Hz. The difficulty comes in hitting the target of a low Fs and high Qts.

Scouring the drive unit market yielded a few examples which come close to the criteria but you have to remember, also, that the majority of modern drive unit designs are either aimed at the reflex box hi-fi loudspeaker or the pro 'guitar' loudspeaker. Most of these designs just won't work satisfactorily in an open baffle where there is no constraining force from the air mass and springiness in a box.

DESIGNING TO A RECIPE

Accordingly there was little to do other than turn to a reliable speaker manufacturer prepared to make to a recipe. It's best, in these cases, to find a manufacturer that already makes something close to what is required in order that only the necessary adaptations need to be made to an existing driver.

Such drivers no longer exist in the hi-fi drive unit manufacturer's repertoire, so the Pro unit guys are where we start looking. Don't forget that, unlike hi-fi drive units, the Pro market requires robust, reliable and unbustable drivers, so finding a unit which will withstand the rigours of open baffle use is easier.

Now I'd love to tell you that the ingredients for the recipe turned out to be as tasty as I expected, but I can't. At time of writing I'm still to receive a driver that both myself and the manufacturer are happy with. At the moment it's a toss-up between a single 15 inch covering the required range or twin 12 inch units. I await developments!

In the meantime I can, at least, describe my choice of midrange unit. Again, keeping to the Briggs open baffle recipe, a 200mm (8 inch) unit is the ideal. This size of unit can encompass the necessary low crossover frequency to the bass units as well as keep the sensitivity high.

It would also be nice if this unit covered the majority of the frequency range to give the musical reproduction from our open baffle design the seamless, effortlessly flowing quality that always seems to come from a well designed single drive unit speaker.

Having heard what an ancient Lowther full range unit could do in an open baffle, supported with two Goodmans Axiom bass units, at our WADFEST last year I've been eager to arrive at a design with a similar performance.

A few months ago the engineers at SEAS finally delivered a drive unit that had both the pedigree and performance that I was looking for. The Exotic range, from SEAS, encapsulates the combined experience of drive unit engineers ranging back to the '50s. Produced in small, handbuilt, quantities the Exotics are totally unlike anything you've seen in a modern commercial loudspeaker.

The first design in this series is the Exotic F8, a full range unit with a lightweight papyrus based cone, special foam rubber surround and Alnico V magnet - all the hallmarks of a traditional design. Equally traditional is the use of a 'whizzer' cone to extend high frequencies.

A 'whizzer' cone is a small cone attached directly to the voice coil just inside the major cone itself. It thus behaves as though it was a treble cone, adding to the output of the midrange section of the cone and taking over completely as the frequency increases beyond the range of the midrange cone.

Because the outer edge of the cone is unsupported and unterminated the term 'whizzer' originally described the typical resonant 'whizz' that the cheaper paper add-ons provided as basic additions to speakers designated for use in desktop radios and the like.

But that shouldn't rule out their use for hi-fi because a correctly designed cone can perform equally as well as the best cone treble units. Of course it doesn't have the radiation characteristics of a dome tweeter, but then nor does it have the cavitation and rear reflection problems of a dome either. Instead it presents a treble output closer in character to that of its supporting cone, which helps the drive unit achieve that seamless performance that you expect from a full range unit.

At first sight the frequency response looks unpromising with its general rise from the midrange towards the treble. But remember, you are looking only at the on-axis response. Because of the narrowing dispersion of treble power as the frequency increases, and the corresponding increase in dispersion of midrange power as frequencies get lower, the overall power response in room, and on a wide baffle, will flatten out.

Average sensitivity lies at 93dB for the 8 Ohm unit and 96dB for the 4 Ohm version, which gives us a choice to suit the bass driver sensitivity once the final units arrive. I'm expecting the 8 Ohm unit to match best as most of the bass unit's sensitivity will be used to bolster the very low frequencies with a deliberately engineered 3dB depression towards the crossover.

Qts of this unit is 0.44 which is ideal for this application and the maximum coil travel of 14mm means that we should be able to pump the long term power handling of 35W into this unit without problems, given a suitable crossover of course. However we won't know the exact outcome until the bass units arrive!

So, apologies that this particular project seems to be extending ever onwards but I never thought it would be easy to engineer something which meets modern performance requirements from a classic design. I am, however, convinced that this open baffle design is worth waiting for.
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CYRUS – WORLD EXCLUSIVE see an amazing (currently secret) product from Cyrus to be released March 2009.

FOCAL – see the stunning new Utopia range!

JVC – launch of the HD750-DILA projector, the first THX certified home cinema projector.

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NAIM – see and hear a number of new products, including the new NAIT XS.

PMC – launching a new high performance i series model.

PSB – launch of the Synchrony loudspeaker series.

SENNHEISER – the new IE Series in-ear headphones.

SIM2 – demonstrating the new Domino D60 Full 1080p HD projector.

SPECTRAL – Showcasing some new furniture designs.

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**Amplifiers**

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<td>Anakete OM-2.5 Pre/BM50 Monoblocks</td>
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<td>Audio Zone Amp-2 Monoblocks</td>
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**Miscellaneous**

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<td>Isotek Gil Minisub</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

Have a product you want to Trade-in? Give us a call for the best deals.

*subject to status*
WDKEL84 Valve Amplifier Kit

“The quality that can be gleaned from this amp is a fine introduction to the joys of the valve sound”

The WDKEL84 features a pair of EL84 valves in Push Pull configuration per channel, providing two channels each 18 Watts into an 8 Ohm load. Available as a 5 input integrated amplifier with ALPS volume control.

WDKEL84 kit £449
WDKEL84 built and tested £599

WD88VA Valve Amplifier Kit

“The result is an amplifier that combines majesty, transparency and rhythmic boogie factor with the ability to swing and sing on all types of music”

Often described as a ‘sweet sounding’ valve, our particular implementation of the KT88 makes sure that it is driven to its ultimate performance. Available as a 35W stereo power amplifier with single input volume control, or as a relay switched integrated with five inputs.

WD88VA kit £899
WD88VA built and tested £1199

WDHD3S Headphone Valve Amplifier Kit

“WDHD3S is a single-ended design with the power pentode wired up in triode configuration for added purity and is as quiet as a mouse”

A beautifully simple stereo headphone amplifier design using Mullard ECL83 valves. It works directly from any source. The circuit uses twin high specification E/I output transformers that can be switched to drive any headphones between 16 to 300 Ohms.

WDHD3S kit £349
WDHD3S built and tested £479

WD25A Standmount Speaker Kit

“The one aspect that stands out is the easy ability to resolve instruments and voices ... bass quality and definition is a revelation”

The aperiodic enclosure offers the bass clarity and definition of a larger closed box, together with the efficiency and easy amplifier load necessary for users of valve amplifiers. Available with SEAS STD soft dome treble unit, or high performance SEAS Excel treble unit.

WD25A STD kit (pair) £215
WD25A XL kit (pair) £398

WD25T Floorstanding Speaker Kit

“The WD25T always sounds crisp and taut, but can ‘rumble’ menacingly giving impressive physicality reminiscent of far larger boxes. Imaging is superb, the midband is also special; it's very open with masses of detail about the condition of the recording”

Cunningly arranged as an aperiodic enclosure leading to a lower sealed compartment, the WD25T combines the optimum damping of aperiodic loading with the bass extension of a large closed box. Available with STD soft dome or high performance Excel treble units.

Both the WD25 kits are based around a SEAS 26cm (10”) paper cone bass unit with an efficiency of 89dB for 1W. The crossover has been developed for an easy drive 6 - 8 Ohm load making the system ideal for all types of amplifiers.

WD25Tv2 STD kit (pair) £299
WD25Tv2 XL kit (pair) £479
TURNTABLES

TURN TABLES

PROJECT RPM GENIE 2007 £125
An absolute masterpiece of 'if you don’t need it, don’t include it' engineering. What’s left is superbly made and turns in a staggeringly good performance, regardless of the low price.

REGA P1 2008 £189
Rega undercut their own P2 with this new entry-level deck. Easy to set up and fine sound quality

REGA P3 2000 £298
Great affordable audiophile deck with fine bundled tonearm. Tweakable, and responds well to careful siting on a base platform.

TECHNICS SL1200 II 1973 £395
Slick build makes it a respectable performer, although the cheapo arm limits it - fit a Rega RB250 and it’s suddenly a serious mid-price machine.

MICHELL TECNODEC 2003 £575
Superb introduction to Michell turntables on a budget. Top quality build and elegant design make it the class of the mid-price field.

PROJECT X PACK 2005 £650
Decently musical sound, fine build and interesting value for money turntable, arm and MC cartridge package.

ROKSAN RADIUS 5 2003 £750
Fantastic value allied to intelligent, interesting and ‘out of the box’ design makes for a wonderful entry-level superdeck. Open and musical sound is more inviting than Michell TeconDec rival, and the bundled Nima Unipivot arm is a superstar.

OL AURORA MKII 2007 £750
Sensational ‘entry level high end’ deck showing obsessive attention to detail. The result is an extremely wide open and natural sounding machine.

FUNK FIRM VECTOR 2006 £760
Innovative attempt to produce the best sounding turntable at the price; highly musically enjoyable.

MICHELL GYRODEC SE 2005 £970
Design classic with superlative build and finish. Sound is beautifully smooth, expansive and effortless but lacks bass grip compared to some rivals now.

MARANTZ TT-1551 2005 £999
This, the most musical sub-£1,000 turntable package, includes a fine tonearm and MM cartridge plug and play vinyl at its best.

ACOUSTIC SIGNATURE CHALLENGER 2006 £1,269
Heavyweight turntable in more ways than one; massive sharply focused soundstage allied to vast dynamic range makes it outstanding at the price.

VPI SCOUT/9' JWM ARM 2006 £1,295
With a massive, solid and focused soundstage, superb transients and excellent musicality, this turntable is exemplary at the price.

PROJECT RPM 10 2006 £1,500
Brilliant ‘fit and forget' deck that gives everything it plays a clean, warm, enjoyable sound - but not quite as effective in absolute terms as some price rivals.

REVOVER REPLAY 2007 £1,500
Revolver spring back into the vinyl market like they’ve never been away, with a stylish and solidly built LP turner. Welcome back!

SCHEU ANALOG BLACK DIAMOND 2007 £1,500
Stylish and highly capable turntable with seriously impressive bass. Comes with tweaked RB250 and high output Benz Micro MC cartridge as a package - superb value for money.

CLEARAUDIO SOLUTION SATISFY 2006 £1,650
Wonderfully big, powerful and enthusiastic sound is tempered by a little over exuberance on occasions. Super value, with a great upgrade path.

THORENS TD2030 2006 £1,895
Excellent design and a supplied Rega RB300 make this a highly capable vinyl turner. Blue tint to the Perspex base is rather pretty, too!

MICHELL ORBE SE 2002 £1,916
Ultimate evolution of the Gyro adds massy acrylic platter and two-stage isolation. Fantastically capable all rounder with commanding, powerful, detailed sound that gets the best from almost any arm and cartridge.

LINN LP125E 1973 £3,510
New keel subchassis is not cheap but brings the LP12 firmly into the 21st Century, with pace, dynamics and low end grunt.

SME MODEL 10A 1995 £6,556
Magnificently designed and built 'record player' that has musical abilities few can match. The arm is particularly impressive, despite its apparent simplicity.

MCINTOSH MT10 2008 £8,995
It’s big expensive, conversationally styled and glows more than some might consider necessary! Fortunately it’s also an astonishingly good performer...

TONEARMS

REGA RB250 1984 £112
This is capable far beyond its price point, with a tight, lean and detailed sound. Responds well to counterweight modification, rewiring and general tweaking.

MICHELL TECNOARM A2003 £399
John Michell’s brilliant reworking of the Rega RB250 theme, using blasting and drilling techniques usually seen in motorsport! The result is the best sounding arm at £400, and as good as some at four times the price.

ORIGIN LIVE SILVER 2006 £599
This expertly fretted Rega boasts a superbly even, transparent and tuneful sound. Gives away only a small degree of finesse and dimensionality to top arms.

These are the best products we’ve heard that are currently on sale in the UK, complete with the date they were originally launched and their current retail prices.
HADDON 242 SE 2000 £649

LaTeX of a long line of unipivots, with added mass, revised geometry and better finish. Musical like no others at the price.

SME 309 1989 £767

Mid-range SME comes complete with cost- cut aluminium arm tube and detachable headshell. Tight, neutral sound with good tonality, but lacks the IV's pace and precision.

