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Powered by music
Nostalgia isn't what it used to be. Once upon a time, we'd hanker after the thaw of leather on willow; and the smell of freshly mown summer lawns. But nowadays we're watching 'how we used to live' TV programmes about the nineteen eighties, smiling affectionately at Sinclair Cs5s, BBC Micros, women in shoulder pads and men in red braces. Not to mention that famous episode of Tomorrow's World when they spread jam over the then new-fangled CD, and amazingly it still played!

It's shocking to think that Compact Disc will soon be thirty years old, and all the more curious that it's still, in the absence of anything else, the de facto music carrier of our time. Still, when a product like the dCS Paganini DAC [see p26] comes along, suddenly I am more comfortable with digital audio. The dCS shows that, given fiendishly clever design, very decent performance can be coaxed from the creaky old 16/44 format.

Still, the Paganini is not inexpensive, and if it's the best sound pound you're looking for, those Tomorrow's World presenters would have been amused to learn that at the end of the first decade of the twenty first century, the value choice is vinyl. Avid's Diva II SP [p11] is a potent weapons-grade musical extraction tool, for around one fifth of the dCS's heady price. They'd also be amazed to learn that one of the best turntables you could buy in 1982 is alive and kicking in 2009. Linn's classic Sondek LPI2 has just got another revision and a profound one too; DC power, no less! See p100.

Yamaha's Soavo 1.1 Piano loudspeaker [p10] would be a veritable ear-opener for our 1982-based time traveller. Using modern cone materials and subtle engineering, it gives a strikingly modern sound, yet one that's svelte and smooth too. I can think of few early eighties speakers that would come close, at any price. It's a sobering reminder that progress can be a good thing.

Indeed this issue's packed with interesting new takes on classic ideas; we tell the TubeTech valve story, made at the old Mullard site [p63], try the latest in a long line of budget loudspeakers in the shape of Wharfedale's Diamond 10.1 [p80] and pit its premium integrated amplifier rivals in this month's supertest [p15]. We've tried hard to make this an issue to remember, so enjoy!

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 & Kjær 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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extremely capable
worth auditing
unremarkable
seriously flawed
keenly priced

verdicts

OUTSTANDING
EXEMPLARY
EXCELLENT
GOOD
MEDIocre
POOR
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David Price auditions Yamaha's freshly revamped floorstanders.

Noel Keywood has a blast with French towers.

Adam Smith listens to new bookshelf gems!

Tony Bolton auditions six of the best sub-£2,000 integrated amplifiers from Cyrus, Icon Audio, Leema, Naim, NuForce and Roksan.

This balanced audiophile preamp gets a workout from David Price.

Noel Keywood is impressed with this fine budget AV receiver.

Salisbury's latest mid-price silver disc player goes for a spin with Adam Smith.

Paul Rigby auditions five iPod docks under £100.

Is the latter worth twice the price of the former? Paul Rigby compares these two new budget CD players.

Neville Roberts reports on a brand new name in valves, from a very old factory!

Noel Keywood explains what we've got to look forward to at the forthcoming Whittlebury hi-fi show.

Paul Rigby with all the latest black plastic releases.

David Price tries the new DC-powered version of this classic transcription turntable.

Noel Keywood finds that size matters with SME's new twelve inch top of the range tonearm.

Adam Smith takes this super new £2,000 turntable for a spin.
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World Radio History
ON AIR

Onkyo has two new entry level components, the A-SVL amplifier and C-S5VL CD/SACD player, both costing £350 each. The former claims 60W per channel and boasts entirely separate, heavyweight transformers for the left/right channels, explaining its hefty 13kg weight. Bi-amping capability is offered, as are wide pitch, gold-plated speaker posts, a headphone jack, motor-driven remote control and defeatable tone controls, along with a 'Direct' facility. The A-SVL is fully compatible with Onkyo's range of iPod/iPhone docks, and it sports optical and coaxial digital inputs which feed a low-jitter, 192kHz/24bit onboard digital to analogue converter (using Burr-Brown's top PCM1796 DAC chips), ideal for those looking to upgrade the performance of an older CD player. There's also a discrete, switchable MM/MC phono stage, allowing a wide variety of cartridges to be partnered.

The new matching C-S5VL CD/SACD player is identically proportioned, and described as "supremely well-equipped". Built to the same standards as the partnering A-SVL amplifier, it incorporates VLSC (Vector Linear Shaping Circuitry) along with a high end Wolfson 192kHz/24bit WM8742 Digital-to-analogue converter, with DSD Bistream support for Super Audio CD playback. The DAC has a multibit sigma-delta architecture to optimise the signal to noise ratio, and has been configured to allow owners to pick from five different digital filter settings (for CD) plus four settings for SACD (plus DSD Direct). To keep timing errors to a minimum Onkyo has paid particular attention to the clocking mechanism. The crystal oscillators normally employed in such players, for instance, can often be prone to deviation with changes in temperature. The C-S5VL is thermally regulated to prevent such variances. For more information on these products, click on www.onkyo.com.

MORE METALLICA

Artisan Silver Cables have launched two new speaker wires, called Silver Dream and Ultimate Silver Dream, designed to complement their range of pure silver interconnects. Pure solid 16AWG (0.6mm) silver conductors are used, with each conductor individually insulated with Teflon. The Silver Dream version uses 8 conductors per speaker, while the Ultimate variant doubles this. They can be specified terminated with silver-plated spades, or banana plugs, or unterminated. Introductory prices range from just £160 for a one metre unterminated 8-way Silver Dream pair, to £850 for a 3.5 metre terminated 16-way Ultimate Silver Dream pair. For more information, see www.artisansilvercables.com.

SLINKY

The £140 InSlink comes from the newly formed Deltec Precision Audio, who describe themselves as "taking the design philosophy from the original Deltec and producing a range of high quality audiophile products". It's a cable with connector and plug in combination said to reduce unwanted RF noise. It achieves this using a special high quality ferrite powder mixed with a polymer compound to produce a dielectric coating that converts RF interference energy into heat. This special dielectric coating is extruded over the copper cores to produce a continuous layer along the entire cable length and then the cores are insulated with a PVC jacket. Additionally, the 3 cores are wrapped and covered by a shield to provide further immunity to induced RF noise from the outside environment that pollutes the cleaned mains signal. Power InSlink is manufactured from 1.5 metres of Power Slink cable with a BS1363 non-re-wireable UK mains plug, with each conductor crimped to ensure a perfect connection. The cable is terminated with a moulded female IEC connector using similar crimped terminations. It's said to give, "smoother and sweeter sound with better instrument separation and focus with a more natural and balanced presentation". For additional information please contact Deltec Precision Audio Limited on +44(0) 01793 238 083 or click on www.de tecprecisionaudio.com.

PLATINUM

The latest addition to Monitor Audio’s flagship Platinum range, the PL200, is a compact version of the PL300 loudspeaker. It uses a rescaled 6.5” version of the Platinum 8” bass driver and by reconfiguring the Platinum midrange Tapered Line Enclosure to align coaxially with the PL200’s bass reflex port, they have endowed the smaller PL200 with the spiritual essence of its universally admired range-mate.

The new, smaller PL200 is said to surrender a little bass extension to the PL300 and cannot quite match SPL and power handling, but in other performance parameters the PL200 and PL300 are comparable proving the calibre of the new PL200 design. Vital statistics are 998x255x285mm, and as with other Platinum speakers, the PL200’s shaped and braced cabinet is finished in a choice of exotic lacquered Santos Rosewood and Ebony natural wood veneers, and in a rich piano black lacquer. The front baffle is upholstered in leather. Price is £4,750 per pair and the new PL200 is available now. For more information on the complete range of Monitor Audio loudspeakers, call +44 (0)1268 740580 or click on www.monitoraudio.co.uk.
**BLU FUNDAY**

With the £169 BDP3000 Blu-ray player, Philips is making full HD movies available to more people than ever before. It is said to deliver Blu-ray movies as stunning 1080p 24fps Full HD images, and all with exceptional detail, sharpness and colour saturation, as well as upscale existing DVDs to near 1080p HD quality. The BDP3000 features Dolby TrueHD 7.1 surround sound decoding, so movies get the highest quality uncompressed audio sound track allowing for the total cinema experience at home. There’s also BD Live (Profile 2.0) support to ensure consumers can get the most from their Blu-ray discs including access to the latest content directly over the internet. By simply connecting external storage to the USB socket the player can access all of the additional content via the internet through its network connection. It has a super slim, minimalist design measuring just 435x58x308mm and features smooth curves and a high gloss black fascia. For more information, click on www.philips.com or call 0906 1010 016.

**PURE AND SIMPLE**

Puresound’s new £599.95 A10 was developed to meet a need for a compact, affordable Class A amplifier compatible with high quality, high sensitivity loudspeakers, the company says. The A10 is a line level integrated design that allows the selection of two different source components and control of the volume via a high quality film potentiometer. Class A operation was chosen because it gives lower distortion and a more relaxing, natural sound. The amplifier uses the 6P14 output valves (an equivalent of the EL84/6BQ5) in an Ultra Linear push pull configuration. The amplifier uses an Auto Bias system, which means that replacement output valves should be fitted as matched pairs. There will be no need to reset or monitor bias conditions. Very high quality components are used throughout, including selected carbon film resistors and polypropylene signal coupling capacitors. All input sockets and speaker terminals are gold plated to ensure good quality electrical contact long term. The output can be configured for use with 4 or 8 Ohm loudspeakers. For more details, call +44(0)1822 612449 or click on www.puresound.info.

**EMOTIONAL RESCUE**

Said to be, “far more than a mere upgrade to the award-winning Emotion”, the new Clearaudio Emotion SE turntable features a new 20mm thick acrylic chassis, high quality height adjustable feet, a 28mm thick precision CNC-machined GS-PMMA acrylic platter, a high mass motor damping base and a new aluminium arm base to produce a high-end analogue turntable in a fit-and-forget package of “extremely elegant appearance and design philosophy”.

The Emotion SE also incorporates the latest patented Clearaudio technology: the Ceramic Magnetic Bearing. The main bearing shaft is machined from an exclusive new polished surface than that previously obtainable in turntable bearings. As the bearing does not use a ball bearing nor a thrust pad of any kind, the Ceramic Magnetic Bearing avoids any point of load and so eliminates bearing friction, wear and noise, it is claimed. The separate motor is entirely isolated from the chassis, driving the precision-machined 28mm thick GS-PMMA acrylic platter via a Clearaudio ‘silent belt’. This joint-less silicon based drive belt transfers significantly less noise into the platter than traditional rubber types.

The Emotion SE turntable is fitted with Clearaudio’s Satisfy Carbon Directwire tonearm which is said to combine extremely high structural rigidity with ultra-low friction movement. The woven carbon fibre arm tube is both extremely rigid yet light. The vertical bearing uses a shaft made out of wolfram, the polished ends of which run in sapphire watch bearings. The twin horizontal bearings use precise long life ceramic bearings. The high precision headshell and full adjustability allows the accurate alignment of any cartridge type. The arm has an unbroken run of Clearaudio’s Direct Wire from the cartridge to phono plugs. Completing the package is Clearaudio’s Aurum Beta-S Wood cartridge, said to be “extremely accurate and musically engaging”, yet boasting compatibility with the widest range of amplifiers and phono stages. Price for the whole package (Clearaudio Emotion SE turntable, Satisfy CA DW arm and Beta-S MM cartridge) is £1,790. For more details, contact Audio Reference UK Ltd. on +44(0)1252 702705 or click on www.audoreference.co.uk.
NEW ENTRIES

Marantz’s £299.90 CD6003 compact disc player sport the Marantz ‘reference standard’ chassis design and ‘M1’ front panel, a precisely installed internal mechanism that plays CDs, CD-R/RW discs, and also MP3 and WMA files. There’s also an advanced USB connection, derived from the SA8003, featuring Apple iPod digital connection, and CD-Text functionality. A good quality power transformer is used, along with a Crystal CS4398 DAC and Marantz HDAM-SA2 op-amps in the output stage. Matching it is the new PM6003 amplifier. A new, lower impedance, case-shielded toroidal transformer was matched to new main capacitors which have been matched to a new type of power transistor capable of handling higher current and keeping better control over the speaker. These are mounted on a new extruded aluminium heatsink, reducing resonances. The result is 2x45W RMS for £350. For more information, click on www.marantz.com.

HIGH LEEMAS

Leema’s new £3,425 Tucana II integrated amplifier is said to borrow heavily from developments pioneered in the Leema Reference Series Altair IV mono power amplifier, and the Pyxis pre-amplifier. Described as “an even more accomplished stereo amplifier than its predecessor”, it features three heavy-duty toroidal power transformers, one for each channel and one for the control circuitry, delivering over fifty amps per side. In addition to the flexible set of LIPS® configurable inputs, record output, full remote control and sophisticated volume display, new features on the Tucana II include a front-panel mounted MP3 input, balanced input, a headphone amplifier, balance control, individually adjustable input gain and direct input selection. The company claims 184W RMS per side in 8 Ohms, and 285W into half that.

The matching Antila CD player gets an upgrade too; recent new developments have led to a significant tweak to the output filter; a key area of the player. Several surface mount parts have been replaced with hand-matched high-grade audiophile components. To accommodate these, a new circuit board has been developed, with improved layout and critically spaced components. Whilst this has led to a modest price increase, “the Antila II produces a performance far beyond that of its illustrious predecessor”, the company says. The unique MD2 Active Differential Multi-DAC technology employs twenty 24-bit 192KHz multibit Delta-Sigma converters, to improve linearity, reduce noise and minimise jitter, a common source of errors within CD players. Numeric inversion generates a fully balanced signal entirely within the digital domain ensuring significantly reduced levels of noise and distortion, thereby producing a real and tactile musical performance, it’s claimed. Price for the Antila II is £2,735. For more details, call +44 (0)1938 811900, or click on www.leema-acoustics.com.

AIR SPACE

Monitor Audio has an interesting new network audio player out, in the distinctive shape of the £225 Airstream 10. Playing over 15,000 Internet radio stations, global music services and every music file on a home network, it even sports RDS FM and DAB (with DAB+ compatibility) radios, plus MP3 player connectivity. The unique shape gives users two different rotational options, improving versatility around the home. “From its strong, low-resonance aluminium shell to the touch-sensitive menu buttons and ergonomic central control dial, AirStream 10 redefines the compact radio through high quality materials and its superior fit and finish”, the company says. For more information, call +44 (0)1268 740580 or click on www.monitoraudio.co.uk.

MY TIME

My Audio Design’s new Balanced Power Isolation Platform uses a box fashioned from handcrafted English Oak and granite, inside which is a specially designed balanced transformer which is accurately wound on a German made silicon alloy core with the finest laminated high purity copper wire, and internally wired with 99.99997% Super Purity copper (also available as a Special Edition with 99.997% silver) onto two Clipsal sockets. The Balanced Transformer has two specially designed noise screens, which take off the unwanted high frequency interference in your mains power supply. The result is said to be “a much quieter background, more robust and dynamic bass and clearer treble without excessive brightness and harshness”. Price is £895, with a thirty-day money-back guarantee. For more information, click on www.madengland.com or call 07782137868.

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How do you improve on a classic? That was the conundrum that Yamaha faced when the time came to advance their premium priced floorstanding Soavo 1 loudspeaker. David Price tunes into the new 1.1 Piano edition...

It was in April 2007 that I first set ears on Yamaha's Soavo 1 loudspeakers, and to be frank as I unpacked them I hadn't really expected anything special. After all, I'm not a fully paid up member of the 'small footprint' floorstander fanclub. This is because like many seasoned observers of the speaker species, I feel you really need a single, seriously large bass driver ("woofer" as they used to be called in the old days) to get a party started, as opposed to a collection of small diameter drive units working together supposedly as one. Anyway, the Soavo turned out to be a very nice surprise. It was obvious Yamaha hadn't just chucked some drive units in a box and hoped for the best; here was a very exciting, vibrantly musical design but with real class too. For its £2,000 selling price, I could think of few serious rivals, at least as far as someone with my own personal listening tastes go...

Now then, some two and a half years later, the new Soavo has apparently grown up by ten percent (or so it logically follows from its new 'one point one' designation!) and gained an exquisite piano black finished cabinet. Given that Yamaha also makes pianos (of every description, including concert grands), then this is piano black par excellence. The finish is flawless, as you'd expect from a Japanese company of this calibre; it most assuredly did not come from one man in a shed with a can of DupliColor! The downside is that the price has gone up considerably however, to a heady £3,000. Of course, the perilous plight of the...
Pound Sterling has played a big part in this, but it's still an inopportune moment for a price rise, and takes the Soavo 1.1s into an altogether more hotly contested field...

Just to recap, like the 2007 original, this loudspeaker was designed by Toshiyuki Kita, an industrial designer of the highest credentials; his work can be found in the permanent collections of museums all over the world, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Happily though, these medium-to-large sized (349x1051x487mm) floorstanders themselves don't look 'designed' at all; it's a case of form following function with non parallel sides to the cabinets to reduce standing waves, while internally the woofer and midrange sections are divided by a slanted partition, and strengthened with large, vertical ladder-type bracing. The three-way mitred construction of the cabinet joints is said to ensure extremely tight joints so the entire cabinet behaves as a single unit, and diecast aluminium stands are fitted that provide the necessary solid floor contact. The new cabinet construction, with its harder and thicker piano finish is said to reduce resonances, as is new damping material fitted inside the cabs. There's also a new top board inside the cabinet, immediately underneath the top surface of the speaker, again said to reduce high frequency resonances. The result is 2.5kg extra weight per cabinet; it's hard to discern any particular tonality from their tall, slim profile. All good then, but there's more...

Elton John's 'Benny and the Jets' reminded me why I loved the original Soavos; it's not a case of days spent placing them to get them to come 'on song', or hours spent warming them up so they'll suddenly smooth out and open up. Nope, the big Yamahas work out-of-the-box with that trademark powerful sound, lack of bass thump, cabinet boomph or port huff and puff. Tonaly they're light and bright by nature (no recessed treble or cloudy puff. Tonally they're light and bright by nature (no recessed treble or cloudy puff. Tonally they're light and bright by nature (no recessed treble or cloudy puff. Tonally they're light and bright by nature (no recessed treble or cloudy puff. Tonally they're light and bright by nature (no recessed treble or cloudy puff. Tonally they're light and bright by nature (no recessed treble or cloudy puff. Tonally they're light and bright by nature (no recessed treble or cloudy puff. Tonally they're light and bright by nature (no recessed treble or cloudy puff. 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“...MA-X interconnect [shown]...a full-bodied and richly saturated rendering of tone color, extraordinary bottom-end extension, startling dynamics, and tremendous resolution of low-level detail without any analytical sound.”


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Once upon a time, if you wanted an amplifier then it came with glowing glass bottles, put out a couple of Watts at best and invariably sounded as cosy as a log fire on a winter’s eve. Then came solid-state and by the eighties, there was a choice of umpteen bright and fuzzy sounding Class AB transistor designs, offering higher power but lower musicality. Now, in the last year of the noughties, we’re into altogether more sophisticated territory. There’s a wide range of amplifiers on sale, all of which follow particular design paths for their own reasons. Whether it’s Class A, AB or D, valve or solid-state, there’s something for everyone — but what to choose?

We rounded up six of the best sub-£2,000 designs, representing all manner of different design philosophies, and tried them with a wide variety of music over a period of several weeks. They range in price from the Leema Acoustics Pulse at £1,170 to Icon Audio’s Stereo 300B costing £1,700. Solid-state predominates with Cyrus’s BXP d, Naim’s Nait XS and the M-series Caspian from Roksan, whereas digital technology is represented by the NuForce IA-7. Each amp was fed with a range of sources and music, as the object of the exercise was to find out which product works best with which type of music (and indeed listener).

I needn’t have worried about the task in hand, as the respective differences between all of these fine integrateds were profound, as you’ll find when you turn the page...

**REFERENCE SYSTEM**
Clearaudio Master Solution/
Ortofon Kontrapunkt a turntable
Holfi Batt2riaa phono stage
Leema Acoustics Antilla CD player
Chario Ursa Major loudspeakers

**THE CONTENDERS**
Leema Acoustics Pulse £1,170 p16
NuForce IA-7 V2 £1,300 p17
Naim Nait XS £1,350 p18
Roksan Caspian M Series -1 £1,450 p19
Cyrus 8 XP d £1,500 p20
Icon Audio Stereo 300B II £1,789 p21

It’s not easy choosing an integrated amplifier, as there’s such a diverse choice of designs available. With this in mind, Tony Bolton was tasked to guide you though the decision making process with six of our favourite sub-£2,000 designs...
LEEMA PULSE £1,170

The Pulse’s alloy front panel is equipped with 3.5mm headphone and MP3 sockets, and a volume control knob surrounded by blue LEDs to indicate the level setting. The back panel contains power and loudspeaker sockets, four line level inputs and a tape loop. There are pre-out sockets and an onboard phono stage which accommodates both moving coil and moving magnet cartridges; a toggle switch selects the appropriate type. There are two little sockets labelled LIPS, Leema’s Intelligent Protocol System, which allows communication between the components of a Leema system, stereo or multi-room.

The amp has a differential input stage, Class A voltage amplifier and Class B output stage, with high performance output transistors. Weighing in at 12kg and measuring 435x90x375mm (W x H x D), the compact Pulse will fit into any standard hi-fi rack. The case is well built and finished, but not outstanding in this respect.

SOUND QUALITY

I am used to the Leema sound, but didn’t expect the scale and power of this affordable amp to be as close to that of the Tucana as it was. My attention was immediately caught by the bass performance, whose tuneful suppleness got the subwoofers in the Charios merrily bouncing along to Benny Goodman, live on tour in 1937! Although not up to the standard of studio recordings they are quite detailed, and portray a vivid picture of the Goodman orchestra, trio and quartet at the height of their prowess. The kick drum and bass drove the music along in an irresistibly foot-tapping manner, and the tonal balance achieved from a fairly difficult recording was exemplary.

Staying in the dance music genre but moving forward seventy years to Shpongle, showed the abilities of the onboard phono stage. It produced a satisfyingly wide and deep soundstage, with well defined placement of the performers. This amplifier proved equally comfortable with pensive classical music in the form of Fauré’s ‘Impromptu for Harp Op.36’. The complex harmonic structure of the instruments glowed in an enticing manner and encouraged contemplative listening to a mellow and restful piece. The Pulse seemed to revel in the reproduction of any type of sound I cared to put through it. In absolute terms, it was a little lacking in low level detail and vague in its sound staging, but at the price such foibles are forgiven; the headline point is its expansive musicality and deep, rich tone.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Pulse produces 84 Watts into 8 Ohms, rising to 132 Watts into 4 Ohms, so in spite of its compact size and low weight plenty of power is available. Distortion remained low at all powers and frequencies, third harmonic being dominant and contributing most to a 0.012% figure recorded at 10kHz, 1 Watt output into 4 Ohms. This is a relatively low amount.

A high damping factor of 50 means the amplifier will sound well controlled at low frequencies, being able to tame loudspeakers with light acoustic damping. Input sensitivity is low at 400mV which will make low gain phono stages a bad match, but then the Pulse has its own phono stages. Noise was a little high at -88dB.

There are separate MM and MC input sockets. Both inputs are accurately equalised right across the audio band, with no warp filter to reduce low frequencies. MC sensitivity was high at 0.18mV so the Pulse has enough gain for very low output Moving Coils. Noise levels were about average as good designs go, low enough for hiss not to be audible.

The Pulse measures well in all areas. It should give fine results from a small package, from CD or LP.

| Power (Watts) | 84 |
| Frequency response (5Hz-40kHz) | |
| Separation | 78dB |
| Noise | -88dB |
| Distortion | 0.01% |
| Sensitivity | 400mV |

DISTORTION

| Power (Watts) | 84 |
| Frequency response (MM/MC) | 9Hz-70kHz |
| Separation | 78dB |
| Noise (e.i.n.) | 0.4uV / 0.07uV |
| Distortion | 0.002% |
| Sensitivity | 3.3/0.18mV |
| Overload | 170/9.6mV |

VERDICT

Excellent all rounder at the price, with a big-hearted, full-bodied sound.
NUFORCE IA-7 £1,300

An interestingly styled and very compact Class D design weighing a mere 3.6kg and measuring 42x204x384mm, the NuForce's handsome alloy casing sports two knobs on the front for source selection and volume. The back panel comes with either four sets of RCA phono-sockets or two pairs of phonos, and two 3.5mm mini-jacks. This is a no-cost option, chosen when ordering. There is the usual option of black or silver finish.

NuForce refer to their amps as Analogue Switching Amplifiers because of the use of an analogue modulation technique, and what is described as a closed loop control system.

SOUND QUALITY

Fresh out of the box, the NuForce sounded hard, but a week's use turned it into a far smoother and more open sounding little thing that actually produced serious bass for its size. Flowjob's album 'Zentertainment' is progressive trance, middle paced and quite melodic with the usual deep rolling bass associated with electronic dance music. The IA-7 lapped it up, displaying a very energetic approach to the timing. Especially coming after the denser sound of the Pulse, the airier sound of the IA-7 took a moment to adjust to. Where the Pulse presented sounds, especially bass, as though hewn from solid granite, the IA-7 delivered them from a lighter and more delicate and nuanced perspective. Such agile pacing made the Goodman pieces flow beautifully, but the aged recordings did not fare so well under the analytical spotlight of the midrange and treble, sounding slightly thin.

I tried several types of classical music through the NuForce but found the results mixed. The detail of the shape and texture of the sounds was very interesting to peruse, but the music seemed to lack flow and cohesiveness sometimes. Trying out some Ray Charles and The Kinks brought life back to the sound, so this amplifier majors on presenting things in a very open and matter-of-fact manner, that suited well recorded and explicitly rhythmic music but didn't work so well with less driven material. Classical music fans will appreciate the detailed description of the shape and texture of sound, but some might find its presentation analytical. I came to really like the NuForce; it's all about telling it like it is, as opposed to embellishing or flattering the source material. Matched with a warm source and/or speakers and it works very successfully.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Class D analogue switching amplifiers have in the past produced dreadful distortion, of a level and type that is audible as 'breaking glass'. Recent designs from Lyngdorf and Nuforce are more sophisticated, as the IA-7 demonstrates. It still produces distortion with an extended harmonic structure - see our analysis - measuring a high-ish 0.24% when delivering just 1 Watt at 10kHz into a 4 Ohm load. Conventional amps typically produce up to 0.1% in these circumstances, so it isn't far off the norm. Distortion was lower in the midband at 0.024% into a 4 Ohm load, a very respectable result.

The IA-7's great advantage is high efficiency and measurement showed it produces no less than 144 Watts into an 8 Ohm load and 220 Watts into a 4 Ohm load over a short period without getting hot. The IA-7 also has a fully balanced output with 26V d.c. on both loudspeaker terminals so the negative terminal must not be grounded, but again this is common with Class D and protection against shorts is provided.

The IA-7 is not sharply band limited at 20kHz, output reaching up to 80kHz (-1dB). At the low frequency end it extended down to 7Hz, making the IA-7 much like any amplifier is this area.

Input sensitivity was extremely high at 70mV, so the amp will go loud at low volume settings and low gain external phono stages can be well accommodated.

The IA-7 is a neatly designed Class D amplifier that measures well. It will likely have its own interesting sound.

NK

VERDICT

Gripping, incisive Class D amplifier with a speedy, exciting sound.

NUFORCE IA-7 V2 £1,300

HiAudio

+ 44 (0)8450 525259

www.hiaudio.co.uk

FOR

- lightning speed
- loves rhythm driven music
- flexible input configuration
- size, style, finish

AGAINST

- leanness won't suit all
NAIM NAIT XS £1,350

Lunched in December 2008, the XS is the latest incarnation of the well respected Nait (Naim Amplifier inTegrated) series. The bodywork, shared with the Nait 5i, features an aluminium chassis and sleeve with a diecast zinc front panel. This sports a 3.5mm mini-jack socket for iPods, an Alps Blue volume control (the same as in the high end NAC 252), mute switch and selector buttons for the six inputs.

This is the first unit to use a newly developed bayonet PCB mounting technique that allows the board to float to reduce the effects of microphony. For the price, the quality of finish on this amplifier was superlative, and a credit to British manufacturing.

VITAL STATISTICS are 432x301x70 and 8.6kg

SOUND QUALITY
When listening to a stereo source I like to have precise imaging, preferably as holographic as possible. Previous Naim amplifiers I’ve reviewed have produced what I have referred to as ‘widescreen mono’. With the Nait XS I discovered that this was no longer the case. It was still somewhat vague in imaging, but there was a very cohesive centre and a genuine advance in the size and detail of the soundstage. Classical music, whether a full orchestra, or just a solo instrument such as the Faure mentioned earlier was played with gusto and grace. The complex tonal colours of the harp were displayed effortlessly, and the gentle, thoughtful nature of the music was allowed the space to open up and draw the listener in. By way of complete contrast, it also handled the rock excesses of Jimi Hendrix with great aplomb, reveling in the bass, and describing the agonised pyrotechnics of the lead guitar in all their glory.

This amplifier’s synergy with guitars was confirmed by its handling of the Kinks material, while the Ray Charles was awash with the sound of lush production values and massed backing strings. However, when faced with more rhythm-driven sounds from the old and modern genres of dance music I felt that there was more focus on the rich tonal qualities of the instruments rather than the beat of the music. There was less urgency to the music than the previous two contenders, which encouraged a seated appreciation of the music rather than a desire to bop around the room. This came as a real surprise; 2009 Naim amps are deep and velvety with real finesse and delicacy, something you could not have said ten years earlier! In both its tonality and soundstaging, this amplifier worked superbly, making it ideal for those who love classical or rock music, whereas dance and electronica fans may find themselves better served elsewhere.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE
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.

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.

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For
- Majestic on classical music
- Beguiling smooth sound
- Accurate tonality
- Upgrade options

Against
- Lack of low level focus
S
ince I reviewed the original Caspian there have been external detail changes, such as the shape and material of the volume and source selector knobs, now in brushed alloy to match the case-work. The display, set across the centre of the facia was lit in red to show which source had been selected. The mute light on the left of this showed green in standby mode, yellow in -20dB muting mode and a matching red when normal operation was selected. All of this operates via the mute button. The back panel contains seven sets of RCA phono sockets for the five line level inputs and the tape loop. Further along were a pair of speaker binding posts and the mains socket, with a master power switch beside it. All this is housed in a case measuring 432x330x80 and weighing 12kg; finish is good, but not up to the standards of Naim.

SOUND QUALITY
There was nearly as much contrast between the sound of the Roksan and the Naim as there was between the Naim and the NuForce. The Roksan finding a mid-ground between the fullness of the Naim and the lighter, more athletic touch of the NuForce. Timing-wise, it had much of the boppiness of both the latter and the Leema Pulse, making it a natural for any sort of beat-driven music. The elderly Goodman tracks were pumped out with energy and detail, onto a seemingly well lit soundstage of good proportion. It had the width of that from the Pulse, but not quite as much depth, although the actual focus on, and placement of, musicians was as good. Sphongle flew out of the speakers with an energy and drive that I felt was a major characteristic of this amp’s method of presentation.

Ranging through my records I was pleased to find no particularly favoured genre, rather an even-handed approach that encompassed every type of music that I played in an accommodating and enjoyable manner. This lack of preference meant that it did not excel in any obvious way with rhythm or tonal texture, rather rolling its sleeves up and getting on with the job in a pleasant and efficient manner. Classical music was handled well, although the lighter tonal balance of this unit did not quite reveal the full majesty of an orchestra. Here I felt the Naim had the edge, with scale and power. The Roksan took the opposite tack, placing musicians accurately in space and revealing more subtle detail about the colour and shape of the sound. Overall I found the Caspian M series -1 to be a very pleasant and easy to live with sound, that, for my taste, only lacked a little of the solidity and impact that some other amps can create. It had good timing and a nicely detailed soundstage.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE
The Caspian produced 66 Watts into an 8 Ohm load and 110 Watts into 4 Ohms under test. It’s a little below the common 100 Watt/ 8 Ohm figure achieved nowadays but is still plenty enough for high volume levels in most domestic situations. With a very high damping factor of 78 the Caspian M Series-1 amplifier will likely sound light and clean in its bass and it will suit boomy, underdamped floorstanders especially. Distortion levels were very low in the midband, hovering around 0.002% at all power levels up to full output. As is common distortion rose toward higher frequencies but although a small amount of crossover distortion was visible - see our analysis - at 10kHz, 1 Watt output even into a 4 Ohm load it measured a very low 0.02%. The M Series-1 should have clean treble, free from obvious coarseness. Input sensitivity was fairly high at 240mV, an aid to external phono stage matching. Noise was very low and d.c. offset low at 10mV or less. Frequency response measured a wide 3Hz-65kHz within 1dB limits. The M Series-1 measured well in every area and should give good results in use, NK.

VERDICT
Very well mannered fine all rounder.

ROKSAN CASPIAN M SERIES-1 £1,450
Henley Designs
+44(0)1253 511166
www.henleydesigns.co.uk

FOR
- consistency across genres
- powerful and clean sound
- accurate imaging

AGAINST
- slightly light tonal balance
This amp has the smallest casework of any in this group at 215x75x365mm yet sports the largest number of sockets, and variants thereof. There are no less than 11 inputs, 6 analogue via RCA phono sockets, 2 electrical SPDIF, 2 optical SPDIF and an onboard digital to analogue Converter with a USB socket? Lurking round the back is a 3.5mm stereo headphone jack.

Setup accesses a plethora of configuration options of which this machine is capable. Colour options are quarz silver or brushed black. The toroidal transformer can be supplemented by an optional £500 PSX-R power supply [pictured], which takes over supplying power to the preamplifier. This was a superbly finished product, showcasing British industrial design at its best.

SOUND QUALITY

The Cyrus had the full bodied nature of the Leema Pulse, but in a more subtle, less exuberant form. Bass lines were deep and well shaped but with a cooler tonal palette than either the Naim or the Leema. Its neutral, no-nonsense nature extended across the frequency range leaving me thoroughly involved in the listening process, rather than being washed along by the charm of the Naim or led a merry dance by the boisterous Leema. Paging was tight, showing off the driving force of music in an engaging manner. Imaging was strong, with a well defined soundstage set neatly between the speakers. The word 'neat' sums up the sound beautifully; performers were precisely placed, not too close or too far, stage lighting was not too bright or too murky. I spent a lot of time sitting, admiring different aspects of the sound, and the tidy presentation of it.

Plugging in the PSX-R added a different personality. One that was more open, possibly a little fuller bodied in its lower regions, but most importantly, with more of a spring in its step, without losing the impeccable manners that it liked to display. Thus equipped, it was a superb integrated amplifier, albeit an expensive one. I tried my MacBook through the USB socket and found the results most pleasing. The Cyrus DAC is upgradable to use the Qx DAC module (£400) which upsamples to 192kHz, which should be interesting. The standard fitment is still worthwhile though. So in standard form I found the Cyrus 8 XP d full bodied but calm in its presentation, while the PSX-R added extra zest. The host of onboard facilities and potential upgrades make for a very flexible machine.

**VERDICT**

Immensely versatile, easily upgradable and highly listenable, the BXP d really flies with the optional PSX-R power supply.

**CYRUS 8 XP d £1,500**

Cyrus Audio Ltd.
+44(0)1480 410900
www.cyrusaudio.com

**FOR**
- clean, sophisticated sound
- powerful, articulate bass
- great packaging
- myriad facilities
- modular upgrade path

**AGAINST**
- needs optional PSX-R

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

For such a small case the Cyrus produces a surprisingly large amount of power, no less than 84 Watts into 8 Ohms and 132 Watts into 4 Ohms. However, with 5 Watts continuous draw the case gets quite hot, although this amounts to a lot more music Watts (20-30) because of the fluctuating amplitude of music. The amp runs quite warm even with no signal, likely due to quiescent current biasing it into Class A at low levels to minimise crossover distortion. Cyrus amplifiers have traditionally returned low distortion figures and the 8 XP d is no exception, producing a worst case result of 0.015% at 1 Watt, 10kHz, seen in our analysis, and this is a very good result indicating clean treble and lack of edginess or grain. Bandwidth was wide and the amplifier appears to be direct coupled, so there should be no low frequency phase shifts. At 240mV sensitivity is high enough to work with low gain external power stages. The digital converter has an absolutely flat response across the audio band but distortion at -60dB was on the high side at 0.45%, against a norm of 0.22% nowadays. It identified a 24bit/96kHz input and downconverted it to 48kHz, giving an upper bandwidth limit of 23kHz (-1dB). Distortion dropped to 0.18%, not a low value for 24bit resolution.

The Cyrus 8 measured well, but it will run warm or hot in use and digital conversion could usefully have been more linear. All the same, it is powerful and clean, especially for its small size.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power</th>
<th>84 Watts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CD/tuner/aux.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency response</td>
<td>1Hz-52kHz</td>
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<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>-90dB</td>
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<tr>
<td>Noise</td>
<td>101dB</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distortion</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity</td>
<td>240mV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISTORTION**

001 0.015% 0.018% 0.015%
002 0.014% 0.015% 0.013%
Weighing in at 35kg, the Icon Audio 300 topped both the price and size scales in this test. The casework (460x400x250mm) looked somewhat industrial in its gloss black with the milled alloy leg posts at each corner. A row of 300B valves stand in front of the three transformer covers. In front of these, like pawns on a chess board, stand pairs of 6SL7 first stage valves and 12AT7 second stage valves. The facia contains an on/off knob, blue power LED, a red LED that indicates that the optional HT delay is operative, a toggle switch for tape/source, volume control (Alps Blue potentiometer) and input selector knobs.

The remote control is weighty and controls only volume and muting.

**SOUND QUALITY**

If you like your sound full bodied and rich like a good claret, then this is the amp for you. 300B amps are sometimes criticised for lacking drive and power, but Icon Audio seem to have designed around this to produce an amp that got my speakers singing their hearts out. Faure’s ‘Impromptu for Harp’ sounded elegant and poised, the transient decay wafting gently around the room. Here I felt there was weight and majesty in the sound, along with colour and texture aplenty. A sound that you want to wallow in, like a good hot bath!

