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BEATLES CD remasters

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HARMAN KARDON HK990 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

ORIGIN LIVE ENTERPRISE C TONEARM

LEEMA AGENA PHONO STAGE

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Acoustic Energy, Audiosmile, Aurousal, Colisium & Mowgan Audio tested

COMPETITION

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welcome

Remember 1999, and the feverish fin de siècle mood of that moment? Amazing isn’t it, to think that we’re now ten years on from talk of ’millennium bugs’ and MP3s!

Back then, all the media talk was of Napster and the menace MP3 presented to the music industry, whilst Dixons started stocking the Diamond Multimedia Rio, with a whopping 64MB of memory!

Quirky as all this sounds now, life ten years ago wasn’t so dramatically different, and nor was hi-fi.

Lest we forget, the vinyl revival had already started by 1999, but ten years on it’s just taken for granted. At the same time, some super new analyse products are now out using sophisticated materials, like Origin Live’s Enterprise CTonearm [p100] and Lyra’s Titan i MC cartridge [p107], raising vinyl’s sonic bar higher.

Digital’s got better too, with cooking 16bit CD players sounding very nice thank you very much, but the real headline news is the arrival of 24bit FLAC downloads. As the distant cousin of MP3, but offering obviously superior sound, they’ve taken the baton from that pesky little compressed file format and run with it...

Ten years ago, valve amplifiers were slowly coming back into the mainstream, and now that’s precisely where they live. It’s no longer trendy to have one; you just buy them to do the job. Meanwhile transistors are striking back, with great powerhouse like Digital Do Main’s Bi-a FET power amplifier [p10] and Musical Fidelity’s pure Class A behemoth, the AMS35i [p25], both of which give the top tube amp something to break out into a sweat about!

Likewise, loudspeakers have evolved into altogether finer things, but there have been no fundamental new developments. The ribbon tweeter, something of a favourite in the nineteen seventies, is back and speakers are all the better for it, as our supertest shows [p15]...

So nothing earth-shattering to report in the last month of the first decade of the new century, then. Hi-fi hasn’t changed dramatically; it’s better without a doubt, but I suspect the next ten years to be an altogether more profound transition.

Get ready for fully networked houses with wireless hi-fi systems, running digital resolution that will make today’s state of the art 24/96 FLAC files look like those early 128kbps MP3s. Bring it on!

David Price, editor

testing

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

Loudspeakers are measured using a calibrated Bruel & Kjaer microphone feeding a Clio-based computer analyser, using pulsed and gated sinewaves, in a large room to eliminate the room’s influence. Pickup arm vibration is measured with a Bruel & Kjaer accelerometer.

No other UK hi-fi magazine has in-house testing, and none has access to such advanced tests across all types of equipment. That’s why you can depend on Hi-Fi World reviews.
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Marantz's new £1,699 PM-15S2 integrated stereo amplifier comes finished in platinum, offset by subtle blue backlighting. The chassis sports double-layer construction, aluminium front and side panels, an additional bottom plate, and substantial shock-absorbing feet, to counter vibration. At its core is an oversized audiophile-grade toroidal transformer delivering a meaty 200 Watts. Pre, power and volume-control circuitry are separated and extensively shielded in discrete enclosures to prevent crosstalk and other unwanted interference. Substantial heatsinks further eliminate cross-channel interference. Circuits are short path designs with symmetrical layout, and the design also features Current Feedback amplification circuitry and Hyper Dynamic Amplifier Modules (HDAM-SA2 and -SA3) delivering fast signal handling with a high slew rate. Completing the package is a new Constant Current Feedback MM/MC phono stage.

The matching £1,699 SA-15S2 Super Audio CD player incorporates engineering lessons learnt from the construction of the flagship £5,000 SA-751, plus "a plethora of new features and internal components for exceptional sound quality", says Marantz. At its heart is the proprietary SACDM-10 mechanism which features an extruded aluminium case for precise, vibration-free reproduction with an ultra-stiff Xyron disc tray to absorb unwanted vibration. This feeds a high quality 24bit/192kHz stereo Digital to Analogue convertor from respected manufacturer Cirrus Logic. The CS4398 is a flagship design and utilises an advanced multi-bit Delta-Sigma modulator with DSD Support. Bespoke electrolytic, thick film capacitors are fitted, along with Shortky diodes, and Marantz's Current Feedback HDAM SA-2 op-amps. There is a high-grade power supply centred on a toroidal transformer, plus independent power supplies for each dedicated system block. A copper-plated zero-impedance matching joint is said to significantly improve signal to noise ratio, as is the shielding case for the digital output, and an optional 'display off' function. The SA-15S2's digital input is a rarity at this price point, so a music server or PC can be connected to make use of the internal DAC. For more information, click on www.marantz.co.uk.