SME SERIES IV 1988 £1,127

Offers nine tenths of the SME's magic at just over half price. Exquisitely built and finished, and a design classic. Faces stiff competition these days, but lovely nevertheless.

AUDIO ORIGAMI PU7 2007 £1,300

A modern superarm with battleship build. Stylish and solid lump of arm with fabulous bass dexterity and soundstaging. Build quality is up with the very best at the price, with a clean, open and musically lucid sound; superb ergonomics and design.

HELISUS OMEGA 2008 £1,595

Stylish and solid lump of arm with fabulous build quality, that turns in a dynamic and weighty performance.

SME SERIES V 1987 £1,614

The so-called Best Pickup Arm in the World isn't quite, but comes pretty close. Vitally, the arm is supplied with the armbase, arm tube and all mounting fixtures. Includes a little fine tuning of the armbase and arm tube. Does everything except beguile the listener.

LNN EKOS 1987 £1,700

Subtle mods over the years, including revised bearings and the recent new wiring has kept it a serious contender in the superarm stakes. Lacks the SME's slam, the OL's clarity or the ARO's emotion, but has a feisty musicality all of its own.

GRAHAM PHANTOM 2006 £2,495

Sonomically stunning arm with magnificent bass dexterity and soundstaging. Build quality almost up to SME standards, which is saying something.

TRI-PANLAR PRECISION 2006 £3,600

Stunning build, exquisite design and surely the most naturally musical and lucid sound around makes this a remarkable pickup arm.

CARTRIDGES

ORTOFON 2M RED/BLUE 2007 £600/£120

The first new budget MM designs for many years. Ortofon's 2M Red and Blue are high resolution designs that are an engaging listen

ORTOFON SABA/SALSA 2006 £150/£200

Fine cartridges that offer an MC magic at an affordable price. Salsa has more dynamic and forward, Salsa rather smoother but both are great performers and track well.

DENON DL103R 2006 £200

Awkward to get working properly with a poor mounting arrangement. Yet it rewards with a musical performance that makes similarly priced cartridges sound cold.

DYNAVECTOR DV10XS 2003 £250

A distant descendant of the classic Ultimo 10X, this has warmth and sweetness in spades, allied to a punchy bass. Beats GI042 comfortably.

DYNAVECTOR DV20X-H2003 £395

The best modern budget MC combines deliciously sweet sound with fantastic get- up-and-go. High output version works a treat with valve phono stages too.

THORN MC WINDFELD 2006 £1,799

Ortofon's new flagship MC is a sophisticated and alluring performer that takes the vinyl experience to a new level.

KOETSU RED K SIG 2007 £2,399

The new K Signature adds a hefty dose of insight and finesse to the already impressive Red and the results are fabulous.

DIGITAL DISC PLAYERS

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 440C2 2006 £250

Superb entry level CD player; crisp, composed, musical sound plus fine build and ergonomics.

MARANTZ CD6002 2008 £299

Revealing and open budget CD spinner, once the menus have been navigated to set the player up optimally.

RECA APOLLO 2006 £498

Highly rhythmic and beguiling performer; although lacks some warmth of tone. Superb ergonomics and design.

RUSS ANDREWS DAC-1 USB 2007 £599

Not just a USB gadget, but a truly accomplished upgrade DAC that makes the best of CDs, MP3s and digital radio.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 440H 2005 £599.95

Fine sonics and decent build make this our favourite affordable HD music server.

MARANTZ SA700I HI SIG 2006 £600

Brilliant CD/G2/SACD spinner with a big, sweet, analogue-like sound - CD is totally competitive at the price with the best dedicated machines.

AUDIOLAB 8000CD 2006 £650

Ultra clean and transparent sound with amazing detail retrieval; just a tad bright and analytical for some, though.

SHANLING CD-70 2005 £650

Very impressive mid-price machine with a big, sumptuous, expansive sound – better still when tubes are changed.

CAMBRIDGE AZUR 840C 2006 £800

Well built CD player with a silky, yet detailed sound and a whole host of useful facilities. Excellent value for money.

NAIM CD5i 2008 £850

Naim's new italic 'i' variant improves even further on the original, offering superb performance in a very well built package.

EASTERN ELECTRIC MINIMAX CD 2005 £925

Highly accomplished tube-equipped allrounder with a clean, open and musically lucid sound; superb value.

STANDARDS
STANDARDS

CYRUS CD8 2005 £1,000
Highly incisive, engaging, grppy and dynamic sound, but needs careful matching to smooth ancillaries. Optional PX/SX adds bass and dimensionality.

BENCHMARK DAC-i USB 2007 £999
Pro-biased DAC with useful range of inputs and impressive headphone outputs, too. Save £250 if you don’t need the USB-equipped version.

ELECTROCOMPANIE PC-i 2008 £1,034
Tidy and polished-sounding CD spinner with strong bass and an assured sense of confidence.

EXPOSURE 3010 2003 £1,200
One of the most ‘analogue’ CD players, second only to the Shantung. Wonderfully beguiling balance leaves you looking for the tube output stage.

REGA SATURN 2007 £1,298
Wacky looks surround a highly accomplished CD spinner that marries a smooth midband to excellent bass grip.

EDGAR CD-i 2007 £1,350
Quirky Slovakian CD spinner in all-valve output and a truly spine-tingling performance.

STELLO DP-200 2004 £1,495
Superbly finessed and loquacious sound allied to mind-boggling flexibility.

MARANTZ DV9600 2006 £1,500
Impressively accomplished universal disc player, that performs superbly on CD, SACD, DVD Audio and DVD Video.

RAYSONIC CD128 2007 £1,599
Spacehip-styling and fine build around a highly competent mid-priced CD spinner means a feast for the senses.

CHORD DAC64 2005 £1,995
Bespoke architecture gives a truly uniquely musical sound that’s beguilingly musical in nature, if a tad tonally dry. Superb build and aesthetics too!

SHANLING SCD-T2000 2007 £2,250
Updated version of original SCD-T200C standards upgrades optional on the older model and adds a few more tweaks for good measure. The result is a stylish player that works superbly with both CD and SACD.

TUBE TECHNOLOGY FUSION 64 2006 £2,200
Unique digital and analogue audio engineering makes for an exceptional CD player that, on some programme material, is peerless.

NORTH STAR MODEL 192 TRANSPORT/EXTREMO DAC 2006 £2,918
Superbly finessed and loquacious sound allied to excellent build and finish make for a brilliant value high end player.

ACUSTIC ARTS CD1i MK2 2007 £3,985
Styling not to everyone’s taste but build quality is impeccable and the performance is stunningly musical.

NAIM CDX2-XP2s 2003 £4,950
A fine high end machine, but add an XP2s and it becomes one of the most charismatically engaging 16bit machines we’ve ever heard. Plays music with such passion!

LINN UNIDISK 1.1 2004 £6,500
Surely the ultimate universal DVD player; superb in every department, but its CD playback shines brightest considering it’s not a bespoke Red Book machine.

NAIM CD5 2003 £7,050
The most polished Naim CD to date: tremendously capable and musical, but lacks the Rootweller quality of the cheaper CDX2-XP2s.

ACUSTIC ARTS DRIVE 1 MK2/TUBE DAC 2 2007 £7,980
Superbly built high end CD transport and DAC combo that shows just what the format can be capable of.

ESOTERIC X-01 2005 £8,995
Breathtaking feat of digital audio engineering, and surely the best sounding combination CD/SACD spinner money can buy.

NAIM CD555/555PS 2006 £14,000
Very possibly the best CD player yet made - certainly the most expensive; a digital tour de force.

DIGITAL RECORDERS

SONY RCD-W3 2002 £250
Usual superb Sony ergonomics make for no-nonsense budget buy. Fine direct digital copies, but analogue input poor. Middling sonics, but there’s a digital output!

YAMAHA CDR-HD1300E2002 £600
HD means MD-style ease of editing, but compromises recording quality ever-so-slightly. Add decent CD replay and it’s a fine all rounder nonetheless - top value.

PHONOSTAGES

PROJECT PHONOBOX LE2004 £99
Great little box that improves on most bundled phono stages found in budget integrated amplifiers, adding detail and definition and a measure of smoothness too.

TRICHORD DINO 2002 £299
Great all rounder with switchable MM/MC, fast, fluid and smooth like no others at the price.

JOLIDA JD9 2006 £400
Hybrid tube/solid state phono stage with a good range of adjustability. Excellent value for money and a fine, dynamic sound.

GRAHAM SLEE ERA GOLD V 2004 £460
Wonderfully warm, open and musical nature makes this an essential audition for those wanting a top value mid-price phono stage.

LEHMANN BLACK CUBE SE2006X495 Clean, smooth and even right across the frequency range, this phono stage represents superb value for money.

PURESOUND P10 2007 £400
Guy Sargeant’s new MM phono stage is an absolute belter. Simple but very effective.

AQUOX PHONO 2 CI 2006 £598
Brilliantly versatile yet affordable phono stage with a beguiling sound, but careful matching essential. Balanced operation of real benefit.

ICON AUDIO PS1.2 2007 £599
Excellent value valve phono stage with good range of facilities and fine imaging abilities.

CLEARAUDIO SYMPHONO+ 2006 £809
Superb high resolution phono stage with a tight, grppy and engagingly musical sound.

ANATEK MCI 2007 £850
A spectacularly good MC phono stage that offers valve-like insight, underpinned by seriously impressive bass.

EASTERN ELECTRIC MINIMAX PHONO 2006 £1,099
A stunning phono stage with superb clarity and impeccable dynamics, allied to the atmosphere of valves. Can hold its own with even more expensive designs. A veritable bargain.

LINN LINTO 2000 £900
A musical and incisive performer, with more speed than the Delphini at the expense of detail and tonal colour.

QUAD QC24P 2007 £995
Dynamic performer that can be used on its own as a complete phono-level preamp.

TRICHORD DIABLO + NCP5U 2006 £1,198
Highly musical performer, this is one of the best phonostages at or near the price, but lacks the polish of the rival Whats.

AMPLIFIERS

NAD CS135EE 2007 £180
A couth and highly polished budget amplifier with NAD’s typically useful loudspeaker driving abilities.

MARANTZ PM6002 2008 £299
Revealing budget amp with fine phono stage and tight, rhythmical bass.

ONKYO A-9755 2006 £700
Beautifully built, beautifully versatile and truly enjoyable sonics make this another great affordable audiophile product from Onkyo.

NAIM NAIT 5/ 2007 £725
Theitalic T version remains one of the most musically coherent and dynamically engaging integrated amps at the price.

CAMBRIDGE 840A V2 2007 £750
Version 2 addresses version 1’s weaknesses to turn in a mightily accomplished performance, offering power, finesse and detail.

JUNGSO JA-88D 2006 £899
Stunning value for money Class A monster integrated; extreme power and clarity at a puzzlingly low price.
SUGDEN A21A S2 2007 £1,299
More power and greater transparency improve even further on the already impressive A21A to give truly impressive results.

AUDIO NOTE OTO SE 2000 £1,199
This baby tube is beautifully sweet and creamy, but lacks solid-state's clarity, detail and incision. Low, low power means speaker choice critical.

SHANLING STP-80 2007 £1,199
Well built and surprisingly muscular valve integrated. Engagingly musical.

CREEK DESTINY AMPLIFIER 2006 £1,200
Superb build, useful power plus a deep full bodied sound make this an excellent mid-price buy.

ELECTROCOMPANION PI-2 2008 £1,430
Powerful integrated with seriously solid bass and impressive dynamic abilities. Superbly musical.

SUGDEN HEADMASTER 2007 £1,600
Unusual combined preamplifier and headphone amplifier, this boasts a surprisingly smooth and open sound.

PREAMPLIFIERS
CREEK OBH-12 2000 £220
Brilliant value budget passive, giving little away in sonics to far more expensive designs. Connectivity and build aren't great, but what do you expect at this price?

STANDARDS

MUSICAL FIDELITY X-CANS' V3 2003 £249
Mr. Michaelson's best headphone amplifier to date, with an extremely open and explicitly detailed sound plus serious bass wallop and the ability to drive any phones to very high levels. Errs towards brightness with some headphones, so match carefully and use smooth cables.

SUGDEN HEADMASTER 2003 £600

PREAMPLIFIERS

MF AUDIO PASSIVE PRE 2003 £1,500
Novel and effective pre with switchable gain via a transformer, and balanced operation. Open and incisive sound, yet makes most active rivals sound edgy by comparison. Silver version at the twice the price adds eerie transparency, and is superlative.

MODWRIGHT SWL9.0SE £2,000
Captivating sound quality that will transform your system. Build quality is equally impressive and value top-notch. Highly recommended.