Changing to more energised music, the 300Bs dug deep into the Goodman recording, describing a snappy jitterbug in the centre of the space between the speakers. I wasn’t too aware of soundstage boundaries when playing either mono or stereo records, the edges seeming to fade out into an inky blackness, rather than have sharply defined perimeters that the solid state and digital contenders displayed. The extreme depths of bass were not executed quite as tidily as either the Cyrus or the Leema managed. Both plumbed the same subterranean levels but seemed to have better braking.

With the rock of Hendrick I felt there was a lack of the bite this music really demands. Staying guitar driven, but returning to the less aggressive sounds of the Kinks, and the amp relaxed again. In the context of the group test the Icon almost writes its own set of rules. The complete opposite of the ultra clean NuForce, it imposes its lovely warm bluff nature on everything it touches, for better or for worse.

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

The Stereo 300 has 8 Ohm outputs only. Into this load it delivers 32 Watts, roughly as expected from 300Bs in push-pull with fixed bias. They are not over-run as my own 300B amplifier manages 28 Watts with auto-bias. However, even ‘8 Ohm’ loudspeakers commonly dip to 4 Ohms or so and in this circumstance distortion rose from 0.02% to 0.11% at 1Watt/1kHz, and from 0.5% to 1% near (-1dB) full output. Maximum power into 4 Ohms was 25 Watts so the 300.1 will drive 4 Ohm loudspeakers and give good results, but it is better (power matched) with higher impedance. A 4 or 6 Ohm power matched winding would have given better results into both low loads and high loads, but the Stereo 300 is very linear as valve amplifiers go, producing just second and third harmonics. Also, bass distortion was very low, which together with a good damping factor of 8 suggests this amplifier will have clean and well controlled bass.

Input sensitivity was low at 500mV, so matching to external phono stages may be difficult. Output noise was extremely low, so low as to suggest d.c. heaters; there was no hum.

The Icon Audio 300B measured very well. Obviously, it has very good transformers with wide bandwidth and low distortion, and it uses a small but useful amount of feedback for effective electrical damping. By running 300Bs well, measurement shows, it all but guarantees a lovely sound. NK

**VERDICT**

Massive, sumptuously musical performer that gives a dark chocolate tone to everything it touches. Flawed but fantastic all the same.

**ICON AUDIO STEREO 300B II £1,799**

**FOR**

- beautiful texturing
- flowing, organic rhythms
- charming character
- decently powerful
- value

**AGAINST**

- too rich a tone for some
- loose low bass
- music-dependent
- middling build
AND THERE WAS CHA’AM
This test was not about picking six amplifiers of varying quality, trashimg some and celebrating others; we knew that all these designs tested were premium products from fine brands that we regularly recommend in the magazine. As such, you're not going to find any dramatic highs and lows in the conclusion that make eye-catching copy. Instead, this test was about matching amplifier type to music choice and listener type, and as such proved a most illuminating process...

The dramatic differences between the respective characters of these integrateds (in some cases at least) produced a host of different options. For instance, if you don't play rock, and like the 'full fat' version of your music then the Icon Audio 300B is the obvious choice. If you prefer a lighter, bit more agile sound, and don't play classical then the NuForce will be right up your street. To imagine the scale difference, I'd like to use a BBC 'Top Gear' analogy if I may? Think of the difference in physical presence of Jeremy Clarkson verses Richard Hammond. Both equally impressive people, but with radically different styles!

If such extremes are too much, then more moderate options of both sounds would be perhaps the Naim (a quieter Clarkson) and the Roksan (think Hammond but two stone heavier!). By the same sonic criteria, the Cyrus could be the James May of the group; quieter mannered, steadier, but with a devil lurking quietly within, that can be released by the addition of a PSX-R! So where does this leave the Leema? Perhaps as a combination of some of the other's characteristics, with the exuberance of Hammond linked to the presence of Clarkson. This is an unusual metaphor, but makes the point that these amplifiers have personalities; not necessarily better or worse, just endearing in different ways.

Judging by other criteria, the Cyrus has the most comprehensive specification, and the built-in DAC will surely be an attraction for those that use a computer as a major source for music reproduction. By contrast vinyl heads will appreciate the excellent phono stage fitted as standard to the Pulse. Headphone listeners will be drawn to the Leema and the Cyrus, while users of iPods and MP3 players will find the built in mini-jacks of the Leema, Naim and Cyrus very convenient.

The NuForce can flash its green credentials in the matter of power consumption, but the lean and fast sound may not be to everyone's taste.

Second place goes to Icon Audio's 300B valve amplifier. I thoroughly enjoyed the way it presented music, and I so rarely play rock that I could live with this machine. In extremis, the bass got a little uneasy on super deep notes when playing electronica, which is why it lost first place to the Pulse. In other ways, the performance is so comprehensive that, as long as the presentation is not too lavish for you, then it is difficult to criticise other than to nitpick. Obvious speaker matching caveats apply though, as it is a valve amplifier and was never designed for driving minute standmounters with less sensitivity than a drunk at a wedding party!

So, up on the podium goes the Leema Acoustics Pulse. This amp has stunned me, being fast, vivid but controlled, and seemingly unfazed by any type of music that I cared to throw at it. The fact that it is the cheapest unit here is the icing on the cake. As someone used to its bigger sibling I can assure you that this amplifier comes remarkably close in performance, and offers excellent value for money. It had the power to drive big speakers loudly, being exuberant while retaining control, yet be quiet and contemplative when the occasion demanded.

Of course this is my own selection, but may be useful even if you have diametrically opposed tastes to mine. Other listeners with differently attuned ears would doubtless reshuffle the line up, as there is so much strength here in both subjective sound and measured performance. They're all credits to their respective designers. So I'd counsel that you hear them for yourself; I've made my choice, now it's your turn!

And that is what it comes down to, in the end, your personal taste, dictated by the unique response of your own ears. I prefer a fairly full-bodied but agile sound, with tight timing and pinpoint imaging, so with that perspective in mind, my personal choice in descending order, would be as follows...

I enjoyed the Naim, but found the timing too stately for my taste, particularly when faced with dance music. Also the imaging, although improved, was still a little vague for me. It's still a gorgeous performer in its way though, with great tonality and resolve.

In equal position I put the NuForce, on the grounds that although the speed and definition were excellent, the sound was too lean for my own palate, and I felt that classical was not really its forte.

Next would be the Roksan, again on the grounds that I prefer a bit more weight to the sound. Otherwise, a very good performer, with detailed presentation and a precise, possibly slightly analytical sound, and no particular dislikes musically.

Surprisingly perhaps, given my own well known thermionic tendencies, the clean sounding Cyrus comes in at third place, the greater depth to the sound and the onboard DAC making it a flexible proposition. The only drawback would be cost, because I would want to have the PSX-R as well to actually release the performance that lurks inside. This would then make it a £2,000 combination, which is a big chunk of change. In fairness though, I suppose you could deselect the 'd' digital input board option, taking the price down a notch or two.

"there is so much strength in this group, both in subjective sound and measured performance..."
A search of all-inclusive, unique perfection. Every minute detail has been meticulously thought out using the finest materials, selected with greatest care to blend beauty and technology. A fundamental and passionate process devised by a team of men and women who strive to achieve their sole ambition, that of providing the future owner of such rare equipment the enjoyment of a perfect instant, so fugitive yet so everlasting.
DBPOWER AMP £15

As the world moves ever closer to hard disk-based music playback, so more people are digitzing their CDs, ripping them to their computers in high resolution compacted form, using codecs such as FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec). For this task, a number of applications have appeared, and none seem to have garnered more acclaim by those in the know (computer geeks with too much time on their hands, mostly) than dBpoweramp.

This piece of software, supplied by Illustrate, is the very same as used in the RipNAS hard disk network music server tested recently in these pages. For those not wanting to shell out for this pricey device the next step is to use RipNAS essentials; the name given to the software and Illustrate-approved TEAC DVD drive; with your own Windows Home Server system. Then again, if you simply want to encode FLAC files on your home PC (most flavours of Windows from 98 onwards), you can just download dBpoweramp for $24 for the more basic Power Pack version, or $36 for dBpoweramp reference. The difference resides mainly in the ability to use multiple processors for encoding. Of course, most of this functionality is available from the freely available and much respected Exact Audio Copy (or sundry other bits of freeware). So why pay up for Illustrate’s wares?

The installation process ran very smoothly, I used a Sony VAIO running Vista, and once downloaded, the ‘Spoon installer’ simply did the job, finishing by launching a web page confirming registration, with links to ‘help’ for the various components (ripping, converting, configuration).

Once the program has installed you will also need to download the year-at-a-time ‘PerfectMeta’ support, the means by which dBpoweramp aggregates AMG, GD3, MusicBrainz and freedb.org data to enable accurate metadata lookup and ID3 tagging. In plain English, this updates dBpoweramp’s library of artists and songs. It has to be said that even with all those databases, with shorter CDs (i.e. more recent two track CD singles) the system can still let you down occasionally, but on the whole it’s one of the more accurate identifiers of your discs.

Once installed it is all too tempting to go straight to the CD Ripper and start ripping away. I picked the HDCD Roxy Music ‘Manifesto’ remaster. The dBpoweramp interface is much more attractive to use than the clunky foobar 2000 or even EAC. But to do so with the default ‘Burst’ mode would be a mistake. The RipNAS ships in ‘Secure mode’ by default, and switching it on immediately (after re-ripping) solved the problem of the two tracks which failed the Accuraterip check (which is an internet-shared rip accuracy database).

All the kerfuffle of having to re-rip my very first disc would have been avoided if I had been using the reputedly more accurate (if you believe the RipNAS internet forum) TEAC DVD drive supplied with RipNAS, or in the RipNAS Essentials package. Some have questioned the company’s belief in this drive, suggesting not all batches will necessarily be of the same quality, but we have found TEAC optical drives to be of excellent quality.

SOUND QUALITY

While dBpoweramp rips done on a bog standard computer sound very nice indeed, making it one of the very best software rippers around, there is still just that little something extra in the versions actually ripped on Illustrate’s RipNAS media server. It’s the same disc and the same replay chain, but I could still hear a little more versacity, groove and ‘snap’ in the snare on ‘Cry, Cry, Cry’. This obviously shows the degree of careful setting up, alignment and general fettling that the RipNAS enjoys (explaining its high price, perchance?), and/or the presence of the TEAC optical drive.

Getting behind dBPoweramp is a bit like joining a club. The overall vibe of the www.dbpoweramp.com forum is of a bunch of like-minded individuals helping each other to a better understanding of the deeper intricacies of Digital Audio Extraction in a Windows-centric context. Unlike the wilder slopes of freeware and open source applications, issues of version control, troubleshooting and enhancement are dealt with by a visible, nameable, responsible individual who knows his subject inside out. Ths is the main reason it is worth paying for this capable technology, rather than using the cheaper (i.e. free) alternatives.

If you’re not of the tewsky disposition but want to invest in a decent computer audio system, the answer is easy; buy a RipNAS box. If you’re altogether more hands on, enjoy experimenting and frequenting forums full of men with nothing better to talk about than extracting their CD datastreams in the finest way known, then dBpoweramp is your Holy Grail. The price of a few pints buys you one of the best ways to transcribe your Compact Discs to hard disk, with far superior fidelity than a certain Apple designed music management system. PC

[Contact: www.dbpoweramp.com]
Ring Tone

David Price attunes his ears to the latest incarnation of dCS's glorious Paganini DAC, sporting the company's legendary Ring DAC electronics...

In these days of fiscal instability, credit crunches and general industrial woe, surely there can't be that much of a market for £10,000 digital to analogue convertors? Aside perhaps from certain impossibly priced turntables, if ever there was a luxury object that you wouldn't think people would want right now, then this would surely be it. Yet the £9,599 dCS Paganini DAC has made a real name for itself, despite the prevailing economic squalls, managing to justify its place in life as one of the most desirable digital products around - at least to those who can afford it.

Having spent a couple of weeks with this distinctively styled, uniquely designed and (for yours truly at least) prohibitively priced bit of kit, I can see why it hasn't fallen victim to the slings and arrows of outrageous economic fortune. Whilst your average merchant banker may have cancelled his Koenigsegg and foreclosed on that Bermudan beach bolt-hole, if his ears are still in working order then I'd suspect he'd be telling his accountant to file the dCS under 'capital investment' rather than 'expenses' and duly going ahead with the purchase. You see, it delivers digital sound the like of which I simply haven't come across before.

The reason for this is not because it has a particularly well engineered power supply, a trick tube analogue output stage populated by an unusual strain of ultra-rare new old stock mid-fifties Mullards, or the world's best implemented aftermarket oversampling chip. Instead, the dCS Paganini DAC is, like all other dCS products, the proud custodian of the company's patented Ring DAC. As its name suggests, Data Conversion Systems started in the late nineteen eighties selling digital systems for military applications.

The company soon followed the passion of its creators however, and moved into the specialist hi-fi realm. The Ring DAC of the early nineties proved the jewel in its crown so to speak, offering a completely fresh approach to the job of changing ones and noughts to different voltages.

Whereas almost all DACs and/or CD players on sale throughout the world use bought-in, off-the-shelf digital-to-analogue conversion integrated circuits (and associated digital filtering ICs), dCS do not. With off-the-shelf electronics, hi-fi manufacturers become little more than box-stuffers, implementing someone else's ideas as best they can. But dCS developed technology that doesn't exist on a single chip, and can't be bought from your local electronics components supplier. The patented dCS Ring DAC circuit uses around forty integrated circuits, none of which are DAC chips. Instead, the circuitry uses Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA) chips, Digital Signal Processing (DSP) chips and a microcontroller system, all of which run code developed and maintained by dCS. This means that the Ring DAC is essentially custom software "stamped" into programmable memory chips, rather than a mass produced integrated circuit such as Philips' original TDA1540 DAC chip.

The Paganini DAC naturally uses the latest version of the Ring DAC package. Essentially it's a clever working compromise between multibit and Bitsream DACs, being the 5bit, 64 times-oversampling system first seen in the early nineteen nineties dCS Elgar (albeit in considerably evolved form), and is claimed to produce exceptional linearity across the dynamic range. All data presented to the Ring DAC is oversampled to the DAC's native 5bit format (at about 3MS/s), and this is decoded to drive 32 balanced current sources, each of which makes the same contribution to the output. The drive to the current sources is rotated randomly (hence the 'Ring' appellation), meaning that any mismatch in the DAC circuitry appears as noise rather than distortion of the original data word, thus improving linearity. As well as this, a sophisticated multi-mode phase locked loop (PLL) is used to significantly reduce clock jitter.

The Paganini DAC has standard AES3 and S/PDIF digital inputs, as well as IEEE1394 interfaces designed to be used primarily with DSD from the matching £8,999 Paganini transport. It can either work with its own master clock (and indeed clock the transport if needed), or it can be locked into an external word clock such as the £4,499 dCS Master Clock.

For the purposes of this review, I had one of these to hand for comparison, but did the bulk of my listening without it. Most of the listening was done with a high end Sony CDP-R1 transport, but I tried a number of sources, even a lowly Cambridge Audio DV30 DVD player!

The front panel of the dCS Paganini DAC is, needless to say, a striking apparition. The fascia is an elaborately machined, and very thick, chunk of machined aluminium, and it sports a backlit dot-matrix LCD display showing the input selected, clocking status and sampling frequency amongst other things. I wouldn't say it's the most beautiful thing I've seen, but it is purposeful and switch-offable. The DAC is also notable for its large volume control knob, so it can be used both as a DAC and a line level digital preamplifier; an excellent feature. Maximum output can be either two
or six volts to suit different amp/speaker combinations. Four filters are provided in DSD mode to allow listeners to tailor system response. The 460x400x1 I Omm, II kg casework is of excellent quality but still, I would gently point out, not up to the exquisite standards of rival Japanese high end designs.

SOUND QUALITY

You don't have to be Hi-Fi World's most eagle-eyed reader to know that I'm a fully paid up member of the analogue appreciation society. In fact I worry that I've almost become a caricature of myself, turning up as I do on press trips with a Sony cassette Walkman hanging out of my breast pocket, when all my fellow hi-fi scribes tout the latest iPod weaponry. With this in mind, I remained sceptical of the dCS's aural abilities right through the set-up and warm up process, until the moment I pressed 'play' on my CD transport...

The most profound, defining characteristic of the Paganini DAC is its sheer lack of grain. It is defiantly smooth and open sounding, in a way that I've not heard from any other digital to analogue convertor. But this isn't smooth in the sense of a Bitstream DAC that's been further tweaked with an ever-so-slight top-end roll-off. Where the latter gives you a dull and slightly dusky sound with workmanlike but unexpressive dynamics, the dCS gives an intricate, almost personal rendition of the music it is fed, with oodles of light shone on the mix.

The result is CD sound with a surprising evenness and finesse to it, devoid of almost all of its upper midband glare. Even compared to seminal CD players like Oracle's CD1500/II reviewed a couple of months ago (at roughly the same price) and Naim's considerably more expensive CD555/PSS55, there's a satiny smoothness to the sound where others would finish it with a coat of gloss. This lets you hear 'into' the mix, whereas other high end digital products, brilliant as they may be, seem to throw the mix at you instead. Simply Red's 'Fairground' bristled with detail, where normally this curious mid-nineties mix sounds either opaque and impenetrable or glassy and nerve-jangling. Suddenly, I could see that it wasn't an impossibly poor recording, just one that simply didn't sound good outside the studio. The complex percussion suddenly slotted into place, rather than hovering around the beat, giving things a real sense of direction where normally there is none. Vocals snapped into focus through the dCS, flattering singer Mick Hucknall rather than hindering him.

The Paganini DAC doesn't have a naturally propulsive nature. It's not like you could ascribe any particular character to it like you would, say, a machine with classic Philips TDA1541 DAC chips inside. It doesn't want to rock you, take the role of an impact player', coming on to steal the show. This means that just as it can unpick the knotty mix that is 'Fairground', it can render the strains of Al Jarreau's 'Summertime' with remarkable ease. One minute it's doing heavily sequenced mid nineties electronic pop without so much as a bead of sweat on its brow, and the next it's lilting through some slick 'dinner jazz' (if you'll pardon that dreadful phrase) like it was born to be. Were it not such an unerringly neutral machine, it would have given a masterful rendition of one and a hash of the other; as LJK Setright used to say, it is for the musician to have character and not the hi-fi equipment. 'Summertime' issued from my loudspeakers as it had been sugar-coated and then vacuum-packed in candyfloss for good measure. The album from which it comes, 'Tenderness', a mid-nineties recording produced by Marcus Miller, is a high watermark production-wise, and the dCS Paganini DAC showed why. It has such a tidy, orderly sound yet never sounded in the slightest bit dry or mechanical; think the very best vinyl, likely through a broadcast direct drive sporting SME Series V tonearm and Lyra Titan moving coil. I was struck by the sheer expanse of the soundstage, and the pinpoint precision of the instruments and musicians without the recorded acoustic. There was a massive, almost disconcerting, sense of space to the recording, the like of which I've not heard from 16/44 Red Book digital before. Tonaly the dCS was a joy too; saxophone sounded reedy and
The best loudspeaker is one that you can't hear. Sounds odd, doesn't it? But it should be all about the music; you don't want to have this disturbed by the distortions and reflections a traditional speaker enclosure presents.

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breathy but never harsh or searing as the soloist went up and down the scale. Piano sounded eerily realistic too, with a tangible solidity normally only heard from digital running at higher resolutions; harmonics gleamed like sunlight on the morning sea.

Nick Drake’s ‘Hazy Jane II’ was another ear-opener for me. On CD, I always tend to migrate to electronic music, feeling it does this the least badly, so an early seventies analogue recording of folk (brilliant as it may be) wouldn’t have seemed a happy partner for the little frisbee. Nonetheless, the dCS was able to convey the delicacy of the original recording from this mastered Island disc, and the subtle beauty of Drake’s vocals shone through. The DAC’s combination of smoothness and forensic low level detail once again made this an unexpected treat; lesser systems are normally little more than a pale reflection of what the dCS could do.

Slotting Bach’s fifth ‘Brandenburg Concerto’ (Diego Fasolis, Il Barocchisti) into the disc tray and playing the dCS Master Clock pushed the DAC up still higher in my estimation; harmonics too, with a tangible solidity normally unimpressive. Given the DAC’s stratospheric price, this is its great achievement; just like good wine, it can sit yourself down and listen for hour after hour, transfixing with the music not the medium. It’s a massively high price to pay for such a privilege, but I’m sorry to say that it’s worth it.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This is a very ‘matter of fact’ sounding device, which is to say it lets the music’s essence out, rather than trying to impose another one on it. In a way, the dCS sounds curiously unimpressive. Given its stratospheric price and arresting visual presentation, the first few bars of any given song can sometimes elicit an “is that it?” type response; you find yourself expecting to be commanded by its presence, summarily shoved back in your seat or cowering behind the sofa. But this isn’t the Paganini’s style. Instead, its main aim in life is self-effacement: it’s the DAC that doesn’t want to be there.

This is the main difference between it and rival high end DACs and CD players I’ve heard: all have impressive, obvious and (usually) very enjoyable characters, whereas the dCS seems to regard discretion as the better part of valour. It’s just there, getting on with the job, sounding supremely open and organic, with an amazing lack of grit, brightness or any other perceptible character trait of the positive or negative variety. This, I would suggest, is its great achievement; just like good wine, the Paganini can sit yourself down and listen for hour after hour, transfixing with the music not the medium. It’s a massively high price to pay for such a privilege, but I’m sorry to say that it’s worth it.

**REFERENCE SYSTEM**

Sony CDP-R1 CD transport
Esoteric P30 CD transport
Sugden IA-4 amplifier
Audio Research VS60 amplifier
Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers
Quad 989 loudspeakers

**Verdict**

Superlatively good; state-of-the-art modern DAC with a uniquely ‘analogue’ sound.
We all want to hear an 'exciting' loudspeaker and this is one I bumped into some time ago at a Manchester Show. Standing well back in a largish room, I found it projected well, sounding lively and dynamic whilst also clean from top to bottom. There wasn't too much treble, the upper mids didn't glare in a desperate attempt to emphasise detail and its bass in particular struck me as well integrated and tight. There were none in the UK so I asked Triangle in France to ship a pair to us direct. So here for your delectation is the Triangle Quartet loudspeaker, price £1,900. As you can see it's a big floorstander; good looking, well finished and thoroughly enjoyable I found. It's also competitively priced.

Regular readers will know I admire the big Tannoy for their ability to project and sound exciting whilst also remaining accurate under measurement. But my favoured Yorkminster costs £9,000. The Zu Essence was another take on this theme, less accurate but very engaging all the same, but again we are talking big bucks, nine thousand of them to be precisely, or £5,000 in old money! In spirit at least, the Quartets stand somewhere between these two loudspeakers, but at a more affordable price. So for all our readers that beg for something that's "exciting and engaging", here is one to consider...

What we have in the Quartet is a very large cabinet standing 117cms high (almost 4ft), and anything over a metre is high. It has a large upper bass/midrange unit near the top, sitting just below a purposeful looking horn loaded tweeter. Below sit no less than two bass units, each reflex loaded by a front-firing port sited between them. The cabinet has a glossy rosewood finish and the front, with grille off, has plenty of adornment set against a gloss black front panel, making the Quartet less bland than many.
loudspeakers. If it’s all too much then with the grille on the loudspeaker looks tall, slim and elegant.

Working from 250Hz upward, much of the sound comes from the upper two units so the stereo sound stage is high. Singers have an almost celestial presence and this always helps add a little drama to the delivery. Because the bass units carry lower midrange information there’s a high vertical spread of lower frequencies and subjectively this gives a generously large presentation, quite different to the tight focus of KEF’s Uni-Q loudspeakers for example. As a result the Quartets don’t just look large, they sound large too, and I found this aspect appealing. This is part of what caught my attention at the Manchester Show: they have great sonic presence.

What so many manufacturers love to do nowadays with big loudspeakers is ensure they have steamroller bass, the sort of stuff that makes all listeners exclaim "my, what powerful bass!". There’s no doubt it gives weight to the sound but over a period conspicuous bass can become ponderous and headache-inducing. Achieved by using an under-damped acoustic response it also brings a soft and wallowy sound to bass lines and can set off room boom. All-in-all, not nice.

The Quartets, for all their size, don’t have especially prominent bass. However, it is in good balance and of great quality, nice and dry and controlled, so when the drummer hits a drum, it’s then and only then that you hear it. Otherwise, the Quartet doesn’t waffle or boom.

**SOUND QUALITY**

The difficult ‘Rockferry’ by Duffy was handled ably. This is a coarse and brightly balanced track that always sounds a little muddled, and if what I read the other day is true, that the mastering engineer includes analogue to digital conversion and back again in the signal loop to deliberately achieve the “sound”, the reason why is clear. The Quartet does little to hide this, but its tweeter is concise rather than splasy so cymbals are lifted adeptly from the background muddle. In ‘Serious’ sibilants are consistently emphasised but although the tweeter adds a hiss to them it is obvious rather than unpleasant. On the less aggressively mixed ‘Warwick Avenue’ cymbals shimmer nicely, Duffy’s vocals are clear and concise, delivered with a nice, insightful dryness, and underpinned by an equally dry bass line that holds the power and control that so many of us strive for. With Sinéad O’Connor’s tremulous tones loud and clear centre stage declaring “tis better to die under an Irish sky”, the Quartet’s had me locked in rapt attention. Strong dynamics and a conspicuous absence of low end waffle made for a gripping experience from The Chieftains.

Nigel Kennedy was handled a treat, but if you are looking for a laidback, romantically hazy rendition of his extraordinary bow work then look elsewhere. The Quartets capture the strength and pace of Kennedy’s playing; they deliver every last minute detail, all in perfectly ordered form in the time domain to show just what temporal grip Kennedy exerts on his nuancing. It all comes across with a breath-taking candour that suits Kennedy’s...
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*Subject to status. Ask instore for details. Not all brands are available in every shop so please check our website before traveling.
but through the Quartets original LPs are more authentic, The Rolling Stones were meant and as the label says this is how on newly cut 200gm virgin vinyl. code no less (quite right too!), any extra warmth from vinyl in Devil', remastered into DSD I could play 'Sympathy For The contrast to CD. This suggested Quartets remained extremely overhang or pluminess. The with not the slightest sign of each note perfectly formed slowly in 'Kill to Get Crimson', O'Connor, singing 'Punish The Monkey' from his LP 'Kill To Get Crimson'. Laconic guitar Knopfler was as dryly but clearly managing better.

I found LP was handled in much the same way as CD. Mark Knopfler was as dryly but clearly outlined centre stage as Sinéad O’Connor, singing 'Punish The Monkey' from his LP 'Kill To Get Crimson', each note perfectly formed with not the slightest sign of overhang or pluminess. The Quartets remained extremely insightful and tightly controlled throughout, with little sign of any extra warmth from vinyl in contrast to CD. This suggested I could play 'Sympathy For The Devil', remastered into DSD code no less (quite right too!), on newly cut 200gm virgin vinyl. And as the label says this is how The Rolling Stones were meant to be heard. Okay, perhaps the original LPs are more authentic, but through the Quartets I heard every "whoa, whoooh" in the left channel whilst Jagger sings "hope you get my name" with ringing clarity in 'Sympathy For The Devil'. It was a great performance beautifully restored for posterity and beautifully captured by the Quartets, which remained clean, concise yet vibrant. Listening right into every small detail of Keith Richards' pedal slide guitar on the following track again had me entranced. At times Jagger's inflections were over accentuated by the Quartets, but this did not especially upset me.

The way these loudspeakers can lift gentle but important information was brought home as a softly sung female counterpoint to Jackie Leven in 'Young Male Suicide Blessed by Invisible Woman' (yes, really!) floated with an ethereal clarity between the cabinets, intelligible and pure.

CONCLUSION
The Triangle Quartets sounded as good as they did at the Manchester Show; they are true attention grabbers. Dry but very revealing, they're an audiophile delight in that they also tease out dynamic contrasts to make music lively and exciting.

With superbly tight bass that's tuneful, plus an ability to not over-drive rooms, the Quartets are a sparklingly good choice of loudspeaker at £1,900. Needing little power they'll work with any amplifier, but it needs to be a good one, and low power valve amps would be my first choice because they'll not flatter transistor amplifiers that screech. From a few Watts you get a big sound that's challengingly insightful and super clean; it's nothing less than impressive.

The Quartet has some midrange prominence when measured close (6.8m) but this lessens at 1.5m, the change being due to integration of multiple spaced drivers. An upper midrange dip from 2kHz-4kHz is consistent near or far and will result in some softening in the midband detailing and delivery. The tweeter is a smooth operator but there is some treble peaking at 12kHz. The Quartet will sound just on the polite side of balanced, but with good treble detailing attributable to the small amount of peaking around 12kHz.

The lower midband isn't especially smooth even with the microphone closer to the loudspeaker, so the Quartet may well have a little more character than usual and some plateau lift will emphasise vocals somewhat, helping make the sound projective in this region.

The bass end is interesting. Ignoring the dip at 150Hz, a room effect, it is fairly even down to 60Hz a third-octave, pink noise analysis (not shown) reveals. The windowing of our gated sine wave analysis smooths lows a bit in the published graph, but is accurate. The port (red) takes over below 80Hz and has unusually broad, flat output, so it is acoustically well damped, more so than most. This suggests the Quartet's bass will sound nicely controlled and non-resonant as reflexes go. It extends output down to a low 25Hz. At 80Hz the port was +3dB up on forward output so again bass looks to be in good balance.

The impedance curve reflects acoustic conditions, showing that the broad port response reflects back to result in an almost flat impedance curve at low frequencies, free from the usual high twin peaks. This again underlines the Quartet is a great low frequency load, broad acoustic dumping folding back to broad electrical damping. However, as a load the Quartet had a measured impedance (with pink noise) of just 4.8 Ohms, the low level of its impedance curve showing this, so it draws amplifier current and may stress some a little, although technically they can all supply sufficient current. Sensitivity was high at 90dB, and the Quartet is an obvious choice for valve amplifiers with a 4 Ohms output. Triangle acknowledge it suits low power Single-Ended designs.

The 200mS decay spectrum is clean and even, with consistent decay across the frequency band. Bass distortion levels were also low, both bass drivers and the port measuring 3% at 40Hz, decreasing to less than 1% above 50Hz. The Quartet is an unusual design in many respects and has especially interesting low frequency properties under measurement. It is a sensitive floorstander with fine bass. NK

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

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FREQUENCY RESPONSE

Green - driver output
Red - port output

IMPEDANCE

OCTOBER 2009 HI-FI WORLD

Dry, clean and highly revealing, the powerful sounding Quartets are fast and fun at a great price.

TRIANGLE QUARTET £1,900

VERDICT

FOR
- highly detailed
- no waffle or overhang
- need little power

AGAINST
- spiky treble
- little low bass
- no warmth
Topping Electrocompaniet’s Classic Line preamplifier range is the new EC4.8, claimed to do great things. David Price sizes it up...

The lot of a preamplifier is not a happy one. A good example is largely ignored, its sonic prowess invariably being attributed to something else along the system chain, usually the loudspeakers. But a bad one takes the blame for its own failings plus those of all the other components in the system.

Then there are the aesthetics to consider; a small box with knobs on can never really be a thing of beauty, and preamps can’t make up for this by virtue of their physical bulk. When you think of a Krell, it’s those vast boxy power amps that spring to mind, not the matching preamps. Let’s be honest here, a weedy box with some unlovely buttons stuck on the front is not an object of desire, whereas a vast sprawling heatsinked behemoth is!

Another unfathomable thing about the breed is the fact that the companies that generally do highly promising power amplifiers often fall at the first hurdle with preamps. Brands like Naim, that do both sides of the amplifier equation rather well, seem the exception and not the rule.

The final cross that the preamplifier has to bear is this. As hi-fi changes, and migrates ever more into the digital domain, we’re now seeing the spectre of digital to analogue converters such as the Benchmark DAC. Pre growing up into preamplifiers. The days of a DAC-less preamp, or preamp-less DAC, are surely numbered? What role in life then has this plain old unconstructed Electrocompaniet preamplifier got to look forward to now, I ask myself? Surely the future is moving against it?

Well, in the EC4.8, Electrocompaniet have gone back to basics to make a preamp the company wants to make for its own purposes. So there’s a USB input, but it’s not for digital audio, but for software upgrades. There are no front panel digital inputs, external power supply inputs or any other such contrivance; instead you get nothing but balanced XLR ins and outs on the rear panel (two pairs of the former, one pair of the latter) plus a concession to convention in the shape of three pairs of RCA phono ins and twin tape outs (steady on guys, don’t knock yourselves out!)

Described as “a fully balanced electronic solution from input to output”, it’s effectively two separate mono preamplifiers, each with its own power supply. The EC4.8 has a new SPAC network for control of Electrocompaniet’s matching power amplifiers, and comes with a cheap looking but effective wireless remote control. It’s the typical, slightly quirky but high quality fare you get from this company, with a thick Perspex front panel and a well finished pressed steel wrap casing (vital statistics are 483x386x76mm, 9 kg). The unit looks neat, but lacks the lavish, beautifully hewn feel you get from Japanese products of this price. The fascia works well enough via a combination of the backlit fluorescent display and up, down, left and right navigation buttons, although some of us fortysomethings would prefer ye olde volume and source selector knobs. My only real gripe is the display handling; I don’t like seeing the company’s ‘If music really matters’ strapline peering out at me whenever I switch the EC4.8 on, and I think the choice of font is clumsy too.

**SOUND QUALITY**

This was never going to be an easy review for the Electrocompaniet, because it’s a trifling £200 cheaper than one of the best preamplifiers I’ve heard, namely the MF Audio Silver Passive. I’ve put this against most in the market over the past few years, and it may not beat everything absolutely, but it comes amazingly close in many ways, and at a relatively bargain price. “Oh dear, hope it’s not a rout”, I thought to myself.

First impressions were mixed, because the EC4.8 is not a preamplifier that serves up high amounts of gain. Don’t expect to use it with your low power valve amp. I duly enlisted the help of my recently updated NuForce REF 9SE v2s power amps, and a Stello DA100 Signature DAC via, running everything in balanced mode, although I still got decent levels via my A.N.T. Audio phono stage too.

The Electrocompaniet, unsurprisingly perhaps, displays the company’s ‘house sound’, which as I’ve said before is as clear as a Norwegian lake on a summer’s morning, and just as fresh. Not for this preamp the languid warmth of a good valve preamplifier, nor the foggy, mushy hash of a poor op-amp based transistor one. Tonal it’s on the spry, crisp and dry side, but very open and almost icy in tonality. This isn’t to say it’s cold or in any way unpleasant, but it’s certainly not going to add a dash of spice to any cool sounding ancillaries. Listening to the Electrocompaniet, I kept thinking of glaciers, epic wide open landscapes and snowcapped mountains; a bit like Cumbria in August!

Be Bop Deluxe’s ‘Terminal Street’ was a perfect case in point. The complex, multilayered guitar stylings of Bill Nelson make your average mid-seventies Rush epic look like a three-chord pub band cover. You should hear the ‘Modern Music’ LP with its sophisticated, meticulously crafted guitar rock with an art-school flourish. The EC4.8 positively relished its complexity, cutting through the mix to separate out all the strands with ease. It was fun to listen aghast, flowing along at a heady pace, but still took the time to eke out as...
much detail as it could on the way. Compared to the MF Audio, I was impressed by the Electrocompaniet’s more spacious treble, it felt better extended and more atmospheric. There was also a slightly lighter, brighter tonality to the midband, as if more light was beaming on to that morass of electric guitars. Nelson’s voice sounded a little better resolved too, with more of a feel to his plaintive strains, and those of the backing vocalists. Moving to the MF Audio though, and despite an apparent lessening of atmosphere to the recording, I felt I’d been pulled closer into the mix. Curiously it wasn’t throwing quite as much detail out apparently, but was bringing me nearer to the music all the same. Bass was stronger via the passive preamp, with a firmer underpinning to the proceedings, but still the EC4.8 wasn’t exactly bass-light.

Moving to Michael Jackson’s ‘Don’t Stop Till You Get Enough’ from the Quincy Jones epic that is ‘The Wall’, and the Electrocompaniet understandably took the opportunity to unpick this superbly recorded multilayered classic analogue recording. I was struck by the clarity of the percussion, sparking out of what’s quite a ‘dark’ backdrop. Cymbals had a delicious sheen, brass showed a wonderful rasp and Jackson’s vocals were carried with delicacy and detail, but passion too. It’s an interesting performer, this preamp, managing as it does to do all the ‘hi-fi’ things really well, yet still sound very musical into the bargain. Moving to the MF, and once again the soundstage moved forward, sounding more intricate, with fractionally greater bass power and grip, but I was less happy about the lack of atmosphere to the treble; it was almost as if a thin veil had been drawn over the percussion. There was also less of an accurate texture to instrument; brass sounded more generic (like it had been sampled) and even Jackson’s voice was less tactile, despite being pushed closer towards me.

John Coltrane and Jonny Hartman’s ‘Lush Life’, a classic fifties Impulse jazz pressing, showed the Electrocompaniet to best effect. It’s not quite as confident in its image projection as the MF Audio, which virtually ‘laser etches’ the instruments in their rightful places inbetween (or beyond) the loudspeakers, but it makes up for this with a more expansive sound. It feels like the music’s suddenly snapped into ‘panoramic’ mode, with the EC4.8 able to convey the true physical scale of a great stereo recording. It also excelled itself with instrumental timbre, lending the piano a wondrous tone, shimmering with harmonics whereas the MF almost seemed to be filtering them out somewhat.