Goldring's new Legacy is a high end moving coil cartridge described as the company's "finest ever design, and the culmination of a century's knowledge and experience". It sports an ultra low resonance magnesium metal body which is both very light and extremely strong. For convenience and rigidity it has threaded inserts, allowing the cartridge to be easily mounted and accurately aligned into the tonearm's headshell. The diamond stylus is a highly polished, very low mass "Vital" fine line design, chosen because of its exceptionally low distortion characteristics. To maintain rigidity, this is attached to a hard alloy cantilever which transfers the maximum level of detail from the diamond to the coils; the latter are hand wound using only the highest purity copper. The bespoke rubber mixture, used to form the stylus damper, ensures optimum compliance, helping The Legacy deliver a smooth, extended frequency response. A precision, rare earth, Neodymium iron boron magnet contributes to outstanding dynamics, the company says. For more information, click on www.goldring.co.uk.
BIENVENUE ANGLETERRE!
The famous Parisian Micromega brand is back in the UK, distributed via Absolute Sounds. As a company, Micromega has recently undergone significant change. The brand has a new owner, Didier Hamdi, a former motorcycle racing world champion and founder of several successful businesses in the field of electrical engineering (including the company responsible for the flash lighting of the Eiffel Tower). Didier is passionate about music and high-quality audio, and upon hearing of the opportunity to purchase Micromega in 2007, he proceeded to invest significant funds "to initiate a triumphant rebirth"! Micromega's founder, Daniel Schar, now leads the R&D department, alongside other core personnel considered instrumental to Micromega's audio design philosophy. As a result of Didier's input, the brand has a new and product range which includes three CD players, three integrated stereo amps, a stereo preamp, two power amps, an FM tuner and a surround sound preamp/processor. As ever with Micromega, every component is designed and manufactured in France, and available in a choice of black or silver finish. To find out more, visit www.micromega-hifi.com.

NEW AGE
The new £795 IsoTek Aquarius is described as "a new benchmark in power conditioning for hi-fi". The heir to the Mini Sub's throne is said to enhance the performance of audio systems with greater clarity and focus. It's a six-way mains conditioning component that sits squarely in the middle of IsoTek's range, above the entry-level Sirius and below the high-end Sigmas, Nova and Titan. It sports two high-current and four medium-current outlets, all individually filtered and fully isolated from one another, together with a newly designed aluminium casing and a host of enhancements under the lid. Current delivery is greater than the GII Mini Sub, with a full 16 Amps available from its two high-current outlets. Thermo-magnetic fusing contributes to this enhanced delivery, as does the use of a 16A IEC C20 inlet to connect Aquarius to the mains. The four medium-current outlets now feature IsoTek's Adaptive Gating technology – an auto-sensing filter stage that adapts to the current draw of the load, thus tailoring the filtering process to suit each individual piece of equipment attached. For more details call +44 (0)1276 501392 or click on www.isoteksystems.com.

TOUCH OF GLASS
Glass loudspeaker specialist Waterfall Audio has launched a new hi-fi loudspeaker concept called Serio. The diminutive satellite speaker features Waterfall's glass design expertise for both hi-fi and AV applications; it comes with on-wall, tabletop and stand-mounting options. It's available in three body colours: black, white and silver with matching grilles (orange and green 'fashion' grilles are also available). For more information, click on www.waterfallaudio.com.
ELEVEN PLUS
Denon’s new AVR-4810 is the company’s ‘ultimate home cinema receiver’. With nine onboard amplifier channels, each rated at 180 Watts, the AVR-4810 is equipped with the latest high resolution audio decoders including Dolby TrueHD and dts-HD Master Audio, and also features Dolby Pro Logic Ilz and Audyssey DSX, delivering additional front height and/or front wide channels. It’s also the first Denon to support the full Audyssey DSX setup through its 11.3 channel outputs. Any video signal, analogue or digital, can be upscaled to 1080p HDMI output via the built-in Anchor Bay advanced VRS processor. The AVR-4810 will be available in October at a suggested retail price of £2,799.99. For details, call +44(0) 2890 279830 or click on www.denon.co.uk.

THREE SERIES
Pioneer announces its Series 3 loudspeakers. French product designer Steve Senescat has created a distinctive line of minimalist speakers with a slim silhouette, curved lines and flush mount grilles. The line-up consists of three models: the S-31 floor-standing speaker, the S-31B bookshelf speaker and the S-31C centre speaker, all available in a light or black wood coloured finish and with flush mounted, removable grilles. Complementing the range is a compact sized black subwoofer, the S-31W. For more information, click on www.pioneer.co.uk.

TOUCHING
Pure’s new Sensia is described as “the world’s first visual radio with large colour touchscreen and advanced user-interface”. It’s a DAB and internet-connected radio with a unique, large 5.7” 640x480 high resolution colour touchscreen. It offers a unique way of interacting with internet and radio content including podcasts and listen again services, plus DAB/DAB+ and FM, a growing set of custom PURE ‘Apps’ such as weather, news, Picasa, Facebook or Twitter and new broadcast material such as station slideshows. Sensia is a media streamer enabling users to listen to music stored on a home computer or network storage device via Wi-Fi technology. Four striking colour choices are offered; bright red, vivid yellow, sleek black and cool white. A moulded stand is supplied, which allows the user to angle the radio to an optimum viewing position and a matching remote control completes the look. A bespoke microsite has been created for Sensia at www.touchmyradio.com. Other features include a claimed 30W RMS; an input for an iPod/MP3 player, alarm and countdown timer; sleep timer and a headphone socket. Sensia will be available in time for Christmas at £249.99. For more information, visit www.pure.com or call 0845 1489001.