NUFORCE P-9 2007 £2,200
Impressive two box preamp with superb resolution and an engaging sound.

MELODY PURE BLACK 101D 2007 £3,295
One of the best preamplifiers we have ever heard. Takes the clarity and openness we expect from valves and adds a staggering level of grip and detail. Stunning.

POWER AMPLIFIERS

ROKSAN KANDY LIII 2008 £600
Fine budget power amp that punches well above its weight and can embarrass more expensive designs.

QUAD 909 2001 £900
The latest current-dumper has a smooth and expansive character with enough wallop to drive most loads. Not the most musical, but super value all the same. Lovely build, finish and Quad's legendary service are nice.

NAIM NAP150 2002 £795
Driven by a decent source and a NAC112, this gives highly enjoyable results - providing you like the Naim sound! Taut, fast and feisty despite its relative lack of power.
STANDARDS

SUDGEN MUSIC MASTER 2003 £1,300 Quinnescential Class A Sudgen sound is not warm as many expect, but extremely neutral and open with real tonal colour. By comparison, tubes sound bloated and standard solid-state hazy and brittle. Superb when partnered with efficient loudspeakers like Revolver R45s, but many will find it under-powered.

NUFORCE REFERENCE 9SE £1,550 Brilliant value for money monoblocks with massive power and super-clean, three-dimensional sound.

ROTAL RB1092 2007 £1,595 Hugely powerful digital amp with neutral midrange and a wonderfully spacious treble.

CHANNEL ISLANDS AUDIO D100 2005 £1,595 Clean and musical Class D monoblock power amplifiers in a neat, small package.

SILK GLOWMASTER KT88 2007 £1,699 KT88 based power amplifier offers dramatic clarity and excellent bass.

QUAD II 40 2005 £3,230PR Brilliant modern tube monoblock power amplifiers with plenty of power, wonderfully liquid and open midband and spacious, airy treble. One of the best tube power amp combos ever.

GRAAF GM20 OTL 2003 £3,300 Amazing output transformer-less valve power amp gives dazzling speed and incision, with an ethereal soundstaging and delicious filigree detail. Tremendous punch belies its humble 20W power rating. Factor in one of the most exquisite finishes this side of an Aston Martin and it's very hard to say no...

LOUDSPEAKERS

ACOUSTIC ENERGY NEO I 2007 £1,199 Tidy and well balanced standmounters with pleasing clarity and detail.

B&W 866 2007 £279 B&W's new baby standmounters offer a sophisticated and mature performance that befits both their dimensions and price tag.

USHER S-520 2006 £320 Astonishingly capable budget standmounters that offer detail and dynamics well beyond their price and dimensions.

MORDAUNT SHORT AVANT 91i 2007 £300 Another pair of storming budget floorstanders from Mordaunt Short. Detailed, punchy and crisp.

MONITOR AUDIO GS60 2007 £2,000 Brilliant modern rock loudspeaker with a fantastically lithe and engaging sound, but partner carefully with a warm front end.

PINCH 2.1 2006 £2,000 Wonderfully neutral and self-effacing with Redoubtable low frequency articulation allied to the superlative hear-through clarity of the Pinch ribbon tweeter makes it an extremely accomplished all-round floorstander.

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REVOLLER CYGNS 2006 £5,999 Revolver pull out all the stops and show what they can do with this magnificent flagship loudspeaker. A superb monitor that is like a mini B&W 801D in many ways.

NAIM ALLAE 2002 £1,990 Taut and grippy like few others, this speaker majors on transient speed. Surprisingly smooth for a Naim box, with nicely etched treble. As always, tonally dry.

VICTROLA 28 2002 £3,000 Brilliant modern floorstander with an ethereal soundstaging and delicacy to spare. Perfect partner with a warm front end.
B&W 80ID 2006 £10,500
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TEAC DR-H300DAB 2008 £329
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ARCAM SOLO 2005 £995
Excellent all-in-one system, with a warm, smooth and balanced sound to match the features and style.

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Pure was one of the very first to market with compact, affordable DAB portable radios. Then, for a while it seemed the company was resting on its laurels whilst being market leader. In the past few months however, we’ve seen several fresh new designs with the Evoke Flow being a standout DAB/FM/Wi-Fi hybrid product. The Mio is less complex than this, being a simple unreconstructed DAB/FM radio, but is none the worse for it. The accent here is on build quality and convenience, and no small amount of style. It comes finished in a two-tone leather and cream suede effect finish, in a range of colours and hues available are chilli, chocolate, moss, candy and midnight.

Still, it’s not simply a reboxed Evoke 1; the Mio has an integrated rechargeable battery pack that gives up to 24 hours of battery life per charge, as well as operating on mains. It’s worth noting that it is the eighth Pure radio to receive an Energy Saving Recommended accreditation from the Energy Saving Trust. This shows it has satisfied an independent panel of experts that it meets strict energy efficiency criteria. A salient point, as until recently DAB radios have been horrendously power-hungry. Other features include an Evoke Flow-style OLED (Organic LED) display, which is crystal-clear from any angle. It even has both manual and automatic brightness controls. Intellitext and textSCAN is provided, letting you pause the scrolling text information display and store it for browsing at a later date. There’s also an alarm, kitchen timer and thirty easy to use presets. An MP3 input completes the picture.

The Mio works beautifully. Small, compact, and unobtrusive in the room, it’s far easier on the eye than some rival radios, and the leather and suede effect finish feels (and looks) superb, making it a joy to carry around. The controls have a crispsness that earlier Pures lacked, navigating through its many functions is straightforward. Sonically the Mio is good too — with a clean, inoffensive sound that’s ideal for music and speech alike. Overall, this new Pure radio is a little on the pricey side but the quality more than justifies the cost.

[Contact: 0845 1 489001, www.pure.com]

RINGMAT PURE POWER MAINS CABLE £386.60
Ringmat Developments are probably best known for their Ringmat LP and CD accessories in recent years, but have expanded their range of products to include interconnects, speaker cable and the mains cable under review here. There are two versions of mains lead in the range; the more expensive of the two is the Pure Power Mains Cable, retailing at £386.60 (including 15% VAT) for a 1.4m length. (1.7m and 2m lengths are also available as standard, and extra lengths cost a further £50 per metre.)

The design is unusual and builds on the company’s research into the effects of phase anomalies in both signal and speaker leads. The main body of the cable consists of four PVC insulated conductors containing 56 strands of 0.30mm diameter high purity oxygen-free copper wire, giving a core size of nearly 4mm square. A single earth conductor of seven 1.35mm diameter strands of plain copper in LSF (Low Smoke and Fume) thermosetting insulation runs alongside the main sheath of cabling; this has a core size of 10mm. Near each end are plastic termination blocks where the bulk of leads are reduced to 1.5mm five core mains cable, that will fit into conventional mains and IEC plugs (Other terminations are available on request).

The instructions note that there is a running in period of a few days before the best sound is obtained. I felt that the sound became settled and consistent after about five days use. This cable is bulky, and will not fit into tight spaces very easily, mostly due to the size of the termination blocks, so care needs to be taken especially if using it with lightweight equipment such as tuners.

The sonic effects were very pleasant, with a wide and detailed soundstage, underpinned by a driving rhythmic energy that was beguiling. In particular, I felt that the smoothness given to potentially shrieky instruments, such as the violin, was well balanced, whilst avoiding the unnatural creamy lushness that can be the signature of some other leads. Separation was good, leaving no doubt as to the relevant location of each performer. Ringmat’s Pure Power Mains Cable is expensive, and may require a little jiggling to fit it in behind your equipment rack, but it is also very effective, and worth auditioning alongside other similarly priced products.

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This 5 input line level preamp is essentially an SE triode power amplifier in concept. WDPRE3 uses an ECC82 double triode arranged as input voltage amplifier and power output amplifier stages, the latter driving oversize 20:1 output transformers.

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World Radio History
comments about Naim's new HDX are a fascinating glimpse of where the great computer audio debate is right now...

david price

The launch of the Naim HDX hard disc music server some six months ago has really put the cat amongst the pigeons on both the subject of the HDX itself and computer audio in general.

Lest we forget, the HDX is essentially a black box with a CD-ROM drive built in, plus twin hard disc drives storing music in either compressed or uncompressed formats. It has a natty little colour display on the front, internet capability with its Ethernet port, plus the ability to hook up to external hard drives and controllers. It's a lovely package as far as I'm concerned, and I said so in these very pages.

However, if you stick your head over the parapet I suppose you should expect to get it shot at. And so it was that yours truly has come in for some flack ('scuse the computer audio-related pun!) for pronouncing positively on the new Naim. Well, I'm a big boy now so didn't take umbrage - but I did take great interest in the nature of the adverse comments, as they're a fascinating glimpse of where the great computer audio debate is right now.

The first 'school' of Naim naysayers simply pointed out that computers don't do music. PCs are designed to number crunch and hi-fi plays harmonious tunes in recognised patterns, and never the twain should meet. As such, if you're serious about high end digital audio, you need an optical disc player of the very best quality, so the argument goes. This perception that computers can't play music remains deep rooted amongst many audiophiles.

Of course, computers are electrically (and even mechanically) quite noisy environments. Hi-fi by contrast — especially the high end variety — pays great attention to the suppression, absorption or dissipation of noise. For this reason, many argue against their use for audio purposes, but let's not forget Compact Disc players themselves are a form of computer, having as they do an optical disc drive sending binary digital data to a central processor (of a sort) 'on the fly' (i.e. in real time), as it were. You have a piece of plastic coated aluminium spinning at high speed, wobbling around inside on the spindle of an electric motor that's throwing vibration into the machine — along with a power hungry servo motor for the optical laser pickup. As such, it's not a simple case of one being bad and the other not so.

It's also important to note that the elimination of real-time optical disc reading (i.e. CD transports) removes a good deal of heartache. Basically, on-the-fly CD reading in a conventional CD player is 'death or glory' as far as the integrity of the digital signal is concerned, which is to say that the CD mechanism must read the disc right or it's forced to use error-correction algorithms that can degrade the sound. A computer hard disk however, can come back and try again until it's got it right.

The other big argument against the Naim HDX comes from a diametrically different direction. The chime is made that the HDX is basically a repackaged PC with commonly available hardware inside, all of which could be bought at a substantially lower price on the open market. As such, the argument goes, the new Naim is simply poor value for money.

Well, that's a bit like saying the Ford Focus has a number of sub-systems (engine, gearbox, electronics, rolling chassis, etc.) from a variety of different suppliers — all of which can be bought relatively inexpensively — and so the car is a complete waste of money. The point of course is that it's the integrated package you buy, with all of that development time spent finessing the various bits so they work along with one another perfectly. Still, this line of reasoning cuts little ice with the HDX's critics.

"What's the point in paying for something that does what we can already do on our own PCs?", they shout. To this I'd retort that — yes, you can get decent computer-based music playback systems for far less than the cost of a new HDX, but you're not comparing like with like. The Naim is an all-in-one, self contained solution.

Curiously then, the poor old Naim HDX has received incoming fire from both sides of this great debate. One, still sizeable chunk of audiophiles think it heresy for computers to be involved in hi-fi at all, whilst others regard it as so routine to use computers for hi-fi that the Naim is almost superfluous anyway!

It's going to be interesting to come back to this some years later and see where the debate has progressed to. I wonder if the 'Red Book Brigade' will still be tut-tutting at the ingress of hard disk music players into their audiophile idyll? Likewise, will we be thinking of the HDX as a curio, very much of its time — a dated stepping stone to the fully integrated, fully networked multimedia entertainment systems we all now run? Perhaps an evolution of the Linn model of 'open source' music systems — where the hi-fi aspect is nothing more than a network equipped DAC and some smart software — will one day hold sway?

In the great hi-fi scheme of things, it sure looks like we're in for an interesting next few years.
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They happened to have a completely winter and the like. family, keeping them warm in the going to cost me an arm and a leg going to buy one, ultimate, compo-

bass panels to sing for the first time. Yes, there are other, more expensive, superb treble panels, which are

classic Quad ESL-57 electrostatic Audio (www.onethingaudio.net). chance encounter with One Thing

then I would have no choice but to a credit card, to buy each component, much my upgrades were going to cost me in the future until I reached hi-fi nirvana. The total was, frankly, enormous and rather scary. So I bit the bullet: I decided about 18 months ago that I would bypass the minor upgrades and leap to the end; I was going to buy one, ultimate, compo-

ment at a time (i.e. turntable, amp, speakers, etc), the intention being that my choice would amount to the end of the upgrade path for that particular component.