CONCLUSION
I hadn’t expected the Electrocompaniet to match the MF Audio Passive Preamplimifier, a giant killer that has slain a good many £6,000 plus preamps in front of my very ears, but it came very close in many respects and bettered it in some. Like Norway’s dramatic landscape, it has a scale, clarity and freshness that I simply hadn’t expected. Its naturalness of tone goes beyond many other price rivals, such as NuForce’s P9 for example, yet it sports a relaxed but confident musicality that wouldn’t shame a Naim. Perhaps I would ask for a little more bass with better bottom end grip, but it’s almost churlish at the price. I’m impressed; here’s a solid-state preamplifier that has few of the breed’s failings, and almost all its strengths. If the some ‘rudimentary’ user interface of the MF Audio doesn’t appeal, or if you’re searching for a more expansive and airy sound, then this is the one to go for at, or anywhere near, the price.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE
It is common for preamps to have a gain of +3 (9.5dB) but the EC4.8 offers a lower 1.75 value, or 5dB through both balanced XLR socket CD and SACD inputs and unbalanced phono socket Tuner (etc) input. With power amplifiers like Electrocompaniet’s Nemo having an input sensitivity of 2.8V for full output this equates to an input sensitivity of 1.6V - very high and only suitable for CD and SACD players, as most tuners and phono stages produce 300mV or so, up to 1V maximum. Paired with a power amplifier of 1V input sensitivity - common - sensitivity is then 600mV but again this is low for any source other than a CD player. So the EC4.8 is not a preamp for all situations; quite the opposite it will have limited applicability, but as most balanced sources are CD players (ignoring the lovely Ayxus phono stage) then perhaps the EC4.8 will match well enough in real life. Bandwidth was wide at 3Hz - 114kHz within 1dB limits at all volume settings and noise low too at -95dBV. Distortion was a very low 0.00016% and output overload huge at 12V in / out.

VERDICT

Spacious, expansive sounding preamp with natural, flowing musicality. Superb sonics but limited gain won’t suit all needs.

ELECTROCOMPANIET

EC4.8 £2,590

NSS Ltd.

+44 (0)20 8893 5835

www.electrocompaniet.com

FOR

- great transparency
- superb soundstaging
- relaxed but musical sound
- prodigious detail

AGAINST

- middling build and finish
- fiddly control system
- mediocre display
- low gain

REFERENCE SYSTEM:

Sony TT-S8000/OL Silver/Ortofon Winfield t/t A.N.T. Audio Kora 3 Ltd. preamp stage
Cyrus CD-XT Se/Stello DA100S CD player
MF Audio Silver Passive Preamplimifier
NuForce Ref 9SE v2 power amplifiers
Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers
Yamaha Soavo 1.1 loudspeakers

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DISTORTION

21V out, decreasing to 3V out / 2V in via the line inputs.

The EC4.8 is a high quality balanced preamplifier for CD and SACD players possessing 2V balanced output, where it works very well. Although it has unbalanced line inputs their sensitivity is very low, making utility limited. NK

Frequency response
3Hz-114kHz

Separation
91dB

Noise
-95dB

Distortion
0.00016%

Gain
x1.75 (dB)

Overload
s out

www.electrocompaniet.com
Our friends in the South are on a bit of a roll at the moment. Not content with expanding the high end Supernait and the middle ground Nait XS, nor with the arrival of the seriously impressive one-box Uniti audio system, nor even launching a brand new, and rather revolutionary loudspeaker, the Ovator S600, at Munich, Naim Audio have now launched a complete new XS range, no less! So whatever you think of Naim and of course opinions are always divided with this company, all this is surely a heartening example of British design and manufacturing know-how triumphing in times of economic adversity.

Naim seems to engender strongly polarised opinions, probably more so than any other manufacturer I can think of. A great many audiophiles adore them and would never even consider buying anything else, but there also seems to be a select band who offer nothing but venom whenever the name of the company crops up. This is something I find hard to understand as I cannot think of any company that has had a flawless, universally adored product track record. But even the company's greatest critics must surely admit how well structured their model range is, expanding into every niche in an intelligent and logical way.

Now, the recently launched Nait XS amplifier has, ermm, had babies. Like Tribbles on the Starship Enterprise, it's multiplied itself into the CD5XS CD player, NAT0XS tuner, NAC152XS preamplifier and NAP155XS power amplifier. All of the above can be used as standalone items, but Naim naturally offer an upgrade power supply for the range, the FlatCap XS, and a sample of this was also provided for this test.

The CD5XS is an evolution of the CD5x player but, although visually similar, is quite new under the bonnet. Outwardly notable is the new casework common to the entire XS series, consisting of a slim, low resonance chassis and a brushed and anodised front panel, machined from one piece of aluminium. Internally, new analogue output circuitry mounted on a four layer PCB with improved grounding for better noise resistance interfaces the player with the outside world through both RCA and DIN sockets. Also for the first time on a Naim player, there is a switchable digital output which is transformer-coupled and isolated from the main circuit, and sends its output through a 75 Ohm BNC socket. Naim have strongly resisted the inclusion of such digital outputs on their players in the past but with the likes of the Supernait featuring such high quality internal DACs, plus the upcoming launch of Naim's own standalone DAC, the move was an obvious one.

Other than that, the CD5XS shares its mains transformer and the swing-tray loading mechanism with its predecessor. This is the first time I have ever spent any time with one of these mechanisms and I have to say I came away impressed. The assembly feels very smooth and solid, and the manual opening and closing, plus the necessity of fitting the magnetic puck to the top of the CD before closing the tray offers an almost vinyl-like sense of ritual to proceedings. It's sad I know, but I
enjoyed it! The CD5XS comes with Naim’s NARCOM 4 remote handset, which is a bit plastic-tastic but does its job well enough. The small display on the player normally shows track number but can be switched to show time, or turned off completely, and it automatically switches to time when searching, which is a nice touch.

The FlatCap XS generates two independent 24V supplies from a 215VA transformer and can power two XS series components, or both of its outputs can be used on the NAC152XS preamplifier. Past experiences have told me that Naim PSU upgrades certainly alter the sound of the products on which they are used but, on the odd occasion, I have felt not necessarily for the better. As a result I was keen to get to know the CD5XS as a standalone player first, and then see what changes the FlatCap XS wrought.

SOUND QUALITY
With the CD5XS warmed through and operating on its own, I quickly realised that this was a CD player I was going to like. The CD5XS has what some consider to be the traditional Naim virtues of ‘pace, rhythm and timing’ by the bucketload, but it is much more than that, and far more of a complete musical performer than this simple, and often inappropriately quoted, epithet suggests. It was the scale of the performance on offer that impressed me the most, and the way in which it fills the space at the front of the listening area, but without resorting to any trickery. If I was listening to a solo guitarist sat atop a stool then that was simply what I heard located in front of me, whereas a large orchestra belting out ‘The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba’ were reproduced on an impressively grand scale. The CD5XS keeps a grip on music like few other players at the price. Bass lines are not so much rock solid, but more set in concrete and mounted on a marble plinth, such was their precision and impact. The title track from Emiliana Torrini’s ‘Me and Armini’ CD is underpinned by a heavy and deep bass line and the CD5XS stormed this through my Ferrograph loudspeakers, but keeping their big KEF B139 bass drivers under perfectly tight control. Even through my reference Marantz CD94, this track has an ever so slightly bloated feel to the low end, but this simply vanished through the CD5XS. Even more impressive was the bass detail that the Naim dug from discs: a regular test track favourite of mine is Steely Dan’s ‘Jack of Speed’...
Borrowing heavily from developments pioneered in the staggering Leema Reference Series Altair IV amplifier, the Tucana II is an even more accomplished performer than its multi-award winning predecessor. Improved dynamic range, resolution of fine detail, and remarkable clarity help the Tucana II present music with life-like verve into even the most fussy of today’s audiophile speakers. This highly refined amplifier can deliver over fifty amps to each channel with a vice-like grip and precise control of the loudspeakers.

New features on the Tucana II include an MP3 input, balanced input, headphone output, direct input selection, adjustable input gain, and a balance control.

The Tucana II helps even the most complex music make complete sense.
and I honestly cannot recall a time when I have heard the bass line from this track so taut focused and lithe; impressive stuff.

Across the midband, the Naim builds on that fine sense of atmosphere to really lay out instruments before you. Nils Lofgren's acoustic guitar on the solo acoustic version of 'Keith don't go' was an absolute masterclass in leading edge precision and shimmering decay, but at the same time the CD5XS captured the nature of every string pluck, and the subtle movements of the hands up and down the fretboard. Equally, more challenging electronic material such as 'Jumbo' from dance-masters Underworld was hard-hitting and impactful, but without the Naim ever drawing attention to the fact that the recording was processed and electronic in nature; it has an uncanny ability to look past this and pull forth the music within.

Moving on, I always feel a listening session isn't complete without some Diana Krall, and it was here I did detect a slight chink in the CD5XS's armour. Once again, piano was stunningly vivid and the double bass perfectly rendered, and even Miss Krall's vocals were deliciously husky and soulful, just as they should be. However, I realised as I listened that they were rather further back in the soundstage than I was used to, and spinning discs from a couple more artists of the same ilk revealed the same thing. The CD5XS is not two dimensional in any sense, but it doesn't quite have the depth perspective of some players at the price. Still, a third glowing Naim logo on my rack reminded me I had one more box to try...

With the FlatCap XS plugged in, I cued up Diana Krall again and shut my eyes, wondering if the upgrade could improve that depth perspective, and nearly fell off my chair as 'Popsicle Toes' took off and I had to open my eyes again to check the lady hadn't sneaked into the room when I wasn't paying attention. So that would be a yes, then... Ultimately, the FlatCap is almost a little irritating as, not only did it resolve the depth issue, but also tidied up a few loose ends that I had not previously noted! Bass seemed more lithe across its upper reaches, the dimensionality of recordings increased and the confidence with which the player approached all music almost turned into a nonchalant swagger. The only area in which I was not completely convinced by the change was in the treble; as standard the CD5XS is a crisp, detailed and stimulating delight — always revealing and soaringly insightful but never harsh. Adding the FlatCap XS allowed more space around cymbals and hi-hats but at the expense of a little of that leading edge impact that I had so enjoyed.

**CONCLUSION**

The Naim CD5XS is a fitting source component for Naim's new XS series, offering a tantalising glimpse into the abilities of the mighty CD555 player at real-world price. Grand in scale, effortless in rhythmical terms and impressive in the detail sense, I would say it pretty much leads the field at its price. Adding the FlatCap XS is like adding a sixth gear to your car's five speed gearbox, in that it does not change the basic character of the player, but just makes everything more effortless. All in all then, a thrilling and somewhat addictive combination.

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**REFERENCE SYSTEM**

Marantz CD94 CD player
Naim Supernait amplifier
Ferrograph S1 loudspeakers

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**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency response (-1dB)</td>
<td>CD: 2Hz-21kHz</td>
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<td>Distortion</td>
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<td>-108dB</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dynamic range</td>
<td>109dB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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**VERDICT**

A focused and forthright CD spinner that times, rocks and reveals like few others. FlatCap XS upgrade rounds off a few rough edges, including ones that weren't previously apparent!

**NAIM CD5XS** £1,750
**NAIM FLATCAP XS** £675

Naim Audio
(0)1722 426600
www.naim-audio.com

**FOR**
- super bass
- dynamic precision
- excellent atmospherics
- vivid treble

**AGAINST**
- needs FlatCap to really add perspective to vocals

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**REVIEW**

![Image of Naim CD5XS and FlatCap XS](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

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**World Radio History**
www.hi-fiworld.co.uk
OCTOBER 2009 HI-FI WORLD
39
In the old days, we had cassette. A gloriously simple idea, they'd slot into your car, your kitchen music portable and even your high end hi-fi if you'd invested in a decent three head recorder. Cassette was the epitome of music on the move; handy, cute and amazingly convenient.

Now of course, the iPod has moved in to fulfill the same function, and by and large it does it very well. But there's one area where Apple's polycarbonate peril doesn't sit so easily, namely a hi-fi system. You can plug it in to your amp's auxiliary input of course, via a mini-jack to RCA phono lead from the iPod's headphone socket, but it's hardly an elegant solution. To wit, there came a demand for a neater solution. The answer came in the shape of the universal iPod dock.

These plumb the audio out of the iPod's universal dock connector (that funny thing at the bottom that you plug your computer link cable into), which has audio out. It's of better quality than the headphone output, so immediately improves the iPod's sound. But that's where the similarities end. Different models have different functions, active amplification stages, remote connectivity, fancy construction materials and so on. So we thought we'd try four of the best sellers under £100, plus a cheaper audiophile interconnect as a reference point, in a bid to find which gives the best sound per pound.

RUSS ANDREWS GQ-24 £60

Our starting point is a high quality, premium priced interconnect with an iPod dock plug on one end with two Kimber UltraPlate phono connectors on the other. It is compatible with all iPods with a dock connector, even older generation models. Playing The Sugababes' "Stronger" from the 'Angels With Dirty Faces' (Island) album the output was nicely warm and smooth with rounded yet strong bass output, and no vocal screeching that is often heard from this overly peak-limited album. This 'warmth', on Carol Kidd's 'Dreamsville' (Linn) and 'A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square', did provide a problem however, as the mellow upper-mids and treble managed to mask the majority of the upper frequency detail leading to a lack of excitement. However, the stereo image was good. Can's 'Yoo Doo Right' from Monster Movie (Mute), was the most successful album played here, merely confirming that the GQ-24 appeared most compatible with rock and its bass-heavy tones.

DENON ASD-1R £80

Compatible with all 4th generation and over iPod models, the ASD-1R is well built and available in black or white. It allows iPod control via a remote, and sports integrated S-Video connectors in addition to decent gold plated phono connectors. Immediately noticeable upon spinning the Sugababes track was the lack of control over the bass frequencies, while the vocals tried valiantly to cope like a storm-tossed ship floating on angry waves. Associated to this was a veiled midrange and treble, although at least there was no harshness. Despite the slight lack of focus on Carol Kidd's vocals, the Denon performed measurably better on 'Nightingale', while the acoustic guitar solo was tracked with aplomb. The news got even better when Can was played, as the dock found a well mastered rock track more to its taste, and fun was had by all here. 'Yoo Doo Right' was busy sounding and engaging, despite its lack of bass grip.
ONKYO DS-A3 £90
Compatible with 4th generation iPods upwards and available in piano gloss black, this dock is the best built here. There’s the usual component video output plus an onscreen display for navigation and content selection. You also receive a useful, dedicated remote control and a sleep/timer option. Playing the Sugababes track, I was hit by a gloriously wide soundstage, sweeping synth and rich, deep bass, with the vocals sitting just in front of the soundstage and providing an effective three dimensional image. That gassy bass continued to the Carol Kidd track but the jazz tones revealed a lack of definition. Despite the fullness of the guitar strumming that presented plenty of character, there was also a certain amount of deadening in material, the internal components made it a fine product at the price. Choose with care.

NAD IPD 2 £95
Supported on a large rubber foot, the simple yet nicely designed base has a heavy, ceramic feel to it. Supplied with a remote control, connections include analogue audio and S-Video connectors. The dock is compatible with iPods of 4th generation upwards. After the rollercoaster rides of the previous docks, the NAD’s gently balanced nature was a relief. With less gain than the other docks reviewed so far, the smooth sounding NAD didn’t exacerbate the harshness of the peak-limited Sugababes track, but didn’t have the bass punch of the Onkyo either or, for that matter, the upper mid/treble detail of the Denon. What it did offer was superior midband and treble clarity compared to the Onkyo and superior overall control when compared to the Denon. In fact, after listening to both Carol Kidd and Can, the NAD sounded like a direct upgrade to the GQ-24. Although not showy, it was smooth, even and organically musical, making it a fine product at the price.

CAMBRIDGE iD50 £100
Despite the rather tacky chassis material, the internal components of the dock are up to scratch including buffered audio outputs and quasi-differential noise cancelling. Connections include composite and S-Video whilst you also receive a remote control. The dock is compatible with 4th generation iPods onwards. Gain was the highest of the group, and this informed the iD50’s overall nature. It was incredibly transparent; in fact you could call it stark. This wasn’t fun with poor recordings such as the Sugababes track, as the nasty drum sound and those strained vocals were all present with no Onkyo-like velvet coating here! However, this meant that Carol Kidd’s vocals, for the first time, exhibited great presence while cymbals showed a unique, metallic character that lent the whole drum kit a sense of reality. Similarly, Can provided far more immediacy and urgency than had previously been heard. A transparent and engagingly musical performer, but before poor recordings and low bitrates!

CONCLUSION
Despite the relatively small difference in price from the cheapest to the most expensive dock tested here, just £40, it was starting to hear just how different each dock sounded and how each manufacturer prioritised build and sound quality with price. The Russ Andrews GQ-24 has been designed with flexibility in mind to allow iPod users to connect to any flavour of hi-fi, no matter how restricted the space, whilst offering decent sound quality. Both the Denon ASD-IR and Onkyo DS-A3 took the opposite viewpoint of dazzling the user with quality construction and features and then closing in on one particular aspect of the sound spectrum whilst largely neglecting the rest. The NAD IPD 2, on the other hand, attempted to become all things to all men. It failed to totally succeed but did manage to provide a more balanced sound with a wider degree of acceptability. The Cambridge iD50 succeeded where the NAD just missed out, providing a broad, balanced appeal in all musical genres but excelling in those same areas in terms of sound. The iD50 is a top quality dock offering great sound at a reasonable price, and a worthy winner of this group test.

VERDICT
Not quite the most transparent dock here, but an extremely musical device all the same, and particularly distinguished in the lower registers.

ONKYO DS-A3 £90
Onkyo
C +44 (0)1628 473350
www.eu.onkyo.com

FOR
- overall musicality
- rich, deep bass

AGAINST
- midband detail

VERDICT
Supremely effective iPod dock providing true high fidelity sound.

NAD IPD 2 £95
NAD
C +44 (0) 01279 501111
www.armourhe.co.uk

FOR
- balanced sound

AGAINST
- too balanced for some

VERDICT
Supremely effective iPod dock providing true high fidelity sound.

CAMBRIDGE iD50 £100
Cambridge Audio
C +44 (0) 845 900 1230
www.cambridgeaudio.com

FOR
- transparency
- musicality

AGAINST
- nothing at the price
Denon AVR-1910 High Definition AV Receiver // The renowned EISA Awards Jury, made up of more than 50 experts, has voted the AVR-1910 to be the best home theatre receiver 2009-2010: "It offers a comprehensive feature set as well as stunning audio and video performance". Its Dolby ProLogic Ilz sound program supports two additional front height speakers to deliver an even more spacial surround experience. The new title holder forms part of Denon's new generation of AV receivers, designed to suit every individual home theatre. To find out more visit www.denon.co.uk

surrounded by success

Denon AVR-1910

Best Home Cinema Receiver 2009-2010
Denon AVR-1910
Visit our website at www.hi-fiworld.co.uk or send your emails to letters@hi-fiworld.co.uk.

Letter of the month wins a pair of KEF IQ30 loudspeakers and one year's FREE subscription to Hi-Fi World.

A pair of KEF IQ30 loudspeakers is on their way to LEN EDELSTEIN, Letter of the Month winner in our SEPTEMBER 2009 issue.

**Letter of the Month**

**Downloader**

You say, in a reply to a reader's letter (August issue p60) that you would like to hear from readers how we would like to listen to and buy music in a non-CD world, so here goes.

If CDs were no longer available the only viable alternative would be downloads. Yes, I know there will be those who scream "vinyl", but going back to vinyl as a mainstream format just ain't going to happen. At present there are few truly high quality downloads available, even true CD quality is quite rare, no matter what the peddlers of data-reduced downloads may say. Of what is available the majority seems to be that "audiophile" stuff that pays more mind to sound quality than musical content and is of interest only to special interest groups.

If it has to be downloads I would like the widest possible range of music including all new releases to be available in high definition. Current internet speeds are quite adequate to carry it, download speeds are acceptable and high capacity storage devices are abundant and cheap. Surely it is possible to offer us master quality downloads, a quality we have never had before. I feel sure that many of us would be willing to pay a premium so long as it is reasonable and represents good value for money.

I do not have much idea as to the best way of dealing with high def downloads. At present I can only download to a computer but this does not seem to be a good way of doing it. Most domestic computers are cheaply made and poorly constructed when compared to even middle range hi-fi and look positively shoddy beside high end stuff. Is this any way to process what should be the epitome of sound quality I ask myself? My ears tell me it is not.

As yet there seems to be no general consensus as to the best way to go, the products on the market show no real consistency of approach. It would appear that I am not alone in finding a screen something of a distraction when all I want to do is listen to music.

A single item of equipment which can download these high quality files sympathetically and with the minimum of incidental processing, verify and store them in an easily accessible manner then pass the signals on for decoding as the owner sees fit, a piece of equipment designed solely to do only that, dedicated to extracting best possible sound quality and built to a typical quality hi-fi standard ought to be a winner. Such an item could easily be made versatile with plug-in extras such as for example a network device for those so inclined. That would be my ideal. Well, you did ask...

Dave Dick

Fascinating. It's a great topic, isn't it? You make some fine points, Dave. Vinyl will never of course become the world's music carrier again. That's not to say it's dead or moribund of course; I liken it to the sports car market; it's pure indulgence, a luxury item for those craving to own it. Certainly, my recent visit to Rise Records in Bristol's Whiteladies Road underlined this point, with few new CDs above £6 and many of the new vinyl albums priced between £20 and £29!

What then takes over from CD is, as you rightly point out, digital downloads, and I think your...
reasoning about how these will be managed is sound. The intriguing thing is, though, it’s not always logic that shapes the market. As Adam Smith points out in his column this month, Betamax should have blown VHS into the weeds but the reverse happened. I suspect if the future of music buying and listening unravelled in a logical manner, there would be a lot of people ordering their Bentleys now!

DP

THE EMPIRE WRITES BACK

After seeing the snippet in the June issue about the Empire 598 turntable, I must confess to being like the kid at the back of the class that knows the answer to the really obscure (audio) question that the teacher has set. I find myself sitting on the edge of my seat, waving my arm saying "Sir, sir, I used to own an Empire 598 turntable!"

Empire Scientific were mostly a cartridge company and their range attempted to out-spec the spec-meisters Shure (more detail in the 1974 Hi-Fi Yearbook) but the Troubadour turntable was an AR-style turntable on steroids (while going to the gym daily and being waxed and adorned with gold chains). The Empire replaced a non-classic Garrard turntable in my early 1980s engineering student system and I was startled to realise that the opening bars of Schubert’s "Unfinished" symphony were not "rumble, rumble rumble".

This turntable had a V8 sized synchronous motor, with a platter and bearing to match. My only real arguments with the design were, what could be politely called a "1970s-style" turntable mat. Adam refers to the wonderfully quirky brass arm and was even more cunning in that it was capable of being almost invisible. As Adam points out in his column this month, the Vintage Knob website states that the Sony TTS-8000 is capable of turning the copper mat and the weight added to the turntable with no trouble. Interestingly Sony TTS-8000 - a broadcast turntable and not MOR!

Empire's weird hexagonal loudspeakers.

Endearingly weird hexagonally shaped loudspeakers. I suspect if the future of music buying and listening unravelled in a logical manner, there would be a lot of people ordering their Bentleys now! I find it unbelievable that David could make ambivalent comparisons between his Sony and the EAT. Surely the EAT destroyed the Sony! Descriptions of the Sony like quick and clever have left my father and me with raised eyebrows.

The most on the pace award would have to go to Noel Keywood with his enthusiastic yet sober review of the Icon parallel 845 monoblocks. These amps are most drool worthy and definitely on my radar. Even my Class A solid-state loving father gave them the nod!

Overall you guys are still top of the hi-fi magazine food chain and your misadventures always make for good reading. And David, a custom 0.01 mm copper foil mat for your Sony is in the mail!

Ben North

Hi Ben - my Sony TT-S8000 has been expertly and comprehensively rebuilt by Vantage Audio. It will easily turn the platter with that copper mat fitted, but just because it will do this doesn’t mean it automatically sounds better doing it! I’ve come to find that there’s an optimum mass for a turntable mat: a modestly heavy one can add a degree of welcome ‘flywheel effect’. I’ve found the SDS GyroDec (amazing, considering their radically different designs). But the Rubato mat I tried simply made the sound strained. According to Audio Technica ceramic mat, so we are curious to know exactly what is going on with David’s turntable. Has this vintage deck’s power supply been fully rebuilt and is it running to spec?

Despite David’s obvious disappointment at the mat not working with his first choice, the review was clearly positive, and led to both my father and I lusting after copper mats for our Technics SP10 Mk IIs (yes, we both have SP10S with matching Nagaoka GL-601 Crystal mats!)

Secondly, David’s use of his Sony as a reviewing tool. My father simply finds references to it annoying and its choice odd, as it is a middle-of-the-road deck and not a deck a lot of people have heard and can therefore reference. I made the sound strained. According to Audio Technica ceramic mat, so we are curious to know exactly what is going on with David’s turntable. Has this vintage deck’s power supply been fully rebuilt and is it running to spec?

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to the Sony's strobe it was still bang-on speed-wise, but it sounded more laboured and less musically convincing. I suspect (and this is just a theory) that something as heavy as this has got the servo pumping loads of juice into the motor, which is straining the power supply. It did this with both the Sony and the Technics, and was especially uncomfortable with the Technics which has a demonstrably less torquey motor than the Sony. I really can't account for what anyone else says on whatever other website about this; I merely report my own findings. Would you like me to sketch my own observations because someone else thinks different?

Given that the Sony TT-S8000 was a high end broadcast turntable, more expensive than an SP10/II in its native Japan and rarely found outside studios, I'm not sure why your father thinks it to be 'middle of the road'. In terms of price, it wasn't that far off that of the EAT in real terms, back in 1977, and is more technically sophisticated, and almost as heavy even in the smaller domestic (i.e. non-broadcast) plinth option. Sonically the EAT displayed slightly superior depth and detail (methinks it has a better main bearing) but was noticeably inferior in speed stability terms (to my ears and those of several senior hi-fi industry figures who happened to visit when I had both decks running back to back). Bass was obviously tighter through the Sony, with the classic high-end direct drive 'LED-like' on-off switching of the motor. Lovely as the EAT was, it wasn't quite as tight.

I agree that few people have heard of the Sony, but it's a top class analogue source.1 am always amazed how other reviewers can only ever review amplifiers and loudspeakers via CD; it's like road testing a sports car in a 30mph limit! How can you really assess the ability of something if you feed it a middling signal and never let it off the leash, so to speak? The Sony provides me with a very clean, three dimensional and tight 'hi res' source that has none of the harsh colourations of CD or the euphonic colourations of a belt drive turntable. It's not the world's most romantic sounding device, but I've found it an unfailingly neutral performer and brilliant at showcasing differences between other bits of kit. My main object is that it's gloss black and picks up dirt; like Adam Smith does old hi-fi separates; namely at great speed and with considerable relish! DP

Hi Ben - thanks for saying I'm "on the pace". I did make your letter No1 as a direct result of this flattery but David bumped it back down, the ratter. Never insult a man's turntable! NK

LIVING VOICE

I find myself in the wonderful position of being able to substantially upgrade my current system but I want to ensure that what I buy will not need further change for a good few years, will be serviceable for that duration and is of 'local' heritage.

My current setup consists of a Michell Gyro SE (with Orbe platter and HR power supply), Hadcock 242SE Silver arm, Audio Note IQ3 cartridge, Graham Slee Era V phono stage, Sonic Euphoria PLC (autoformer based passive pre http://www.sonic-euphoria.com/) and Linn 512S power with active cards feeding Linn Ninkas. I also have an old Arcam Alpha Plus CD but I don't use it much. Cabling is Chord Chorus 2 interconnects and DIY speaker cables (TNT Ubyte 2). My Edwardian room has a suspended wooden floor plus heavy rugs, is 15x20 feet and 10.5 feet high plus two bay windows and the speakers are placed on granite slabs 2.5 feet from the rear wall, either side of the chimney breast facing down the length. Finally, I use a Clearlight Audio RDC Aspekt rack.

I find this system plays lighter material very well, with great treble clarity and bass extension (especially since I upgraded to the Chord Chorus). However, put something heavier on and it seems to get a little congested, less so in the treble. In essence, I'd like to improve clarity and dynamics across all material without losing on the bass extension and without increasing treble brightness. Also, I do find my foot tapping away, but feel a little more musicality would be nice. I listen to most genres of music.

My budget is around 10k including system. Therefore, I feel I should focus on changing the power amp, speakers and speaker cable, as I feel these components share a relationship that possibly gets overlooked, hopefully provide what I'm looking for now and provide a platform for future upgrades. I could also change the pre-amp (and phono amp if part of it) but only if there was a clear imperative. I knew this approach would leave my system 'a little light' at the front end, but am prepared to accept this for the moment.

The speakers need to visually appeal to my wife and not dominate the room (the Ninkas do get a tick in the box here). Having heard Martin Logans and Quad electrostatics briefly, I loved their clarity but they're too big and unsightly. Something simple with quality wood veneer. Having done some research, I hit upon Living Voice Avatar IBX-R2 or OBX-R2, which use relatively standard components (tick serviceable), are not too large and seem to fit the bill sonically. I still have the review by Simon Pope (April 2003) and he was very complementary. Of course, there must be others to look at.

The Living Voices are highly efficient and so don't require a lot of juice. For this, I'm thinking of one of the valve amps that you've reviewed over the last few years; Quad IL Forty, Icon Audio MB 845, EAR 890, or maybe even the World Designs WD88VA. Again, I would hope a valve power amp to be serviceable for quite some time. However, I do have a question over the time it takes a valve amp to reach optimum performance after power on as I tend to snack at my music rather than have extended listening sessions. An alternative could be the Sugden Masterclass SPA-4 (or maybe even the IA-4 integrated if you feel it was a good match), but this I presume is a more complicated beast to service in the long term and maybe takes a while to warm up as well?

In terms of speaker cables, I was looking for something visually unobtrusive against wooden floors,
**OUR CURRENT PRE-OWNED STOCK LIST:**

**AMPLIFICATION**

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Bel Canto e.ONE REF 1000 mono blocks. One owner from new. Boxed in unmarked mint condition. Great reviews and a bargain price! (Cost new £3500) only £1995.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naim NAP 150 and MAC 112 pre/power combination. One owner, unmarked condition and a 5-year warranty for the new owner. Cost new £5500.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Analogue Maestro Supernova Integrated Amplifier. Wonderful condition, with all original boxes, Packing, Manuals and Brush Remote Control. As always, we have uploaded the display to current condition. Incredible transparency and dynamics, make this the Maestro a favourite with reviewers and buyers alike. (£2500 New) £995.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McIntosh MA2775 integrated valve amplifier. Absolutely as new. One owner, boxed, manuals. Stereophile amplifier of the year award. Only 8 months old. Cost new £7800.00 incredible value £4995.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piurcoos P8 Power amplifier. Boxed in excellent condition. One owner from new. A rare opportunity indeed. Only 30 pairs of these will ever be manufactured. (£1524) £1095.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van den Hult ( VDH ) Array A-1 pre-amplifier. One owner from new and a very rare item indeed. Costing nearly £3000 when new, this pre-amplifier will surprise many with its incredible performance. (£3000) £1995.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Physic Avanti V speakers. Finished in cherry. One owner from new and a huge saving on new price. (£1600) £999.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quad Q90 Power Amplifier. One owner from new, 4 months old. Unmarked, boxed, manuals. (£995.95) £525.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Electric Minimax Pre. Boxed in as new condition, one owner from new and a huge saving on new price. (£1800) £999.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audio Physic Scorpio II - Latest model, finished in cherry, one local owner from new, boxed, manual. (£5500) £2995.</td>
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**DIGITAL**

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<tr>
<td>Wadia 301 CD player. One owner from new in silver, boxed, packing, excellent condition. Comes with the upgrade metal remote (these normally have a plastic one). Can be run directly into a power amplifier using the digital volume control (£4000) £1695.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCS Verona Master Clock. One very careful owner from new. Original box, packing and manual. The reviews and reputation speak for themselves. Great reviews and a bargain price! (£6000) £2295.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audio Analogue DAC1 mk4. Fully balanced or single ended operation, current model with latest spec. 66 bit, 1036kHz upsampling. As digital inputs, One owner from new, unmarked condition. Boxed, manual. 5-year warranty for the new owner. A bargain. (£3950) £2295.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McIntosh MC1201 SACD player. One owner from new with a huge saving on original box price. Great reviews. Built in pre-amp, so can be used directly into a power amplifier. (£3495) £1795.</td>
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**LOUDSPEAKERS**

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<tr>
<td>Jel Audio Orsa Loudspeakers. One owner, from new, finished in Hi-Gloss Cherry, wonderful condition. These are exceptional loudspeakers in every regard. (£1152) £695.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Logan Motion X-1 speakers. One owner from new. Exceptional condition. Finished in Light Oak and complete with immaculate original boxes, packing, accessories and paperwork. (£1895) £1395.</td>
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<tr>
<td>MBL 601D Reference Pre-amp. Boxed in as new condition, one owner from new and a huge saving on new price. (£1800) £999.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio Physic Scorpio boxed in cherry. One owner only 4 months old. Simply sensational (£1495) £949.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audio Physic Scorpio II - Latest model, finished in cherry, one local owner from new, boxed, manual. (£5500) £2995.</td>
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**CABLES**

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**Mains Conditioning**

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<tr>
<td>Quad ESL 2805 electrostatic speakers. Finished in black, one local owner from new, boxed, mainan excellent condition. Price includes a 5-year warranty for the new owner. (£5500) £2995.</td>
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**Please ask about our unbeatable part-exchange programme.**
such as Chord Epic Twin and am also looking for unequal lengths (is this bad?) as my rack is sited at one side of the room. Some of the above amps would be too large for the Aspekt rack, so an alternative would be to place monoblocks near the speakers and run lengths of interconnect from the preamp. Your recommendations would be very much appreciated and help me to focus on what equipment to audition.

Chris
Newcastle upon Tyne

You already have a very decent system, so it’s lucky you’ve got a few quid to spend because improving on this little lot won’t be cheap. First, I would change your GyroDec to an Orbe SE. You’ll get a good price for your Gyro, so it won’t be too expensive to do, and you’ll notice a considerably cleaner and more stable sound, with all that’s good about the Gyro (tonality, expansive soundstaging) plus an obviously more solid, precise and defined sound. I still think the Orbe isn’t far off some decks at three times its price, so it remains a bargain. To this, I’d suggest you fit an Origin Live Encounter; this arm is better than ever and as always a particularly nice synergistic combination on Michell decks. It will give a step change up over your Hadcock, which will sound vague and ponderous by comparison, charming as this classic arm is. For the phono stage, I would suggest an Icon Audio PS-3; a brilliant valve design, with a volume control which you can use to drive power amps directly.

For my money, the class of the field in your price bracket are the Icon Audio MB845s; both Noel and Paul Rigby are using them and methinks they’re not going to change soon! These have a beautifully sound but massive visceral impact too, like only a high end valve amp can give. Truly special, if I were you I’d write the cheque now! However, if you ‘snack’ at your music, then switching expensive valves on an off all the time is not good. In this case, the Sugden (solid-state Class A) IA-4 integrated is a much better bet. Believe me, this amp doesn’t take long to warm up (about one millisecond) and is singing happily after ten minutes or so. It has a more brightly lit presentation than the Icon Audio valve amps, but it detailed and truly musical. I also know it to work brilliantly with what I’m just about to suggest...

As for speakers, your wife puts some tough constraints on you. I am afraid I’m not familiar with Living Voices, but if you want a ‘known quantity’ and if your better half will accept gorgeous lacquered piano gloss black (the very same as used on real concert grands), then the Yamaha Soavo 1.1 Pianos would be my choice. They really are self effacing and open loudspeakers which are unfailingly musical at all times and sound great via valves. I can’t think of a more suitable big box. Put this little lot together with some Black Rhodium Tango loudspeaker cables (nice and smooth, with a dark tonality) and you’ll have a special high end music system that I suspect you’ll simply never want to upgrade again! Oh well, maybe the cartridge. Try an Ortofon Cadenza Bronze when the time comes! DP

CHEAP MCs

I think an interesting article in your magazine would be a comparison of the cheaper end of the MC cartridge range, versus the more expensive MM cartridges. I know a while back you tested some MM’s and threw in the Denon DL103, but I wasn’t thinking that cheap! Specifically I was wondering how cartridges like the Ortofon Rondo Red and Audio Technica AT-OC9 MLII stack up against your prize MM’s. The Ortofon 2M Black and the Goldring 1042.

This is because I am in a bit of a quandary as to where to upgrade my vinyl playing set up. Being a dyed-in-the-wool olde school type, I believe the wine is the most important component in a system – “garbage in, garbage out” as they used to say. I have an all-Rega stage consisting of P5/Ortofon 2M Blue (P5 doesn’t have the power supply optional extra), Rega Mira 3 amplifier and R3 speakers. I use the phono stage built into the Mira 3. I also have an Apollo CD player. I have been a bit of a Roy Gandy aficionado for about eleven years now, and although I have auditioned other stuff over the years I keep coming back to that relaxed and superbly musical sound. I know it’s a tad bass light, but what bass there is, is solid and makes you move. What it lacks is the ability to draw the listener in, and keep the attention over long periods. I put this down to the cartridge choice, which was the best I could afford at the time. I believe that MC cartridges “do involvement in spades”, although I don’t want extra treble edge masquerading as involvement.

I am hoping to be able to raise about £600-£700 in the next few weeks and am mulling over the following options:

1. Would the Mira 3’s built in phono stage show off the capabilities of the 2M Black? I could save some money (or stretch a bit and add the Rega optional power supply) this way.

2. Would either the AT cartridge I mention or the Rondo Red, plus something like the Clearaudio Smart phono bring about more involvement?

I would imagine giving the lion’s share of the budget to the cartridge would produce better sonics so are there cheaper decent phono stages that would allow me to allocate more to the cartridge?

As an aside, can I thank your magazine and readers for raising awareness of the “loudness war” issue. One day, record companies may listen to their punters and stop this silly practice. It’s ruining music!

Mark Pearce

Hastings,

I think your idea of comparing budget MCs against expensive MM’s is a good one and I hope we can follow it up. We certainly need to cover budget MCs because a lot of people are interested in them, for quite obvious reasons. They promise the benefits of an MC; mainly superb clarity and sound staging; at MM prices.