My philosophy was this: it was going to cost me an arm and a leg now but, in the long run, I would save a lot of money in bypassing multiple minor upgrades. Psychologically too, it would represent commitment. Too often, in the past, I had saved for a hardware upgrade and then spent it on frivolities such as feeding my family, keeping them warm in the winter and the like.

Now! I would go into debt, with a credit card, to buy each component, then I would have no choice but to pay it back over a carefully calculated interest free period.

The process began with a chance encounter with One Thing Audio (www.onethingaudio.net). They happened to have a completely refurbished and upgraded set of classic Quad ESL-57 electrostatic loudspeakers, utilising their own superb treble panels, which are robust enough to allow the Quad bass panels to sing for the first time. Yes, there are other, more expensive, speakers on the market. However, I was after truth. I don't want my hi-fi to spin me a yarn, colouring the output to soften the edges, I want the facts. If a group had an off day in the studio or the engineer cocked up, then I want to hear about it. For such transparency, I would need the '57s. So, I had found my 'theme', the direction of my upgrade. I recommend that you find yours to aid synchronicity in all your hi-fi components.

Next? My priority is vinyl, so I found my desired turntable. The Avid Acutus (www.avidhifi.co.uk) arrived complete with a SME IV arm plus Benz Glider cartridge. Probably the best designed turntable on the planet, the Avid, with its belt drive, sprung chassis featuring a unique suspension and clamping system, exposed a wealth of detail. For example, the strumming of an acoustic guitar, for the first time, revealed the bite and attack of the action of finger hting and scraping string. But this is one element in a long, long list of improvements. Every aspect of the musical presentation was improved, in fact.

Time passed and I was left with my old Naim NAC 112/NAP 150 pre/power and a Trichord Dino phono amp. I have been told that the Quads would really perform with a quality valve amp and so I endeavoured to demo one. By sheer coincidence, I got to hear about the new Icon Audio MB845 (www. iconaudio.com) monoblocks (see review in the January issue) and read the Icon Audio PS3 phono amp review in the November 2008 issue.

After hooking them up and playing one of my best vinyl albums I ignored the music, initially, because I could hear an odd crackling. I initially thought that my Quads had developed a fault, so I powered down, swapped speakers and powered back up. The noise remained. I powered down, checked all connections and powered up. The noise was still there.

Well, I must have checked every piece of hardware for problems. I cleaned the contacts, my stylus...I even cleaned the record three times.

Then a thought occurred, I changed the record itself - which had always played fine. And you know what! The noise disappeared! I had, in fact, revealed a subtle pressing problem on the vinyl itself. The level of resolution had now reached such a high level that I was hearing musical information from the gods themselves. So I sat for a bit and listened to my new system with a silly grin on my face. I've never been so happy to have found a fault on one of my vinyl records!

Even if you decide not to follow my, admittedly, extreme method of upgrading, the bottle-neck example still stands. In my case the amplifier and phono preamp was holding back my musical progression. Post upgrade, both the Avid and Quad were let off the leash.

Do you have a weak point in your system? Is one box letting the rest down? As can be seen with my own independent review of the budget, Yamaha A-S700 in the January issue, careful pairing of the right components can get the most from your entire set-up. If you suspect that your hardware might be under performing, take a trip to your local dealer and ask his advice. You never know, for very little outlay, you could find hidden depths within your current system.
So, after 18 month’s development the ‘Servo Evolution’ (SE) CD players and dedicated CD transport have finally arrived.

The biggest limitation in hi-fi CD players is the laser and servo that reads the music from the disc because it is not specifically designed for high performance audio. Knowing this is a performance barrier, Cyrus spent 18 months developing its own CD engine specifically designed for the highest sound quality possible.

The SE engine is all the elements before the DAC. Cyrus has carefully chosen the disc loader, laser, motors and most importantly, the software that controls the laser travel, focus and data spiral tracking accuracy. The servo software is the bit that controls these components and allows Cyrus’ engineers to tune the elements for ultimate accuracy.

The new SE based players comprise:

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"this could at long last significantly improve the overall audio quality of the BBC's stations on DAB..."

steven green

The Media Guardian has reported that the BBC is looking to move the Asian Network, plus possibly one or two other stations, onto the Digital One national commercial DAB multiplex. If correct, this could at long last significantly improve the overall audio quality of the BBC's stations on DAB, although how much the quality would improve by is heavily dependent on the number of stations that would make the move.

I'd say that the Asian Network is very likely to move, because the BBC wanted to move the Asian Network onto the second national commercial multiplex (which isn't now going to launch) last year anyway. However, the Asian Network only uses a bit rate of 64kbps, so that's also the amount of capacity that would be freed up on the BBC multiplex if the station were moved. That would allow Radios 1 and 2 to increase their bit rates from 128kbps to 160kbps, but this would still leave the quality of those stations seriously lacking. The bit rates of Radios 3 and 4 would no longer need to be reduced when Radio 5 Sports Extra goes on-air, though, because Radios 1 and 2 would almost certainly be reduced back to 128kbps instead. Overall though, only moving the Asian Network would still leave serious problems with the audio quality on most of the BBC's stereo stations, plus Radio 7 would still be in mono, so this would only be marginally better than the situation we have at the moment.

If two stations were moved to Digital One, the most likely candidate to be moved alongside the Asian Network would be iXtra, in which case 192kbps of capacity would be freed up on the BBC multiplex. This would allow Radio 2 to increase from 128 to 192kbps, which would provide a significant improvement in quality; 6 Music's quality could also be improved and Radio 7 could start using stereo. This would leave 64kbps of capacity, which could either be used to increase Radio 1 to 192kbps, or it could be split equally between Radios 1 and 3, which would mean that the stations would transmit at 160 and 224kbps respectively.

If three stations were moved to Digital One, the BBC's national FM stations would then all be able to use the same 192kbps bit rate on DAB (Radio 3 would actually be able to use 224kbps, which is higher than originally) that the stations were using prior to 2002, when the BBC launched its five new digital stations, and massacred the audio quality in the process. 6 Music would also be able to transmit at a much more respectable 192kbps as well.

While not being ideal, I'd say that the bit rate levels just mentioned are about as high as we could realistically expect to see the BBC use on DAB given the relatively small amount of national capacity available. I would still say that FM would provide slightly higher quality than DAB though. It's also looking increasingly likely that the BBC will use decent bit rates for its live Internet radio streams starting in January, in which case the Internet streams should also provide higher quality due to their use of the superior AAC audio codec. Hopefully I'll be able to bring you some news about this next month.

However, it's far from being a foregone conclusion that multiple stations could be removed from the BBC multiplex, due to the fact that the Digital One multiplex doesn't cover Northern Ireland. The Asian Network could still be removed without any problems though, because the Northern Ireland 'local' DAB multiplex has sufficient spare capacity on it to carry the Asian Network, so the station would continue to have UK-wide coverage. But removing other stations from the BBC national multiplex would either require the BBC to secure additional capacity in Northern Ireland, or else those stations would simply no longer be available in the province.

It's certainly possible that the BBC would be able to secure additional capacity in Northern Ireland, though. Firstly, Ofcom is strongly rumoured to be re-planning DAB spectrum as a whole in an attempt to reduce the overall transmission costs for the cash-strapped commercial broadcasters. And as the planned second national commercial multiplex is no longer going to launch at all now, this leaves a vacant channel in which a new multiplex covering Northern Ireland could easily be provided. Also, with the commercial radio industry being in dire financial straits, it wouldn't surprise me if stations in Northern Ireland would snap the BBC's hand off if it offered to relieve them of their capacity, and hence of their expensive transmission contracts.

It should also be said that the BBC's motives for moving stations onto Digital One are not purely to improve the audio quality of its stations, because another major reason is to help bail out Digital One, which is estimated to be losing around £5 million per year. Many would say that it's not the BBC's job to bail out commercial radio, and ordinarily I would agree. But as the BBC could finally be about to sort out its quality on DAB, for once I'll support them on this!
Innovation in the pursuit of reproducing recordings, so perfectly they are indistinguishable from live performance, has been the KEF philosophy since Raymond Cooke founded the company in 1961 and remains at the heart of every KEF product today. Not least with the Q Series, each generation of which has received accolades and awards from the International Press.

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"Blu-ray shows us that when it contains high resolution digital music, the results can be stunning..."

noel keyewood

Suddenly sound quality is becoming important again, which is fine by me. Told not so long ago that the days of pure audio were numbered and that in tomorrow’s shiny new world it would play second fiddle to video, I did start to wonder whether people really had given up listening to music. But there’s been an almost complete about turn, and good sound quality is back in fashion - ignoring one or two stubborn pockets of resistance, such as DAB radio!

The limited acceptance of AV and the rise and rise of Apple’s iTunes online music store seems to have given music listening a real boost. Okay, this has been predicted for a long time but only recently has it started to turn into reality. Apple now offer losslessly compressed files of better quality than the usual AAC fare and they can be transferred easily as full rights are conferred on the end user. As internet speeds increase this makes iTunes and services like it, such as Nokia downloaded music via your mobile phone and out through a Chordette DAC, interesting ways of playing downloads through a decent hi-fi.

I can’t help but notice too how both the Naim and Linn music servers seem to be triggering a lot of interest amongst Hi-Fi World readers; both companies offer high quality music downloads also.

As someone who has been there, done that and lost an iTunes collection when a hard drive failed I’ve become a sceptic about music downloading, but perhaps it is time to try again and get stuck in alongside everyone else! My short love affair with iTunes happened many moons ago when it wasn’t easy to back up, and listening to the downloads meant either burning them to a CD for use in the hi-fi system or sitting bolt upright in front of the computer on a chair late at night which, if accompanied by wine, meant I was likely to fall off it eventually.

Leading my life in front of a computer in any case, I like to get away from it, so computer music or YouTube hold my attention for a short while only, then I am off to my beloved 300Bs which can be enjoyed in the comfort of a warm lounge.

But not always. Often I switch on a big solid-state receiver, hooked up to a Samsung BD-P1500 Blu-ray player (and an Oppo DV-980H to spin my SACDs and DVD-As). Blu-ray is slowly catching my attention. Music on DVD never did appeal to me because sound quality was uncompelling. The culprit was Dolby Digital surround sound, a strong music compression system that has a soft, flaccid presentation.

DTs came into being on the backs of better sound quality and at this very moment I’m enjoying Within Temptation’s latest ‘Black Symphony’ DVD with DTS 24/96 surround. However, whilst it’s clean and gentle sounding, no matter how many of the 2,000 or so Watts I choose to use from Onkyo’s latest TX-NR906 receiver I am reviewing, it still lacks visceral impact. Enter Blu-ray.

Just last night I was reminded how vicious high rate PCM can sound when I span the award winning soundtrack of ‘Master and Commander: Far Side of the World’. The crack of the canons was almost too much to bear from this DTS HD Master Audio track. The same sort of presentation is apparent with the Nine Inch Nails Concert, losslessly compressed in Dolby TrueHD on Blu-ray. As a result I’m now lusting after ‘Black Symphony’ on Blu-ray, available on U.S. Amazon at the time of writing, but not U.K. Amazon. It’s obvious from watching the DVD that a lot of effort has been put into recording this live concert at Rotterdam’s Ahoy arena and U.S. reviews give the Blu-ray sound a thumbs up for its impact. The prospect of an orchestra, choir and rock band playing music of Wagnerian proportions is exciting, especially with a lead singer as extraordinary as Sharon den Adel.

What Blu-ray shows is that when it contains high resolution digital music the result can be stunning.

So high definition digital does have appeal. I won’t say at present it is perfect; there’s still a clinical coolness and a hard edge that I don’t quite buy as totally natural, but sound quality on Blu-ray is getting to be very interesting, shall I say. It’s surprising just how much of an AV receiver is nowadays dedicated to sound processing schemes, from Dolby, DTS and now THX. Is AV swinging around to a source of good audio, accompanied by pictures? It is for me.

Soon the pictures may disappear. Perusing latest BPI sales figures shows that music videos account for a very small percentage of the overall music market. People want to listen to music without switching on the TV and I sense that Blu-ray Profile 3 music-only discs will start to appear soon. Will they ever become popular and take over from CD? Could they rival internet downloads? I doubt it.

Judging by the number of iTunes players I see being used on London’s streets and Underground trains, downloading has it. But the Blu-ray music disc could also have much to offer: surround-sound in 24/192 anyone? Either way, music is back with a vengeance and quality is now an issue again. I’m a happy man.
When only the best will do

Platinum is Monitor Audio's new flagship speaker range named after this most precious of metals.

The range comprises three models; the PL100 compact two-way speaker, the PL300 three-way floor standing speaker and the PLC350, a large three-way, four-driver centre channel speaker. All models feature Monitor Audio's RDT® technology drive units and C-CAM® ribbon tweeters. Custom-designed floor stands are available for the PL100 and PLC350.

The braced cabinets are finished in exotic Santos Rosewood, Ebony natural wood veneers and Piano black lacquer. All are coated with eleven layers of clear gloss piano lacquer for an outstanding finish, complementing the hand-upholstered leather front baffles.

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the experts in home entertainment
"setting your system up again from scratch can often be a worthwhile activity..."

adam smith

Well, the fridge freezer has been sold, our new local radio station The Coast is still playing good music and the restoration of the Smith household back to a sense of normality continues apace. With painting and furniture replacement complete it was now finally time for me to turn my attention to the task that I had been looking forward to and dreading in equal measure - the re-establishing of my listening room...

Clearly there was excitement to a certain degree, as it meant a clean slate on which to arrange my equipment and set my system up in the best way possible. Why could I fail to be totally enthusiastic, I hear you cry! Well, if you’ve ever carried a Ferrograph 51 loudspeaker up a flight of stairs and positioned one whilst sat on a stand, you’ll know that, whilst not exactly an insurmountable task, they’re quite heavy and dimensionally a bit awkward! However, I set to with duster, vacuum cleaner and a healthy dose of elbow grease and soon I was looking at a neat, clean room, with an equally clean pile of hi-fi ready to position.

My listening room also occupies a secondary role as our third bedroom and so, consequently, has to have the facility to be made comfortable for visitors with a minimum of fuss and furniture heaving. However, in its previous incarnation, my loudspeakers were firing across the room and were heaving. However, in its previous experimentation with it, I found that this really brought out the heart of the details lurking in the music, hence my wielding the Smith credit card on them. However, substituting my trusty old cables - some sturdy but anonymous Heco items that I acquired years ago in a big box of ‘odds and ends’ from a hi-fi shop’s bankrupt stock auction - and all was well again.

This proved two things to me - firstly, that starting with a clean slate and setting up from scratch can often be a worthwhile activity - it may not be a convenient thing to do too often but the intervention of some construction work may not be quite the pain in the neck that it seems! Secondly, never assume that something you hear in the context of a different system will work in your own. My new cables are back in their credit card on them. However, substituting my trusty old cables - some sturdy but anonymous Heco items that I acquired years ago in a big box of ‘odds and ends’ from a hi-fi shop’s bankrupt stock auction - and all was well again.

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As I sat and pondered however, my eyes alighted on the one other thing that had changed - my fancy new loudspeaker cables. When I first encountered them, I was stunned by their sheer brio, dynamics, clarity and the way in which they really cut into the heart of the details lurking in the music, hence my wieldling the Smith credit card on them. However, substituting my trusty old cables - some sturdy but anonymous Heco items that I acquired years ago in a big box of ‘odds and ends’ from a hi-fi shop’s bankrupt stock auction - and all was well again.

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JAZZED UP
Classic Records has similarly stepped up the pace with five new Blue Note jazz releases on 200gm vinyl. Freddie Hubbard's 'Open Sesame' was his excellent debut as leader from 1960, showing a maturity the belied his twenty-two years. Horace Silver's 'Horace Scope', also from 1960, and the third offering from his quintet exhibits tight, driving hard bop. A classic and just one of a range of top sixties Silver releases. Another Horace, Parlan this time, released 'Speakin' My Piece' in, you guessed it, 1960. Also playing hard bop, also on piano but this time in a more laid back, swinging fashion. Also look out for Jackie McLean's hard bop infused 'Jackie's Bag' (1959) plus Donald Byrd's trumpet bop 'Byrd In Flight' (1960).

BACK TO BLACK
Universal has realised that vinyl hasn't, in fact, died and so has surprised itself by reissuing a blend of classics on a new reissue label called Back To Black which will also allow you to download a MP3 version of the album for portable use. Everyone's a gem including Cat Stevens' 'Tea For The Tillerman', a self-assured album that reflected on the spirituality that would direct his later embracing of the Muslim faith. Faith played a part in The Who's 'Quadrophenia', (1973) even though, for the young star of the film version, it was misplaced. A commanding work and another rock opera concept for the band's Pete Townshend. Also look out for Cream's 'Wheels On Fire' (1968) and John Mayall's 'Bluesbreakers' (1966), plus Guns N' Roses 'Use Your Illusion 1 & 2' (1991) and Supertramp's 'Crime Of The Century' (1974).
DMM IT!

One Little Indian has released a new batch of 200gm DMM masters, via Abbey Road. Sneaker Pimps' 'Becoming X' took Portishead as a template and trip-hopped their way to stardom but with more edge to their production. Bjork's side-project, 'Drawing Restraint 9', a collaboration with Matthew Barney for the film of the same name is both demanding but also satisfying. A conceptual piece.


ELBOW

Elbow's 'The Seldom Seen Kid', their newly released album on Polydor, continues the band's mixture of early Radiohead-type prog and Coldplay-type melodies with plenty of oddness thrown in to keep things interesting. It tugs at the emotions and often carries you away on soaring wings of accessibility.

CAPITOL VAULTS — THE SECOND BATCH

EMI has released a new batch of releases under its limited edition, Capitol Vaults, 180gm, series. Currently recording a brand new album, Roxy Music also offer two classic reissues: the self-titled debut album (1972) featuring 'Virginia Plain' plus the sequel, 'For Your Pleasure' (1973) featuring 'Do The Strand'. The Band - who had previously backed Dylan under their previous Hawks incarnation - are also present with two releases: the group's debut, 'Music From Big Pink' (1968) is pure mountain rock, a mystical exploration into American culture, whilst the self-titled release follow-up (1969) continued to tell stories about people and places. Also look out for John Lennon's 'Rock'n'Roll', produced by Phil Spector and The Beach Boys hits compilation, 'Endless Summer' (1974).

DAZED?

YOU WILL BE...

This is a busy month for vinyl reissues and the pace shows no sign of easing off. US-based Sundazed is a good example with six releases here and many more to come. The most startling aspect of all the releases this month is the variety. Look at this lot.

Firstly we've got Latin flavoured rock/blues/jazz from Santana with the classic, self-titled debut album (1969) and 'Abraxas' (1970). Remastered from the original master tapes, 'Abraxas' also includes the rare band poster.

On to the fuzz guitar warbling of Davie Allan & The Arrows and 'Cycle Breed' that features sixteen wild journeys into cult film soundtrack rarities and unissued cuts. Tracks such as 'The Angry Mob' and 'Wild In The Streets' say it all. Similarly wild - or just plain brutal - is Iggy Pop's 'Raw Power' (1973), co-mixed with David Bowie. Pop, the godfather of punk, gives a brilliant performance even though you'll be cowering behind the sofa to hear it. Also look out for Big Brother & The Holding Company's self-titled debut (1967) featuring Janis Joplin on vocals and Quatrains self-titled album (1969), a mix of psyche, folk and rock.
The new TD550/TP125SE is Thorens' latest top turntable and arm combination. Adam Smith sails away...

Following the great surge to digital towards the end of the nineteen eighties, things were not looking promising for Thorens. Let us not forget that this was a company that had been producing turntables for a long time, and was one of the great names from the heyday of vinyl in the nineteen fifties and sixties. The company that had given us the likes of the TD124, TD150, TD160, TD320 and the mighty TD520, all of which have a dedicated following amongst enthusiasts of classic vinyl spinners, seemed on the wane...

With the ascent of Compact Disc, Thorens' turntable range shrank greatly. Indeed, I have an old Thorens brochure from the mid eighties and it is a thing of wonder to behold. Model numbers like TD320, TD2001, TD3001 and TD521 are on it, as are a couple of oddities like the Thorens Concrete, and of course the mighty Thorens Prestige — 90kg of massive high end statement, capable of taking up to three arms, up to twelve inches in length. But move on a few years and the model line-up then mainly consisted of small, budget automatic designs that shared appearances with some of the cheaper Dual models.

Various electronics also came and went — often well received by reviewers but less so by the buying public, with tales abounding of reliability issues and consequently casting a cloud over these stylish items. Many a lesser company would have closed its doors but Thorens never quite gave up and, since the resurgence in interest of black plastic, they have risen phoenix-like from the ashes with new designs, new ranges and some serious manufacturing. This is thanks in no small part to the helping hands of Dr. Roland Gauder, well known for his range of Isophon loudspeakers, amongst others.

Whilst there are still cheaper decks with varying degrees of automation, we have also seen the arrival of the TD800 and TD2000... more than that. Most notable is the stunning 'Makassar' gloss wood effect finish of our review sample, complete with gloss black side panels and chrome plated front. If you wish however, the main deck can be black, as can the front, so you can mix and match to your heart's content. The platter weighs no less than 6.3kg, is fully filled with damping material and driven around its periphery by one of Thorens' clever synchronous AC motors, that gradually winds up the torque for a smooth start-up.

At the front are power and start/stop buttons on the left, and 33/45rpm selectors on the right, plus associated blue LEDs and a lovely blue illuminated 'Thorens' logo in the centre. At the rear are output sockets in both unbalanced phono and balanced XLR format, a five pin DIN socket for the external PSU and three screwdriver-adjustable trim pots — one for 33rpm, one for 45 and one for the illumination levels for the front panel button LEDs and Thorens logo. Finally, three hinges support a series models, as well as a nod to the past in the form of the TD350 and the resurgence of a true classic in the form of the TD160HD. However, the last year has seen Thorens re-establish their high end credentials. The £28,000 Jubilee may be a strictly limited edition to celebrate the company's 125th anniversary, but the TD550 is here to stay, and sits firmly at the pinnacle of the Thorens range.

In many ways the TD550 looks like a buffed up TD350 that has been through a photocopier with the 'Enlarge' button pressed, but it is "It is great to see a resurgent Thorens back with a vengeance - and not before time...."
solid lid, expertly shaped to match
the front curvature of the plinth.

The deck's subchassis is
suspended, as per so many classic
Thorens designs, and is easily
adjustable from the top of the
plinth for level courtesy of three
beautiful chrome adjustment
knobs. The suspended armboard
is made from carbon fibre and,
as might be suspected from the
deck's 190x525x415mm (-lxWxD)
dimensions, it will accommodate
arms up to a foot in length. SME and
Ortofon arms are available pre-fitted,
but our review sample came with a
twelve inch Thorens TP125SE. This
is a brand new item, designed and
manufactured for Thorens by Da
Vinci Audio Labs in Switzerland and
featuring a carbon fibre arm tube,
aluminium bearing block, double
gimballed ruby bearings and magnetic
anti-skating.

Both deck and arm are superbly
finished and not difficult to set up.
The multi-language manual is clear
and concise, and I had the TD550
set up with cartridge fitted and a
record playing within half an hour
or so.

SOUND QUALITY
As I mentioned in my review of
the Roksan Xerxes 20Plus last
month, listening to a capable and
well set up high end turntable is a
profound experience and, before
the first track I chose had ended,
I knew that I was in the presence
of another vinyl great. The massive
TD550 turntable once again did
a more effective job than our
builders at removing the walls of
my listening room and spreading the
music out in a way that makes you
glad to be alive.

Incredibly stable and self-assured
like only the best turntables are,
the deck provided a rock-solid
Discover more detail, more ambience, more music, more involvement when you improve the source in your system.

Super Sources

Start with the source – as true today as ever when you want to upgrade. Better amplifiers, better cabling and even better speakers will give you more information but you'll also hear the source's faults more clearly. You've spent money but lost enjoyment.

We regard highly Clearaudio vinyl components, from the "Plus" series rechargeable battery-driven phono stages to the upgradeable Solution or Champion turntables. Expect stunning results from about £2500 for a complete Clearaudio package.

Vinyl lovers tend to denigrate CD but then we find they often have rather "ordinary" players – a self-fulfilling situation, a vicious circle.

We are vastly impressed with the Esoteric X-05 CD and SACD player with TEAC's superb VMK-5 "turntable" transport that clamps the disc for better data reading. "The X-05 achieves the fine balancing act of revealing what is on the disc, without exaggerating the unpleasant aspects of poorly recorded discs." Hi-Fi Choice

Bel Canto's CD-2 and separate DAC3 also bring hope to CD-haters with the unforced, natural sound common to the whole Bel Canto range – from a designer of triode valve amps!

Both digital units (about £2k each) have the output to drive power amps direct. So – dump the preamp, save and enjoy!