However, I have yet to be persuaded, because every one I have heard over the years had nothing to offer over a good MM except extra cost and hassle. But perhaps there are some goodies out there, and the market has been rearranged by currency fluctuations that have in most cases made budget types like the Denons

What cartridge to fit to a Rega P5, asks Mark Pearce.
Hello, and thank you for taking a look today.

Here's the Somervell XTC-4c active loudspeaker, designed and built in the UK. Uniquely for an active speaker and to avoid microphony, the four powerful mono power amps and sophisticated crossovers are built into the separate (not shown here) XTC-4c controller. There are no mains leads attached to these speakers. The cabinets use material not previous seen in the audiophile world.

The XTC-4c controller has fully remote switching, five RCA line inputs and some rather clever other bits and pieces which I don't understand. There's some very advanced thinking here.

It's no exaggeration to admit that during 33 years in this industry I have never, and I do mean never heard a more agile, more articulate and more detailed speaker system. The ability to convey musical detail and subtleties (even at whisper-quiet levels) and yet when required, to produce room-filling dynamics, literally leaves me speechless. The imaging is deep, wide, tall and stable. The pace, the rhythm and the timing are to me, state-of-the-art at ANY price. These have to be heard to be believed.

Imagine if you will please, Harbeth Super HL5s driven by an LFD NCSE super-integrated amp. That's what you get here but at a fraction of the price. These have to be heard to be believed.

Imagine if you will please, Harbeth Super HL5s driven by an LFD NCSE super-integrated amp. That's what you get here but at a fraction of the price. Here's what you get:

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far more expensive.

Unfortunately, Rega amps and loudspeakers do have a polite sound exactly as you describe and changing from an Ortofon Blue to a Black will affect this little. It is a far better cartridge than the Blue, which I wasn’t moved by, so you will like the from an Ortofon Blue to a Black far more expensive.

NK

A good question. The trouble is that it’s not as simple as whether a top MM is ‘better’ than a similarly priced entry-level MC. What you’ve also got to factor in is the cost of hearing the MC. By this, I mean that most integrated amplifier phono stages are poor to middling at best. So even a Koetsu through these would be little better than a Goldring G1042. You’ve then got to budget for a decent phono stage, and as you observe, this then skews your ‘like for like’ comparison.

The answer to questions [1] and [2] simply depends on where you want to go eventually. If you’re going to continue along the upgrade path, my instinct would be to buy the very best phono stage you can right now; for example, an Icon Audio PSI mark II MM/MC (£635). This would [a] make your existing cartridge sound far better than via the Rega Mira’s phono stage, and [b] then give you the freedom to get a really good MC for your next upgrade (I’d counsel the Lyra Dorian (£695) which I adore and believe to be by far the best sub-£600 cartridge, although I know Noel is not a fan).

Still, if you don’t want to migrate towards a higher end vinyl system in the middle term future, then I’d say stick with an MM and be happy; they are very good these days (well, some at least) and the likes of an Ortofon 2M Bronze (£249) would be ideal (the Black might be overkill through your Rega’s phono stage). This done, make sure you’ve got the deck set-up properly; I find Audiophile Furniture Base isolation platforms works brilliantly under Regas, for example.

DP

SYMMETRY

I thought you and perhaps your readers might find my recent experience interesting if not enlightening. I’ve been into hi-fi for over forty years and have acquired over this time an eclectic mix of budget equipment. This has resulted in my swapping round items when I get a new piece of kit to see what’s compatible with what (synergy rules okay).

My most recent acquisition is a pair of large floorstanding three way speakers approx 85 litres each (if my maths is up to scratch) which consist of a 12 inch woof and dome squawker and tweeter in an IB enclosure made of 2 thicknesses of chipboard. They weigh about 33kg each with no covering on the enclosures so the WAF on a scale of 1-10 is about 0 which is why he had to get rid of them. Fortunately, I’ve got a dedicated listening room, otherwise referred to as ‘the SASS Pit’, which is about 16x8x8 so you can probably guess what it used to be. I know the dimensions are far from ideal but it does mean I can crank the volume up without upsetting The Mistress of the Universe.

I noticed that the balance wasn’t quite right as the imaging seemed to be slightly shifted to left which I hadn’t noticed before the fiddling. The speakers previously in use were Mission 752 Freestores so I assumed there was a problem with the speakers. They were duly swapped over, left with right, but the imbalance to the left was still there.

I then started my quest for symmetry in earnest. Amps were swapped, NAD 3020 and C370, Marantz PM655SE, Sonic Impact T-Amp and the one I favour most, Pioneer A300R, but all to no avail. My attention then turned to the turntable because it seemed to be worse with vinyl. Also I’d recently acquired a Technics SL1210, with a view to arm upgrade, to replace my Planar 2. I’d swapped the Denon DL110 (love the sound) so I started checking all the tracking weight, cartridge alignment, turntable levelling and all the other fascinating time consuming adjustments vinyl junkies have to do.

Again this was all to no avail. I was beginning to get paranoid and couldn’t enjoy the music as all I could hear was this very slight imbalance and I was beginning to notice a slight vagueness to the stereo image. I now thought the polarity was wrong somewhere in the cable run so I decided to check the internal speaker wiring (getting desperate or what) as I knew the external was okay.

As you’ve probably guessed everything was alright so my attention, or perhaps more accurately blame, now turned to the room dimensions and its acoustic properties. The left hand speaker, which appeared the loudest, was firing towards a radiator so I assumed, probably more in desperation than logical thought, that this was the problem. And guess what? It wasn’t! Moving 35kg boxes with spikes in the bottom had all been pointless.

I was now resigned to the problem and decided to, horror of horrors, use the balance control as I wanted to keep the speakers owing to their sound and tight deep bass (can’t beat a big 12 inch in an IB enclosure).

As I now had nothing else to do these balmy summer evenings (I must get a life) I decided to clean up my interconnects, phone sockets and mains plugs with combinations of brass and ethyl alcohol.

I’ve always been suspicious of claims about the difference interconnects and speaker cables make but I noticed something at right with my Qnnect leads from the phono amp. I’d previously noticed a few years ago that one pair of interconnects had arrows pointing in one direction but the other pair didn’t, even though they were the same type bought at the same time. I’d always ensured the ones with the arrows pointed in the direction the signal was going but didn’t with the other pair.

My curiosity was aroused by the fact that the writing on the leads without the arrows that I was using on the phono amp weren’t reading in the same direction, if you get my drift, so I decided to swap one round so that the wording read the way the signal was going on both leads.

My quest was finally over. Everything was now symmetrical. The soundstage had been opened up, PRAT was as it should be and finally the balance control was moved to its central position with a flourish.

I hope this story may be of some use to another troubled hi-fi enthusiast and perhaps save them hours of fiddling, but then again that’s what hi-fi’s all about.

Dave Arnold
Bromley

Thanks Dave - nice tale. The first thing I do if I get a channel imbalance is get the Kontak out and start ‘rodding’ my phone sockets, plugs and speaker terminals. It’s amazing how a little bit of scunge on a plug somewhere can take the volume level down. It’s also amazing how much ‘black’ stuff comes off seemingly gleaming plugs; just goes to show you!

DP

SMOOTH CABLES

I’d appreciate your advice, please, on a speaker cable upgrade. My somewhat venerable system comprises an Arcam Delta 500 DAC/250 Transport into a Delta 290/290P combo, bi-amped into Spendor SP2/2Is. Overall, I’m pleased with the sound and have improved things over the past year by upgrading the interconnects — replacing £40-£50 cables with £100+ ones and installing Isoktek power cables. I’m currently using Ortofon Spk300 speaker cable. This
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CS-122, a Van den Hul Carbon Sheathed loudspeaker cable at a reasonable price.

cost something over £100 about 15 years ago (for about 12m worth) and I suspect it can be improved on. Basically, I need something that will perform well at modest volume levels (can't upset the neighbours) and I can't stretch to a bit more if you think it would be worthwhile.

Philip Reeves

Sounds to me you need to use one of the Van den Hul carbon sheathed cables, known for sounding very smooth yet uncoloured and insightful. I still use Royal Jade hybrid cables (just £14/metre) but Van den Hul now list this as obsolete, replaced with various other hybrids like the CS-122 at £15.75/metre or The Wind MkII at £22/single wire metre (prices from www.divinecables.co.uk). NK

TURNTABLE UPGRADE

I'm looking to make a good pound for pound, value for money upgrade to my vinyl setup. With over 3000 records from DJing and collecting, it's the vinyl that still gives me easily the most listening pleasure and it's only here I'm prepared to invest to increase the enjoyment. I have Michelle GyroDec SE with the HR power upgrade, a Tecnoroom and MM Rega Elys cartridge. My system is Naim amp, 250 Naim pre-amp, 282 Hi-cap Dynavector XX2 cartridge (my local dealer's advice).

C) Keep my Gyro — only upgrade the MM cartridge. Example stay MM — but buy the Ortofon 2M Black £400

D) Keep My Gyro - just upgrade the cartridge to an MC — thinking of maybe the new Ortofon MC you reviewed last issue.

E) Or replace my Naim MM Stageline phono stage with the new Superline MC phono stage.

Stuart Simpson

Personally, I'd go for a Michell Orbe with Origin Live Encounter tonearm; the SME V is a thing of loveliness, but having had one on my own Orbe, I found it a less synergistic combination than the OL, which for some reason seems to be a 'greater than the sum of the parts' combination with the big Michell. This would free you up for a decent MC, in the shape of the Ortofon Cadenza Bronze. The above combo will sound gorgeous; stable, deep, dark, powerful, dynamic yet rhythmically fleet of foot and very musical. It's way above what you can get from the GyroDec with any arm fitted; much as I love this iconic turntable. DP

NOT SO GOOD

Usually, I agree with your assessment when the opportunity arises to listen to reviewed equipment. Imagine my surprise when, armed with my test CDs (chosen to reveal colourations and transients, harmonics, reproduction), I went to a seasoned Naim dealer and listened to the Uniti (awarded 5 Globes in June). The Uniti was installed on a sturdy support next to a Nait and a Wilson Benesch Arc Speakers Naim CDX2. The Gyro's the leading light. This is what's in my head below;

A) Upgrade to a Michell Orbe SE with an SME V arm. Keep a budget cartridge on this for 2-3 months until funds arrive go for something better (I'm thinking here, buy one the best — but I'm worried about value for money)

B) Keep My Gyro, but upgrade my arm to a SME IV and upgrade to an MC

CDSi, and had been on for several hours. The speakers were typical of what was likely to be used at the price point. The first CD (a limp choir in a known acoustic) produced a sound which would have been just acceptable from a £400/500 mini system; voices were badly coloured, the acoustic was muffled and soundstaging vague. Lest we forget, I was listening to an outfit costing around £3,000 in all! I got up and checked connections and phase — they were correct.

The second CD (an excellent Naim guitar recording) was supposed to reveal transients and harmonics. The Uniti did nothing of the sort: transients were loose, harmonics muffled, with no air around the instrument.

The third CD (a piano shimmering with harmonics) was in the same vein. In sum, this was not remotely the "detailed, tuneful, subtle sound, if short on scale" noted in the review. The dealer assured me that a previous sample was similar. At the request, the same speakers via the same cables were connected to the nearby Nait+CDSi, after all the Uniti was said to be "a Nait with a CDSi in one box". The change produced a very substantial overall improvement. This would now indeed (to my ears) deserve DP's comments... "musical, dynamic, tactile... if lacking in scale". Needless to say, I did not buy the Uniti (intended as a present!)

I am puzzled to say the least. Could it be, perish the thought, that the reviewed sample had been souped up for HFW?

Allen Edelstein
NJ, USA

Hmm... Very unlikely Alan. If it's between cock-up and conspiracy I always go for the former. My suspicion has to be that the U.S. samples you heard had a problem. I suggest the dealer sorts this out with Naim, because Naim are surely going to take U.S. complaints seriously. NK

Obviously your dealer had a duff batch, or you had a duff dealer. I auditioned the Uniti in my usual reference room with the same speakers, cables, etc. as ever, and it made a very nice noise considering its price point. I subsequently heard one again at a nearby Naim dealer, and had no reason to change my mind.

My experience teaches me that whenever human beings are involved, things go wrong more often than they should. Bitter experience grappling with faulty or non-delivered review samples on a monthly basis for this magazine has taught me this!

DP

RIP TIDE

I last wrote for advice in 2003, asking about a mid-priced CD player. The second-hand Marantz CD17 Ki that I bought for £300 that year is still doing me proud (indeed has seen on, on sonic grounds, a top-rated Accuphase CDP which I trundled in 2006 as a possible replacement). Even so, times have moved on and I've known for some time that the next upgrade would not feature a CDP replacement. Like many, I suspect, I've been waiting until...
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I really enjoy your website and find it very informative (and read it every day). — Richard Holbrook

I have never replied to online audio reviews but wanted you to know that I have enjoyed several articles. — Craig Mattice

What a great review! — Paul Kittinger
the utterly confusing mess that is the arena of digital recording, storage, and playback became somewhat clearer and good domestic solution offering good sonics at a reasonable price emerged. That would still be my strategy, but my wife and I have been lucky enough to be offered jobs in Australia and we will be emigrating next June. However, we don't want to take around 800 CDs with us, so we need a solution now.

My first thought was to use my current (six year old) Dell Precision M60 laptop as a dedicated music server and simply connect it, networked to a decent storage device, to a good DAC. This would be cheap enough, but I suspect I would be compromising audio quality and having to put up with the vagaries of Windows XP, fans, etc. If I am right and you do not recommend such a step, what would be the best way to go? I have up to £1,500 to spend on a lossless disc ripper/server/storer and anything else (the confusing bit) that goes between such a device and a high quality DAC. My criteria are that I don't want to compromise on sound quality, so disc ripping/storage must be lossless, it must be capable of handling hi-res audio (I'm thinking in terms of better-than-CD-quality downloads at some future point), and preferably it should have wireless capability and be capable of networking with both PC and Mac. Is this currently possible? Is the RipNAS device, which I've just seen in the September issue the way to go?

Dr T F Keenan

Yes - the RipNAS is ideal. After this you're looking at a Logitech Squeezebox 3 and a Stello DA100 Signature DAC (hooked up by optical TOSLINK cable), or if you want an easier one-box answer and can stretch your budget a little, Linn's Sneaky DS. DP

SPEEDY GONZALEZ

I have constructed a hi-fi system on a budget: a very low powered Decware SE valve amp, on Origin Live Ultra turntable and Silver MkII tonearm with Goldring Eroica LX cartridge, a Lehmann Block 2 speaker cable, Chord Odyssey Z speaker cable and self-built Decware HDT speakers ( http://www.decware.com/newsite/HDT.htm ) plus a Vertex Joyo mains filter.

I should start by saying the system sounds wonderful in almost every aspect and I am quite nervous about changing something and upsetting the apple cart.

Anyway, here's the problem - the speakers use single driver Fostex full range paper cones, so while they are wonderfully fast and coherent I believe the frequency response is a bit uneven. The end result can be quite a thin sound (with the wrong music) and a feeling that the sound is not quite full enough in the mid to low frequencies.

So, I'm looking to try new speakers which might possibly retain the coherence and speed, at least to a degree, whilst delivering a more even sound. The obvious choice is the Revolver RW45; it being very friendly with low powered valve amps but I wondered if there are any other speakers you'd recommend?

It is possible that my current speakers are too large for the room, it being a small loft room with the speakers firing across the room.

The other thing I'd appreciate some advice with is my phono stage which I recently bought. While I'm very happy with it, I'd like to try a valve phono stage and wondered how the World Audio WDPhono3 compares to retail valve phono stages such as the Icon Audio, Eastern Electric etc. There seem to be so few valve phono stages at the £500 mark I am seriously considering the World Audio kit as it would be superb value for money if it is good.

John Bloor

A problem here John is that Fostex cones, like Lowthers, are strictly their own type of sound and we can't really recommend anything that will sound even similar. My nearest choice has been a number of recent pressings that have problems despite the use of heavyweight virgin vinyl.

Three copies of Stevie Wonder's 'Talking Book' have shown severe distortion in places on one side and when returning these copies, I have been told by two dealers that all the reissued

The RipNAS Statement comes with optional solid-state drives, for silence and reliability.
Press releases have this problem. One puts it down to the cutting head being overloaded in an attempt to achieve a very wide dynamic range. Two copies of the reissue of 'Autobahn' by Kraftwerk have gone back with one track unplayable; the assistant in HMV said that he had seen several of these being returned. Lily Allen's latest album (told you the taste was eclectic) has several jumping grooves on side I and again, the dealer has confirmed that they have a lot of these coming back.

I have to say that there has been no quibble from any of the record shops about exchanges, but at a time when we are being told that vinyl is the only physical medium for music sales that is showing growth I fear that with these quality control problems, there is a great danger of people losing patience once again. So my plea to the manufacturers is to tighten up on the quality control and take more care in the production of vinyl records or we are in danger of throwing away the best medium again.

Andy Crossey

Very true, but you do need to ensure your arm and cartridge are okay as well Andy. I buy quite a lot of vinyl and have no such problems. If a cartridge is mistracking it will do so at the same point over and over again, eventually causing groove damage that is an implant of the mistracking. Goldring cartridges track very well and a 1006 is the minimum you need. NK

DIGITAL BRITAIN - THE FIGHTBACK

You may recall that I wrote to the BBC Trust recently regarding analogue radio turn off. I've today received the attached reply. I will contact the government department mentioned, but don't you think that the BBC Trust is shirking its duty?

"Dear BBC. As a licence payer, I strongly object to the proposed switch off of analogue radio in 2015. There are millions of analogue radios in the UK, many used by the elderly and those people to whom technology is of no importance. For them to change over to digital radio would mean spending a fortune, collectively. Besides all that, the present system of digital radio is a dated technology and I believe that the rest of the world just is not investing in it, some countries preferring to adopt the superior DAB+ system.

As the BBC Trust, you have a duty to carry out a public consultation on the matter and not allow the government to dictate policy, merely for the sake of saving money. I and many others would welcome such a consultation without any interference from the pro-digital lobby, which seems to consist of non-technical people telling us what they think we should do. The various technical aspects of FM vs. DAB are well known to myself and other people who listen to the radio for enjoyment.

FM is a superior system possessed of better sonic qualities and can reach greater distances with a single transmitter than the DAB system, which when it is finished nationwide will cost a vast amount of tax payer's money. To force DAB upon the public will mean cars, homes, schools and other places where radio is listened to spending money merely for the sake of it. Please arrange a public consultation.

many thanks,

Cliff Millward"

...and the answer was:

"Thank you for your e-mail to the BBC Trust regarding digital radio upgrading.

I have noted your request that the Trust instigate a public consultation on the proposed switch to digital radio. I should explain however that the measures outlined in the Digital Britain report, including Digital Radio Upgrade by 2015, form part of the Government's plans for the UK's digital transition. As such any complaints or concerns that you have about these measures should be directed to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in the first instance. Further details of the report, and of how to contact DCMS, can be found on their website at: http://www.culture.gov.uk/index.aspx.


I hope this is helpful. yours sincerely

Lucy Tristram
Correspondence Adviser,
BBC Trust Unit

...and my letter to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport:

"I recently wrote to the BBC Trust asking them to do a public consultation regarding the analogue switch off. They have replied today and suggest I contact you, since you are the department forcing this issue along. Perhaps you should ask the public what it wants before forcing digital radio onto it. I do hope you will reconsider and let the tax payer have our say for a change.

Cliff Millward"

Hi Cliff. Thanks for taking the time to write to the BBC Trust and the DCMS about this. I completely agree that the BBC Trust is trying to shirk its responsibility to hold a consultation. However, a document titled "How the BBC Trust will consult" http://tinyurl.com/bbctrust-consult says that the BBC Trust will "always consult as part of a "Public Value Test" when there has been a proposal for a new service, or a significant change to an existing service." So, as you rightly pointed out in your letter, it is the BBC Trust's duty to carry out a public consultation about this, because the proposal to switch off the BBC's national FM stations clearly constitutes "a significant change to an existing service". So I would suggest that you complain to the BBC Trust itself about the BBC Trust's decision not to hold a public consultation. The address to send complaints about the BBC Trust to is Correspondence Manager, BBC Trust, Room 211, 35 Marylebone High St, London W1U 4AA. More information about the complaints procedure can be found here: http://tinyurl.com/bbctrust-complaint.

Regarding the BBC Trust's reply suggesting that you should address your complaints about this to the DCMS, the BBC Trust seems to be forgetting that it was the Digital Radio Working Group (DRWG) that recommended to Government that an early FM switch-off date be set, and the Government merely rubber-stamped the DRWG's recommendations. The main player within the DRWG was the BBC itself, and whether the DRWG made this recommendation or not was pretty much solely the BBC's decision, because the BBC had to agree to extend its national DAB multiplex to provide the same population coverage as FM does now, otherwise FM couldn't be switched off. The BBC obviously did agree to this, so the BBC and the BBC Trust cannot now conveniently hide behind the Government after they've just sold the public down the river.

The BBC Trust is also being incredibly hypocritical by passing the buck onto the Government anyway, because it repeatedly claims on its website that one of its main duties is to protect the BBC's independence from Government!

The BBC Trust should have held a public consultation about this prior to the BBC deciding that an FM switch-off date should be set. And if the BBC Trust refuses to hold a public consultation now, then it would be guilty of acting against the interests of licence fee payers – the exact opposite of what the BBC Trust is specifically required to do. The only
way that the BBC Trust could avoid such an allegation would be if it could produce some evidence to show that the majority of the population is in favour of FM being switched off, but I think it's clear from the reaction so far that the public is strongly opposed to this happening.

So I definitely wouldn’t be put off by the BBC Trust’s disingenuous response to your letter; and I would urge yourself and others to complain to the BBC Trust about its decision not to hold a consultation. If the Trust never held a consultation, then to my mind the BBC would have no right to switch off its FM stations, because it wouldn’t have received the consent of the public to do so. SG

IN DEFENCE OF DAB

I bought the September issue of Hi-Fi World after missing it for a few years and was glad to see that there has been no drop in editorial standards in the meantime. As a consequence I have missed most of the debate about DAB and FM radio, but would nevertheless like to express my opinion at this time. While I agree that the decision to scrap FM in only five years time is appalling and so environmentally wasteful, what with millions of usable radios having to be scrapped overnight, my own experiences with DAB have been positive. As I live within an uninterrupted mile of Alexandra Palace, perhaps I enjoy ideal conditions, (the signal strength readout is always 100%), but on the basis of my personal experience in the last three years I can suggest the following advantages of DAB:

1. I Lo-Fi listening. I have a little Philips AJ5/100 DAB/FM transistor type radio. When listening to the news, sport, etc., via DAB there is always crystal clear reception with no interference at all wherever I listen. Switch to FM and you are back to stations drifting, background noise and having to move the radio around to get the best reception. To me it seems to be a complete no-brainer that DAB is superior for this type of use.

2. Hi-Fi listening. I use a Pure The Bug DAB radio in my main system. Although this was an inexpensive model, it does have an optical digital output, which I hook up to an Alchemist TSD-1 DAC. In comparison with my FM tuner, an old Musical Fidelity T1, (which I have connected to a roof aerial), with a relatively high-quality broadcast such as Radio 3 live music, I consider the basic sound quality to be only slightly below FM in my system. However, I now find the slightest noise on FM intolerable and so now always listen to DAB for preference (although it has to be with the external DAC).

3. Recording. My "The Bug" DAB tuner was designed as a bedside clock radio primarily and so it has alarm functions that I can make use of for recording late-night shows such as Jazz on 3 and Hear and Now, (a weekend Radio 3 programme devoted to avant-garde classical music). The combination of DAB and MiniDisc is I think a perfect match for the home recordist. I can conveniently put the MD player on standby and then set the DAB to come on at the appropriate time via its alarm function. With a little [very user-friendly,] editing, excellent recordings can be produced. I have a good Sony J33ES MiniDisc player, and using the same DAC, the sound quality is very decent, nearly as good as CD. This system is way better than the classic home-recordist's setup of FM radio and cassette tape in my view.

As I was an LP Luddite who did not accept CD until around the turn of the century, I am surprised to find myself defending a digital medium. However I feel that, unlike vinyl, FM does not have sufficient compensatory advantages to be worth preferring over DAB. However that is just a personal opinion. The government should allow the public to choose (they are always talking about "choice" after all), and therefore guarantee the long-term survival of both formats. I do think that DAB has more to offer than your contributors seem to.

Jim Taylor,
Wood Green,
London.

As you say Jim, you are in Wood Green right next to the Alexandra Palace DAB transmitter. At Hi-Fi World towers in Kilburn and my home in Maida Vale, both a few miles away, DAB is impossible to obtain reliably, the signal being obstructed by Hampstead Heath, which is all but 20ft higher than Alexandra Palace, the Ordnance Survey map at Multimap shows. DAB is susceptible to obstruction because it operates at higher frequency than VHF/FM, around 170MHz. For most people in the UK they will hear nothing at all, or 'burbling mud'.

DAB sound quality is fine for portables, but Radio 3 concerts sound 'crude' in their depiction of strings, to say the least, and this is down to MP2 data reduction, not something that can be ameliorated by using a quality DAC. It's difficult to accept that we should be happy to pay for an outdated radio system that will cost hundreds of millions to install, is difficult to obtain outside Wood Green (!) and provides no quality benefit.

Hi jim, your description of FM reception strongly suggests that the FM signal strength where you live is quite low, which would explain why you don’t have as high an opinion of FM’s sound quality as many other people do, because to get the best out of FM you really need to have a strong signal. For example, I may be lucky, but there’s no audible hiss at all when I listen to any of the BBC’s national FM stations either on a portable radio or via my tuner — and for the record, my DAB reception quality is very good on the BBC’s national multiplex as well.

To perform a fair comparison of the sound quality of DAB and FM you need to have good reception quality on both systems, because otherwise the reception quality would affect the results. And I find FM sounds a lot better than DAB.

I think you also need to take...
into consideration the fact that you listen to Radio 3, which is the only UK DAB station to use 192 kbps, whereas 96% of stereo stations on DAB in the UK only use a bit rate of 128 or 112 kbps, and a fair number of music stations even use mono these days. Most of these low bit rate stations on DAB sound absolutely diabolical, and they shouldn't be ignored when making overall comparisons between DAB and FM.

However, as you're clearly a convert to digital, I'd suggest that you try out the new AAC live Internet radio streams on the BBC iPlayer, or the WMA BBC Internet streams available on Wi-Fi Internet radio devices, because they're both significantly higher quality than DAB — the AAC streams especially. SG

**FAB FM**

As someone who has been a life-long listener to BBC Radio broadcasts, on all four current channels and to the previous incarnations (Light Programme; Third Programme; Droitwich, etc., on Medium Wave and Long Wave), I am appalled to hear that the BBC is planning on turning off the current FM (and AM?) transmissions, in favour of the decidedly inferior DAB broadcasts.

Over the past thirty years (or more), I have built up a collection of very expensive hi-fi components, so that I might enjoy all manner of music, plays, opera, etc., at the highest possible quality; therefore to be informed that the BBC is planning on abandoning FM transmissions (to supposedly allow 'more choice' to its listeners), is unacceptable to me, given that it is well known and proven that current DAB transmissions are of inferior quality (a fact known to the BBC for many years) and more importantly, will not be available to me on my current equipment.

I see no reason at all why I and millions of others like me, should be obliged to throw away perfectly serviceable radios and tuners (some of them expensive) solely for the benefit of the Commercial Radio Stations.

If I wish to listen to any of those commercial stations (which I do not), then I will gladly buy a DAB radio, but as I have no interest whatsoever in the rubbish they broadcast, nor the grossly inferior standards of their broadcasts, then I will save my money and continue to listen to those stations which serve my needs and play the sort of music I like, namely BBC Radios 2, 3 and 4 (I no longer listen to Radio 1).

If the BBC were going to be saving any appreciable money by broadcasting their programmes on DAB, that would at least be understandable, but along with grossly inferior broadcast standards, at least one company has withdrawn any further investment in DAB because transmission and maintenance would be far more expensive and therefore, uneconomical, than maintaining the current FM stations. Sales of DAB equipment have been extremely poor, because of the dire lack of appropriate quality and the short distances the signals will reach, without installing thousands of extra transmitter masts.

There are still large tracts of Scotland and Wales where radio and TV broadcasts are difficult to receive and where mobile phone coverage is still non-existent. As DAB is going to require thousands more transmitters, to be able to cover the country and given the BBC's (and other service providers) blatant refusal to connect large parts of the country to such services and the Internet, then I can see even less justification for abandoning FM in favour of DAB, as even fewer people will be able to listen to the radio programmes of their choice and millions more will be cut off entirely from any such services.

As the BBC Trust exists for the regulation of the BBC and in the Trust's own words, "works on behalf of Licence Fee Payers", then I think it appropriate that the Trust should call for a Public Consultation, to establish the needs and wishes of the Licence Fee Paying Public, as to whether or not they want to retain AM and FM broadcasts, on perfectly serviceable equipment, or whether they want the BBC to end FM transmission and replace them with the clearly inferior DAB transmissions, which will benefit nobody but the Commercial Radio Stations and the odd 'Minority Interest' listeners.

Finally, I shall also be writing to my Member of Parliament on this subject and also any other forum, which might be interested in hastening the demise of DAB.

**R A Betts,**

**Havant, Hants.**

Couldn't agree more with what you say. I think the best thing to do at the moment would be to complain to the BBC Trust about its decision not to hold a public consultation about FM switch-off. The BBC Trust sums up its remit as follows: [http://tinyurl.com/bbctrust-complaint]."The BBC Trust is responsible for setting the overall strategic direction of the BBC, including its priorities. It is a requirement that the Trust performs this role in the public interest". The reaction to the proposals so far has clearly shown that the public is opposed to FM being switched off, so if the BBC Trust didn't hold a public consultation about this it would be acting against the interests of the public, which means it would be disobeying its remit. The BBC Trust is also supposed to hold the BBC to account on behalf of the public, and it's about time it started doing that with regards to DAB, because the BBC has shown a blatant disregard for what the public wants on this subject over the course of the last decade. SG

I believe this is the only mechanism by which you are likely to get anyone to give your views any consideration at all. The BBC Trust is unlikely to consider the public view, only what it thinks is the public interest, which they decide, not us. No Government would be prepared to hold a referendum on this, given their dislike for referenda generally. That leaves only your local MP. You might like to send him/her a print out from www.savefm.org, which states the arguments succinctly. NK

**PUBLICITY PLEASE**

You may wish to give publicity (please!) to a group on Facebook campaigning to save FM radio. It needs more members!
The group is called 'DAB Digital Radio is terrible - Save FM.' Thank you ever so much for championing FM and highlighting the serious shortcomings of DAB over the years in the pages of your excellent magazine (the only UK hi-fi mag I trust!).

Gordon Hamilton

[Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/noe.schitt]

...AND AGAIN!

Would be possible to mention the Save FM campaign in the News section of the mag. I'd really appreciate it.

Steve Green

[http://www.savefm.org]

**RISING TIDE**

I see a growing uprising against the planned FM radio switch off in various forums, see the Naim forum for example, it seems the masses are beginning to stir. A new petition is started and I encourage HFW to sign up: [http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/AM-FM-Radio/]

Unfortunately this petition is simply protesting against the switch off. I do not believe that we should be focused only against national high power FM broadcasting switching off as I think that will probably be inevitable considering the problems of overloaded radio band management. We all, including HFW and Steven Green, should be working towards and pressuring all concerned into replacing it with a digital system that is better in quality terms than FM, especially so on the channels with quality music and speech where it matters. I think we all agree that DAB
is not able to do this and that the government, Ofcom, BBC and associated working groups are in denial or at best procrastinating.

The key to the whole issue has to be the automotive industry. This has the largest volume of receiver sales by far and collectively has the clout to move political directions of all E.U. governments. Given that BBC DAB has significant problems even with domestic coverage in London, let alone mobile and country wide, to satisfy the auto market, we have to have 100% country wide terrestrial transmissions. Get that right and we might be halfway there.

So assuming Steven Green et al. are right and that Europe almost universally will not use DAB and that digital broadcasting of any sort will not be universally acceptable until it works properly in both car and home, the challenge has to be for all of us, but especially the car industry and the tuner manufacturers, to pressurise Number 10. This includes the new tenant moving in next year, plus Ofcom, the BBC and all associated groups into replacing it with the best possible digital system, and that is probably DAB+ or T-DMB using AAC.

Hi-Fi World readers should use this as a doorstep discussion point next spring when the politicians come around with the begging bowl?

Mike Oxford

My strictly personal view, which Steve Green does not share I believe, is that we do not need DAB at all, that enough public money (BBC license fee) has been wasted on it and we should call a halt. I am heartened that Germany has reached the same conclusion. Not one penny more should be spent on DAB, except for basic maintenance over say the next 10 years. By that time the technologies that overwhelm it will be obvious to all concerned. Digital radio to the home is already available from the internet, satellite and TV transmitters. Digital radio to portable, including car radios, will come from the mobile phone network. The VH/FM network will continue to reach distant corners of Britain and provide both adequate variety and great quality. No one has to throw anything away and we are all spared great expense and wastage.

NK

Hi Mike, I completely agree that we should campaign for higher quality to be delivered via digital radio, although I personally don’t think it’s inevitable that the BBC will switch off its national FM stations, so I still think it’s worthwhile campaigning about that.

I actually do agree with Noel that we don’t need to use DAB, and I would personally be very happy to see DAB switched off tomorrow so that we could start afresh using a modern digital radio system that’s combined with the Internet.

Personally, I would suggest that people who want to receive good quality on digital radio would be far better off listening via the Internet. The new AAC Internet radio streams on the BBC iPlayer are already higher quality than the BBC will ever be able to deliver via DAB+, and the same can be said for a large number of commercial radio’s Internet streams as well.

Hi I don’t really care about better DAB, I just want analogue to stay alive. And if we must have DAB, then let it be a far more advanced system than the one we’re being offered now, and more importantly let it not threaten FM: DAB should sit alongside FM/AM and not kill it. I’m sorry to say that this government is of the mindset that it knows what’s good for us, and that’s that. This is why I’m not optimistic that the ‘Save FM’ will get any kind of an airing from this government. The good thing is that, as you state, there’s another lot trying to take their place and it’s a great opportunity to bend their ears about it - whether you vote for them or not come next spring! So it’s a case of pens poised, petitions at the ready, and let rip when the aspirings MPs come knocking on your door! DP

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THE GREAT SWITCHOVER

Now we learn the Great DAB Switchover is due for 2015. Steven Green’s comments about it in the August issue are spot on and once again I find myself in full agreement with him. Recently, long-experienced radio broadcaster Libby Purves wrote an article on this in The Times. It makes compulsive reading. And I truly recommend reading it. If you missed it, try Googling ‘Libby Purves article on DAB’ or see http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/libby_purves/article6549533.ece Her article is headed ‘Radio revolution will leave listeners in silence’ and comes with the byline - ‘Take-up of the costly and energy-guzzling DAB technology is so pathetic that we must fight for our beloved analogue sets’.

So well does this article cover the DAB owning experience, the green issues, and the stupidity of it all, that if you click to see all the comments you may, like me, be astonished. For there are no less than 195 of them! The very number is an indication of how emotive this subject is. They come not only from all over England, but Scotland, Wales and Ireland; also from France, Belgium, Italy and the U.S. And guess what? Only a couple of them have anything positive to say about DAB. A copy of that article and those comments ought to be sent to every one of our M.P.s. and to Ofcom.

It’s what DAB owners have found out the hard way. Lack of station choice and lack of signal quality are the main issues. Sadly I’ve found out the hard way too. The only station (I want to hear) on DAB that I can’t get on FM is Radio 7, but with its broadcasting in mono at 80kps, I’d prefer it on Long Wave or Medium, where I’d have no trouble picking it up.

But so much so for the hardware technology. But what about the software? Yes, the actual station content. Not much has been said about that. Despite promises of more listening choice do we really have that? My preferred listening is to the spoken word. If you happen to like sport and listening to 24-hour phone calls, you’re well catered for. Interactive radio is not for me. I like drama and witty game shows. Despite the addition, even encouragement, of commercial digital stations, the BBC still has a monopoly on drama. Why is this still allowed? Where are the stations offering me a choice of drama? At the moment it means Radio 4 or Radio 7. Radio 4 is still discovering stereo. Its forty five minute afternoon plays consist of the left speaker talking to the right. What’s more, the BBC are into ‘relationship’ plays. I like my plays to have plots. Twisted convoluted and clever thrillers. Comedies where I can follow what’s happening. On top of that a Radio 4 controller made an announcement that plays had to be based on the news. Sure enough, we now find many plays set in Iraq. We’re supposed to learn about the human condition. Sorry matey, that’s the wrong way round. My decades of listening to plays have allowed me to escape from reality into worlds best imagined. Escapism is the thing for me, not reality. Comedy shows are mostly based on the news now too. Hard luck if you don’t keep up with it.

Plays on Radio 7? Yes I’ll listen to them, but I note that they’re repeating many of the plays they broadcast last year, and other shows too. The chances are I heard the shows when they were broadcast in the 60s or 70s anyway. Here we are again...

So come on commercial radio, let’s have some drama, some of this choice we’re hearing about. Let’s have some of that escapism, something to thrill, something to surprise, something to keep me riveted to my seat. Oh, one thing I don’t want to be asked to phone in afterwards to give feedback on what I thought of the play!

Melvyn Dover.
Price Points

Are all budget CD players much of a muchness? And even if not, is there any logic to their respective market positioning? Paul Rigby set out to answer the question, with reference to two brand new affordable silver disc spinners, in the shape of Cambridge Audio's Azur 650C and Rotel's RCD-1520...

Chips are fattening, footballers are all greedy good-for-nothings and the seventies was a terrible decade. I'm generalising, you understand, as deep down I know that these assertions aren't strictly true. If you hand fry your chips, cut them thick enough to avoid fat absorption and cook 'em hot enough then they're fine. There are plenty of footballers playing in the UK whose only desire is to support their friends and family. And as for the seventies? Any decade that can give me Yes in their pomp, full size Curly Wurlys, Morecombe & Wise and deathly quiet roads on a Sunday can't be all bad...

Budget hi-fi is no different. This area of the market is often viewed somewhat condescendingly as 'cheap and cheerful' by hi-fi scribes who have the onerous task of listening to the latest dCS delectation [it's a tough job, but someone's got to do it, Paul. Ed.], but what with the prevailing economic climate, now more than ever, it's an important one. It's diverse too, and the market for budget separates gets ever more crowded.

To get some perspective on this, we decided to put two new affordable CD spinners together. They both have fine pedigrees, and their manufacturers have excellent reputations amongst cash-strapped yet passionate audiophiles. Cue fanfare then for Cambridge Audio's new 650C (£350), and Rotel's new RCD-1520 (£695). At twice the price (nearly), the Rotel has a lot to prove; if it's not convincingly better than the Cambridge then it's not going to win many friends. But what of the Cambridge? If it's so obviously inferior, then many will add a couple of hundred quid to their flexible friends and go straight for the real deal! Suddenly there's quite a lot at stake for both companies, from this seemingly innocuous back-to-back review...

It may be less than half the price of the Rotel but that doesn't mean that the Cambridge lacks quality. Measuring 430x85x305mm and weighing 4.8kg, the 650C features a number of details which will find approval from any audiophile. For example, in the past, the company has used carbon film volume pots at an affordable price. Now, the 650C utilises ALPS black box plastic film pots which boast much better channel balance. Another improvement over the 640C it replaces is the buffered input circuits that lower possible crosstalk problems and which should, all things being equal, improve the stereo imaging. Plus, alongside the improved capacitors and transistors, improved CAPS protection circuitry is included that prevents your CD player blowing sky high if it comes across a peak in electricity it doesn't agree with.

There's another useful but little talked about feature that illustrates just how carefully this CD player has been designed. Like other products, the 650C provides a standby option, in this case known as Energy Star. However, as this machine requires less than 1W whilst on standby,
there's a separate transformer in the 650C handling this, with a change-over relay. This means that when the 650C is in standby, the main transformer is completely isolated and disconnected from the amplifier and vice versa, so the standby feature doesn't affect the sound quality when on a proper.

The philosophy behind the construction of the Rotel RCD-1520 is intriguing. The company makes a point to say that it rejects the idea of employing surface mounting on its circuit boards because it prefers to have the freedom of swapping new and improved components in and out of its kit when the need arises. This is interesting because I have talked to competing hi-fi companies who much prefer surface mounted components because it results in shorter electrical pathways between components. All this just goes to show that everyone is right and the world is full of grey scales! Measuring 431x99x320mm and weighing in at a relatively heavy 6.5kg, the Rotel features a large toroidal transformer to give the CD player the power to relax and perform without any constraints as well as to minimise noise, plus the latest Wolfson DACs for fine sound quality.

The main visual difference between the two CD players here is the transport. For while the 650C features a traditional loading tray, the RCD-1520 provides the user with a slot loading facility, which is a far nicer thing to use in practice. Although it's clunkier, the drawer loading mech of the Cambridge is the company's own design; they've put real work into getting the best, most stable platform possible at the price. Rotel on the other have bought in a mech, and then spent time festling to give of its best, like Cyrus with the CD 8SE.

The other visual differences relate to the front and rear layouts. The front of the Cambridge keeps the controls down to those essential buttons required to get the CD up and running. The Rotel, on the other hand, adds many additional controls such as Time, Scan and Search. I did wonder why they were not relegated to the remote and if their inclusion affected the sound quality in a negative manner at all. The rear of the Rotel features just the essential outputs, with Cambridge adding a variety of extras dedicated to multi-room control. Personally speaking, I'm baffled by such needless features.

In aesthetic terms, the Rotel looks considerably pricier than the Cambridge with a better finish and a greater sense of finesse - thanks in no small part to that lovely disc handling via the slot loader. But it's important to point out that the Cambridge is no longer the poor relation; its lavish brushed aluminium looks a lot more expensive than it really is, and certainly a whole step up from the previous 640C. Of course, neither approach the stratospheric build and finish of, say, a classic Japanese battleship machine, but it's no longer true to say that machines of this ilk look and feel cheap anymore.

**SOUND QUALITY**

Kicking off with the Cambridge, it simply did not sound like I was listening to a £350 CD spinner. It's a good deal more svelte sounding than the 640C it replaces, which itself was the class of the budget field. Listening to Carol Kidd's jazz piece 'A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square', and the 650C hit the ground running with a weighty solo bass that was really substantial. Vocals were unforced, natural and wholly organic whilst the percussive cymbal delay sounded impressively realistic. A great start then, as the Cambridge simply didn't sound like a cheapo silver disc spinner. It was only when the song got more complex that it rather lost some of its focus. For example, during the acoustic guitar solo, the lower midband showed some bass bloom, as the lower registers struggled to cope with the information onslaught provided by the rest of the band.

In comparison, the twice-as-expensive Rotel added some focus, largely losing the lower mid bloom on the guitar solo which helped to track that complex recital and, while the Cambridge responded well in the upper registers, the Rotel added meat to the bones adding body and form. There was also a distinctly cleaner sound of the upper frequencies via the Rotel. The RCD-1520 provided "here are two great CD spinners at their respective price points, showing that the more you spend the better it gets, and markedly so in this case..."
"It just has such natural dynamics, exceptional levels of detail, excellent bass resolution and power, superbly judged tonal balance, and the ability to convey a musical performance with a greater level of holistic entirety than any other power amplifier had previously shown was possible."

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complex piece that highlighted the weaknesses of the Cambridge. The Azur 650C has plenty of bandwidth. The digital output possessed random jitter measuring 300pS and this suggests the digital signal could be better clocked for cleaner results. The RCD1520 measures well but its unusual low frequency roll off may impact the sound. It will likely sound clean. NK

VERDICT
Excellent mid-price machine with a spry, crisp and detailed sound, allied to gripping rhythms and dynamics - plus a peach of a slot-loading CD drive.

ROTEL RCD-1520
£695
Rotel UK
+44 (0)1903 221 500
www.rotel.com

FOR
- insight
- clarity
- dimensionality

AGAINST
- nothing at the price

VERDICT
Super entry-level CD spinner with a warm, spacious and musical character allied to fine build and finish.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO
650C
£325
Cambridge Audio
+44 (0)1845 900 1230
www.cambridgeaudio.com

FOR
- spacious treble
- musically lucid

AGAINST
- bass bloom
- muddy lower registers
- lack of focus

REFERENCE SYSTEM
Aesthetix Calypso preamplifier
Icon Audio MB845 monoblock power amps
Quad ESL-57 (One Thing modified) speakers
Chord Anthem 2 interconnects
Chord Epic Twin loudspeaker cables
Atacama Equinox XLPro SE HiFi Rack

MEASURED PERFORMANCE
The Cambridge has a smooth frequency response characteristic with just a slight lossening of output above 10kHz, not enough to make it sound soft or warm but it should be sufficient to avoid obvious sharpness in the sound. With low frequency output extending down to 2Hz, the Azur 650C has plenty of bandwidth.

Linearity was good through the player's range, distortion being as low as possible from 16bit code right down to -80dB, including a dithered signal that returned just 1.8%. EIAJ Dynamic range was wide as a result of good linearity, measuring 112dB.

Jitter measured a very low 10pS across the audioband with just a small increase above this low random level for signal related components. The digital stream is effectively clocked and will have well defined sound domain definition.

The Azur 650C turns in a tidy measured performance all round and will likely sound clean and easy on the ear. NK

Frequency response (-1dB)
CD
2Hz-21.1kHz

VERDICT

The Rotel, at nearly twice the price, is not nearly twice better. But it is still substantially superior, and enough to start mixing it with the sub-£1,000 machines. It's not in the league as our fave mid price machine, the Cyrus CD8 SE, but again you can listen to the Rotel and enjoy it, having lived with the Cyrus, and not feel you're in some way punishing yourself. It's a very open, detailed performer with a spry tonality and a nicely, naturally musical gait. It likes along just grips you too. The RCD-1520 showed a level of maturity that belied its price point. It had a tough fight, however. Overall then, two great CD spinners at their respective price points, showing that the more you spend the better it is likely to be. NK

VERDICT

CONCLUSION
The Cambridge is about as good as £350 Compact Disc gear, which is not as bad as you'd think. In absolute terms, it's a slightly coloured sounding device that's a bit opaque across the midband and treble, but it hides its problems very well. The result is that you could slot this into any system and enjoy its naturally musical gait, and overlook its sins (which are mostly those of omission). You can't say this about any other similarly priced CD spinner we've heard here at Hi-Fi World, so for Cambridge Audio that is a result.

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VERDICT

An unusual feature of the Rotel is a slow roll off in low frequency output which measured -0.5dB at 30Hz and -5dB at 8Hz. It isn't quite enough to give the RCD1520 obviously light bass, but it may give it a slightly floaty-off-foot quality. As this is an unusual characteristic how it will affect the player subjectively is difficult to predict, only listening tests can decide if there is a subjective impact. At high frequencies there is no peaking so the Rotel player will not sound bright or sharp. Distortion levels were very low right through the player's dynamic range, so the EIAJ Dynamic range value is a high 112dB.

The digital output possessed randon jitter measuring 300pS and this suggests the digital signal could be better clocked for cleaner results.

The RCD1520 measures well but its unusual low frequency roll off may impact the sound. It will likely sound clean. NK

Frequency response (-1dB)
CD
22Hz-21.2kHz

VERDICT

REVIEW

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

REFERENCE SYSTEM
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Icon Audio MB845 monoblock power amps
Quad ESL-57 (One Thing modified) speakers
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CD
2Hz-21.1kHz

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feature

to facilitate the release of electrons when heated by the filament. Around the cathode is the grid, which is a larger diameter tube made of fine mesh or a spiral of wire that the electrons pass through to reach the anode. The anode is an outer tube of metal that is the final destination of the thermionic electrons as they pass through the valve elements. This traditional electrode assembly is supported by two insulating mica washers; one at the top and one at the bottom of the cylinders. By making the anode positive with respect to the cathode, the electrons are attracted to it and their flow is controlled by a small potential applied to the grid. Simple!

However, Blackburn MicroTech Solutions has gone back to the drawing board and developed their own structure for triode assemblies. It is a completely new way of making triodes based on micro assembly techniques previously used in the CRT industry. The result, they claim, is more accuracy and most importantly more consistency. It is easy to see how different it looks from a conventional valve. The filament and cathode assembly, together with the grid, are located inside a metal can. Instead of being emitted radially as in a conventional valve, the electrons are directed through an aperture at the top of the can that has the grid laser welded to it. The anode that collects the electrons is situated on the other side of the grid just above the can and is in the form of a little metal 'top hat'. So the elements of the valve are of a planar construction, instead of the conventional radial design, which is strikingly similar to the design of electron guns used in CRTs. This is perhaps not surprising when you consider that the factory has been specialising in electron gun components for the past forty years...

This planar valve design results in a valve with very low capacitance and minimal structural restraint. The low capacitance bodes well for a valve with excellent high frequency characteristics. The fact that there is only one mica support at the top of the valve, instead of the more usual two, should reduce the mechanical coupling of the electrode assembly with the outer glass envelope and, therefore, reduce colouration through acoustic feedback to the valve. However, this has to be balanced against the risk of microphonic caused by a reliance on the internal structures for support of the electrodes. The term 'microphony' is used to describe the injection of a metallic ringing into the audio signal and is caused by mechanically-induced vibrations being transmitted from outside the valve to the electrode assembly inside.

Although the E813CC has the same electrical characteristics as the ECC83 and also the identical B9A pin base and 6.3V heater for each triode, it is constructed to much tighter tolerances for extended life and lower sample variation. Blackburn MicroTech Solutions claims. Due to the small surface area of the valve and the micron cathode and anode to grid distances, the internal capacitance is very low indeed, with a quoted grid to cathode capacitance of 0.4pF (25% of that of a traditional valve) and a grid to anode value of 0.9pF (50% of that of a standard valve). Finally, the filament of each triode consumes a meagre 112mA. This is about 75% of the heater current of a standard valve, so the valves should generate a bit less heat, which is a good feature.

Sounding Out

Of course, 'different' doesn't necessarily mean 'better', so how exactly do the TechTubes stand up against the competition? After some extensive listening with my top-of-the-range conventional audiophile valves (with a price tag to match!), it was time to swap the three ECC83s in my World Designs Phono3 phono stage with the new E813CC valves. Straight out of the box, they certainly sounded impressive in the lower registers. Bass performance was crisp, tight, punchy and well extended. The bass drum in Stravinsky's 'The Firebird Suite' (The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra - Telarc digital recording DG-10039) was quite breathtaking. Initially, the top end was slightly muffled and the midrange was not as clear as I had been used to; vocals were recessed in the sound stage and there was a general feeling of restraint. I was expecting quite the reverse, given the low capacitance construction, but after a few hours of running-in, the situation changed dramatically. Bass performance was unchanged, but the top-end reappeared from nowhere.

Following a full twenty four hours of running, the TechTubes had clearly bedded in well. All the muffling had gone and the valves produced a sound of effortless clarity and openness. Vocal soloists took up their rightful place in front of the orchestras again and electric guitars demonstrated fantastic speed and detail in all the harmonics. This is not to say that they are at all harsh. In fact, Blackburn MicroTech Solutions seem to have achieved the wonderful valve smoothness without sacrificing clarity and detail. On jazz recordings, 'hi-hats' sound crisp, fast and sparkling. The bass notes in rhythm sections are clearly defined and well proportioned with the rest of the music.

A direct-to-disc live recording from the 1970s of 'Lincoln Mayorga and Distinguished Colleagues Volume III' (Sheffield Labs LAB-1 SL5/SL6)
A naked valve!

was scarily realistic and the TechTubes gave one of the finest reproductions of this LP I have ever heard. Similarly, with the vocals of Thelma Houston 'I've Got the Music in Me' on Sheffield Labs LAB-2 SL7/SL8, the overall balance, presentation and realism of the sound was superb. Again, the performances were thoroughly enjoyable providing a musical and tuneful presentation that is very easy on the ears. It was also interesting to note that these valves definitely run cooler than their conventional counterparts. Even after constant running overnight, the case of my Phono3 was barely warm and you could easily grasp a valve with your fingers to remove it.

Now, a word or two about microphony. Blackburn MicroTech Solutions do put a 'Don't flick the tube' warning in their literature! This is all about flicking the valve with the fingers and the ringing that this will inevitably cause. They go on to say that this effect is perfectly normal and is a characteristic of the design. I was using the valves in a phono stage to amplify the very tiny signals from a moving coil cartridge, so any microphonic effects would be very apparent. It was noticeable that the valves, when new, were somewhat microphonic. However, this effect diminished substantially during the running in period, and when fully run in they exhibited less microphony than my existing audiophile valves.

CONCLUSION

Retailing for around £30 per valve, the TechTube E813CC is certainly a winner. In the near future, the company is also planning to introduce the E812CC and E811CC valves as replacements for the ECC82 and ECC81 respectively. Further downstream, Blackburn MicroTech Solutions intend to produce replacements for the EL34, EL84, KT66 and KT88 power valves and investigate other valves of various types to assess their suitability for the new technology. We await all this with interest, and welcome this iconic company back into the thermionic fold.
...over 65 brands ...with more being added every week!*

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By car: North, Take the M56 motorway to the City Centre
South, Take the M6 motorway north towards Manchester and exit onto the M56

By train: Manchester Victoria Station is only a 5 minute walk. Piccadilly Station is only a 5 minute taxi ride or 10 minute walk.

Organised by the Audio T Group
In association with
Previously known as
Practical Hi-Fi

*Visit www.manchestershow.co.uk for all the latest information
Pure and Simple

Noel Keywood loves Onkyo's budget wonder, the £500 TX-SR607 AV receiver...

As AV receivers go, the new budget TX-SR607 is dinky; I could almost lift it from its carton with one hand. Shelf space required is little more than that of a stereo amplifier, so small and cheap it may be, but lacking in ability it is not, Onkyo flaunt their skill yet again in the AV receiver field, where they are UK market leaders, by dropping out a lot of AV tat and giving us what matters, much of it concerned with audio performance. So if AV on a shoestring, with no big compromise to sound quality, takes your fancy, this receiver is for you.

In spite of the low price it is a full 7.1 receiver, and our tests showed more than 100 Watts from each channel so there's no lack of power. Two channels can be used for stereo in another room, making it 5.1. It can be run in 5.1 and the front loudspeakers bi-amped for better sound quality, so audiophiles haven't been ignored. Centre channel refuseniks like me can de-select it for room-friendly, better quality frontal stereo supported by quadraphonic surround sound. I notice that Onkyo even place the Centre terminal out of the main grouping, effectively ostracised! There is no phono stage and no Ethernet connection for internet radio, nor DAB, but there is a VHF/FM tuner and an AM tuner. It will handle digital signals from CD, DVD and Blu-ray because 24/192 convertors are used. It will also play SACD in conjunction with the Oppo DV-980H player that plays SACDs and outputs DSD code.

Simplicity suits audio and, shorn of much AV clutter, the little TX-SR607 is well suited to those who want decent sound without the paraphernalia of AV, especially from THX because there are no THX cinema enhancement modes. There's a swathe of DTS modes however, plus the usual and expected synthesised effects such as Unplugged, Orchestra, Studio Mix and various Games modes. Onkyo also include Theater Dimensional to give surround-sound effect from stereo loudspeakers, as well as the DTS version called Surround-Sensation.

Gone also are multichannel inputs, so you cannot connect up any multichannel player using analogue cables, which obsoletes a lot of decent old DVD and SACD players. But the brutal truth is a good modern BD (Blu-ray Disc) player like the Samsung BD-P1600 now costs £150, plays everything except SACD and DVD-A and connects up using HDMI. The Oppo BDP-83 player can handle every disc format and also uses HDMI, so old analogue connected players are getting to the end of their useful existence in this digitally connected world. The absence of multichannel analogue outputs simply means external power amps cannot be used.

Onkyo have also thrown out decent loudspeaker terminals, fitting shaky 1970s style screw posts that accept only bare wires and not 4mm banana plugs. The handbook says it has banana plug compatible 4mm posts, then appendix saying they are 'prohibited' in Europe. I found the blanking plug inserts were not removable, even though I tried hard with various sharp implements. In contrast to these crude old connectors Onkyo have at last included a front panel HDMI input for HD camcorders. There are lines of HDMI inputs on the rear panel, all Version 1.3a, but gone are the lines of antiquated Composite and S-Video inputs and outputs that festoon every receiver - thank the Lord! Component video still gets a look in though: inputs and an output for a monitor are fitted.

In spite of the price the TX-SR607 has full processing from HDMI (i.e. it is not pass through) and it will decode losslessly compressed Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio from Blu-ray discs. It also has Dolby Digital Plus, an updated version connected players are getting to the end of their useful existence in this digitally connected world. The absence of multichannel analogue outputs simply means external power amps cannot be used.

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of standard Dolby Digital (AC3) surround-sound common on DVD.

Surprisingly, Onkyo have also fitted new Dolby ProLogic III, in addition to IX. The Dolby Pro Logic system turns stereo into surround-sound by vector addition and subtraction of Left and Right channels. It works well with many CDs, if not all, and gives interesting results with matrix encoded TV sound I have found in the past. With 'z' Pro Logic synthesises frontal height information, bringing height to the forward soundstage, but to appreciate it you must fix loudspeakers to the walls and lead wires up to them! Somehow I don't think this will find many takers. Whilst this potentially gives 9.1 channels, the receiver has only 7 amplifiers onboard so Back loudspeakers must be forfeited if frontal 'heights' are used (see p16 of handbook). Since few Blu-rays have discrete 7.1 soundtracks, Back information is usually synthesised from the Surround channels in any case, so owners can choose between synthesised Back or Height channels.

DTS have a similar system to Pro Logic III called Neo 6 and it is included on the Onkyo. A full list of DTS processing schemes for those interested can be found on p67 of the handbook available at the Onkyo website.

Audyssey room tuning is fitted, with automatic equalisation in addition to the usual loudspeaker identification, level and distance settings. Unfortunately, the equalisation applied is not shown, although all other parameters are and were, as usual, spot on correct. It judged my speaker distances correctly and that I was not using a subwoofer, but that I was using full range Surrounds and Backs. As I have found before though, Audyssey sets the Surrounds too loud for effect, so they dominate, and it also boosts the upper midband to enhance detail and presence. I could hear this when switching from Direct to Stereo, but I also confirmed what was going on with a spectrum analyser, as I have done before. Audyssey can be switched out permanently and I prefer to do this, or it gets knocked out automatically by selecting Direct or Pure Direct, both of which bypass the internal DSPs that apply Audyssey correction.

Onkyo include tone controls and a five-band equaliser for those who would prefer to make their own adjustments and, as always, I set by ear and tape measure, and listening was in Pure Direct.

Connecting up the TX-SR607 was a fiddle as initially I had to amend my usual Van den Hul Royal Jade front cables with their fixed 4mm plugs and make up heavy duty OFC Shark cable from Maplin but it was audibly a bit vague and incohesive, so I had to abandon it. Looking at the problem again I found I could squeeze 4mm plugs into the lower row of speaker terminals from below, and from the upper ones from above, as the entry holes are just big enough, so the Van den Huls were back in. Connecting up wasn't confidence inspiring because the terminals shock like a turkey at the approach of Christmas and the VHF aerial lead fell off immediately I plugged it in, because the panel plug was slightly undersize; I had to dress my stiff, twin screen coaxial aerial cable to force it on. At least the HDMI were a decent fit, so the cables didn't fall out even though they are high quality, stiff Monster cables. With just one HDMI TV output owners won't be faced with a blank screen at switch on, something that can happen with twin outputs.

The set up menus are unlike Onkyo's usual fare; quite why I don't know. Cheapy receivers usually come out of China and Taiwan (the factory producing U.S. brand Sherwood told me they make most of them) and the menus looked like a tarted up form of some basic proprietary menu format. However, the TX-SR607 is made in Malaysia and has the stamp of Onkyo's design standards on it, including a very good VHF tuner and analogue output stages that run hot, suggesting they are strongly biased into Class A in a Class A/B system. This reduces crossover distortion and makes for a smoother sound at low levels. I was surprised at the heat streaming out under ordinary usage, but this is a feature of Onkyo receivers; the '607 was almost a match for my 300B valve amplifier!

Set up was easy enough, if not quite as easy as that of their more expensive receivers. Happily, the European version has a Pure Direct button on front which turns off the displays. There is also a Direct mode that similarly routes signals straight through without turning off the front display, bypassing the input ADC for analogue inputs, such as an external phono stage for example. The remote cycles through Pure Direct and Direct, amongst other selections and this was irritating. I like a Pure Direct panic button! But favourably, the remote also recognises cinema, audio and games buff requirements and separates them out, which is an excellent feature.

As always Onkyo make their VHF/FM receiver easy, from the front panel and the remote. The tuner has a mono mode which lifts noise muting so weak, distant stations can be received and there are 40 presets that can be allocated between FM and AM. The VHF/FM section has Radio Data System (Europe only) and will display radio text to identify stations - a useful feature I find. I had twelve London stations entered by frequency (to avoid weak relay transmitters) within a few minutes, Onkyo's tuning system was so easy to use - unlike many.

The receiver will also work with Onkyo's UP-A1 iPod dock and then the remote control can control the iPod.

Onkyo fit a video upscaling unit to turn low res. DVD pics into hi-res for 1080 TV screens, but since most modern Blu-ray players already have internal upscaling I am not sure it is especially important. A decent Samsung BD-P1600 costs just £150 from HMV and other outlets and will play CD, and upscale DVD. If you want to play SACDs and DVD-As as well then an Oppo BDP-83 (£250) is

"A modern receiver devoid of superfluous tat, it is remarkable value and something of an eye popper quality-wise. I don't know how Onkyo do it..."
the weapon of choice. There are both optical and coaxial digital inputs of course, for connecting CD players.

**SOUND QUALITY**

Spinning Carlos Santana’s Supernatural DVD-A in 24/96 PCM from an Oppo DV-980H, the Thorens TD-160se and the TX-SR607 to be talented. It isn’t as smooth, cohesive and svelte as Onkyo’s more expensive models, nor the Marantz SR-8002 I use, but it isn’t far off. And in essence it is clear, dynamic and entertaining in the usual Onkyo style, Santana’s guitar having most of its stark and sharply outlined presence, maracas coming from right rear from this 24/96 recording. Deep presence, maracas coming from right most of its stark and sharply outlined Onkyo style, Santana’s guitar having dynamic and entertaining in the usual.

**CONCLUSION**

For the price, the TX-SR607 is remarkable. It offers more than receivers costing twice as much. Sound quality is extremely good from every section and excellent from SACD. This is a modern receiver devoid of superfluous tat, yet able to cope with legacy formats in conjunction with an Oppo BDP-83 it can play everything, and very well. It is remarkable value and something of an eye popper quality wise. I don’t know how Onkyo does it.
The Stingray is legendary throughout the world...

Stingray iTube:
The Manley Stingray iTube retains the same basic tube circuitry and marvellous output transformers as the original with some important improvements, such as an iPod dock and full featured RF / IR remote control.

With the Stingray, the MANLEY team has struck a remarkably harmonious balance in design, which satisfies the sonic desires of the audiophile and the rocker, the student and the master, the yin and the yang.

"Even if you don’t own an iPod, the Stingray must feature on any list of integrated amp contenders in the £2k-£3k region. The triode vs. ultralinear option, the magical sound, the superb construction - it’s a delight. But the way it exploits the iPod so perfectly, addressing every function, multiplies its appeal logarithmically. Neater than any external dock, the Stingray is the valve lover’s ideal entrée into the "new world.""

Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News Sept 09

SA-KI:
"Fed all manner of SACDs from Mobile Fidelity, Linn, Telarc and other admirable die-hards, the SA-KI showed itself to be a thoroughbred player reminiscent of the far costlier Esoteric devices, though the voicing differs. Marantz itself used the adjective ‘silky’ to describe the Pearls’ black finish.”
Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News Sept 09

PM-KI:
"The phono stage was open, quiet and precise, especially the MM setting, and in every sense - from vinyl to CD to SACD - the bass was consistently quick. Decay or transient stops down below were as progressive or abrupt as required, nigh on perfect, while well-recorded bass drum kicks were reproduced with a vividly detailed sensation of foot, hammer and skin in motion.”
Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News Sept 09

Ken Ishiwata’s 30th Anniversary Masterpieces are here...

SA-KI (CD/SACD Player): £2,500

PM-KI (Integrated Amp): £2,500

When you first encounter the new KI Pearls, the first thing you notice are their unique 'Silk Pearl' finishing. The first of its kind in fact for Marantz. But it’s the magic that Ken Ishiwata has created inside the box that really gets the pulse racing. He has built-in everything possible to ensure that the music is reproduced exactly as the original artist and recording engineer intended.

Visit www.jordanacoustics.co.uk to view all products and finance deals available.
Here's your chance to win one of the best modern integrated amplifiers, the Cyrus 8XP d, complete with digital input card option, which received a rave review in the August 2009 edition of Hi-Fi World magazine! Here's what David Price said...

"After the success of its Servo Evolution platform CD players, Cyrus's next move is to the new frontier of modular amplifiers. The company is now offering its amplifier range in XP guise, using a preamplifier based on the same circuit topology as its £2,275 DAC XP. Cyrus's Peter Bartlett notes that, “although the XP preamps are not fully dual mono like the DAC XP, the components and layout are based on the same concept the more expensive model. This has allowed us to expand the tuning of the sound to be more open than the vs2 models”. This means that the component budget's much higher than the previous vs2 version of the Cyrus integrated amplifiers. There's also the option of a digital board, indicated by a 'd' suffix which provides two S/PDIF and two optical digital inputs, plus a newly developed USB input designed to work with a computer, making nine inputs in total. All these are easily selectable on the front panel of the Cyrus 8 XP d, or via the remote. The new model also has a new power supply section that now has many levels of regulation for the amplifier plus a separate toroidal transformer for the control sections. There's also the option of a PSX-R power supply.

The basic analogue section of the amplifier is a step change over the previous 'vs' incarnation. ELO's 'Last Train to London' showed real clarity, a vanishingly low noise floor and a conspicuous lack of muddle. The new XP version continues to be dry, but is augmented by extra detail, air to the treble, and superior dynamics. In crude terms, it feels like a veil has been lifted; the amplifier takes you a long way, maybe it's a little more laid back rhythmically, but there's no sensation of having the music forced at you. This makes it a very amenable long time listening companion. As a standalone amplifier, the Cyrus 8 XP is noticeably improved from its previous incarnation, gaining a wider dynamic range, greater speed and more natural musical flow. The d module adds a very useful digital to analogue converter that makes every digital source I tried (including computer audio via USB) sound crisp and rhythmically engaging, and feed it a serious source like Cyrus's matching CD XT SE transport and it really flies. Overall then, this is a great new modular amplifier that's completely in tune with the exigencies of modern life."

For a chance to win this great new product, just answer the following four easy questions.

**QUESTIONS**

1. What is the pre-amplifier topology based on?
   - [a] Cyrus DAC XP
   - [b] Linn Sondek LP12
   - [c] Roksan Darius
   - [d] Audiolab 8000a

2. Is the new component budget...
   - [a] much higher?
   - [b] lower?
   - [c] about the same?
   - [d] none of your business?

3. What's the digital input board called?
   - [a] 'c'
   - [b] 't'
   - [c] 'SE'
   - [d] 'a'

4. Match the 8XP d to what Cyrus product for best results?
   - [a] CD XT SE
   - [b] Mission Cyrus 2
   - [c] Cyrus DacMaster
   - [d] Cyrus CD3

Send your entries on a postcard only by 30th September 2009 to: October 2009 Competition, Hi-Fi World magazine, Unit G4, Argo House, The Park Business Centre, Kilburn Park Road, London NW6 5LF.
Hi-Fi World will have a stand at the National Audio Show and will be:-

- Holding demonstrations of LP versus CD and hopefully other topics too.
- Come and hear publisher Noel Keywood of Hi-Fi World talk about and demonstrate the latest and best hi-fi to you.
- Also there to talk will be Martin Colloms from The Audio Critic.
- Peter Comeau, Senior Engineer of the International Audio Group.
- As in the past we expect to have some interesting products running and a full room of eager listeners. It will be simple and enjoyable so do join us if you can. We'd love to see you.
The National Audio Show 2009

Written by Chester Group.

The National Audio Show 2009 is now well on its way to being a great success. Having uprooted itself from its traditional location at Heathrow in September and moved to a brand new location just north of the M25 this was a major decision jointly taken by the UK trade, and the organizers who’ve been consulting with them since day one. Whittlebury Hall Conference and Exhibitions Centre has been inspirational for all those who have visited it on the many open days organized by the Chester Group; virtually every company who’s attended has booked their suites or space on the day. The exhibition will be based on two giant floors, the ground floor of which is now full, as is much of the trade space which fronts the show.

The first floor is now 75% occupied and the organizers confirm that they have ample leads to accomplish a sellout. They also report that despite the state of the economy, sales at this point are well ahead of last year’s show. Here are just some of the reasons.

FREE PARKING FOR UP TO 500 CARS.
Twice as many demonstration Suites.
Over 500 square metres of trade space. 1,500 square metres of event space. Shuttle bus service from Milton Keynes and Luton Airport plus Stagecoach service from Oxford and Northampton. Great arterial access from the M40 or M1. Huge range of offsite attractions, towns, events and sports activities going on in this beautiful part of Northants including a magnificent on site Golf Course. Accommodation packages start from £89, which means our visitors really can make this a complete weekend’s indulgent entertainment.

Renamed the National Audio Show the organizers were adamant the show be designed to appeal to all age groups, hence the name update and the fact that the show will cover all aspects of both static and portable audio. Clinics, Media Demonstrations, book signings, world product launches, huge record fair will complete the picture and to cap it all a great exclusive concert on the Saturday evening; for the star attraction see our website.

A NATIONAL EVENT
One message that has been played again and again throughout the trade for some time is “why can’t we have a single National Audio Show in a central location that can unite the trade?” Well, the organizers think they have now achieved that now.

Opening times are confirmed as 10.00am — 5.00pm on the Saturday and 10.30am — 4.00pm on the Sunday. Advance tickets will be available ‘only’ from Chester Group’s website from the 19th August and uniquely this year will cover four interest groups. Those that prefer to pay on the day, Concession for our regular visitors, Bring a Friend and of course the Family ticket. The organizers stress that because of rising postal costs it’s simply no longer possible to send tickets out in the post. A complete show guide and update. www.chestergroup.org will be downloadable from the middle of September (as usual free) For further information call Justin on 05601 326407 or email: justin@chestergroup.org
WORLD STANDARDS

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.

**TURNTABLES**

**PRO-JECT GENIE 2** 2008 £1175
A masterpiece of minimalism, this is well made for the money and includes a decent Ortofon OMS moving magnet cartridge.

**REGA P2** 2008 £220
Some say the cheapest real hi-fi turntable money can buy - excellent value for money engineering, easy set up and fine sound.

**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 brilliant mid-price machine.

**REGA P3-24** 2008 £400
Semi-lux affordable audiophile deck with fine bundled tonearm. Tweakable, and really sings with optional £150 outboard power supply.

**MICHELL TECNODEC 2003 £579**
Superb introduction to Michel turns - on a budget. Top quality build and elegant design make it the class of the mid-price field.

**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 TechnoDec rival, and the bundled Nima Unipivot arm is a superstar.

**FUNK FIRM VECTOR II 2009 £860**
Innovative engineering gives a nimble, pacey and musical sound that’s one of the best at the price.

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**FUNK FIRM VECTOR II 2009 £860**
Innovative engineering gives a nimble, pacey and musical sound that’s one of the best at the price.

**AVID DIVA II 2008 £1,200**
Commanding performer with great speed, dynamics and detail allied to an expansive soundstage; surely the one to beat.

**ACOUSTIC SOLID CLASSIC WOOD 2008 £1,350**
Majoring on impact, punch and drive, this is an impressively mid-price turntable in sonic terms as well as physical size.

**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.

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

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

**MICHELL ORBE 1995 £2,500**
The top Michel disc spinner remains a superbly capable all rounder with powerful, spacious sound that’s delicate and beguiling.

**LINN LP125E 1973 £3,510**
Surely hi-fi’s most iconic turntable, the legendary Sonodek goes from strength to strength. New Keel subchassis and Radikal DC motor add precision and grip to one of the world’s most musical disc spinners.

**SME MODEL 10A 1995 £6,556**
Exquisitely engineered deck and SME V tonearm combo that’s an extremely accomplished performer with classical music.

**CLEARAUDIO REFERENCE 2003 £6,000**
The company’s best value vinyl spinner; good enough to get the best from almost any tonearm and cartridge combination. Brilliantly open and neutral sound; superlative pitch stability; stunning build and styling – Michel Orbe does most of this at half the price, however.

**ACOUSTIC SOLID ONE 2007 £6,000**
Huge turntable, both in terms of sheer mass and sonic dynamics. Fits up to three arms and enjoys just don’t damage your back moving it...

**AVID VOLVERE SEQUEL 2007 £4,600**
Stylish high end vinyl spinner with industrial strength build quality and a sound to match. Exceedingly neutral yet powerful sound is edge-of-the-seat stuff.

**MCLINTOSH MT10 2008 £8,995**
Big, expensive, controversially styled and glows more than some might consider necessary, but an astonishingly good performer.

**EAT FORTE 2009 £12,500**
 Lavishly finished two box, two motor turntable with gorgeous Reeds 407 tonearm bundled. Exceptionally stable and unfussy performer with a relaxed but highly enjoyable gait.

**TONEARMS**

**REGA RB251 1984 £136**
Capable way past its price point, the new 3-point mount version of the classic RB251 serves up a taut and detailed sound. A little lean for some tastes, but responds very well to rewiring and counterweight modification.

**MICHELL TECNOARM A2003 £442**
The late John Michell’s clever reworking of the Rega theme, using blasting, drilling and rewiring! Surely the best overall performer under £500.

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

**HADCODC 242 SE 2000 £649**
Latest of a long line of unipivots, with added mass, revised geometry and better finish. Musical like no others at the price.