Customers say we make some of the best sounds they have ever heard, so you know we can do the same in your home. Our advice will take account of your best components and guide you where change is needed, in stages you can afford. You avoid expensive mistakes, enjoy music along the way and save money in the long run.

Just listen and you'll know


Cables: Chord Co., DNM, Kubala Sosna, Nordost, Siltech, Vertex AQ.

Mains: Vertex AQ. Supports: Arcadia, Stands Unique, Vertex AQ.

01225 874728 or lo-call 0845 230 7570
rendition of the compressed studio recording that is Nelly Furtado's 'Say it Right', the soundstage stretching off into the distance like I have never heard before. The lady's vocals had form, scale and timbre, and each backing element to the track occupied a solid and focused space behind her.

Most surprising was the glockenspiel being tapped which came out of the depths to step right up to the loudspeakers. The turntable is very speed-stable, our measurements show, explaining the crisp, focused and punchy basslines. More intricate low notes from double basses also came through with feeling, alacrity and punchy basslines.

As a result, I was left with music, pure and simple; Antonio Forcione's guitar offered depth, warmth and the kind of atmospheric decay that turns a well recorded instrument into what seems to be a truly real one, sat right in between the loudspeakers. Feist's '1,2,3,4' bounded along with the enthusiasm of an excited puppy and Alison Goldfrapp seemed to be kneeling on the floor in front of me when I Chose to spin 'Lovely Head' from her first album, 'Felt Mountain'. Where I was used to hearing clear percussion, or plucked guitars, I was now hearing a wooden stick, tapping a metal cymbal, and clearly a plastic plectrum plucking life into a metallic guitar string. At all times, the TD550 offered scale, insight and atmospherics to everything I threw at it, highlighting the limitations of poor recordings, but without hammering home their deficiencies, and making good recordings soar effortlessly from my loudspeakers.

"the TD550 is stable and self-assured as only the best turntables are..."

CONCLUSION

There's no doubt in my mind that the new Thorens TD550 turntable is one of the very best at the price, offering a commandingly stable rendition of the music with smoothness, sweetness and insight in equal measure. It is also beautifully built, sumptuously finished and surprisingly easy to set up. As such, it's a worthy modern flagship for this illustrious company. However, whilst the TP125SE tonearm auditioned well on this turntable, we still have reservations about it in isolation due to some obvious resonance modes, and as such would have to give this a qualified recommendation. Overall, it's great to see a bold, resurgent Thorens back with a vengeance - and not before time.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

WOW & FLUTTER

ARM VIBRATION

VERDICT

Magnificently designed turntable that sounds like few others, but tonearm has limitations.

THORENS TD550/TP125SE £5,250/£4,000 UKD 0 +44(0)1753 652669 www.ukd.co.uk

FOR

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- great bass authority
- sweet top end
- build and finish

AGAINST

- resonant arm tube
- price
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Brothers In Arms

Adam Smith checks out Jelco's new flagship SA-750D tonearm...

Right then, let's start out with a quick quiz. Mobile phones away, please, no conferring and fingers on buzzers. "What links Acoustic Research, Revolver, Avid, Acoustic Signature, London Acoustical Developments, Sumiko, Audioquest, Project and Ariston?" If you're thinking turntables, very good — award yourself a point. Now to part two — "Who links all the above names?" Now, if you said 'Adam Smith', because I just mentioned them all in the same review, then frankly you're not really trying. However, if you said "Jelco" then go to the top of the class!

Jelco is a fascinating company, simply because it has been so influential yet remains largely unknown in the hi-fi world. In fact, the Jelco Ichikawa Jewel Company has a history stretching back to 1920 and Ichikawa-san himself holds a 1977 patent for a 'Pick-up arm rotary pivot bearing structure ("One Point Cross Suspension System")! This is clearly a company that knows their tonearms and deserves far more than to be dismissed as merely an OEM source of arms for eighties turntables.

Not only did the classic and sought-after Sumiko MMT and Audioquest PT9 models roll out of the Jelco factory, but there are a couple of current models from one or two prestigious manufacturers that are made there — possibly the distributors would rather you didn't know this, so my lips are sealed!

In a reaction to the renewed interest in vinyl however, Jelco have recently introduced a new model bearing their own name. Until now, their range was twofold — the SA-250ST straight arm, as featured on the Revolver Replay and Avid Diva II decks, and the S-shaped version of it, the SA-250, which can be found on decks from the likes of TW Acoustic. However, they recently upped their game somewhat and it appears that I was not the only person to sit up and shout 'I recognise that!' when they unveiled the SA-750D. Now I have heard that, although very well-meaning and helpful, Jelco are not the easiest company to deal with, mainly due to the language barrier, but several people have persevered and now, thanks to Dave Cawley at Sumiko was quite clear as soon as I unpacked the SA-750D, but it has clearly evolved. Most obvious is that the arm has a common feature of older Jelco designs, the oil damping pot on top of the horizontal bearing. Jelco supply a pot of oil and give a guide to topping up and this can pay dividends in terms of damping out arm resonances and adding a modicum of extra control to more wayward cartridges. Other than this, the arm has Jelco's patented one point cross suspension system and comes complete with a detachable and sturdy SME-style headshell, which makes cartridge fitment nice and easy. Bias is applied by a rotary spring control, and the SA-750D mounts using a single 30mm diameter mounting hole — a solid base secured by three bolts is supplied.

The arm comes complete with the basics, namely a full-size paper mounting template and another "I was taken aback at its sophisticated performance and sheer musicality..."

Sound Hi-Fi, a batch of SA-750Ds have made it to the UK. Not only did Dave supply a sample for review but he also trusted me with a recent eBay acquisition of his, namely a mint Sumiko MMT [see BOX].

The family resemblance to the paper sheet, which serves as an all-in-one technical drawing/specification sheet/instruction manual — basic but effective enough. Finally, the most notable aspect of the arm is its glorious finish - an absolutely pristine dark chrome plate. The old MMT is
no slouch in style terms, thanks to its smart matt black finish, but the SA-750D definitely trumps it. As to actual build quality, regular readers will know that I have long used SME as a benchmark, but if I were them, I'd be getting nervous, as Jelco are creeping up. Finally, Sound Hi-Fi also supplied a Jelco arm lead — a very solidly constructed item using gold plated connectors and high quality OFC cable for around £85 for a version with phono plugs (straight or right-angled arm connectors are available) or £125 for versions with balanced XLRs.

SOUND QUALITY

At the Jelco's £400 price point there are two main competitors. First is a favourite of mine, the Roksan Nima unipivot and the other is actually more than one item, namely hot-rodded Rega variants from the likes of Michell (TecnoArm), Origin Live and Audio Origami. Sonically these are quite different and so I was keen to see how the SA-750D would fit in. The answer was intriguing...

Knowing the cheaper SA-250 variants are very fluid performers I was pleased to hear that the SA-750D upheld the family tradition but even I was not prepared for the sheer sophistication that the top model in the range brings. I have been playing with a Goldring 2500 cartridge for the past few months and it is an excellent performer but is more sensitive than many designs I have come across in terms of arm matching. Most recently it has been sat in my Audio Origami'd Helius Aureus Gold arm, but I gradually came to the conclusion that the two did not really gel. However, in the SA-750D, the sounds coming from the Goldring were nothing short of a revelation, and it gave truly the best performance I have heard from a MC- style insight and clarity, but it is a smooth yet insightful performer, and emotion-packed performance. Not a hint of splash ever passed its output plugs, but the Jelco was always in control of the finest top end details lurking within the depths of the mix. Tarja Turunen's vocals from Nightwish's 'Century Child' had the hairs on the back of my neck standing up and spinning Nick Drake's beautiful 'Northern Sky' had me sniffling. Regular readers will know that emotion and insight is where I feel the many Rega-based designs fall down, no matter how 'turbocharged' they are. Where they do score however, is in terms of bass dynamics and sheer low end alacrity and I have to say that the likes of the TecnoArm does still come out on top here, although I feel the differences are subtle and you would definitely have to go looking for them.

Swapping MM for MC and changing the Goldring for my Audio Technica AT-OC9MLII was a nice easy job, thanks to that detachable headshell. Suitably set up, the good things just kept on coming from the SA-750D and it proved that a high MC design held no fears for it. The overall nature of the sound remained, with the AT adding a fine dose of MC-style insight and clarity, but it showed that the arm's character is a strong yet neutral one and it is one that seems merely to be fine-tuned by your choice of cartridge. I actually spent a whole evening swapping in and out a few more that were rattling round in the Smith vinyl toolbox and at no time did I catch it out - even a rather laid back Audio Technica AT-440MLa seemed to come out of its shell by just the right amount.

Above all, however, this consistent nature that the Jelco possessed did not result in a dominant sonic signature. In fact, I would say that the SA-750D's most notable feature is in the way it simply does not get in the way of the music. Obviously when reviewing, it is my job to try and listen to the item I am reviewing but with the Jelco I found it incredibly easy to 'tune it out', sit back and really enjoy what I was listening to.

CONCLUSION

I had a feeling I might like the Jelco SA-750D, but ended up quite taken aback at its sophisticated performance and sheer musicality. It is an easy arm to get to the best from, simple to set up and beautifully built. However, what most surprised me with this review was the discovery that the SA-750D is only a little dearer than the SA-250 and SA-250ST. Excellent performers though these two designs are, I cannot help but feel that the extra hundred pounds or so buys you a sonic improvement that sounds much more. On this basis, not only is the Jelco SA-750D a very capable tonearm but also something of a bargain. Let's hope the likes of Sound Hi-Fi can keep the supply lines open.

**VERDICT**

Jelco may be best known for budget OEM arms, but the silky smooth SA-750D shows they can mix it in the higher echelons with ease.

**JELCO SA-750D**

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<td>Naim SuperNait amplifier</td>
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<td>Modified Ferrograph S1 loudspeakers</td>
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**AGAINST**

- nothing at the price

**FOR**

- sonic uniformity
- engaging, revealing nature
- svelte musicality
- build and finish
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Celestite Delon 44 speaker: Boxed. excellent. £149 Quad F3L63's Isle serviced. Excellent cond. Black £109

Nititor Audio R252 speakers. Teak finish. £59 Kef Coda 7. Black finish. Fitted & mint

B&W CDM7SE floorstears. Mint bxd. Red ash. £549 Sarah OA4 eminidirestional weal: Mike £149


• • • LAD 3 CD player and remote. Ex condition. £199

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QUAD ESL-57

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Plugging in to your computer via its Universal Serial Bus output, Pro-Ject's Debut III/Phono USB turntable is a handy budget transcribing tool, says Andrew Harrison...

**Bus Station**

The Pro-Ject Debut turntable is a solid plinth design, closely resembling the eighties-vintage audiophile starter Rega Planar 2 by using a single slab of MDF for its plinth supported on four soft rubber feet. In contrast to the more colourful glossy options found on the standard-trim Debut, it's only finished in a choice of either matt black or silver paint.

A small AC synchronous motor is supported on a rubber trapeze, and a belt drives a plastic inner platter, with a pressed-steel outer platter sitting on top. To cushion a record and damp the ringing platter, Pro-Ject provide a thin black felt mat. Unusually, the main metallic platter is not the full foot across, but only 11 inches. This makes an LP look somewhat oversized when placed on top and viewed from the side.

The fitted Pro-Ject 8.6 tonearm is a smart-looking affair, using a parallel-sided alloy tube cramped flat at one end to support the cartridge. Improved sapphire bearings are said to be an addition to the tonearm on its latest Debut III host. It's immaculately finished in satin black, and works smoothly from an accurate lift/lower cueing arm. For anti-skate compensation, we get the classic weight and thread setup to maintain required bias. The cartridge ready-mounted is an Ortofon OM5E, running 1.75g as optimal downforce.

So far, so conventional for a Debut. But over the years the basic deck has seen various extra fittings and trimmings to lift its presence, from onboard quartz-locked power supplies to auto arm-lift devices which raise the needle from the record at the end of side on what is, otherwise, a fully manual turntable.

The Debut III/Phono USB Phono gets two additions for its £230 package price. First, and perhaps most useful when it comes to adding a turntable to a modern amplifier, there's the onboard phono stage. But the headline news is the USB digital output. Soldered on the reverse of the same little circuit board as the RIAA phono amp is an analogue-to-digital converter feeding a USB port.