**SME 300 1989 £767**
Mid-range SME comes complete with cost-cut aluminium armtube and detachable headshell. Tight, neutral sound with good tonality, but lacks the SME’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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audio Origami PU7</strong></td>
<td>£1,300</td>
<td>HPF's best tonemair of 2007 is a derivative of the classic Syrinx PU7 updated to spectacular effect. Hand made to order, with any mass, length and colour you care for. Fitz, finish and sound truly impressive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Naim Aro</strong></td>
<td>£1,425</td>
<td>Charismatic unipivot is poor at frequency extremes but sublime in the midband; truly emotive and insightful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helius Omega</strong></td>
<td>£1,595</td>
<td>Stylish and solid lamp of arm with fabulous build quality, that turns in a dynamic and weighty performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sme Series V</strong></td>
<td>£1,614</td>
<td>The so-called Best Pickup Arm in the World build quality., that turns in a dynamic and weighty performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Heilus Omega</strong></td>
<td>£1,595</td>
<td>Charismatic unipivot is poor at frequency extremes but sublime in the midband; truly emotive and insightful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ortofon 2M Black</strong></td>
<td>£350</td>
<td>Staggeringly good high-end MM that uses a stylus from the MC Jubilee and easily rivals similarly-priced MCs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dynamr Vector</strong></td>
<td>£250</td>
<td>A direct descendant of the classic Ultimo 10X, this has warmth and sweetness in spades, allied to a punchy bass. Beats G1042 comfortably.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audio Technica AT-OCMFLII</strong></td>
<td>£399</td>
<td>New and improved stylus and cantilever plus serious price reduction equals stunning dynamics and clarity. A real bargain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ortofon Contra B1999</strong></td>
<td>£720</td>
<td>Surprisingly articulate performer by Ortofon standards. All the brand's usual polish and detail allied to real vim. Loves making music!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lyra Dorian</strong></td>
<td>£495</td>
<td>Inclusive and musical, the Dorian is one of the most revealing cartridges at the price.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ORtofon Rondo Bronze</strong></td>
<td>£500</td>
<td>Excellent mid-price moving coil with real rhythmic alacrity and a decent deal of finesse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Zyx R-100H</strong></td>
<td>£625</td>
<td>Exceptionally tight sounding and detailed cartridge with the musical skills to match, this is up with the very best at the price, with a presentation all of its own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benj Micro Glider L2</strong></td>
<td>£650</td>
<td>Crisp, clean and detailed MC; particularly impressive at both ends of the frequency spectrum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transfiguration Axia</strong></td>
<td>£690</td>
<td>Musically adept and highly resolve cartridge with impressive tracking abilities. Top end lift means careful matching required, however.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ortofon Kontra C2004</strong></td>
<td>£1,000</td>
<td>The most secure tracking MC we've heard; its super clean, fast, detailed and neutral sonics make it a brilliant partner to warmer sounding turntables.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ortofon MC Windfeldl2008</strong></td>
<td>£1,799</td>
<td>Ortofon's new flagship MC is a sophisticated and alluring performer that takes the vinyl experience to a new level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KOetsu Red K Signature</strong></td>
<td>£2,399</td>
<td>The new K Signature adds a hefty dose of insight and finesse to the already impressive Red and the results are fabulous.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Digital Disc Players</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cambridge Audio 640C V2</strong></td>
<td>£250</td>
<td>Superb entry level CD player; crisp, composed, musical sound plus fine build and ergonomics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rega Apollo</strong></td>
<td>£498</td>
<td>Highly rhythmic and beguiling performer, although lacks some warmth of tone. Superb ergonomics and design.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Russ Andrews DAC-1 USB</strong></td>
<td>£599</td>
<td>Not just a USB gadget, but a truly accomplished upgrade DAC that makes the best of CDs, MP3s and digital radio.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cambridge Audio 640H</strong></td>
<td>£599.95</td>
<td>Fine sonic and decibel build make this our favourite affordable HD music server.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marantz SA7001ki S1G2006</strong></td>
<td>£600</td>
<td>Brilliant CD/2ch SACD spinner with a big, sweet, analogue-like sound — CD is totally competitive at the price with the best dedicated machines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audiolab 8000CD</strong></td>
<td>£450</td>
<td>Ultra clean and transparent sound with great detail retrieval; just a tad bright and analytical for some, though.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shanling CDT-80</strong></td>
<td>£650</td>
<td>Very impressive mid-price machine with a big, sumptuous, expansive sound — better still when tubes are changed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cambridge Azur 840C</strong></td>
<td>£800</td>
<td>Well built CD player with a silky, yet detailed sound and a whole host of useful facilities. Excellent value for money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Naim CD5i</strong></td>
<td>£895</td>
<td>Naim's new italic 'l' variant improves even further on the original mid-price classic, offering super tight, grippy and musical sound.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eastern Electric Minimax CD</strong></td>
<td>£925</td>
<td>Highly accomplished tube-equipped all rounder with a clean, open and musically lucid sound; superb value.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cyrus CD8 SE</strong></td>
<td>£1,200</td>
<td>New Servo-Evolution mechanism makes this the most musically engaging machine at the price, with super smooth tonality to boot. Optional PSX-R adds bass and dimensionality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benchmark DAC-1 USB2007£999</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pro-biased DAC with useful range of inputs and impressive headphone outputs, too. Save £150 if you don't need the USB-equipped version.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Electrocompaniet PC-1</strong></td>
<td>£1,034</td>
<td>Tidy and polished-sounding CD spinner with strong bass and an assured sense of confidence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
STANDARDS

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

STELLO CD-T100/DA100 SIG 2008 £1,270
Fine top loading transport linked via i2s to an excellent upsampling DAC. Confident, detailed, explicit and architectural sound but smooth too.

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

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

RAYSONIC CDI28 2007 £1,599
Spaceship styling and fine build around a highly competent mid-priced CD spinner means a feast for the senses.

CHORD QBD64 2008 £3,000
Bespoke architecture gives a truly uniquely musical sound that's beguilingly musical in nature, with ditzying incision and grip.

SHANLING SCD-T2000 2007 £2,250
Updated version of original SCD-T200C standardises 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 end by end.

ELECTROCOMPANIET EMC-1 UP 2003 £3,450
Quirky yet extremely capable high end upsampling CD spinner, with a musical fluency that beguiles more than it impresses.

ACUSTIC ARTS CDP1MJK2 2007 £3,985
Styling not to everyone's taste but build quality is impeccable and the performance is stunningly musical.

NAIM CDX2-XPS2 2003 £4,950
A fine high end machine, but add an XPS2 and it becomes one of the most characteristically 16-bit machines we've ever heard. Plays music with such passion!

NAIM CD53 2003 £7,050
The most polished Naim CD to date; tremendously capable and musical, but lacks the Rottweiler quality of the cheaper CDX2-XPS2.

ACCUSTIC 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. Very tangible, musical sound with wonderful dynamics and glimmering harmonics. Only curious styling and clunky build detract from its brilliance.

ESOTERIC X-01 2005 £6,995
Breathtaking feat of digital audio engineering, and surely the best sounding combination CD/SACD spinner money can buy.

LINN KLIMAX DS 2007 £9,600
Landmark network music player, offering brilliant sonics at up to 24/96 resolution from hard disk/NAS. Expensive, but you can hear why...

NAIM CD555/S555PS 2006 £14,000
Very probably the best CD player yet made - certainly the most expensive; a digital tour de force.

DISSONI 64 2006 £1,290
Stunningly musical.

STELLO CD-T100/DA100 SIG 2008 £1,270
Fine top loading transport linked via i2s to an excellent upsampling DAC. Confident, detailed, explicit and architectural sound but smooth too.

Linna A-100 2008 £1,590
Highly musical performer, this is one of the best phonostages at or near the price, but lacks the polish of the rival Whet.

ICON AUDIO PS3 2008 £995
One of the very best valve phonostage ever. This we've heard, with an expansive, engaging and organic sound that makes vinyl a joy to listen to.

DIGITAL RECORDERS

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

NAIM HDX 2009 £4,405
Interesting one-box network enabled hard disk music system gives superb sonics together with impressive ease of use.

PHONO STAGES

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 640P 2004 £499
Excellent entry level design that raises the bar for budget phono stages. Crisp, smooth yet brighly lit on both MM and MC. A vast improvement on most budget board designs.

JOLIDA JD9 2006 £490
Great little box that improves on most 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.

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

PRINCE LEOPOLD + NPSU 2002 £1,198
Highly musical performer, this is one of the finest phono stages at or near the price, but lacks the polish of the rival Whet.

ICON AUDIO STEREO 25 2006 £500
Cracking entry-level valve integrated, with a warm and engaging sound. Limited power so needs careful partnering, though.

ROTEL RA-06 2008 £550
Vivacious sounding device that, whilst lacking the finesse of some of the best valve units, wears its heart on its sleeve and has plenty of power to match.

NAIM NAIT 5i 2007 £725
The italic 'i' version remains one of the most musically competent and dynamically engaging integrated amplifiers at the price.

CAMBRIDGE 640A V2 2007 £750
Version 2 addresses version 1's weaknesses to turn in a mightily accomplished performer, 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.

AMPLIFIERS

AUDIOLAB 8000s 2006 £400
In other life, this sold for three times the price, making it a stand-out bargain now. Very clean, powerful and tidy sound but not the world's most beguiling.

ANATEK MC1 2007 £850
Spectacularly good MC phono stage that offers serious insight underpinned by powerful and tuneful bass.

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.

EASTERN ELECTRIC MINIMAX PHONO 2006 £1,099
Highly capable valve phono stage with a relaxed yet involving demeanour. More beguiling than rival transistor designs, but sacrifices little in detail terms.

TRICHORD DIABLO + NPSU 2006 £1,198
Highly musical performer, this is one of the best phono stages at or near the price, but lacks the polish of the rival Whet.

ICON AUDIO PS3 2008 £995
One of the very best valve phono preamplifiers we've heard, with an expansive, engaging and organic sound that makes vinyl a joy to listen to.

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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 A21 to give truly impressive results.

HI-FI WORLD OCTOBER 2009
**NAIM NAIT XS** 2009 £1,250
With much of the sound of the Supernait at half the price, this is powerful, articulate and smooth beyond class expectations.

**SHANLING STP-80** 2007 £1,199
Well built and surprisingly muscular valve amplifier, useful power plus a deep full-bodied sound make this an excellent mid-price buy.

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

**NAIM NAIT XS** 2009 £1,250
Superb build, useful power plus a deep full-bodied sound make this an excellent mid-price buy. Engagingly musical.

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

**ANATEK A50R** 2007 £1,600
Simple integrated amplifier with spectacular bass grip and effortless dynamics.

**UNISON RESEARCH S62002** £1,025
Tremendously musical and lithe sound with real finesse and subtlety too. Very slightly upper mid forward encourages careful partnering with ancillaries (Revolver R45s are ideal), but overall fantastic value for money.

**MOON i-3RS** 2008 £1,890
Grippy and clean performer with fine soundstage and build quality.

**COPLAND CSA39** 2006 £1,998
Unfailingly suave, sophisticated and smooth — both to listen to and look at — this is a truly desirable high end integrated.

**NAIM SUPERNAIT** 2007 £2,475
Brilliant audiophile multichannel pre-power amplifier combo; not as good with music as a two-channel Naim set-up at the same price, obviously, but surprisingly close. Elegant control layout plus a strong, clean and brilliantly engaging sound make this a serious crossover product. Ultimately lacks power compared to similarly priced Arcam gear, but is more musically involving.

**HEADPHONE AMPLIFIERS**

**CHANNEL ISLANDS VHP-1** £390
A truly exceptional headphone output stage; the best at the price and an essential audition.

**NAIM AV2/NAP 150/NAPV 175** 2002 £4,190
Brilliant audiofile multichannel pre-power amplifier combo; not as good with music as a two-channel Naim set-up at the same price, obviously, but surprisingly close. Elegant control layout plus a strong, clean and brilliantly engaging sound make this a serious crossover product. Ultimately lacks power compared to similarly priced Arcam gear, but is more musically involving.

**SUGDEN IA4** 2007 £3,650
Goody amount of Class A power, icy clarity and a breathtakingly fast, musical sound make this one of the very best super-integrateds.

**AV AMPLIFIERS**

**YAMAHA DSP-AX661SE2007** £700
Highly capable AV amplifier with mind-boggling array of surround sound options. Even has a decent MM phono stage!

**ARCAM AVR330** 2006 £1,500
Superbly accomplished do-it-all AV receiver package, with an uncommonly, warm, natural and musical sound. A winner goes from strength to strength.

**DENON AVR-4308** 2007 £2,800
Huge behemoth festooned with facilities and sockets, plus two remotes! Fortunately it's a highly accomplished audiofile with real finesse and subtlety. 

**NAIM AV2/NAP 150/NAPV 175** 2002 £4,190
Brilliant audiofile multichannel pre-power amplifier combo; not as good with music as a two-channel Naim set-up at the same price, obviously, but surprisingly close. Elegant control layout plus a strong, clean and brilliantly engaging sound make this a serious crossover product. Ultimately lacks power compared to similarly priced Arcam gear, but is more musically involving.

**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 superb value all the same. Lovely build, finish and Quad's legendary service are nice.

**SUGDEN MUSIC MASTER** 2003 £1,900
Impressively built and stylish pre/power combo; not as good with music as a two-channel Naim set-up at the same price, obviously, but surprisingly close. Elegant control layout plus a strong, clean and brilliantly engaging sound make this a serious crossover product. Ultimately lacks power compared to similarly priced Arcam gear, but is more musically involving.

**MUSICAL FIDELITY PRIMO BLACK 1010** 2007 £2,995
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.

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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.

**NUFORCE REFERENCE 95E V2** 2006 £1,750
Flexible pre with switchable gain via a transformer, and balanced operation. Open and incisive sound, yet makes most active rivals sound edge by comparison. Silver version at twice the price adds transparency.

**NUFORCE REFERENCE 95E V2** 2006 £1,750
Superbly accomplished audiofile with real finesse and subtlety. Takes the clarity and openness we expect from valves and adds a staggering level of grip and detail. Stunning.

**MODWRIGHT SWL9.0SE** £2,800
Captivating sound quality that will transform your system. Build quality is equally impressive and value top-notch. Highly recommended.

**NUFORCE P.9** 2007 £2,795
Impressive two box preamp with superb resolution and an engaging sound.

**MELODY PURE BLACK 1010** 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.

**STEREO SYSTEMS**

**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?

**ROKSAN KANDY LIII** 2008 £600
Fine budget power amp that punches well above its weight.

**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 superb value all the same. Lovely build, finish and Quad's legendary service are nice.

**SUGDEN MUSIC MASTER** 2003 £1,900
Quintessential Class A Sugden sound is not warm as many expect, but extremely neutral and open with real tonal colour. Superb when partnered with efficient loudspeakers like Revolver R45s, but many will find it underpowered.
STANDARDS

**ROTEL 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**
KT88 based power amplifier offers dramatic clarity and excellent bass heft.

**ICON AUDIO MB845** 2009 £2,499
Creamy and seductive yet blisteringly fast and musically lucid; this pair of 845 tube monoblocks is staggering value for money.

**QUAD II-10** 2005 £3,230
Modern tube monoblock power amplifiers with plenty of power; liquid and open midband and spacious, airy treble. Explicit, engaging sound, but not as euphonic as some.

**GRAAF GM20 OTL** 2003 £1,300
Awesome 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...

**ELECTROCOMPANIET NEMO 2009** £4,450 (EACH)
Monoblock power amplifier with breathtakingly open and fast sound, and apparently infinite reserves of power. Match with a smooth source for big audio dynamite!

**QUAD II-80** 2005 £6,000
Quad’s best ever power amplifier, this is a dramatic performer with a silky but dark tonality, blistering dynamics, serious power and a compellingly musical sound. They don’t come much better than these...

**LOUDSPEAKERS**

**ACOUSTIC ENERGY AEI CLASSIC £845**
Brilliantly successful remake of an iconic design; not flawless, but surely one of the most musical loudspeakers ever made.

**ICON AUDIO MB845** 2009 £2,499
Creamy and seductive yet blisteringly fast and musically lucid; this pair of 845 tube monoblocks is staggering value for money.

**GOODWIN ROBERTS 650** 2007 £1,450
Attractive smaller version of the 650 with a excellent price tag.

**SPENDOR S3/SE** 2004 £950
A natural successor to the BBC LS3/5a, whose impressive neutrality, imaging and evenhandedness makes this a superior, if less charismatic, loudspeaker.

**WHARFEDALE OPUS 2-MI** 2007 £999
Large standmounters with impressive midrange dome and fine integration across the frequency range.

**RRR FS100** 2007 £1,055
Mind-boggling amount of loudspeaker for the money; Big and sturdily built with serious bass and awesome soundstage scale. A real bargain.

**YAMAHA SOAVO 2** 2007 £1,200
Just as capable as their floorstanding brethren, the Soavo 2s have an assured sense of sophistication and poise.

**RE Volver RW451** 2006 £1,199
Very musical floorstanding that’s clear, concise and truthful, whilst being exceptionally amplifier friendly - a dreamboat for valves.

**ONE THING AUDIO ESL57** 2007 £1,450
One Thing Audio’s modifications keep the good old ESL57 at the very top of the game.

**KIBRI NAIMA** 2007 £1,550
Unusual-looking omnidirectional loudspeakers with an absolutely captivating performance. Huge soundstage and bags of clarity - brilliant!

**GURU QM-10P** 2007 £1,955
Quickly but adorable standmounters that are way off the pace in detail and power, but amazingly capable at playing a tune and pulling you in to the music.

**MARTIN LOGAN SOURCE** 2008 £1,599
Brilliant entry level electrostatics, giving a taste of loudspeaker esoterica for the price of most moving coil boxes. Tremendous clarity, evenness and delicacy, although not the world’s most powerful sound.

**USHER BE-718** 2007 £1,600
Beryllium tweeters work superbly, allied to a fast and punchy bass driver. The result is subtle, smooth and emotive.

**SPENDOR SBE** 2007 £1,095
Generously large, silky smooth delivery, this dynamic sounding floorstander is an excellent all-rounder.

**MONITOR AUDIO GS60** 2008 £2,100
Massively capable loudspeakers that offer dynamics, scale and clarity in an elegantly simple package. Wide range of finishes, too.

**B&O BEOLAB 9** 2007 £5,000
Technically impressive and visually striking loudspeakers with sound quality that more than matches their looks.

**ARS AURES HI** 2006 £5,995
Sublime build and finish allied to an insightful, assured and even-handed musical performance makes these an essential high end audiophiles.

**QUAD ESL-2905** 2006 £5,995
The old 989 with all the bugs taken out, this gives a brilliantly neutral and open sound like only a top electrostatic can; still not a natural rock loudspeaker, though.

**REVOLVER CYGM1S** 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.

**B&W 801D** 2006 £10,500
In many respects, the ultimate studio monitor; dazzling clarity and speed with commanding scale and dynamics.
ISOPHON CASSIANO 2007 £12,900
Drive units featuring exotic materials allied to superlative build quality result in an immense-capable loudspeaker. Not an easy load to drive, however.

ACCESSORIES
MONITOR AUDIO IDECK2006 £200
Fine design, impressive flexibility and a lucidly musical sound make the iDeck the current iPod dock champion.

ISOTEK GII VISION 2006 £550
A genuinely effective and surprisingly cost-effective upgrade, but results could vary so a home dem of the power conditioner is recommended.

TOWNSEND MAXIMUM 2003 £800
Classy ribbon superwoofer with flexible level settings and cool styling - you'll be amazed at the difference it makes, especially with Quad electrostatics.

HEADPHONES
SENNHEISER MX-550 2005 £19
Our unqualified recommendation for those seeking a serious sounding pair of in-ear phones. Smooth, detailed and musical.

SENNHEISER PX-100 2002 £29
Cracking pair of lightweight open back cans ideal for personalists, but good enough for real hi-fi use. Superb build allied to a smooth and engaging performance make them the spiritual successor to the HD400s.

GOLDRING DRISQ 2006 £70
Excellent build and fine sound makes this budget cans superlative value for money.

SENNHEISER HD-590 1998 £199
The company's best real-world cans to date. Open and smooth with plenty of detail. Brightly lit midband makes them an ideal partner for a valve headphone amp.

SENNHEISER HD-650 2004 £250
Not the best headphone in the world, but a superlative build quality. Good enough for real hi-fi use. Superb build allied to a smooth and engaging performance make them the spiritual successor to the HD400s.

STAX SR-007T OMEGA 2008 £1,290
The combination of SA-7S I disc player, SC-792 preamp and MA-9S2 monoblocks delivers a truly jaw-dropping performance. Start saving now...

STANDARDS

WIREWORLD OASIS 5 2003 £99/M
Excellent mid-price design with a very neutral, silky and self-effacing sound. Superb value for money.

CHORD COMPANY CHAMELEON 2 £90/M
One of our favourites, these are musical performers with a smooth yet open sound.

TOWNSHEND MAXIMUM 2003 £800
Classy ribbon superwoofer with flexible level settings and cool styling - you'll be amazed at the difference it makes, especially with Quad electrostatics.

GOLDRING DRISQ 2006 £70
Excellent build and fine sound makes this budget cans superlative value for money.

DCM RESON 2002 £40/M
Neutral and transparent - a steal!

VDH ULTIMATE THE FIRST 2004 £260/0.6M
Carbon interconnects that help you forget the electronics and concentrate on the music. Miraculous transparency. Tight and tuned bass mixed with air and space results in a cracking cable for the money.

MISSING LINK CRY° REFERENCE 2008 £375
Currently our favourite 'affordable high end' interconnects, with a deliciously smooth, open and subtle sound without a hint of edge or grain. Superb value, inasmuch as it's as good as some designs at three times the price.

TUNERS
DENON TU-1500AE 2006 £120
Excellent entry level analogue tuner; slick sonics and fine feature count makes it a bargain.

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 640T 2005 £250
Sweet sounding digital/analogue hybrid with fine build and finish at the price.

MARANTZ ST-7001 2006 £299
Super performance on FM coupled with its ability to get the most from DAB broadcasts makes this the best affordable tuner.

YAMAHA TX-761 2007 £350
Sets the standard for FM performance at the price and is no slouch on DAB either.

ARCAM FMJ T32 2008 £650
Small, neat looks cover a truly capable system. Not the best headphone in the world, but a superlative build and fine comfort makes all most people will ever want. Cable upgrade yields great results.

STAX SR-007T OMEGA 2006 £890
Simply the best headphones we've ever heard to date. These sleekly transparent electrostatic earrings are like no other headphone, or loudspeaker for that matter.

INTERCONNECTS
TECHLINK WIRES XS 2007 £20
Highly accomplished interconnects at an absurdly low price. Steaming value for money.
Adam Smith checks out the latest 10.1 version of Wharfedale's classic Diamond loudspeaker...

Gem Stones

It was way back in 1985 that Wharfedale released the first Diamond, resplendent in a thin chipboard cabinet with tasteful and oh-so-eighties black ash vinyl wrap. Driver lineup at that time was a 19mm soft dome tweeter and a 120mm polypropylene bass/mid driver mated via a simple crossover. Maybe this doesn’t sound so exciting nowadays, but the overall result was one of those classic examples of the whole being far more than the sum of the parts. Those original Diamonds, as I found out last year when I acquired a pair for my budget-busting vinyl system challenge, were almost shockingly capable in the way in which they communicated on a musically emotive level.

Subsequent versions may have become better built and more technically 'correct' in their sonic presentation, but somehow I always felt that the little spark of brilliance that marked out the originals from their peers had been quietly snuffed out somewhere along the way. Consequently, as I sit in front of these new Diamond 10.1s, I cannot help but wonder just where along that line that joins enjoyment to accuracy they are going to sit...

As you may have gathered, the 'Diamond' name now actually belongs to a range of loudspeakers rather than just one particular model, and stretches across no less than sixteen different models, made up of three standmounters, five floorstanders, three centre channels, two surround models and three subwoofers. If you can’t find a combo to satisfy you from this little lot, there’s probably no satisfying you. The 10.1s are the centre standmounter model, sporting a 125mm Kevlar bass driver with a new rubber surround that incorporates a diamond pattern embossed into it — very cute, but Wharfedale state that this is not just for show, as it helps to damp out standing waves in the surround. The driver is mounted into the 'vibration-reducing' composite front baffle using a wider chassis flange than before, to improve coupling and stability and bass loading is provided by two rear-facing ports, so a decent gap between loudspeaker and rear wall will be a wise move, but a certain amount of tuning will result from varying this.

Above this, treble duties are taken care of by a 25mm soft dome tweeter that is tucked beneath a metal diffusion grid that Wharfedale state "helps to iron out high frequency perturbations up to 30kHz", as well as affording protection from marauding child fingers or assorted poking devices when the loudspeakers are used without their grilles. Talking of grilles, the Diamond 10.1s are supplied with a set and these affix using small pegs into the driver securing bolts; a simple and neat solution that seems to be taking a strangely long time to be adopted by many designers.

The cabinets into which these drivers are bolted are very neatly made and well finished, being offered in no less than seven finishes, including the stylish Rosewood of the review samples. The cabinet walls themselves are curved to minimise internal reflections, and consist of
A sandwich of four materials, each coated with a special adhesive that Wharfedale state is cured using high intensity RF energy. Whether this adhesive is likely to return to its liquid state if your house happens to be located near an electricity pylon is not something that the manual covers, however! Finally, vital statistics for the 10.1s are 296x194x278mm (HxWxD) and signal connections are through two pairs of gold plated binding posts that can accept bare wire, spades and banana plugs, the latter after the inevitable plastic inserts are prised out (and invariably lost) using a sharp knife or small screwdriver.

**SOUND QUALITY**

A budget loudspeaker can cause even the hardened hi-fi reviewer a moment of trepidation when approached, as there is always the fear of what might have been added into the design’s overall melting pot. History is littered with examples of such beasts featuring hard and shrill tweeters, or bass drivers working overtime in order to convince that there is more bass then there really is. Such tricks are soon seen through however, and often leave little else of note behind once they are unveiled. The Wharfedale Diamond 10.1s are most definitely not such a design however, and straightway I’m going to let the cat out of the bag and say that the spirit of those original Diamonds is well and truly back – about time too!

What Wharfedale have come up with for the 10.1 is a loudspeaker that loves to get down and have a party. Give them a rhythm and they’re off, snapping into the groove with precision and a deftness that is all too often missing at this humble price point. Bass lines are confident and pleasingly impactful through the Diamond 10.1s, not seeking to push the small drive unit past its limits, but nevertheless making the most of what it has to offer. As a result, when the loudspeakers were perched on top of my Atabite-loaded Atacama Nexus 6 stands and pulled up at a foot clear of the rear wall, I was more than impressed by the confident way in which they punched out bass lines, and simultaneously picked out individual low notes very deftly.

As a result of this fine sense of timing, I found myself heading towards music with pep and verve to it. The Diamonds proved no slouches when it came to holding the best of dance music such as the vocal remix of ‘I Remember’, the recent twelve inch single from Deadmau5, and a complete change of style to spin some trad jazz courtesy of Kenny Ball showed that they enjoy nothing more than a rollicking good time!

At the top end, Measured Performance shows a slight tail off towards 20kHz but this most certainly does not make the Diamonds sound dull. In fact, given that it is all too common to stick a lift in for ‘showroom appeal’ in order to make the loudspeaker sound crisp and detailed, when it actually soon becomes overblown and harsh, Wharfedale have balanced the Diamond 10.1’s top end very nicely. As a result, cymbals rang forth with impact and there was a good sense of atmosphere to proceedings. This fine top end blended with the bass across a very smooth and considered midrange that sets up an aural picture between the cabinets and gives performers good space to work in. Orchestras sounded rich and fulsome, and the Diamonds never gave any sense of strain or compression when crescendos came along – they really are very civilised in this respect.

So, strong contenders for some serious budget bargains then? Well, yes and no. You see, whilst they may be civilised and yet fun performers, most £200-ish loudspeakers have a chink in their armour somewhere, and I found that of the Diamonds when I played something a little more slow, considered and atmospheric though them. In simple terms, their midrange, whilst well balanced and nicely integrated, is rather characterless. Notes from guitar strings, pianos and the like, which should have a firm leading edge, a characterful main note and a gentle decay seemed to have their front and back chopped off by the Diamonds, leaving a note that was vivid, but rather opaque. Obviously I do not expect a £200 loudspeaker to pinpoint a Steinway comparison to a Yamaha Concert Grand, but I would hope it could tell me the difference between said Steinway and a Korg! Similarly priced rivals from the likes of B&W, Mordaunt Short and Acoustic Energy can do so, and so the Diamonds were definitely a little behind the best in this respect. Equally, vocals were well placed in the centre of the soundstage, but seemed to be pushed back to be rather crowded into the general performance.

**CONCLUSION**

So the new Wharfedale Diamond 10.1s may not be the most revealing or forensically insightful loudspeakers around, but I still maintain they are some of the most fun. As always, an audition is mandatory and if you have a shelf full of acoustic music, I suspect the Diamonds may not be quite your cup of English Breakfast. On the other hand, however, if you’re more into rock, dancing or jazziing it up, then they deserve to be auditioned. As I do, you too might find them to be something of a little gem.

---

**VERDICT**

The spirit of the original Diamond rises from the ashes in the 10.1s, as they are rhythmically adapt and musically persuasive.

**WHARFEDALE DIAMOND 10.1 £200**

**FOR**

- well balanced performers
- addictive musicality
- fine low end impact
- build and finish

**AGAINST**

- low level detailing

---

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

The Diamond 10.1 has a very civil response balance, lacking anything that will offend, unless that is you like a bright sound. There is a slight but distinct plateau lowering of output across the upper midband from 1.8kHz up to 4.5kHz that will ensure there’s no glare, but the tweeter works well above these frequencies, having smooth output to 12kHz, so detailing should be good but ‘sting’ will be absent. Upper bass frequencies lift a little below 300Hz which will usefully add a little body to the sound. Bass output extends down to 65Hz (-6dB), good for a small cabinet. Having a gentle roll down in output below 120Hz the Diamond 10.1 is balanced for near wall use. The twin rear ports work at 40Hz to add a little extra low end oomph.

Sensitivity was mediocre at 85dB, especially as impedance measured a low 5.5 Ohms and a bass unit with a 3.8 Ohm DCR is used. The impedance curve is free of large peaks, and fairly unreactive as a result of the low slopes seen in our published impedance curve. Amplifiers can drive loads like this but with low impedance and low sensitivity the Diamond 10.1 will need 40 Watts or more to go loud.

The 200ms decay spectrum is clean, displaying no overhangs or undue colourations. Bass distortion, even from the small ports, was fairly low at 2% from the bass unit and 5% from the port, so there is little ‘bass doubling’. The Diamond 10.1 has been well engineered to give a very accurate and even sound, free of emphases. Like the many models before it, it is a high quality miniature. NK

---

**FREQUENCY RESPONSE**

Green - driver output

Red - port output

**IMPEDANCE**

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DUANE EDDY
 Twenty Terrific 'Twangies' / Water Skiing
 BGO

Duane Eddy! You betcha! Eddy was a highly influential artist in the fifties and had a stream of hits to boot; fifteen in just five years from 1958 to 1963. His instrumental tracks served as an ideal vehicle for the electric guitar, bestowing an aura of power on the instrument that triggered the creation of many a guitar band, especially as Eddy took the bassy riff as his signature; stand up The Shadows! In fact, Eddy was the first rock star to lend his signature name to an electric guitar, made by Guild Guitars. Much later, Gretsch did the same. Eddy utilised his low and slow style to devastating effect. Some may remember his relatively recent hit, in 1986, with the Art Of Noise, covering the stirring 'Peter Gunn' theme.

This CD release, which has been thoughtfully and carefully mastered by Andrew Thompson at Sound Performance studios in London, features two intriguing albums. 'Twenty' was originally released in 1980 and featured five previously unreleased tracks. This is the first time it has ever been released on CD. It's an ideal entry point to the man as it features some of his biggest hits such as '(Dance With The) Guitar Man' and his monster hit, 'Rebel Rouser': anyone familiar with the films, 'Forest Gump' or 'Natural Born Killers' will know this track.

Alongside 'Twenty..' is 'Water Skiing' one of Eddy's best ever albums. That's Eddy on the cover; pity it was taken in the middle of winter while the photographer donned a fur coat! A superb surf LP, this record was similarly influential for later surf rockers. Also look out for the two accompanying CD releases under the same label; 'Dance With The Guitar Man/Twanging Up A Storm' from 1963 and 'Guitar Man' from 1969.

THE KENNY CLARKE-FRANCY BOLAND Big Band

Now Hear Our Meanin': The Complete 1963 Recordings Jazz Lips

Another artist of influence. However, instead of the guitar, American-born Kenny Clarke was an important drummer from the bebop era. His understated drumming style shouldn't be ignored. In fact, his important innovation was more of a transformation moving the beat from the bass drum to the ride cymbal. This isn't the cymbal that you see sitting right next to the drummer's strong hand, hundreds, rays thousands, of drummers copied Clarke's style afterwards.

The CD represents all the band's recording dates during the year (January 25th and 26th), offering great value for money as they were originally available on two, separate albums. All the tracks highlight one of Boland's talents, his arrangement skills (something he'd already accomplished with some aplomb for the likes of Count Basie and Duke Ellington) while a selection of soloists feature strongly such as Sahib Shihab (flute and baritone sax), Ake Persson (trombone) and Clarke himself. Four tracks from a later 1966 session and one from an earlier 1961 recording, have been added as bonus tracks. This is an excellent suite of jazz tracks that will have any bebop fans tapping with a frenzy.
EDDIE C. CAMPBELL
Tear This World Up
Delmark

Taking Kenny Clarke’s cymbal beat style as a trigger, the interesting thing about Eddie Campbell’s blues guitar, which adopts the Westside Chicago-style from the sixties period, is how he, and other electric guitar blues players of the genre, actually play the thing. It’s not that easy. In fact, Campbell refers to this problem himself, stating that, too often, wannabe blues guitarists attempt to play the blues, struggle with it a bit and then get frustrated and revert back to an easier, more common Hendrix, psychedelic form. Keeping the true Westside form is tough. In fact, it’s a delicate balance because, if you ease back on the power and associated effects such as feedback then you’ve lost it again and you suddenly find yourself playing fifties-style blues guitar.

Campbell grew up playing electric guitar and appeared on stage from an early age. For example, he managed to jam with his blues hero, Muddy Waters when he was just twelve years old. From that time onwards he soaked in the influences. He was a sideman to the likes of Little Walter, Jimmy Reed and Howlin’ Wolf – and, if you can’t learn a little from that lot...

You have to be in the zone to play this stuff and Campbell certainly is with this new CD which leads you to make instant comparisons to Magic Sam (especially when he plays Sam’s own ‘Easy Baby’, complete with a fond introduction) and Buddy Guy. This CD, which is well recorded, wallows in reflection for a style of blues from the past but it’s no worse for that. A classic blues style guitar player. In fact, the recording is almost celebratory.

COLOSSEUM
Morituri Te Salutant
Sanctuary/Universal

Colosseum, a jazz/rock group, was founded in 1968, and featured Jon Hiseman, Dick Heckstall-Smith and Tony Reeves, all of whom were ex-John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers. Dave Greenslade (who would later form his own prog outfit called Greenslade) was also a member along with Jim Roche. Others would come and go including the legendary Chris Farlowe on vocals for the group’s fourth album, ‘Daughter Of Time’.

This 4-CD boxed set brings together studio recordings, live material and BBC radio sessions, including many previously unreleased versions. Some of the tracks have been taken from old Sanctuary catalogue – this was originally a Sanctuary project before the independent label went bust and was bought by Universal. Many other tracks have been supplied by leader, Jon Hiseman, along with the demos, rough mixes and other rarities.

"Most of the sources were CD-Rs, both audio and data," said Peter Reynolds, the mastering engineer. "Some derived from rare multi-tracks that have been floating around for years. The job was relatively painless, however. There was a fair bit of EQ-ing to be done to equate the levels; you don’t want to be changing the volume between each track; plus tweaking studio-weighted output. For example, if a studio recorded with bass-heavy speakers, the final master would be bass-light."

The jigsaw manner of the collection is highlighted by tracks that appear on disc four which are, frankly, acquired bootlegs. When sending the sources to Reynolds, Hiseman noted that the sound quality was nothing more than archival benefit. "They were pretty poor," confirmed Reynolds. However, he has certainly made them listenable, doing a fine job. In fact, Reynolds has produced a box set that both the band and himself should be proud of. It’s an excellent mix of favourites and rarities that will keep any fan busy for some time.
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"The entertainment system of the future will have everything there for you, just as you like it..."

David Price

Right now, hi-fi is in a curious transitional phase, not just from one type of digital disc format to another, but from the old paradigm to the new. Everything about the way we buy, store, organise, listen to and use music is now moving, irreversibly, to a new model that we haven’t quite found yet...

Like someone rummaging around in the dark for the light-switch they can’t quite find, we’re currently groping for the solution in a haphazard and clumsy way. All manner of short-term compromises are being pursued right now that will go on to look as irrelevant as MiniDisc or Digital Compact Cassette. Rest assured, Blu-ray, DAB, iPods and Squeezeboxes will all go by the wayside, as we migrate to integrated multimedia computers.

Permanently and wirelessly attached to what we once quaintly called the ‘information superhighway’, there will be no need to store media data such as music files, let alone physical media like CDs or DVDs. Data will arrive anywhere there’s a mobile phone signal, via a vast network of satellites, dramatically more powerful than now, orbiting the earth to provide the planet with all its data needs. More of an information ‘suprahighway’, huge amounts of traffic (comprised simply of ones and zeros) will fly around the Earth like the asteroid belt.

All our music, video, movies, audio, radio, photographs and art will reside in the digital domain, piped up above the clouds and then beamed down to your media computer as and when you require. It will then go out to any particular ‘client-device’ that suits. So if you’re in the bath, you might want something resembling a Roberts radio of yesteryear to accompany your ablutions. For style and convenience’s sake, it would look, feel and work like radios of yore, but is simply a streaming client in disguise.

In your den, you’ll have your real hi-fi, switched to its ‘media’ input, with all your digital music coming straight from the clouds via your home media centre. You’ll be able to choose resolution, format and so on if you really want to, otherwise the system will simply select the best sounding available option, or the one it’s learned that you prefer. As every piece of music ever recorded will be available in the best possible digital resolution, streamed off that ‘suprahighway’, that’s quite a lot of listening available to you. And instead of buying music in the shops (or online, and downloading it to your machine), you’ll simply buy ‘credits’: the ability to listen to any music for a certain amount of time, just as you pay for your phone now. What’s the point of physically duplicating the data on a local hard drive under your stairs, if everything ever recorded is ‘suprahighway’, that’s quite a lot of listening available to you. And instead of buying music in the shops (or online, and downloading it to your machine), you’ll simply buy ‘credits’: the ability to listen to any music for a certain amount of time, just as you pay for your phone now. What’s the point of physically duplicating the data on a local hard drive under your stairs, if everything ever recorded is sitting up in the heavens anyway?

So record collecting in 2050 will become a sort of ‘ultra browsing’ experience. Guides point music fans to ‘schools of music’, so if you like REM then try The Byrds, Mercury Rev, The Long Ryders, Talking Heads, etc. Instead of searching out physical media, people spend countless hours searching reviews, documentaries, forums and the like, following a trail of music along like a twenty first century, three-dimensional rock family tree. All this will be done on the same wireless tablet-style interface that controls your entire media needs, hooked up to computer ‘wiredless’ to the superhighway.

In the lounge, all your TV needs will be catered for by the same system; you’ll be able to watch any telly programme ever made on demand, in whatever quality, resolution or format best suits you or your display screen. Some of it you’ll pay for, others you won’t. Ditto movies; the notion of physically buying a Blu-ray disc to take home with you will be laughable; just key in what you want to watch, sit back and go. Once again, you’ll be able to follow cultural themes, search by directors, stars, leading ladies, set designers of whatever; for Stanley Kubrick see Leonard Rossiter, Peter Sellers, Tom Cruise...