All digital functions are handled by this single integrated circuit, a Burr-Brown PCM2904. This USB codec chip digitises the line-level output from the phono stage and pipes it out through a USB Type B socket, the same as found on most printers, for example. There's even the necessary USB lead supplied in the box to make the connection, which is more than can be said for most printers sold these days. You need only plug this into a Windows PC or Mac, and the computer will recognise the Debut as an external audio device. The complete deck is powered by a small external 16V wall transformer. This supplies all the deck's power requirements for the AC motor, the phono stage, and the A-D converter.

The first point to note is that a USB-connected Debut will not directly play music through your PC as if you had connected, say, an
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<td>Audio Note Zero pre-amp</td>
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### PRICING

*Manufacturers warranty. List price £11,950. Offered for only £6995.*

**PRE-AMPS:**

- EAR 834L pre-amp: £395
- Audio Note Zero pre-amp (ex demo): £395
- Proceed PM pre-amp: £295

**CD PLAYERS & TRANSPORTS:**

- Meridian 506 20 bit CD player, immaculate: £295
- Accuphase DP 65 CD player: £395
- Vinyl Arts 1 Reference CD transport with Accustic Arts Reference Tube DAC 11 SE: £395

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- Sony AM/FM ST-SE370 Tuner: £75
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iPod. With the turntable physically connected, you’ll need to install software to make recordings. This is not to be confused with installing drivers – both Windows XP and Macintosh OS X operating systems will acknowledge the deck’s presence without any additional drivers. But in order to play through the computer, or record music to it, you’ll need digital audio recording software. Pro-Ject Audio doesn’t provide this software in the box but instead advises that you download the free open-source Audacity program from www.audacity.sourceforge.net. This is available for Windows, Mac and Linux platforms, and while not the slickest program on the market, it can get the job done once you’ve learnt your way around the interface.

There’s no need to manually set record levels, since this has already been lined-up in Pro-Ject’s combined phono stage/A-D converter underslung box. The trickiest part of the software interface is probably negotiating the monitoring before you’re ready to click ‘Record’. First set your preferred input device as ‘USB Audio CODEC’ (this is how your computer will ‘see’ this USB turntable) in Audacity’s Preferences settings. Then from Audacity’s drop-down menu labelled Transport, you need to enable Software Playthrough, to hear what the deck is playing. Or, once the program is already busily recording, you should automatically hear this piped through your computer speakers.

In order to minimise digital distortions caused by unnecessary sample-rate conversion, it’s wise to ensure that Audacity is set up to record at the same native sample frequency as the Debut III, that is, 44.1kHz. But you can raise the bit depth from the deck’s inherent 16-bit output, and record at 32bit floating. The benefits of this are maintaining available 16-bit resolution if you should make edits and tweaks to the recorded audio later.

You can even compress 16-bit WAV files to MP3 within Audacity. To commit this heresy to innocent vinyl, you will need to download a separate LAME encoder plug-in (linked on Audacity website) and follow instructions to install within the program.

**SOUND QUALITY**

Set up on a stable table and connected via its line-level outputs, the new Debut III plays records with ease, requiring little assembling or fiddling before its raring to go. The cartridge is already fitted and aligned so you need only remove a couple of transist screws that secure the rubber-band suspended motor, drop on the outer platter and set the counterweight and bias weights.

One issue I did encounter was a slightly higher than expected electrical hum level. This was heard through both analogue and USB digital outputs, and with the help of Audacity the background noise could be visually monitored, evident at around -54dB relative to full-scale 0dBFS output. That meant that with the system amplifier volume turned up, faint hum could be heard just below the music in quiet passages of orchestral music, for example. Environmental factors can’t be entirely ruled out, although I’ve not encountered the same issue with other turntables in the same room.

A second sample of the deck had identical-level quiet hum, which would prove an annoyance to listeners looking for pin-drop silence.

The Debut III doesn’t try to dazzle you with limitless bass power and treble extension. There’s a good sense of warmth and drive in the bass, but it’s contained and well-damped. The Ortofon cartridge may be a budget moving-magnet yet it can track well enough to show you what’s happening on the record. Surface noise will also be higher than with more expensive offerings.

After a spell of listening to digital audio from CD, lossless WAV and DVD, it’s always a pleasant surprise to come back to the sound of even a budget vinyl player, to hear how much music is hidden in the LP. There’s that sense of openness in the midrange and treble, for example, which the Debut III showed aplenty, such that voices, guitars and strings always sounded unforced and in keeping with the rest of the music.

Playing through Rachmaninov’s Third Piano Concerto, the piano sat stably in place amidst the orchestra, yet from the stereo miking of the 1973 Philips recording you could still pick out the pianist Orazzo’s movements through the octaves by the finely drawn image placement, left to right, in the soundstage. Crucially, and without the aid of additional motor power supplies, speed was fixed rigidly with no hint of drift, wow nor flutter. Piano tone was rounded off at the top but music remained superbly timed and with effortless flow. On these critical grounds alone the Debut deserves attention.

Where the Debut III loses out to more upmarket offerings is in its slight congestion and overlapping of sounds, so that if you’re trying to hear into the corners of a recording you find one instrument may subtly occlude another. So somewhat veiled, yes, but not in such a way that you’ll feel especially musically shortchanged. In the fine art of component balance, Pro-Ject has successfully tuned the complete turntable/arm/cartridge system so that no distracting colorations will upset your day.

Used as a digital transcription deck, the Debut III performed well too, although inevitably recordings were limited by the narrower window of the digital sampling format. Comparing a live analogue feed with one that had been through a 16-bit/44.1kHz A-D and D-A process, even using reference level DACs, I could hear some truncation and compression of the soundfield. For more earnest archivers of the black plastic, a better solution would be to find a quiet deck with better resolving cartridge, hooked up to a sound card capable of recording at least 20bit/96kHz resolution.

**CONCLUSION**

The new Debut III is the smartest looking yet with its superbly finished tonearm and an interesting addition to the line. It makes the chore of getting vinyl into a more transporatable digital medium that much easier. In sonic terms, the core deck has an enviable balance of virtues which means that while it’s far from the last word in vinyl playback, there’s no single vice that stands out to interrupt your listening enjoyment.

VERDICT

Convenient and musically enjoyable solution for basic archiving of vinyl to computer, but some rough edges.

**PRO-JECK DEBUT III/PHONO USB**

- Lightweight, compact
- Unpretentious sound quality
- Easy of use

**AGAINST**

- middling digital converter
- susceptible to faint hum

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Showtime

Japan is a land of many surprises, and its leading hi-fi event – the Tokyo International Audio Show – is no exception. Roving reporter Robert Kelly is your guide...

Tokyo’s International Audio show is the highlight of the Japanese high-end audio calendar, when audiophiles find out what new goodies the main audio importers and domestic manufacturers have for them. Indeed, recently some of the major Japanese high-end makers have been participating seriously, making it an illuminating snapshot of the Japanese high-end market in general. The show was held at the centrally located Tokyo International Forum, and the building boasts some very interesting architecture in its roof [pictured right], hence its other name, "the boat".

AIRTIGHT
Japanese maker Airtight demonstrated their monster ATM-2001 class A valve mono blocks. Each channel uses no less than twelve 6550 valves and is rated at 338W into 8 ohms! This is totally point-to-point wired and the amplifier and power supply are housed in separate beautifully finished aluminium chassis. Price is a hefty ¥3,150,000 a pair, or £22,500...

LUXMAN
Luxman, the company where Britain’s own Tim de Paravicini spent many years, showed several new products. Their SQ-38u is an EL34 based 30W integrated amplifier with a MM/MC phono input and four line inputs and priced at ¥360,000 (£2,571). It is very attractively styled, in the manner of the Golden Age of audio! Also launched was their E-200 phono preamp which has two separate inputs and caters for MM and high and low output MC cartridges. It’s priced at a very reasonable ¥98,000 (£700).

ACCUPHASE
This renowned high end specialist brand showed their first phono preamplifier, the C27. This has three inputs, gain settings for MM and high and low output MC cartridges and eight load impedance settings. They also showed their new DP-600 SACD player, which uses their Multiple Double Speed DAC, and DP-400 CD player.

EMT
Japanese audiophiles have always had a fascination with professional products. Turntables from the German professional maker EMT are highly prized here and this accounts for the interest in the EMT 986 professional CD player. This is loaded with features that are only of use to professionals, but this simply makes it more attractive to the Japanese audiophile!

CEC’s minimalist new CD3800 represents the other end of the spectrum - a CD player with AES, Toslink, SPDIF and USB digital inputs.
CARTRIDGE SELECTION

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<td>Elektra</td>
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<td>1012 GX</td>
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<td>Audio Technica</td>
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HEADPHONE SELECTION

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<td>Grado Prestige SR-60</td>
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<td>Goldring DR 50</td>
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<td>DR 100</td>
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<td>Active Noise Reduction</td>
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ITEMS EX STOCK DELIVERY BY RETURN OTHERWISE 3 - 10 DAYS

HI FI ACCESSORIES

| ARTcessories USB Phone Plus ProAmp | £85 |
| Artisan+ Super Eustatic Brush | £114 |
| Swiss Quality Diamond Stylus | £17 |
| Akai AN 5, 60                     | £13 |
| Ank AN 70                        | £13 |
| Ahwa AN11                       | £13 |
| Dual DN 145 E, DN 165 E         | £17 |
| JVC D755, 116                   | £13 |
| National EPS 24, P 30, P 33 D   | £13 |
| Ortofon FF15/VMS20, BL, DSM/1040/20| £17 |
| Pioneer PH 210/220/240           | £13 |
| Shure N75C, N75-5, SC33C        | £13 |
| HDJ 150, 250                    | £13 |
| Sony ND 142/155, G62344         | £13 |
| Stanton Q 885 EEE               | £21 |

REPLACEMENT STYLIS

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<td>£21</td>
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A new lease of life for your Musical Fidelity amp, CD or DAC.

To upgrade your hi-fi without losing a penny in part exchanges, book in for a factory tune up from Musical Fidelity. We carry out an exhaustive list of upgrades that gives well-used gear a new lease of life and means your favourite gear can perform as never before.

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Audiomachina

The Maestro is the second model from this American brand, and comprises two enclosures, each machined from a solid block of aerospace aluminium. The lower enclosure houses an active bass system, while the upper enclosure houses a passive midband/high frequency system. This was producing one of the best sounds in the show - dynamic and detailed with excellent imaging.

VPi

Another interesting turntable on display was the VPI HR-X, which uses two motors to drive a 5.5kg flywheel at 300 rpm, which then drives the platter. In addition it has a separate, massive, synthesised AC power source with a variable speed adjustment. A refreshing approach to the issue of belt drive speed stability, we say!

Davone

The Davone Rithm loudspeaker hails from Denmark. The intriguing cabinet shape is produced by gluing together a large number of thin layers of wood using techniques taken from the furniture industry. This construction combined with the unique shape is intended to produce a non-resonant structure with minimal internal reflections. It uses a 1 inch dome tweeter mounted coaxially with an 8 inch woofer - and sounds as impressive as it looks!

Goldmund

...but the prize for the most unforgettable product of the show goes to the Goldmund Telos 5000 monoblock power amplifiers. They can accept digital as well as analogue inputs, use 72 power devices per channel, weigh 260kg each and can deliver 5,000W RMS continuously into 2 ohms - enough to weld very large bits of metal together. The price is ¥38,000,000 a pair (€271,462), which is the cost of a small apartment here. Understandably only twenty pairs will be made. My spy tells me they have already sold two sets in Hong Kong and another two are under offer!

Well Tempered

The Amadeus GT is the budget model from this line of excellent turntables. The original fishing line supported unipivot arm has been refined over the years and on the simplified version fitted to this player, the damper paddle looks suspiciously like it has been made from a golf ball! One wonders how many different types they listened to during development?

Esoteric

Japan digital specialists Esoteric showed a new phono preamplifier in the shape of the E-03. This has two inputs; one for MC cartridges only and the other for MC and MM cartridges. Each input has a comprehensive range of load impedance settings and interestingly there is also a demagnetiser function for each input...

Viola

Viola showed their new Legacy 100W Class A solid state amplifier. Unusually, it uses an output transformer enabling it to deliver full power into 8, 4 or 2 ohms. It was the last design by the legendary US designer Tom Colangelo who sadly died last year. Tom worked on all the Cello designs and much of the early Mark Levinson products. The Legacy was inspired by his original ML2. The Legacy showed superb bass control and transparency and is a fitting memorial to a fine engineer.

Ayre

To my eyes at least, the most gorgeous product at the show was surely the Ayre Acoustics KX-R preamplifier. Housed is a chassis machined from a solid block of aluminium, it showed an exceptional build standard. The volume controls use stepped attenuators of their own manufacture driven remotely from the front panel control by a motor system. It is easy to see why Ayre is becoming so popular around the world...
DISTRIBUTORS OF TANNOW PRESTIGE LOUDSPEAKERS TRADE-IN WELCOME!!