The entertainment system of the future will sense all your mobile devices, all your media needs, all your online purchases, all your favourites (of small screen and large, radio and music) and have them all there for you just as you like it. When true portability is needed on a device that can’t grab the data from out of the sky, it will squirt everything it thinks you’ll ever want into a yottabyte memory card (the size of postage stamp, playable on anything but uncopyable) that slots into your car system or digital portable. The idea will be to have no physical media anywhere if possible, minimal replication of the same data on multiple storage devices and no need on the user’s part to copy or backup anything. It will be pure, object-oriented music and media replay with no fuss - and why not?

In this brave new world, I predict that hi-fi will still be very much alive; media centres, DACs, amplifiers and loudspeakers will flourish while CD players, DVD players, radios and network attached storage boxes will all fade away. Vinyl, I am sure, will continue. As electronics reach a new level of complexity and power, there will be a resurgence in interest in mechanical machines, from typewriters to turntables. Digital will take all the pain, fuss and faffing out of our lives, which will leave us wanting something tangible, tactile, formed and fiddy to replace it. The future for analogue, then, looks assured!
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"the major record labels haven't got the foggiest idea what music they own..."

Paul Rigby

A re thrusting young twentysomething record executives inadvertently preventing rare and quality music from reaching the ears of the public?
The accusation I have towards the major record labels is that this breed of employee has flooded the staff lists and that many experienced, knowledgeable, staffers (who knew where all the bodies were buried) have disappeared, often due to redundancies thanks to the present economic climate and the ongoing record company shrinkages. The upshot is that the major record labels haven't got the foggiest idea what music they own...This means that, not only do the major labels not have a complete and organised database of their musical library but that there is some debate over the full contents of each and every master in the library.

This situation does not look like it will improve anytime soon. However, there is one chink of light on this dark tableau – independent record labels. One of which I have never mentioned in this magazine, called Shout!, is an excellent example of a carefully nurtured, well crafted label that has grown, for no other reason, than it produces good CD releases and people like them.

"Shout! was my idea when looking at areas of music that I enjoyed but wanted to explore further as part of the RPM label," said Shout! Director, Mark Stratford.

"About eight years ago, I thought that the time was right because no other label was exploring classic R&B – especially as another label with a similar genre focus, Charly, had folded. I thought now was the time to acquire the rights that it had secured through the eighties."

To get Shout! going, Stratford brought in A&R man Clive Richardson, who used to run a soul magazine called Shout!, in the sixties. He was one of a small band of people back then, who helped popularise black American music and soul music.

"Clive has a fantastic treasure trove of original vinyl releases from the sixties, that he was buying, and from the seventies via releases that he was sent for his magazine."

In terms of sourcing A&R ideas and, on occasion, master sources, Richardson's library has proved to be incredibly useful. Stratford released the first few CDs from Charly licenses, initially as a series under the RPM umbrella. "These were not records which Charly had already released, but Charly held the rights to the music (the label is now owned by Snapper Records). After twenty releases, I decided that Shout! could stand up on its own."

Insider knowledge counts for everything when seeking rare recordings, and this is where the major labels can flounder, "We looked up at Universal, unless any of those tracks have become active, they're left off all subsequent databases. The company doesn't know it has it. And a twenty year old kid who's a whizz at IT, which are the sort of people that these corporations employ nowadays (they don't employ music people) isn't going to know or be interested to go looking for these things. So a lot of how (fellow independent label) Ace operate and how we operate is to acquire that knowledge and spoon-feed the majors. Then they know where to look and then, hopefully, you can get your license. But that can sometimes take two years to fulfill."

In many respects, the independent labels have taken over the role of the major labels as a driving force in music; the majors are quickly becoming mere libraries. It is the independents which offer dynamism. It is they who are on the front line, they who search out masters and who employ music experts with essential knowledge. Who else will save us from the hair-gelled oiks who strut around the City, in suits two sizes too big for them, slavering over Audi TT's while talking too loud into their smartphones?"
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"If Germany ends up using Internet radio, what would that say about the UK's decision to soldier on with 20-year-old DAB?"

After years of very low DAB sales, Germany had been planning towards a "big bang" relaunch of digital radio using the DAB+ standard later this year. In July however, the VPRT, which is the organisation that represents the German commercial radio broadcasters, threw a rather large spanner into the works by issuing a press release saying that they were opposed to the plans to relaunch digital radio. The press release said that relaunching digital radio using the DAB/DAB+ standard wouldn't be a market-driven approach, and that even if a large amount of public money were spent on promoting digital radio, the commercial broadcasters didn't think they'd see a return on their investment for many years to come. Given the very poor DAB sales in the UK over the last few years and the near total collapse of DAB last year, I think their concerns are very well founded. The broadcasters said that they were still in favour of a move to digital radio though, but they wanted transmission networks and receivers to be able to connect to the Internet as well as supporting a (unspecified) broadcast standard.

A couple of weeks after this, the KEF, which distributes licence fee money to the German public service broadcasters, announced that it had "unanimously" decided not to release funds for the relaunch of digital radio using DAB+, citing that it would be "inconceivable" to go ahead without the support of the commercial broadcasters, along with expressing a number of other concerns with the public broadcasters' plans. The KEF went on to say that the money that had been earmarked for the relaunch would still be available for other digital radio projects over the next few years, but that it wouldn't be made available in future to relaunch DAB/DAB+.

Following the KEF's decision, Thomas Jarzombek, the media spokesman for the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) political party, whose leader is the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, laid into DAB by saying that Germany had already spent €200m on rolling it out, yet DAB still only accounted for 0.1% of all radio listening, and he concluded: "There must be no more time wasted with this project now... Instead, all the resources are now directed towards the Internet... After the exit of [commercial] radio stations and the rejection by the KEF digital radio on DAB+ died."

I think Germany's decision to ditch DAB+ is excellent for a number of reasons. First and foremost, I think digital radio supporting the Internet well as a broadcast standard is absolutely the right thing to do, especially when viewed over the medium to long-term. The Internet offers some huge benefits to listeners that traditional broadcasting systems simply cannot replicate, so it makes perfect sense to take advantage of these features in order to make digital radio a far more attractive proposition to consumers than could be delivered via a broadcasting system alone. For example, there is a strong and growing trend towards listening on-demand and away from listening live, yet traditional broadcasting systems like DAB/DAB+ cannot deliver on-demand streams to listeners at all.

Internet radio obviously delivers wider choice and higher audio quality than DAB+ is ever likely to, along with it being feasible to deliver 'HD' radio via the Internet in future, whereas it would always be too expensive to deliver it via traditional broadcasting systems. The Internet also allows listeners to interact, and it allows broadcasters to deliver content that's personalised to a listener's tastes, which is impossible on a broadcasting system where everybody receives the same signals and therefore the same content as everybody else.

On the broadcasting systems front, Germany could adopt the new DVB-T2 system (the system that's going to deliver HDTV on Freeview, but it's well-suited to mobile use as well), which is three times as efficient as DAB++ and it is ten times as efficient as DAB! The cost of transmitting a radio station on DVB-T2 should be about a tenth of the cost of transmitting on DAB, and there would be room for a very large number of stations, so if Germany did adopt DVB-T2 as their national digital radio standard you would definitely expect radio stations to be delivered at high audio quality.

Germany could alternatively use eMBMS (Evolved Multimedia Broadcast Multicast Service), which is the broadcast standard linked to the LTE (Long Term Evolution) 4G mobile phone system that most network operators are expected to adopt. eMBMS allows the stations being broadcast to change dynamically depending on which stations people are listening to, in a given location, so all live Internet radio streams would potentially be available via eMBMS. Given that the German broadcasters want digital radios to support the Internet, it would make sense to use an Internet-based standard like eMBMS for the broadcast side too.

Combining Internet connectivity with a state-of-the-art broadcasting standard would clearly enable the broadcasters to make digital radio into a far more compelling proposition to consumers than using DAB+ alone, so I think Germany's decision is spot on. If Germany does end up using something like this though, what would that say about the UK's decision to soldier on with the twenty-year-old DAB system?
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"I'd always assumed digital would mature into something better than analogue, but now I am not so certain..."

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Some time in the future, but certainly not now, the word 'digital' will fall into disuse as an archaic adjective. Much like the word 'atomic' sums up the fifties and sixties when 'the atom' apparently held the key to the future, or at least our mastery of it did, so digital at present means all things modern, up to date and just plain clever. What came before digital we all know was 'steam' by way of contrast, and by its very nature inferior and to be done away with if we are to enjoy a bright, shiny tomorrow. But it isn't turning out like that.

I believe in digital too, or I want to and have always wanted to, but these days I am becoming increasingly uncertain about where it is going to lead us, if anywhere at all. Audio went digital a long time ago of course, in 1982 when Compact Disc was launched, and at that time even if you took the view, as I did, that CD was 'challenged', it still didn't mean that tomorrow would not bring something better. Nor did it mean that something better would certainly be better digital. It didn't take a genius to see that 16bit resolution wasn't adequate for audio and that, looking past Philips famous "perfect sound forever" slogan, 24bit resolution was required and would do nicely. A higher sampling rate of 96kHz would eliminate filtering problems and doubling that again to 192kHz would bring a smile to the faces of the hardcore SACD fraternity. 24/192 because even though it can offer a frightening experience when used in a soundtrack (listen to the battle sequences in 'Master and Commander', 'The Far Side of the World' on Blu-ray) you need a good system to reproduce this and it isn't/gon't get close.

I am not trying to put you off buying Blu-ray or enjoying high resolution digital. It is absolutely the case that 24/192 recordings are better than CD, although you need good playback equipment to resolve the differences. But depressingly, high resolution digital still sounds 'digital'! By that I mean 'hard' and 'sterile'. It is not a sound that I find convincing; by that I mean 'hard' and 'sterile'. It remains a simulacrum, an elaborate construct with an alternative. But that does leave us to a little bit of a quandary.

With CD slowly dying and high resolution 24/96 PCM digital sounding little better than CD or say, the 24/48 PCM specification that the recording industry loves, this means the age of digital has reached its limits, at least in offering us improved quality. I cannot see consumers rushing to buy high resolution digital audio of much higher specification than we have today in 24/96 or 24/192 because even though it can offer a frightening experience when used in a soundtrack (listen to the battle sequences in 'Master and Commander', 'The Far Side of the World' on Blu-ray) you need a good system to reproduce this and it isn't/gon't get any more dynamic.

Gunfire and general mayhem on Blu-ray are one thing, and perhaps an end achieved. Massed violins are another and here PCM digital is far less convincing than either SACD or analogue. But we are not going to get anything better for a long, long time to come; 24/192 PCM code is here now and that's it!

'Great', I can hear some say. Now we will not have to upgrade our equipment any more and can buy Blu-rays until the cows come home, knowing that they will never be replaced by anything 'better'.

Not so fast! Unlike analogue, digital systems come with a fixed specification and can be improved only little within this rigid defining framework. At some time in the future, Blu-ray or any other 'product' will come to the end of its life in the way LP, CD, VHS and DVD have done. Then what? Then, the promise of a better tomorrow courtesy of 'digital' will have ground to a halt and we will all be left wondering what next. It is 'then', I have to say, that 'digital' will join 'atomic' in the lexicon of great ideas that somehow never quite fulfilled their promise and faded away to become a token of past aspirations.
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Hi-Fi WORLD OCTOBER 2009
Much as I am a fan of technology, I do have a tendency for scepticism when confronted with things allegedly "new and improved".

And I have to announce the sad departure of one example of good old classic analogue technology from the Smith household recently. As regular readers will know, I have often moaned about the whole DAB fiasco in my little corner of the Hampshire countryside – namely that there isn't any and the www.getdigitalradio.com website still smugly tells me that, "We're sorry, there are no digital radio stations available in your area at the moment".

Well, unfortunately(!) this situation also extends to Freeview digital television, as there is also a postcode search on www.freeview.co.uk and guess what this one says? Yes, that's right; "Unfortunately you can't receive the Freeview channels in your area now". Clearly, those twenty miles to our transmitter, which is one of the largest in the south of England, are just a few too many for that feeble digital signal. In actual fact, I can permit myself a bit of smugness here as, thanks to the combined sterling efforts of Thomson and Bang & Olufsen, we actually do watch Freeview on a regular basis...

Sad, that doesn't last too long as we suffer regularly from interference from passing motorcycles, poorly suppressed van engines and general high pressure weather conditions. In fact, things became so bad recently that for over a week the signal on all channels was unwatchable. Yes, my wife and I enjoyed more conversation, evening country walks and book-reading, but it meant that I missed the last in the series of Top Gear!

Intriguingly, our analogue TV signal was actually no worse than usual – snowy but watchable, but only on BBC1 and ITV1.

Consequently, I decided the time had come to stop pontificating over the satellite dish on the side of our house that the previous occupants kindly left behind and so I took the plunge and invested in one with a hard disc recorder inside. As a result, as mentioned earlier, this has meant that the Smith household has finally kissed goodbye to that staple of televisual convenience for nearly thirty years, good old VHS.

I have actually said for several years that I would invest in some sort of digital recording device when my video recorder finally died. Unfortunately the item in question is a top of the range Sony model which has never put a foot wrong in the twelve or so years I have owned it, and still has remarkably good picture quality. The problem is that my small collection of pre-recorded videos changed to DVDs years ago and the old Sony was only ever brought into service for recording the odd television programme whilst we were out. I think the clue that it might be time to think about a change came on two occasions recently when the aforementioned programmes failed to record, as the tapes on which I was recording were so old that the results were unwatchable!

Now obviously I can look forward to the delights of 'Series Link' and recording from two channels simultaneously should I so choose, but part of me is a little sad that VHS is no more in my lounge, I can remember only too well the excitement of my parents acquiring that first machine and the novelty of being able to record something whilst watching something else. An aged relative, when shown my sister's wedding video over twenty years ago, was completely unable to comprehend how the pictures came out of the little black box with two wheels and some 'ribbon' in that we put into the mysterious machine!

Even more intriguing to me, given the endless conversations amongst enthusiasts these days that encompass DAB versus FM, vinyl versus CD, belt drive versus direct drive and the like, the big one that many people have forgotten about is the one that really started it all; Betamax versus VHS. Although admittedly this was rather predated by the crucial "stereo; is it just a passing fad?"...

The general consensus is that Betamax was the superior format but VHS eventually won the day, although no-one is totally sure what the definitive factor in deciding this was. Some say it was better marketing from the VHS camp, some that it was the initially more limited recording time of early Betamax tapes (60 minutes, against 3 hours for VHS) and some even that it was simply down to porn; little was available on Betamax and some even that it was simply down to porn; little was available on Betamax because owners Sony would allegedly not allow it!

Whatever the reason, Betamax faded away to become a little backwater in the video technology pool and I think it is true to say that nearly everyone reading this article will have owned a VHS machine at one time or another. Maybe, like me you will have had occasion to curse when you inadvertently recorded the wrong channel, undoubtedly most of us have had something precious recorded over by another member of the family, and I'm sure I am not the only person who has had to take a machine apart to unravel a snapped tape from the innards! Either way, VHS has been an important part of my life and as my recorder gets carefully tucked away in the loft, where it will very probably not see the light of day again for a long time, I think a moment of respect is due to the format that started us on the road to the televisual choice and freedom we have today...
VINYL NEWS

vinyl section

contents

OCTOBER 2009  www.hi-fiworld.co.uk

LINN SONDEK LP12 RADIKAL 100
David Price tries the latest, DC-powered version of this classic transcription turntable.

SME 312S 104
Noel Keywood finds that size matters with SME's new twelve inch top of the range tonearm.

AVID DIVA II SP 110
Adam Smith takes this super new £2,000 turntable for a spin.

FOUR FROM SUNDAZED
We featured them in the August 2009 issue, within the CD column. Now you can pick up the Holy Modal Rounders on vinyl via 'Good Taste Is Timeless' (1971). Not one of their best but, on the other hand, one of the band's more accessible releases. The label has also released Spirit's 'Twelve Dreams Of Dr Sardonicus' (1970), one of the rock band's best ever albums: it's both tight and well written. Also look out for two Mike Bloomfield/Al Kooper albums: 'Super Session' (1968) and 'The Live Adventures of...' (1969). The former also features Stephen Stills in a superb blues rock outing while the latter, featuring Bloomfield's singing debut, is a decent release but with possibly a touch too much jamming for most ears.

BACK ON BLACK
A label of love from Plastic Head distribution director Steve Beatty, Back On Black was seen as his chance to get his favourites back onto vinyl, his format of choice. Two releases from Slayer are distinct highlights: one of the best thrash metal outfits of the eighties. 'Show No Mercy' (1983), the band's debut, shows lots of influences from Venom and was released before the band found their own voice. 'Live Undead' features the band's EPs, the self-titled vinyl and 'Haunting The Chapel'.

Next is Motorhead's self-titled debut along with the single b-side, 'City Kids' and the four EP tracks from the 'Beer Drinkers and Hellraisers' EP. Finally, Holland's operatic metal band Epica provide a live cut, 'The Classical Conspiracy' shows an amazing mixture of metal and classical music. All releases are featured in gatefolds.

ROCK AND KRAUTROCK
A splendid mixture of rock and the more leftfield Krautrock from the German outfit SPV, greet us this month. The Krautrock stems from Amon Duul II, the evolution of the original, commune-based Amon Duul. SPV has released both the debut, 'Phallas Dei' (1969), an ambitious and imaginative rock creation, and the follow-up 'Yeti', which is a combination of structured rock songs and excellent improv pieces. Of a more straightforward nature is Magnum's hard rock new release which is packed with hooks and very accessible, along with UFO's new album 'The Visitor', an excellent fortieth anniversary release, mixing hard rock and blues rock. Also look out for Moonspell's 'Night Eternal' (2008) and ex-Tangerine Dream man, Klaus Schulze's 'X' (1978) and 'Mirage' (1977).
THE LOVES OF VINYL LOVERS

New out on the Vinyl Lovers label are a range of intriguing rarities including Giles, Giles & Fripp’s ‘The Brondesburg Road Tapes’ from 1968. This pre-King Crimson album features ex-Fairport Convention singer, Judy Dyble. From the sublime to Marilyn Monroe’s ‘...who else?’ a collection of favourites and rarities that also features Jane Russell. Next, two Soft Machine connections and ex-Soft Machine drummer Robert Wyatt’s ‘A Short Break’, a 10”, green vinyl release of 1996 recordings. The Wilde Flowers’ self-titled collection collates tracks from 1965-1969 and includes personnel from both Soft Machine and prog-outfit Caravan (i.e.: Kevin Ayers, Robert Wyatt, David Sinclair and Hugh Hopper). Also watch out for rare and unreleased tracks from pre-T-Rex outfit John’s Children and ‘Jagged Time Lapse’.

A VINTAGE COLLECTION

Doxy shows no sign of reducing the pace of its release schedule including the only LP released during Buddy Holly’s lifetime, ‘The Chirping Crickets’ featuring a bag of hits including ‘Oh, Boy!’ and ‘That’ll Be The Day’. From a similar time period is country legend, Johnny Cash’s ‘First Steps’ that covers his works from 1955 to 1958 over two discs. Also watch out for rare and unreleased tracks from pre-T-Rex outfit John’s Children and ‘Jagged Time Lapse’.

AND FINALLY

From The Last Record Company in Norway is a range of ‘out there’ new records combining raw guitar madness of Stian Westerhus on ‘Galore’ to the the dark drone sonic experiments of Ultryld on ‘Renditions’. Krautrock fans should keep a look out for Grobschnitt’s ‘Live’ album on Sirena Records, a two disc affair from 2008, presented in a gatefold. Also look out for the reissue of Mike Oldfield’s ‘Tubular Bells’ via Mercury, which should please audiophiles as it has been lovingly remastered.

MORE FROM WARNERS

Further releases from Warners Back To Vinyl imprint now include Stephen Stills’ ‘Just Roll Tape’, a session from 1968 that was lost for forty years and features his work prior to him joining Crosby, Stills & Nash. Anyone remember ‘Chuck E’s In Love? The single from Rickie Lee Jones’ perfect debut? For anyone who’s not familiar, think Joni Mitchell. Also check out two from Talking Heads. ‘Remain In Light’ (1980) included the wonderful ‘Once In A Lifetime’ and the superb debut, ‘Talking Heads: 77’, featuring the landmark single, ‘Psycho Killer’. And watch out for The Eagles’ ‘Hotel California’ (1976), Warren Zevon’s self-titled album (1976) and, Husker Du’s ‘Candy Apple Grey’ (1986) and ZZ Top’s ‘Fandango’ (1975).
New Radikal

Thirty six years after its inception, the Linn Sondek is back to scare its rivals, armed with a brand new DC motor no less.

David Price listens to the new LP12 SE Radikal...

There I was, sitting in this very chair some two years ago, wondering if I'd written my last ever Linn Sondek LP12 review. The Keel subchassis was a vast improvement as it turned out, albeit for a not inconsiderable chunk of change. I reasoned that, now Linn had changed the deck's backbone, and given that they'd tweaked just about everything else in its long production run, what else was there to upgrade? The answer was "nothing", as we all knew what Ivor Tiefenbrun had said about DC motors in the past, and everything else had been revamped. So I presumed that I was looking at the last ever Linn, and I'd never be reviewing another. Doh!

The LP12 is back with a new DC motor, claimed to offer "a new level of speed accuracy, as well as radically reduced electrical and mechanical noise". It has an interesting new onboard speed management system which automatically calibrates the turntable for accurate motor speed control, via a new brushed DC motor which is said to have a very low magnetic field as well as very low electrical noise. This is fitted inside its own machined casing designed to reduce vibration and resonance. Like the Lingo of yore, the Radikal motor control unit and power supply comes in a standard Linn chassis, available in black or silver, but can also be specified in one of the company's lovely velvet-touch 'machined-from-solid' aluminium chassis that I first remember seeing on the CD12 CD player, and then latterly on the Klimax DS network music player. The price of the new DC motor and associated control box is a hefty £2,500 (obviously on top of the LP12 chassis itself which now comes in at £1,750), but if you want the swanky shiny Perspex, quartz-locked direct crystal driven power supply board (38,794), which really tightened up its sound somewhat. The modified main bearing in 1974 (serial number 2000) and Nirvana spring and motor mod kit (from 32,826) made for an altogether more grippy sound, with the LP12 losing some of its bass bloom and midband warmth. Then came the first major mod, the Valhalla crystal-driven power supply board (38,794), which really tightened up the sound. Indeed, I'd say this was the transition point from the romance of the original LP12 to an altogether more incisive design; its 'second age' if you see what I mean?

Suddenly the LP12 seemed critical of pressings, beginning to really tell you what was in the groove, rather than providing a larger-than-life thumbnail of it. The deck was still great to listen to, but certainly different. Strictly speaking it was far more correct; you could hear the spaces between notes better, instruments stopping and starting with far greater alacrity. Dynamics were better too, the deck becoming a more intense experience.

The nineteen eighties saw more mods to the LP12 which took it ever further away from that sumptuous original. For example, the plinth was braced more stiffly (£3,000), the subchassis strengthened (£4,101) and the suspension springs stiffened. A better bearing arrived in 1987 (£70,000), along with a superior armboard (£90,160), but it wasn't until 1990 that the third age of the LP12 was entered, with the arrival of the Lingo power supply and soon after in 1992, the Cirkus package (£90,583).

The deck moved yet further away from euphony to accuracy. The Lingo was a dramatic improvement to the LP12 in my view, once again giving a more explicit sense of the spaces between the notes. But not everyone thought it was positive; the old Valhalla Linn (and even more so in the case of the pre-Valhalla) squelched them somewhat, giving a more mellifluous quality. The Lingo seemed to go in there with a scalpel and cut out all the fat, making the Sondek a drier sounding device altogether, and quite a distance now from the first generation of the seventies Sondek.

If the Lingo worked on the timing of the deck, then the Cirkus worked on its detail retrieval, adding a whole new extra layer of information. Suddenly, you could hear through to the back of the recorded acoustic, rather than focusing on the centre...
Soundstaging dramatically improved too; hitherto the LP12 was a little closer to dual-channel mono than it might ideally have been, with instruments hanging either left or right without much in the middle. The Cirkus changed this, bringing a more realistic rendition of the recorded acoustic.

In my view, the Cirkus/Lingo LP12 was still right on the pace in the early nineties. It was only when Michell's Orbe arrived in 1995 that it could have been said to have been lacking; the latter had a more expansive soundstage, stronger and more solid bass, and superior treble detail too. But still, the LP12 'had the funk' and the Orbe did not, the Michell providing a more matter-of-fact rendition of a musical event.

Back in the early eighties this was a deck that many reviewers would confidently recommend as being 'the best', but twenty years later it was found wanting in speed stability against the Roksan, soundstaging against the Michell and bass grip against the Pink. We'd now reached a point where you bought the Linn for its musicality, rather than its overall across-the-board competence. Still, what it did, it did brilliantly; cue up Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's 'Wooden Ships' and the Linn was the only deck in town. It had a lovely, lilting musicality that somehow seemed to perfectly capture the essence of the song, whereas others simply told you how bad the original recording quality was.

This is the reason people still buy the LP12. It's not, contrary to what the company's detractors would claim, smoke and mirrors marketing, pushy dealers or anything else. Linn buyers are not stupid; they know what they like and why. The deck sings with jazz; to my ears it's still one of the finest hi-fi moments with a good classic Blue Note pressing; and really makes sense of rock. Everything from the densely textured washes of sound from The Pixies to some smooth Rickie Lee Jones comes over unfathomably well via the Sondek. But cue up some classic electronica like Kraftwerk's 'Tour de France Soundtracks' for example, and the likes of Avid's Acutus gets so much further into it. So this is where we're left in 2009, a deck that's brilliant in parts, but not quite the all round slayer of superdecks it once was.

The new Radikal DC motor upgrade of course professes to change all this. Now, I am not going to get drawn into the 'DC is better than AC' debate (or vice versa), because I'm no longer young and stupid enough to believe that theories are more important than practice. Just as a 500BHP sports car sounds great on paper, it doesn't necessarily mean it's going to deliver its promise in practice to give pure, unadulterated driving pleasure. Suffice to say that Linn's Ivor Tiefenbrun was once a DC motor refusenik, and has now obviously changed his mind. This is not a sign of hypocrisy or cynicism on his part, but expedience. In his view, if they can make a DC motor work better, then Linn should offer one. Fortunately for the purposes of the review, I was able to do a direct comparison with a stock LP12SE (with AC motor and Lingo) against the new LP12SE Radikal, both expertly set up by Brian Morris of House of Linn. It was a fascinating comparison to make, to hear the difference the two motor systems made.

**SOUND QUALITY**

Just to recap. The basic (if you can call it that) Linn LP12SE Lingo is a very impressive sounding device. Whilst it's not quite up with Avid's Acutus in its ability to retrieve vast amounts of detail off the disc, there's no denying that it's no less enjoyable a listen - especially with jazz or rock music. The Linn is a Linn, and sounds like a Linn, so Avid, SME and even middle-of-the-road Michell buyers
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Midband was wide and warm, with a great deal of space between the instrumentals in the mix, and vocals had a tactile quality that the LP12 manages particularly well. Treble was smooth and silky, with a lovely cymbal sound resolved in a completely relaxed way. Switching to the Radikal, and it was as if the Sondek had taken a pep pill, with the music at once sounding more urgent, more emotive and impactful. The difference wasn’t dramatic, in the way that you’d instantly feel if you’d switched from CD to vinyl for example, but it was there alright, and the more the song progressed the more I could hear how much better the Radikal was at the job in hand...

For example, bass notes started and stopped in a more tangible way, the Radikal LP12 conveying the dynamic articulation of the playing more explicitly. Here was a note the bassist was forcing on the fret, and here was a note he wasn’t. Guitars sounded slightly thinner and more wiry via the DC driven Sondek, but their percussive nature was far more apparent. Whereas the standard Linn timed very nicely, the DC deck showed how vague it actually was, bringing metronomic precision to the party. Switching back to the AC deck and that rhythm guitar track now sounded ponderous and almost semi-detached from the rest of the song. Vocals moved forward in the mix slightly with the Radikal, attaining a more earthy and direct quality and also timing better; there was more of a sense of the voice itself being used as a percussive instrument. Drums had greater impact, and the Radikal in altogether different ways. I’d put myself in the latter category, as I think being brought closer to what’s on the record is surely no bad thing. But then again, I’d love to own one of those early seventies LP12s, complete with its full complement of soft suspension grommets and wobbly springs to enjoy the classic Sondek sound too!

In 2009, as the world moves to hard disk-based digital music playback en masse, turntables become an ever more specialist pursuit. I’ve likened them to sports cars; they’re not going to endure the rigours of your daily commute so **** can ‘knock yourself out’ and treat yourself to the one you’ve always dreamed of. This, I think, sums up the LP12’s position perfectly. At £1,750 for the deck and £2,350 for the Keel subchassis, it is already a premium priced product, and on top of this, Linn are now asking an extra £2,500 for the Radikal DC motor package. By any yardstick this is very expensive indeed, but I can still see why many people will buy one. As the ultimate expression of a turntable that a great many people desire, it’s a very nice thing to have in your listening room indeed, and people will be happy to pay this for the privilege. Similarly exalted levels of performance are available elsewhere for less money however, but these rivals have their own essential sounds which are all distinctly un-Linn-like... So, I doubt you’ll be disappointed.

CONCLUSION

Having attended several Linn dealer musical evenings since the launch of the Radikal, I’ve heard many people’s thoughts on this new DC power supply. It’s strangely redolent of what was said when the Lingo was launched, which is that it strips away some of the romance of the famed Sondek sound. Obviously, a great many people bought the deck for that sound, and so regard it as a retrograde step, as if some of its innate character has been surgically removed, but others who may be on a different journey, that of getting closer to the original music, regard the Radikal in altogether different ways. I’d put myself in the latter category, as I think being brought closer to what’s on the record is surely no bad thing. But then again, I’d love to own one of those early seventies LP12s, complete with its full complement of soft suspension grommets and wobbly springs to enjoy the classic Sondek sound too!

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Noel Keywood brings home some serious firepower from SME, in the shape of its 312S new twelve inch tonearm...

Whilst nine inch arms occupy the functional end of the market, twelve inchers look altogether more intriguing and purposeful. Perhaps that's why they seem to be making something of a comeback in today's vinyl revival, where appearance matters. Not to be caught napping, SME have launched an upgraded version of their long 312 arm, the magnesium alloy 312S, reviewed here. The SME312 I have lived with happily for the last twenty years or so, and finally I had to do what I have always least wanted to do, change my arm!

Why buy a twelve inch arm, especially when it costs £1,750? The rational answer is because it looks good! Like a Ferrari or a Triumph 675, an SME312 is an object of beauty that is finely honed to do its job immaculately well, and years away into the future you'll still enjoy owning and using it – as I do. Twelve inch arms not only look superb they are gorgeous to use and sound wonderful I can assure you.

As well as looking good, with their beautiful design and gorgeous finish, SMEs feel good in the hand and the 312, as well as the 312S are second only to the remarkable SME V (and IV) in this respect (although I must say Regas feel good too, to be absolutely fair). I never quite took to the original 3012 because the lightweight tube rang, a tap on its tube with a screwdriver revealed. So the 3012, although visually appealing, never qualified in my mind as a likely inhabitant of Keywood towers. But SME's 312 arm is an altogether different animal I realised long ago, one I couldn't do without. The 312 has a rolled, tapered, stiff aluminium arm, unlike the 3012. I am not going to start droning on about lower tracking distortion but I did find originally that using the SME312 arm when measuring pickup cartridge distortion gave me obviously better figures. A distortion figure of 0.8% or so, mainly second harmonic I should add, would fall to 0.5% or so from a CBS test disc, in line with what is to be expected from looking at Stephenson's modified Baerwald equations, a subject I worked through for Hi-Fi Answers in 1975 no less! So the SME312 and the geometrically similar 312S do give lower distortion than shorter nine inch arms – and that has to be good.

But I've never quite been certain that that fact alone accounted for the smooth sound that I've so appreciated over the years from my SME312. Now I suspect it is a contributory factor, a useful benefit but not the only benefit to be had from making an arm longer. If you've used nine inch Regas and SMEs like the legendary V you will know they are hardly short of ability; think fast, clean and concise. A twelve inch tonearm is an altogether smoother and more svetle experience.

If you've never seen an SME in the flesh, then think finest Japanese camera quality, plus about ten percent. They're objects of engineering perfection. Like all SME products the 312S comes beautifully packed. It has more tiddlly bits than the 312: you get screws, three special adjusting tools, two templates, two instruction books (one for the arm, the other for the damping trough) a small spanner, counterweight shims and now even a simple tracking force balance. Vinylistas will love it all, but others may balk and want their dealer to handle fitting and set-up. The arm itself is all black: the screws are black, the arm tube is black and so is the finger lift (which I choose to use). Gold lines declare this is a 312S and a magnesium arm. To be absolutely clear, the 312S like the 312 has a detachable headshell, to ease cartridge changing, but if you are looking for the ultimate and don't need to change cartridges regularly, the 512 is a better choice, assuming cost is of no consequence of course!

Our pictures show the arm tube is tapered for strength and to suppress arm tube resonances. Tap it lightly with a small screwdriver and it responds with a dead 'clunk'. The arm tube needs to be non resonant if it is not to impose its own sound on the cartridge. The 312S is less resonant than its less expensive stablemate, the 312, our accelerometer tests revealed [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE] but still has a main
arm tube resonant mode, albeit at a lower frequency than shorter arms, pushing it downward in frequency to the lower midrange - the other reason a 12in arm sounds different to others.

The lightweight magnesium headshell comes with an optional finger lift and clamps to the arm with a screw tightened collar. The screw passes through a depression in the arm tube to hold the collar in place and this means the headshell cannot be slid on or off the arm until the screw has been lifted out completely - and this I find is a fiddly and often difficult process. The headshell must be pushed back against pressure from the spring loaded arm contacts before the screw will easily lift out and I usually use tiny jewellers pliers to extract it. Then the small washer beneath the screw's head falls off, rolls across the floor and...

The arm is balanced by a large, rigidly clamped counterweight that is adjusted along the axis of the arm tube to set tracking force. When set, the weight is locked into place using a special screwdriver supplied. SME provide a set heavy shims that hold the arm in place whilst working on it forced me to twist a piece of single core wire around tube and rest to bind them together securely to prevent the arm flying out of the rest. The review process is different and more demanding than ordinary usage I must admit, but owners who buy this arm are likely to change headshells and cartridges and need a way to lock the arm whilst doing so, to avoid stylus demolition.

The 312S slides on SME's locking base system, to adjust tracking and arm height. It's a neat system but demands an elongated cutout in the plinth that's more difficult to cut than the simple, circular hole required by other arms, another reason it can be a good idea to get the arm fitted by a dealer. The sense of this will become even more apparent when you see the size of plinth a twelve inch arm needs; my Martin Bastin plinth is a monster weighing 42lbs. and needs its own table.

The SME312S improves on the 312S in use with SME's locking base system, to adjust tracking and arm height. It's a neat system but demands an elongated cutout in the plinth that's more difficult to cut than the simple, circular hole required by other arms, another reason it can be a good idea to get the arm fitted by a dealer. The sense of this will become even more apparent when you see the size of plinth a twelve inch arm needs; my Martin Bastin plinth is a monster weighing 42lbs. and needs its own table.

The SME3125 comes with a damping trough attached, which was a surprise as I hadn't fiddled with paddles and damping fluid for a long, long time. The trough has a cover and a paddle that screws up or down, to adjust the amount of damping applied. The trough system only damps lateral arm motion; it does not affect behaviour over warps; SME told me it was to cope with bouncy floors. Our measurements show even with full damping and a slightly over filled trough the degree of damping applied is quite light, but it is there [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE].

SME now supply a silver litz wired signal cable terminated with gold plated phono plugs. They can supply a fully balanced cable with XLR connectors as an alternative, for those with an Aqvox phono stage.

**SOUND QUALITY**

The 312S keeps the broad, open soundstage and deliciously sleek sound free from the rest of shorter arms, that I have become so used to from my 312. I suppose you could poke fun and call it an "armchair and slippers" presentation against the more boisterous results from some arms, but this is going a bit far. I call it simple, clean and very refined, a sound so free of artifice it doesn't draw attention to itself, instead letting the music flow through unaltered.

The 312S improves on the 312 in many subtle ways. From the off I noticed it was even quieter to use than my old 312, and that both electrically and mechanically it was deadly silent. Let me explain; not only has my 312 had a hard working life as a review tool for pickup cartridges, it had fully balanced cables attached that I had to make up some time ago for an Aqvox phono stage review. These were terminated by XLR to phono adaptors so I could use everyday phono stages including my one of choice used within this review, an Icon Audio PS3. The 312S comes with new, better cabling than before and it was deathly silent against my 312, as was the arm structure. With my usual World Audio Design 300B amplifier I was greeted by total silence from the loudspeakers, until the arm hit the playing surface — and then I realised that I had set volume too high to compensate for the silence.

Not unexpectedly the 312S sounded altogether tidier in its image construction, adding body and weight to singers and instruments, as well as greater dynamic thrust. Spoken verse...
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Spurred on by the resurgence of vinyl, it would appear that Avid is a company going places. I had a long and interesting chat with owner Conrad Mas at the Munich Hi-Fi Show and he was telling me of the company’s plans for the future, and what they are planning to introduce over the next couple of years. Naturally I am sworn to secrecy but suffice it to say that I nearly fell off my stool when he announced that the number of new products in this period will be in double figures! Interestingly, a teaser has now been posted on Avid’s website, and it turns out that the launch for several of these new products will be the September Hi-Fi Show at Whittlebury Hall over the weekend of the 26th and 27th of September. As the full Hi-Fi World team will be in attendance, it remains only to see who ends up banging on the door of the Avid room to grab first glance at the new £18,000 flagship!

I think this is indicative that Avid has become something of a success story since it opened its doors in 1995. Yes, the company also doubles as a source of high quality mechanical engineering, but making perfect ‘oily bits’ for a turntable is all very well if you don’t know how to put them together or how to make them interact successfully. Fortunately, judging by the Diva II, Volvere and Acutus models that we are such fans of, it appears this isn’t an issue. Consequently, it was with a great sense of anticipation that I set to unpacking the first newbie from Avid; the Diva II SP turntable...

As its name suggests, this deck is an evolution of the base model Diva II, which incorporates some features found on bigger brother Volvere, but also launches one or two new ideas for Avid onto the market. Obviously visually similar to the Diva II, the first thing you notice when assembling the deck is that the platter is a metal item, rather than the MDF of the standard Diva II, and this spins on a high quality Tungsten carbide/sapphire bearing assembly taken from the dearer decks. As per all Avid designs, the Diva II SP is belt driven, but it is here that the new item I mentioned earlier shows its face, in the form of a synchronous AC motor, driving the platter through twin belts and offering variable speed through a brand new frequency-adjustable power supply.

This configuration came about as Conrad prefers to stick with a synchronous AC motor. As he explained, he sees the use of a DC type as something of an easy option, requiring a simple voltage alteration for speed adjustment but his concerns at how the changing load on such a motor can ever make it hope to remain stable meant that he stuck with the AC, and chose to develop a circuit that regenerates a clean AC signal to power the motor, making it frequency-adjustable for the possibility of speed alteration. The result is the DSP Vari-Speed supply, so called because it uses Digital Signal Processing for signal generation and control.

Physically the supply is a small and neat metal box with an on/off knob and two buttons. One starts and stops the platter, and the other
changes the speed, whilst pressing and holding both moves the unit into speed adjustment mode, where one button speeds up in fine increments and the other slows down. Once the desired speed is reached, both buttons are pressed together once more and the setting is stored in memory.

A simple process and an effective one too, as both speeds remained rock-solid after several days of continuous running.

In physical terms, the Diva II SP is very well built as I would have expected, but the fitting of the twin belts is fiddly. As there is no separate subplatter, Avid provide a pin which is located in a hole under the platter, the belts are fitted around the drive surface and hooked over this, then it is put into position, the belts guided onto the pulley and the pin removed. All very well but clearance under the platter isn’t great and when I tried to remove the pin, the belt tension caused it to ping off, ricochet around the back of my rack and vanish into thin air!

SOUND QUALITY

With my Audio Technica AT-OC9MLII fitted, and warming up the Diva II SP and supplied SME 309 arm with something a little frivolous in the form of Kleerup’s recent twelve inch single ‘Longing for Lullabies’, I realised that the Diva II SP does indeed have the Avid family sound, but definitely takes the performance of the standard Diva II up a gear.

The electronic bass line from this track was punchy and deep, offering visceral excitement, and the Diva II SP proved a more than willing accomplice to some dance-related shenanigans. Moving to something a little more sophisticated, it continued to show that it is right at the top of the tree when it comes to bass lines, imbuing Tift Merrit’s ‘Still Pretending’ with a delightfully well formed underpinning.

I was aware that some notes were not quite as well separated as I am used to (but that’s a Garrard 301 for you...), but generally the Diva II SP carried the underlying tune beautifully and remained solid and confident throughout the track.

Equally delightful was its sense of expressiveness and feeling across the midband. Tift’s vocals were vivid and finely etched onto the performance, the Avid making it easy to spot when she pulled back from the microphone when delivering something of a vocal crescendo; some lesser decks simply leave you wondering why...
For almost 30 years, Wharfedale’s famous Diamond speakers have served as the classic entry point to true high-fidelity sound, their exceptional value for money earning dozens of awards around the globe. Now, with the introduction of the Diamond 10 Series, Wharfedale has again raised the bar for affordable, high-performance loudspeakers.

The latest evolution of this classic speaker range builds upon the success of its multi-award-winning predecessors with numerous enhancements, including a more rigid enclosure and a high-gloss, polymer-finished front baffle, giving greater support to the new, improved drive units. The result is a sound that’s crisp, focused and spacious, effortlessly dynamic yet firmly in control. Add the visual appeal of elegantly curved cabinets, enhanced by a choice of six perfectly formed finishes, and it’s clear: the new Diamond 10 Series is the sparkling jewel in Wharfedale’s crown.
"It's easy to discern the extra sophistication and musical insight that the superior engineering has brought about..."

...she's gone a bit quiet suddenly, but the Avid didn't miss a trick here. Instruments also held no fear for the deck, and the Ulilean pipes from Brian Kennedy's track 'Captured' were magnificent in both timbre and sonic texture. Once again, a less than capable deck can make these sound rather strained and uncomfortable, but through the Avid they sounded as clear and as lifelike as I could have hoped.

Shifting the musical genre again to Jean Michel Jarre showed that the Diva II SP is also something of a wizard when it comes to timing. Those delicious analogue synthesizers stopped and started perfectly, and the Avid made sure that each and every note sat in its own space and could be easily picked out if one chose to do so, and yet could be made with its companions to form a beautifully cohesive and flowing whole. In fact, in imagery terms, I felt that the Diva II SP is one of the best at its price in the way in which it layers performances. That is to say, some decks pull everything out into the room, some push all the action off into the distance, but the Diva II SP has perfected the trick that usually identifies something much more expensive. Which is to say that it positions everything perfectly, lining the main action up at the front, and tucking the backing performances behind this just where they need to be. Frankly, it's further grist to my theory that, if you want surround sound but don't want a roomful of loudspeakers, try a decent turntable instead [hear, hear! Ed.]

Inspirational detail was another trick up the Diva II SP's sleeve that it unveiled fairly early on in the game. As I replaced the aforementioned Kleerup twelve inch single in my box of 45rpm vinyl delights, I came across another disc that hasn't seen the light of day for a few years. 'Birdman' by Ride is an indie classic that starts with some softly tapped bongos and a delicately strummed bass guitar, which the Avid absolutely lapped up. In fact, the bongo strikes were quite uncannily lifelike in the corner of my room. The rest of the track is predictably noisier, and the Avid had fun with this, but I did detect a hint of compression starting to creep in on occasion.

A further wander through my records seemed to suggest that, yes, the Diva II SP could sometimes get a little uncomfortable with harder, louder and more congested material, seemingly cowering away from it a little. As this was the first time I had used an SME 309, I did fit my own rewired Alphason HR1005 to the deck at a later stage to see if this was causing the issue, but it remained in place, and so is something to look out for when auditioning. Still, it's worth pointing out that all the best of the rest of its price rivals are similarly afflicted by this to an extent. It's not for nothing that folk spend twice as much money on the likes of the Volve Requiem...

CONCLUSION

The Avid Diva II SP is a fine turntable and, the doubling of price it commands over the standard Diva II is well worth the extra outlay. The Diva II is certainly an absolute bargain at its £1,000 price point and punches well above its weight sonically, but listening to the Diva II SP, it's easy to pick out the extra sophistication and musical insight that the superior engineering has brought about. Add in a versatile new power supply that will undoubtedly be making its influence felt elsewhere, and you have a very fine vinyl spinner indeed that promises a high standard for the other forthcoming models.

The SME309 tonearm supplied uses a tapered, cat magnesium tube with detachable magnesium headshell. It is internally damped to suppress vibration, SME say. Our vibration analysis, made with a Brulé & Kjær accelerometer, shows two well suppressed modal peaks, at 400Hz and 650Hz from the arm in its basic bending mode, something all arms suffer to a greater or lesser extent; usually a greater extent because the 309 puts up a good performance here, with accelerations of 0.1g, although it does not better the Rega RB1000 or one-piece SME V. The detachable headshell may well have some impact, but the 309 is still reasonably clean. There is a large 0.35g peak at 1200Hz but narrow peak containing little energy. There is a cluster of high frequency peaks above 5kHz, a common pattern, but these are also slightly lower than is normal. So the 309 puts up a good performance in terms of arm vibration.

The Avid Diva II SP itself ran at exactly the right speed. An unweighted wow value of around 0.2% (0.22% in our analysis) is a little below the best and this was likely affecting the weighted value which at 0.07% was satisfactorily low, if not quite as low as is possible (0.06%). So the Avid Diva SP with SME309 tonearm package measured well all round. There are no weaknesses, and both items are very well built. NK

VERDICT

- superb midrange detail
- depth perspective
- taut, tuneful bass
- versatile new PSU
- build quality

AGAINST
- occasional compression

REFERENCE SYSTEM
Garrard 301 turntable
Alphason HR-100S arm (Cardas wired)
Audio Technica AT-0C9MLII cartridge
Anatek MC1 phono stage
Naim Supernait amplifier
Ferrograph Si loudspeakers

VINYL SECTION

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Hi-Fi Components

Cyrus
Cyrus has introduced a new series of amplifiers, the appealing Pro-30A. Developed for its DAC and the Pro-10A, Pro-30A includes digital modes ideal for playing movies, stored on your computer while the entry model, 6 XP, is housed in the 9.35 but without the digital option. These new models also include two zone multiroom capability.

Leema ANITALA II CD PLAYER TUCANA II AMPLIFIER
Leema's stunning sound quality and captivating good looks are just the beginning. The new Antila II CD player features unique MD2 active equalization, offering a more affordable and compact package. A new SE can also be con,structed from a Tucana II, featuring a planar and dustcover.

Arcam FIVU
Arcam's five design, flexible connectivity and a level of innovation beyond that of budget separates systems. Arcam's FM range includes two CD players, three integrated amplifiers, monobloc and stereo power amplifiers plus a DAB/AM/FM tuner. A range of home cinema components is also available. Available in black or black.

Rotel 15 SERIES
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Marantz SAPPHIRE PEARL
To celebrate 30 years with Marantz, its Audio Director, Ken Ishiwata, launched the Kandy K2. The Kandy K2 amplifier offers an even more accurate, more delicate and even more powerful sound than its award-winning predecessor, the Kandy L1. The matching CD player is an impressive performer and is the ideal partner. The Kandy K2 speakers feature a cuspian designed woofers and ribbons tweeters. These are housed in solidly built piano lacquered cabinets for outstanding performance.

Hi-Fi Speakers

B&W Zeppelin
This award-winning 8 XP docking station is ideal for playing music stored on your computer - while the entry model, 421, is based on the 8 XP but without the digital option. These new models also include two-zone multiroom capability. Developed for its DAC XP, the 8 XP and Pre EP XP include digital inputs - the Gold Signature series has been expertly crafted to draw a rich natural sound from the most demanding music, reproducing the power and scale of theatrical performances with breathtaking fidelity.

Monitor Audio
The Monitor Audio Gold Reference is a three-way, three-ter, and five-ter, hybrid design that pairs two powerful, three-way special power amplifiers with a DAB/AM/FM tuner. A range of home cinema components is also available. Available in black or black.

KEF Reference
The first Reference speaker was launched in 1973 to worldwide acclaim. Several generations later, the Reference 105 is a significant improvement over its predecessor, the Reference 100. It may be small but the Reference 105 showcases the multiple talents that make the Gold Signature series so remarkable.

Home Cinema Speakers

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B&W Panorama
This new soundbar is ideal for screens 42" plus.

Turntables

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Onkyo raises the bar once again in the competitive world of home cinema with its TX-S11607 which features Dolby ProLogic Ilz support. Onkyo's new 2009 range includes five new AV receivers, a wide range of products, have comfortable demonstration rooms, provide first-class customer service and can deliver and install your purchase.

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Panasonic DMP-BD60 & 80

- Features with top drawer picture and sound quality.

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- The new YAS-107 separates can be fitted into a Yamaha soundbar, and two pair stands with built-in crossover circuitry.

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Paul Messenger Hi-Fi Choice September 2008
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- Benz Micro ACE High BNIB: £435 - £299
- Koetsu MCR-1 Transformer S/H: £3333 - £1399
- Kuzma Stabi XL4/313 x-demo: £17945 - £12999
- Kuzma Stabi S/ Stogi S double arm version xdemo: £1712 - £1199
- Mark Levinson No320s Phono Module x-demo: £2887 - £1995
- Lehmann Black Cube Twin BNIB: £900 - £599
- Lehmann Black Cube Linear BNIB: £1300 - £950
- Pink Triangle PT1/Syrinx PU3/OC7 S/H: N/A - £599

**Loudspeakers**

- Avalon Opus Cherry S/H: £16000 - £6299
- Konus Essence Floor stander zebrano x-demo: £2800 - £1350
- Martin Logan Vista Dark cherry x-demo: £3490 - £2750
- Martin Logan Fresno pair inc stands S/H: £1500 - £699
- Martin Logan Vantage dark cherry x-demo: £5149 - £3999
- Martin Logan Summits Cherry X-demo: £8998 - £5999
- Pen Audio Charm Active Subwoofer x-demo: £1995 - £899

**Tuners & Tape decks, power supplies**

- Magnum Dynalab FTR remote/Tuner for Etude S/H: £395 - £199
- Nakamichi LXS 3 head cassette deck S/H: N/A - £150
- Tandberg 3011 AM/FM tuner S/h: N/A - £59

We have a large record collection mainly Jazz and Classical from £3.00 up to £20 for some boxed sets. Please call for more details.

Midland Audio X-change are looking for High end audio separates best prices paid for good examples.

- Audio Research
- Krell
- Mark Levinson
- Naim Audio
- SME
- Wadia

Midland Audio X-change are looking for Audio Research, Krell, Mark Levinson, Naim Audio, SME, Wadia.
KENWOOD DM9090 MiniDisc recorder. World Classic, excellent. £175. Tenaga sand filled stands, 20". £40. C.A.D. speaker cable bi-wire. £35. Mobile Fidelity GeoDisc, £20. Hi-Fi News Test Record, £10. Tel: 07852 386 988

NAIM CDX2, very good condition, remote, boxed, can demonstrate. £1499. Tel: 01949 831 063 after 6pm (South Notts)

WANTED: SPENDOR SP2 Mk1 or Mk2. Don’t have to be in working order (spare parts) or just Spender Bass/Mid 200m polypropylene unis. Tel: Toni 07971 953 628

CHORD COMPANY Indigo analogue interconnect. One metre RCA £425 (£925). Tel: 0208 473 9890

LORICRAFT AUDIO Oak plinth for Garrard 301 turntable, £100. Quad PM4 tuner £125. Cambridge Audio DAC2 £40. Buyer to collect. Tel: 01279 443 485 (Harlow)

KEF 104-2 (rosewood) floorstanders £1800. £350. Shahinan Oberlisk omni-directional (cherrywood) stunning sound £4000. £1450. Kef Coda8 (rosewood) bookshelf £1000. £50. Celestion Centre2, grey, A/V speaker £150 £70. Tel: 07872 955 698 or email: pavz_O I @ msn.com

FOR SALE: Sugden Masterclass pre-amp (Serial No. 0235) £875. B&W DM605.2 speakers with integral 130 watt sub-woofer. £100. Buyer to collect speakers. Tel: Peter 01642 559 078


ARCAM A65+ integrated amplifier. Excellent condition, one owner, silver, 40w, pre-out. 2x speaker terminals, CR224 remote, superb Phonostage (MM), user manual. £150 inc & P&P Tel: 07768081615

NAIM 150x, under two years old, mint, instructions, boxed. £500. Conrad Johnson PV10A, superb phonostage, boxed, instructions. £450. Taul Electronics Tornado 2 power amp, boxed. £195. Tel: 0772 962 0621

WANTED: Hi-Fi World magazine issue October 1999 or copy of CD Recorders review. Please help. Contact: 01631 562 486. Thanks

QUAD QC24 valve linestage. Rather fine performer, boxed, serviced with manuals. 40% off new price at £400. Tel: 01424 203 192

WANTED: MUSICAL Fidelity F32 or XRay CD player. Other makes also considered. Tel: 01277 219 639 (Essex)

TUBE TECHNOLOGY Mac phonostage, immaculate condition, own from new, with manual. £400. Tel: 07952 336 766

SOLTI RING Decca D100 D19 nineteen LP set. Offers. Also Goodall Ring in English. Four box set. Offers: Tel: 01341 422 111 (Gwynedd)

WANTED: SONY 777ES DAB/FM/AM, remote control tuner boxed perfect condition little used Tel: 0794 184 2605

DALI ROYAL Minuet II speakers £275. NAD 2020 amp £75. Technics SL-PG490 CD player £50. Denon DRM600 tape deck. Tel: 01766 771 266 (North Wales)

NAIM CDS1. mint, boxed, £375. No offers. Tel: 0794 117 4804 after 6pm. Berkshire area.

BEN DUNCAN Research power amp, high quality build and great sound. Offers or exchange for quality speakers suitable for valve amps. Fanco Nuance pre-amp with offboard power supply, MC. £200. Tel: 01476 407452

LOVINGTON SH1 horn speaker, Foster FX102 full range unit, dynamic, detailed (£3250) £1500. Sugden A21a £425. E.A.R. 834P MM £200. Hi-Fi Magazines, approximately 350. All details phone 020 76095030 anytime

QUAD ELECTROSTATIC professional 63's loudspeakers, fully refurbished with One Thing audio panels. New spark detector and zener clamps fitted. Mint condition. £1495. Tel: Andy 0116 239 2373

GOLDRING LECNO 88 upgraded by precision engineer and mounted in a compact solid plinth. Comes with a top quality 5m and MC cartridge. £350. Or part exchange for CD player. Tel: 01277 219639 (Essex)


COMPACT KT88 integrated, very good condition, boxed, £650. Come and hear this amazing valve amplifier/Vinyls, 70 albums, little played plus belt turntable £50. Technics Direct Drive turntable £99. Tel: Stanley 07951 553 091 (London NW)

ROGERS CADET 3 amplifier, serviced and modified with original valves. £250. Ross Andrews 1m Power Cord £45. Chord Solid £45. Marantz CD63SE, slightly faulty. £45. Tel: 07810 103908

LINN CLASSIK turner/amp/CD player. White. As new £350 ono. Tel: 01341 422 111 (Gwynedd)

NAIM HYDRA (custom made 4 in 1 mains leads) £1600. £80. Lorn International 1/2 metre IC-100 (silver interconnector custom made for Naim CD players) £170. £75. QED Profile 4x1 (2x5 metre terminated speaker cable) £35. Tel: 07785 926 578

MICHOLL ARGO pre-amp, boxed, £200. M&K V-125 12" active sub, £200. Pro-Ject Debut III, black, £85. Cambridge Audio £499. MM/MMC phono amp, £65. MS Pageant Series II, boxed, £60. All immaculate. Tel: 01722 334 694 (Salisbury)

LOWTHER LOWTHER Acousa Twin cabinets wanted. Made late 1960s. Working drawings. Twin feet. Drive unit mounting screws. Tel: Jeff 020 8220 0380

UNISON RESEARCH Unico ‘R’ FM/AM valve tuner. £757 (current new price £1275) Mint and boxed. Superb sound. Spare remote controls for Quad 99 and Primare CD 10 systems. Offers. Tel: 023 8073 8935

DENON DL304 moving coil pick up, 10 hours use only. As new, all packing and instructions. £165. Michell Isso HR and Hera Supply, min, instructions, indistinguishable from new. £160. Tel: 0116 288 2338

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For our exclusive offer to Hifi World readers: 0208 958 1004
FOR SALE: Pair of Quicksilver Valve Mono-amps £650, Musical Fidelity A5 Pre £600, Musical Fidelity X-PSU £150, X-PRE £150; X-24 £200, X-10D £150, X-LPS £150, Perpetual Technologies P-I Upsampler and Enhancer £400, Marantz KI Signature CD Player £180, USB Digital Bypass and DAC (Russ Andrews modified) £150. Offers accepted! Antón 07956236455

SAMSON AUDIO samson resolv2.1 system active studio monitors very good condition little used boxed as new buyer collects 300.00 contact davidson 07984327776 Eondon

WANTED FAULTY or non working Quad 34 or 44 preamps, 405-2 boards, Quad fm2 tuners. Also required Leak sandwich speakers (not later Rank models). Contact Mike 01758 61 3790.

GARRARD 401, perfect example in beautiful Loricraft Audio plinth and GH242 Tonearm. Also has Loricraft Audio p.s.u and musical fidelity phono stage. Also have an SME 309 tonearm and various accessories. Serious offers, may sell separately. Tel:07899067456, File.

ACCUPHASE E-550, 30W Class A super amp. Genuine high end state product from the legendary Accuphase. Perfect condition. Comes with or without DAC20 board(at cost) £410.00on david.crosbie2@gmail.com

PAIR DUEVEL Planets Speakers 6 months old, as new, fantastic open sound. Mint condition. Cost £800 new, accept £450.Tel: 02380 242003

SUGDEN MASTERCLASS PDT - 4 cd player, silver, 4 months old, mint condition, box, receipt, remote control, instructions. Bargain at £1,950 (E1,149 new). John 0208 530 1219 evenings or decor8888@mac.com (E London)

WANTED: TOP quality Hi Fi separates and complete systems, Naim,Linn,Cyrus,Meridian,ArCAM etc,fast,friendly response and willing to travel/pay cash. Please call me on 0781 5924952

TRANSPARENT AUDIO Super Balanced XLR interconnects 1mter: pair in mint condition. Hardly used and in original packaging, RRP £1200 sell for £300 Terry Bishop 0571724809

NAIM CD3.5 CD Player with Flatcap PSU £450, Naim Nato3 FM Tuner £300. All in excellent condition complete with leads, manuals & packaging. Contact: Derek 01798 817106 (Daytime)

TEAC ZD808 with Clock 4, NC power supply, better caps and 750mH BNC output. Mod cost over £600 with bill to prove. Started skipping occasionally, upgraded to CXXDX7E £125 Sheffield 0114 2344200

PRIMARE D30.2 High-end CD Player (Black) balanced/phono/co-axial outputs remote,heavyweight machine.boxed/excellent condition,fabulous reviews,(cost £1200) £495 ono.Call Simon on 0779205820 (daytime)or 01483271669 (evenings/weekends) Surrey.

SPEAKERS: CASTLE Richmond3i stand mount speakers with original boxes complete with Mark II Linn Kan stands. Excellent condition. £295 Will splic 0115971641 jennyreyes@ntlworld.com for further info.


HI-FI WORLD Annuals 1961-1979. Wanted. Serviceman in S.E. England for Revox and NAD Tuners. Ron Paxton 01243 548222 or Ron-Pax@tiscali.co.uk

FREE TO good home, buyer collects. Black tube steel, spiked with extra glass shelf. Good Condition. 20xHxWx16'D.0114 234 4200

FOR SALE Quad 988s black vinyl boxed as found (£3,500). £900 ona Tel Rob 07976621529 Leeds.

JOHN LINSLEY Hood design Class A amplifier. Includes two pbs (populated),heatsinks,output transistors. Just needs PSU for a fully functional stereo amp. £65 Tel 07779 199 392

POWER SUPPLY for John Linsley Hood Class A Custom built, cases, featuring 300UA toroidal, and capacitance multiplier filtering resulting in no hum at loudspeakers. £100 Tel 07779 199 392

CYRUS 8xp-Qs Integrated Amplifier and Q-DAC New. Full Warranty. Sale due to change in circumstances. List Price £1800. £1300 posted and insured Tel 01560 483503

Glasgow

FOR SALE: LUXMAN MQ-50 valve stereo power amp 50W/Bomh. Valves 6H650 (2/12a7/7E12C/2) 2 & 6AQ8/ECC85). Champagne colour, Mint condition, Weight 18bg. Asking price for this gem 1600 pounds.Tel Sweden: +46 47 10734, Kent E-mail: k-nilsson@telia.com

MISSION 732 loudspeakers in black ash (VGC) + target metal stands £75. Excellent sound! E-mail Marco: m.cinnirella@rhu.ac.uk

KEF KQ50 Centre Stage Speaker most important speaker in a surround system as brand new mint condition £575 Tel 020 8951 3178

BARGAIN OFFER! Jelco SA-50 High-tone arm. As new; in original box and unused. Only £225.00. Contact 01922 644775

NAIM CREDO speakers in american cherry colour with black grills.Used in nain system from new & in excellent condition with only light fading under grills, £350 07980570645

FOR SALE Wharfedale Pacific Evo 30 Floorstanders. Boxed, great condition with instructions. Buyer collects. £400 Norfolk 01493 665761

MARK LEVINSON 335 £2200, 380 preamp £295. Revel Studios speakers. Boxed (£850) £320. CD transport & DAC, Audiomeca Mephisto ii.x & Enkianthus (new £7500) £300. Tel07721890036 or email drmerg@btinternet.com

MERIDIAN 504 tuner nice condition sorry no box £300.00 a phone 0191-4171669 after 6pm or 07596236764

NORROST SUPER flatline bi wireable speaker cable 4m lengths £195 (£400).Custom design icon signature range hi fi rack oak and glass £200 (£425) 0208 658 2490

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO R50W loud-speakers in teak. 3 way system using KEF speakers. £75. Tel: 020 8688 6397

SAHILLINH COMPASS Omnidirectional floorstanding loudspeakers, finished in light oak. Totally unmarked and mint. £895 (Leicester). Buyer collects. Tel 01530 833347

REGA P3 (no cartridge), Rega Brio, Rega RL splmers., Partington splker. stands, QED splkr. cables & wall-shelf. For quick sale as whole system £450.00. Tel: Des 0207498-8902

GARRARD 301 (strobe platter, oil bearing) £550. Quad 33 / 405 £170. Telephone 01189 413708.

SIM AUDIO MOON i3-rs integrated black,remote, box + instructions bought ex display march 09. 18 months remaining warranty. pristine cond £1075 can post jings-turn@icarn.com or 01698356965 eentral Scotland

AMBRIDGE AUDIO R50W loud-speakers in teak. 3 way system using KEF speakers. £75. Tel:020 8688 6397


NAKAMICHI 55 portable w/ all accessoryse E285 Nakamichi 700 zxe(ABLE calibration) wextensive accessories inc nak infrared remote485 Nakamichi410 slim power amp (120db s/m,coil 2.3/2m input £200, new pilot light needed Nakamichi 420 slim power amp £200 new pilot light needed.(gaming machine type box) Nakamichi 430 slim fn tuner £250 - see fm tuner center site for detail. technics 150 dd turntable w/h.cover & sme plate) £190 all in cared- for condition and working A1: serious people call 01249- 730575 collection preferred nr J17 M4

MUSICAL FIDELITY A308 integrated amplifier. Box, manual, remote and ISOkinistik mains lead. £750 plus carriage. Heavy so prefer buyer collects or can deliver reasonable distance. Pete, N.Wales 01492 594696

AUDIO ANALOGUE Bellini and Donizetti, boxed, £500. Jamo Concert 8s, cherry, boxed, £600. Partington Dredgounds stands, shoe loaded, £80, Merlil CC power supply (£150, 078 8649 2690 or gordon.ronson4@ntlworld.com"

FOR SALE, World Audio Design HVD850 valve/hybrid amplifier, 18 months old, immaculate,RRP £430, sell for £220 ono. Tel: 01782 333928, or e-mail ktennispixie@aol.com (Staffs.)

ARGACAM ALPHA 8 CD player (upgraded to C22D); 8R amplifier; 8P power amp; Biwired Sonik Link speaker/interconnect cables; remote; instruction manuals. All in very good condition. Price: £550.00 tonv_davis72@hotmail.com

LIBERTY AUDIO Suite speaker builder design programme, includes user manual, cables ,preamp,microphone, tripod,Boxmod, txboxmodelneta, lc, runs on windows 98 etc,£250 ring mike 01189631777
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 £499
WDKEL84 built and tested £649

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 £989
WD88VA built and tested £1289

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 £398
WDHD3S built and tested £528

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 Millenium treble unit.

WD25A STD kit (pair) £269
WD25A EX kit (pair) £699

Cabinet kit (pair) £349

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) £329
WD25Tv2 XL kit (pair) £499

Cabinet kit (pair) £549

All our kits are complete with pictorial easy-to-follow instructions.
All parts are included - all you need is a screwdriver and soldering iron.
CROFT PRECENSION 1
Micronaut Pre-Amp and Polestar 25wp power amplifier for sale only months old, need the cash will except £800.00 or nearest offer. Ring Geoff on 07766236492 or email perpic@yahoo.co.uk.

EXCELLENT SECONDOHND
Hi Fi for Sale Sony S70 Toner, Leak A-K11 Amp, JVC Amp, Pioneer PLX-430 Turntable, Tannoy Mercury Speakers No sensible offer refused. Tel: Hill, 01256 419334 or email: Linda_Hill@fsmail.net.

LEAK 2075 speakers immaculate tear £595 JBE State Mk3 direct drive turntable £495.EAR 834P 5m/mmc valve phonostage £395. B&W 1800 speakers £195. 01798 81133 concord@bdrs.freeserve.co.uk

Chord Chameleon silver plus interconnect £60 (£125) 2 available Chord Cobserv 3 interconnect 1 £30 (£60) All boxed as new. Lee West Midlands 01384 421234 leetc2009@hotmail.co.uk

SUGDEN BIJOU CDmaster CD Player finished in Titanium, bought September 06. In excellent condition and comes complete with all original packaging and manual. £650 (£1200). Contact Jeff on 01305 263069 (Dorset).

AWARD WINNING acoustic energy aegis evo 5.1 surround sound speakers in red cherry. Excellent unmarked in original boxes with manuals £190.TEL 01493 700385 (Norwich) (buyer collects).

NAIM ARMAGEDDON LP12 PSU as new complete with all leads packaging etc £450 ONO Contact Derek 01798 817106 (daytime weekends) or 01903 726842 (evening).

ELAC F5207.2 speakers.cherry finish,mint cond.(rrp £995) £425 ono,boxes & manuals,could deliver with reason.tel frank 02920 419226 (South Glamorgan) or email: frankBush@ntworld.com

WANTED FOR projects faulty or non working Quad 34 or 44 preamps.405-2 boards. Also Quad fm 2 tuner decoder board or complete tuner. Contact Mike 01758 613790.

LINN MAJIK 140 speakers finished in maple. Brand new still in boxes. RRP £1570, sell for £975 + courier fee. Contact James, brapeonase@yahoo.co.uk

PROJECT XPERIENCE 11 turntable with Dynavector DVX10 cartridge. Very good condition. Complete with box. Can include some quality interconnects too. 3 Years old and about 200 vinyl play wear on cartridge. Reason for sale, I have upgraded. Cost £850 with cartridge, sell £400 or v.v.n.o. Call 01903 244538.

CONSONANCE CD 2.2 Reference CD player 3 years old No much use, mint condition. Black, with silver knobs. Comes complete with box and Instructions. Can include lat mains cable too Worth over £100. Lack of money forces sale. Cost £1400 new, sell £825 or v.o.n. call 01903 244538.

CLASSIC KONAMICHI (Paul Williams, Worthing, West Sussex). Restore, Repair & Service Nakamichi Cassette Decks. Tel 020 8 743 4567 Email: paul@wembleyloudspeaker.co.uk or wembleyloudspeaker@talktalk.net

ROEXO REP-var Service
(Re-charing & testing of all) £25 Limited to some items. Contact Bruce 020 8951 3178 or e-mail: oem395shona@btinternet.co.uk

JOHN LINSLEY Hood Mosfet power amp PCB boards. Has been used, but in good condition. £30 each board. Tel: 07779 199 392.

WANTED: TRANSPARENT Audio Musicwave Ultra (XL) speaker or interconnect Cables, & Transparent Audio Mains Cable Stuart - 07870 912 963. Email: stuartshardash67@goolemail.com

HARBETH HLF7ES-3 in cherry (anniversary edition) with atacama stands as new £850. Collection only phone 01773856328 (Derbyshire). Will demo.

When a classic goes 'poof' your troubles have just started, but there may be a good ending. Replacing failing parts can improve the sound, so here is a short listing of all those companies who specialise in getting a classic up and running again after its deposited a small ring of soot on your ceiling!

CLASSIC CONTACTS

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When a classic goes 'poof' your troubles have just started, but there may be a good ending. Replacing failing parts can improve the sound, so here is a short listing of all those companies who specialise in getting a classic up and running again after its deposited a small ring of soot on your ceiling!
As the long nights draw in, the hi-fi season kicks off a proper. In the run-up to the Whittlebury Show, we'll be putting a wide range of kit through its paces, from the superb new Leema Tucana 2 high end integrated amplifier [pictured] to Rotel’s affordable Class D RB-1562 power amp. We'll have a range of speakers too, including the curiously named Brooklyn-made Devore Gibbon 9 floorstanders and the far more conventional but no less interesting, Acoustic Energy Radiance 3. Turntablists will love the reappearance of the classic Transcriptors Hydraulic Reference, while digital devotees get the low down on Marantz's superb SACD-based Pearl system. Factor in features on the forthcoming Beatles reissues and our unique and exclusive special on Digital Radio, and it’s another bumper issue! Here’s just some of what we hope to bring you:

- TRANSCRIPTORS HYDRAULIC REFERENCE TURNTABLE
- ACOUSTIC ENERGY RADIANCE 3 LOUDSPEAKER
- MY AUDIO DESIGN BALANCED POWER BOX
- LEEMA TUCANA 2 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
- SUGDEN MYSTRO INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
- COLLOSEUM CARRILON LOUDSPEAKER
- STELLO Ai500 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER
- ORIGIN LIVE ENTERPRISE II TONEARM
- LYRA TITAN MOVING COIL CARTRIDGE
- ROTEL RB-1562 POWER AMPLIFIER
- DEVORE GIBBON 9 LOUDSPEAKERS
- AIR WARS: DAB VS. FM FEATURE
- AURA NOTE PREMIER SYSTEM
- CONSONANCE T988 TONEARM
- BEATLES REISSUES FEATURE
- MARANTZ PEARL SYSTEM
- SEEDEECLICK SOFTWARE
- NAIM NAT-05 TUNER

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NOVEMBER 2009 - 7TH SEPTEMBER
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**FREE READER CLASSIFIED ADS ORDER FORM**

STOP PRESS
The Smiths hit the ground running with the release of their magnificent self-titled debut in 1984.

After pausing for breath with the compilation, "Hatful of Hollow", featuring the haunting "How Soon Is Now!", the boys tripped up with the opaque "Meat Is Murder" then found their feet with this classic cut a year later. A blend of high-energy rock (the title track), crumblingly sad ballads ('There Is A Light That Never Goes Out' and 'I Know It's Over') plus witty lyrics on contemporary social mores, 'The Queen Is Dead' proved to be The Smiths' career high point.

Now, you can revisit the album, along with the other three principal releases: 'The Smiths', 'Meat Is Murder' and 'Strangeways Here We Come', via a new set of reissues via Warners. Cut on 180gm vinyl, each album is issued in its original sleeve and artwork with the 'Queen Is Dead' presented in a gatefold sleeve. Each vinyl reissue also arrives with a code to download the MP3 version of the album.

Frank Arkwright, mastering engineer at the respected outfit Metropolis, was responsible for mastering the album (in addition to the other three LPs), which he did from half-inch tapes. "A lot of the analogue tapes from the seventies and eighties are subject to a degree of deterioration. The oxide coating on the tape loses its bond and flakes. It is fixable, though," he told me.

Regular readers will be familiar with this problem and how mastering engineers attempt to solve it. However, as you're expecting an audiophile-like master of 'The Queen Is Dead', it must come as a shock to hear that such a relatively recent production can deteriorate so quickly. After all, 1986 seems like yesterday doesn't it? Well, it does for me. Also, it may be a shock to hear that more wasn't done at the time to prevent the deterioration of the masters in the first place. I can easily remember my thoughts back then, and how modern everything seemed. So it's disturbing to hear of the blatant neglect of what's a significant popular cultural artifact.

The solution of course was that Arkwright had to bake the tape to make it usable. "We had to heat the tapes to 55 degrees centigrade at a constant temperature to make the oxide coating rebond. The temperature remains the same even with different types of tape. The one variable is the amount of time you need for each type of tape. Also, if it's quarter inch, the process takes half as long as half inch", he added. "We use specialised laboratory ovens, made in Germany, I think. Possibly also used in chemistry labs, they look like a cube box with shelves in it sized at around one metre square. Each looks like a safe, with a thick door and a big handle."

Oddy enough, when you put the tapes in the oven, the tapes themselves don't look in any great distress and, when removed from the oven, there's no visible difference. The proof of the pudding is in the playing. Arkwright revealed that playing the Smiths' tape on his reel-to-reel immediately signaled that oxide was being shed. That's the only way you can tell that you've got, as the engineers say, 'Sticky Tape'. Well, there are other, more florid, descriptions but I won't go into them here. Once baked, you leave the tape for twenty-four hours before playing. The process should be fine for half a dozen plays or a month in time. Reportedly, there is no information loss after the process, which is a relief.

This superb reissue of 'The Queen is Dead' reminds us of what heady musical times the eighties were. It was an immensely diverse era for pop, from the sinewy reggae of Grace Jones to the syrupy synthetic trains of Swing Out Sister. The Smiths had always fought a rear-guard action against the establishment, but here they became fully paid up members, and reshaped British guitar pop in so doing...

"The Smiths had always fought a rear-guard action against the establishment, but here they became fully paid up members, and reshaped British guitar pop in so doing..."
Size really doesn't matter.

Close your eyes when listening to the Usher DANCER mini speakers, and you forget about their size immediately. The weight, energy and scale of ambience reproduced by these speakers simply defy their physical size. You'll also be pleasantly surprised that coherence and precision, often unique to small monitors, are an essential part of the Usher DANGER mini experience.

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<td>1.26&quot; be dome tweeter</td>
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<tr>
<td>7&quot; woofer</td>
<td>two 7&quot; woofers</td>
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<tr>
<td>sensitivity: 87 dB @ 1 watt-1m</td>
<td>sensitivity: 90 dB @ 1 watt / 1m</td>
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<tr>
<td>nominal impedance: 8 ohms</td>
<td>nominal impedance: 4 ohms</td>
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<tr>
<td>frequency response @ -3 dB: 38 Hz - 40k Hz</td>
<td>frequency response @ -3dB: 28 Hz - 40k Hz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dimensions (w x d x h): 31 cm x 36.5 cm x 105cm</td>
<td>dimensions (w x d x h): 34 cm x 48 cm x 123 cm</td>
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USHER AUDIO TECHNOLOGY
67 Kai-fong Street Sec.1 Taipei 100 Taiwan Tel:886-2-2381 6299 Fax:886-2-2371 1053 E-mail: usher@ms11.hinet.net

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