- AMPS, EX-DEMO £1,700
- NU-FORCE IA7 V9 REFERENCE 9V2 SPECIAL
- NU-FORCE P9 REFERENCE 9V2 SPECIAL EDMON N700
- NU-FORCE IA7 V9 REFERENCE 9V2 SPECIAL EDMON N700
- NU-FORCE P9 REFERENCE 9V2 SPECIAL EDMON N700
- NU-FORCE IA7 V9 REFERENCE 9V2 SPECIAL EDMON N700
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Precision engineering
A passion for the music

Ortofon Cartridges
at last you will
find all the music in your vinyl
**Happy New Year from Icon Audio of Leicester**

**Real Hi End Hi Fi to suit all pockets!**

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**Our New Speaker “Made For Valves”**

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Virtually all modern speakers are designed for transistor amplifiers. This means that they often don’t “hit the mark” when using valves. Our MFV 3 was designed and tested exclusively using valves, using our experience of making a wide range of Push-Pull and Single Ended valve amplifiers. An ideal partner to tubes, you will hear rich deep bass, wonderful lucid mid-range and smooth transparent treble. We use custom designed doped woven fibre bass/midrange cones with long life neoprene roll surrounds, superb silk dome tweeter, and simple high quality crossover, and long fibre MDF cabinets. Matched veneers, with a choice of dark walnut or light cherry finishes. Fully Bi-wireable, complete with plinth, spikes (and cover) we are confident that the MFV 3 will delight your ears on a wide range of music. Full leaflet on iconaudio.com or ask for a leaflet by post.

Only £979.00 per pair

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**100w Mono-Blocks**

*A FINE INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF SERIOUS TUBE POWER*

Hi Fi World
April 2008

**Powerful, Beautiful, and Versatile!**

KT88/6550 or KT90

Smooth, precise and powerful. Without any harshness. Massive 100w headroom means you can comfortably drive speakers normally out of reach of most valve amps. Hand wired “Point to Point”. Hand wound transformers. Will exceed the performance of many other brands. Check our specification: Incredible 100 watts (28.3v @ 8Ω). New all valve design by David Shaw. Low & high sensitivity means Can be passive or pre-amp driven. Triode driver stage using excellent 6SN7/6SL7 valves. Silver audio cable. Switchable to 50w Triode output. Choke PSU. Beautiful stainless steel and Plexiglas cover included. Vital warm-up/Standby facility.

From £1,799 pair complete (Various upgrades available)

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**Passive Pre-amp**

(Featured in Hi Fi World)

4 inputs, tape loop. Alps Blue Pot, silver Teflon cable

Gold plated terminals, ideal for Leak, QUAD Only £244.00

NEW REMOTE CONTROL VERSION £299.95

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**Fabulous New MB 845s!**

“Amongst the best amplifiers I have ever heard...Awesome dynamics and power! High Drama. Superb Value”

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These extraordinary mono blocks are not for girls! They are big, brutal and uncompromising. At 90+90 watts of pure triode magic they were designed to go into sonic territory inaccessible by 300Bs or KT86s. The 1931 RCA huge power triode is still without equal, partnered with the superb 1941 6SN7/6SL7s using only 3 stages. Inspired by the QUAD! They are the answer to anyone jaded by their present system.

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Based on our award winning £900 Stereo 40. “Entry level” does not have to mean low power or quality! Inspired by “Leak”. Hand crafted “Point to Point” wiring. Versatile: can use 6L6, EL34, KT66 or KT88s. Beautiful stainless steel and Plexiglas cover included. Limited offer of free EL34 upgrade worth £100

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**LA4 Line pre-amp**

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Hi Fi News July 2006

Valve rectification 2x EZ81
Twin choke smoothing.
All triode design 3x 6SN7
Remote control included
Four inputs plus tape loop
High & low level outputs
Will match any power amp

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Avid Angus, chrome ex demo as new
Alphason Opal arm, excellent
Cleoroudio Performance, o/w arm & cartridge ex dem, superb!
Aesthetix Rheo phono, the best we've ever heard
4r1storl R(380 ex rondIrlon
Transfiguration Aria, brand new end of line 499
Technics SLI210 mk2, various from
Michell Tecnoorm, nr mint
Linn LP12, Ittok LVII and K18, excellent
Heybrook TI2 c/w Ann Basik LVX
Graham Phantom, ex demo, excellent boxed
AVI Lab Series, mint boxed used bargain
Audio Analogue Rossini Valve ( d player, mint boxed
Accuphose DP75V, analogue cord, excellent boxed
Omens TD850/RB300, excellent boxed
Systemdek II ( biscuit tin), AD( arm, vgc
SME Model 10, excellent boxed
Roksan Radius, acrylic, mint boxed
Roksan DAS2, as new boxed with power supply
Roksan Xerxes Reference Power supply, nr mint boxed
Roksan TMSI.5, and OSA, SME cut, boxed
Rego P3, in block
Origin Live Silver, mint boxed new version,
Ann  tinto,  excellent boxed
Koetsu Red K Signature, mint
Marontz CD6000 KI Signature excellent with remote
Esoteric P-03Uni/D-03, nr mint boxed, absolutely stunning
Cyrus DAD3Q24, excellent
(sien  Fog v2, in silver with Soft upsampling board, BARGAIN!
Chord Signature RCA and Digital available
Theta TLC and power supply
Shonling ( 01300 Omega Drive, fully boxed and complete
Shanling CDT80, excellent
Roksan Kandy 13, nr mini ex demo unit
Musical Fidelity A308CR ( D, excellent, remote, box
Morantz CD63se KI Signature excellent boxed
Linn Korik, y lote  version ex boxed
Krell CD DSP Top loader, very stylish sweet sounding player
Esoteric X.01, nr mint boxed, absolutely stunning
Unison Research Unico CD, excellent
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Hi Fi News - Oct 08
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REVOLVER RW45i speakers, light cherry. Boxed and immaculate. £525 ono. 2 x 2m Chord Signature speaker cables. Boxed and immaculate. £130 ono. 01639 641043

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CLASSIQUE SOUNDS (Paul Greenfield, Leicester) ESL-57s restored, re Comprehensive loudspeaker systems, PA, power loudspeaker systems. Tel: 01708 474 344

LOCKWOOD AUDIO (London) Tannoy loudspeaker parts, restoration and repair. Also Ejos and TDL loudspeakers. Tel: 020 8 864 8008 www.lockwoodaudio.co.uk

LORICRAFT AUDIO (Jerry O’Sullivan, Bucks) Garrard 301/401 and their own S01 repair services and service. Tel: 0188 7272867 www.garrard301.com

OCTAVE AUDIOWOODWORKING (Bristol) Unit 2, 16 Midland Street, St Phillips, Bristol. Tel: 0117 925 6015 www.octave-aw.co.uk

FREE READER CLASSIFIEDS

Audio analogue Puccini special edition integrated amplifier. 50 w/ch. Original 1997 model, owned from new. Modified by Audiocon. £450. Tel: Mike 01323 645317


NOTTINGHAM ANALOGUE HyperSpace record deck with Hadcock GH242 Special Edition Arm and giant-killing Music Maker cartridge. A truly stunning combination, at less than half original cost. £1650. 07957303634 jc@jonnythompson.co.uk
**NEXT MONTH**

As the winter months drag by at a glacial pace, why not seek solace in the March issue of Hi-Fi World magazine? You'll be comforted by our review of EAR's superb 868PL/890 valve pre-power combination (pictured), and warmed by our sizzling integrated amplifier supertest with the latest and greatest from Cambridge Audio, Exposure, Leema, Marantz, Naim, Roksan and Yamaha. Then there's the dazzling Avid Acutus turntable to read all about, and Neat's unusual MFS Ultimatum loudspeakers — plus so much more! Here's some of what we hope to bring you:

- **MS MEZZO 6, KEF IQ70 & B&W 683 LOUDSPEAKERS**
- **OLDE WORLDE: DUNLOP SYSTEMDEK TURNTABLE**
- **MUSICAL FIDELITY V-DAC DIGITAL CONVERTOR**
- **EAR 868PL/EAR 890 PRE-POWER AMPLIFIERS**
- **NEAT ULTIMATIM MFS LOUDSPEAKERS**
- **YAMAMOTO YC390S MC CARTRIDGE**
- **ONKYO TX-NR906 AV RECEIVER**
- **PIONEER PD-D9 SACD PLAYER**
- **YINPULI T6 LOUDSPEAKERS**
- **PMC GB1 LOUDSPEAKERS**
- **AVID ACUTUS TURNTABLE**
- **ROKSAN K2 CD PLAYER**
- **BENT X PREAMPLIFIER**
- **MYRYAD MI SYSTEM**

**PICK UP THE MARCH 2009 ISSUE OF HI-FI WORLD ON SALE JANUARY 30TH, OR SUBSCRIBE AND GET IT DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR:** p32
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Hi-Fi World Free Readers Ads,
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**FREE READER CLASSIFIED ADS COPY DEADLINES**

MARCH 2009 - 5TH JANUARY
APRIL 2009 - 3RD FEBRUARY
What a mighty collection this 6CD box set is, and what ripples it created when it was launched in 1997 - amongst the public, industry and fellow musicians and artists. Created by the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings label, it staggered the world famous museum who had previously never enjoyed the gold record sales this Grammy winning box set provided. The box set itself highlighted a lost culture of American folk featuring names like the Alabama Sacred Harp Singers, Uncle Dave Macon, Bascom Lamar Lunsford and Hoyt Ming & his Pep-Steppers.

Senior archivist for the museum, Jeff Place, remembers the critical historical background for the box set itself. "The project started off with Harry Smith, a rather eccentric, beatnik character - even before there were any beatniks around. He tended to be rather obsessive about anything he took on and, at that time, he was collecting records. In this case, ethnic, folk records and so on."

Smith did this around the WW2 era, when the US government was melting down shellac discs as part of a project to collect spare raw material for the war effort.

"Because a lot of the discs were being sold for very little money," said Place, "Smith managed to gather thousands of these old 78s. Smith was always a sort of 'down and out' character and someone must have suggested that the Folkways' record label owner, Moses Asch, might be interested in actually buying these 78s from him. Moe suggested that Smith put a record together with them instead." The suggestion was a good one, especially as the LP format was just arriving on the market allowing the formulation of the anthology theme.

The final 'Anthology' records appeared in 1952 on the Folkways label as a series of three, double albums, each themed (i.e.: songs, spirituals and social comment) and each sporting a unique colour behind a standardised artwork. Smith was interested in metaphysics and he considered himself an alchemist. Each release was supposed to be based on the elements of air, water and fire. As such, the covers themselves were coloured appropriately. There was supposed to be a fourth collection (earth) but Harry Smith fell out of the picture before that could be completed.

Along with the packaging, the running order itself was important, Smith took a long time to decide on it. In fact, there are a lot of people who approached this collection, from the world of Fine Arts, who considered the whole project a work of art - not just a great 'mix tape'. This is the reason that the CD box set mimics the six discs and its precise running order.

"People criticised us for that - they said we could have squeezed the music onto four discs. We said we couldn't do that because each LP was considered a distinct piece and you can't put half of side two alongside one without destroying the integrity of the work itself," said Place.

The music itself was a shock. Smith's production was another world: raw, natural, stripped down, this was music from the very heart of the American soil. It also caught the cusp of a general folk revival in the USA and so influenced musicians of the time. The difference, to their ears, was profound, "like listening to mainstream rock'n'roll and then suddenly discovering punk. It was edgy stuff."

Hence, it was the musicians (everyone from Bob Dylan to The Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia), who leapt upon the anthology and started to play the songs from those records, that educated the public about the anthology's content. This led to the cognoscenti actively venturing forth and searching out the obscure musicians on the 'Anthology' (who, during the fifties, were still alive), dragging them to folk festivals and listening, agog. Hence, these previously obscure artists had a tremendous influence on the later folk revival and, ultimately, modern music that has followed since.

When The Smithsonian museum bought the Folkways label, a CD version of the original Anthology was top of the list of tasks. Original 78s were sourced from hardcore collectors in addition to a fair amount of music that had been originally transferred to master tape for the original vinyl version. Most of the time, however, was taken up trying to trace the copyright owners and seek permission to record – an essential task before general sale. "That took us around ten years to complete," said Place. It was worth it. Boy, was it worth it! PR
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