PRO FEEL
Sennheiser’s new HD 380 pro (£139.99) are described as “foldable professional monitoring headphones designed for audio professionals”. The closed back design provides an extended frequency response (up to 27kHz) it is claimed, plus a high sound pressure level (up to 110dB). It also uses Sennheiser’s Ergonomic Acoustic Refinement (E.A.R) design which channels the audio signal directly into the user’s ears. The space-saving foldable design of the HD 380 pro makes them very easy to transport. After use, the headphones can be folded away and stored in the tough zipped carrying case provided. It has replaceable parts, weighs just 220g and has a 1m coiled cable extending to 3m. A carry case is supplied. For more details, call +44(0) 1494 551 551 or click on www.sennheiser.co.uk.

AIR TIME
Bowers & Wilkins’ new £299 Zeppelin Mini is a compact iPod speaker system that boasts USB iPod connectivity via the docking arm that synchronises with PCs or Macs, and offers ninety degree rotation for cover flow and video playback. It’s said to attain “the same high standards in sound quality and design set by Zeppelin, but in a more compact form, it is reduced in size, not in sound”. For more information, click on www.bowers-wilkins.com/zeppelinmini or call +44 (0)1903 221500.

SPOTTED!
Vantage Audio’s Richard Peachey showcases his legendary turntable set-up skills with the editor’s recently restored Marantz TT-1000 direct drive...
Following in the footsteps of Japan’s legendary 1970s MOSFET amplifiers, Noel Keywood assesses the new Digital Do Main B-1a stereo power amp sporting special Field Effect Transistors...

Drawn by the eerie purple glow of a corona discharge, I went into a room at the Munich High End show earlier this year to see the Lansenhe Audio No3 loudspeakers. Seated in the gloom of this low lit room, however, I saw to my right a very unusual looking amplifier, the Digital Do Main B-la you see pictured here. Beside was an earnest looking Japanese gentleman, Kazuhiko Nishi, eager to explain to me the inner workings of a radical amplifier that used custom made, large area audio power FETs (field effect transistors) able to give better sound quality than we get from today’s general purpose industrial power transistors. With words like “silver vapour deposition”, a “mirror image FET power supply” using the same devices, “gold plated heat-sink contact areas” and other esoterica, the Digital Do Main B-la sounded like one highly specialised solid-state design to me, potentially able to overcome all the ills that afflict the breed, I thought, and hoped...

Aware that the amplifier has 2SK278B, 2SK78 and 2SJ78 low power static induction transistors used in the B-1a. been little seen in Europe or the UK, I beseeched our Japanese speaking editor to phone ‘em in Hamamatsu and get one if he could. I don’t know what he said in Japanese but it worked, and a B-1a was delivered through UK importer ABC Audio. Well, collected in fact, from the ABC room at Audio 09 Show a few weeks ago by myself. I was again nervous, as with the wonderful Ortofon Cadenza moving coil cartridges I nabbed at Munich, that the B-1a might not make it back to Hi-Fi World towers if anyone found out about it at the Show, but I was lucky enough to make it home Sunday night with a single B-1a securely housed in a sturdy flight case, adorned with Japan Airlines stickers. Yes, this unit was straight from the factory and the rear panel carries a large ‘SAMPLE’ sticker. It is also a 100V version so was accompanied by a step-down transformer, one of surprisingly small dimensions. It struck me immediately that this would affect bass quality, likely for the worse, something to bear in mind in this review. Our review sample was a single stereo power amplifier. But this amplifier can be set to bridge mode to double power output, in which case it becomes a monoblock and two are needed, doubling available power for those that need more than 150 Watts per channel. With rear mounted input level controls for each channel, plus a big volume control in the centre of the front panel, a preamplifier isn’t needed, doubling available power for those that need more than 150 Watts per channel. With rear mounted input level controls for each channel, plus a big volume control in the centre of the front panel, a preamplifier isn’t needed, so we did not use one, running a Stello DA-100 DAC straight in for CD purposes and an Eastern Electric Minimax phono stage for vinyl. Loudspeakers were our Spendor S8e benchmark references, chosen for a nicely damped, colouration-free midband.

Weighing 35kgs – and much more in its flight case – our B-1a was going to be spirited away from me too easily and I had to get two security guards to carry it into a London guarded store. Although it has a compact fascia measuring 218mm wide and 176mm high, it is an enormous 550mm deep. The front carries a power switch and a centrally placed volume control illuminated by a small escutcheon. A master power switch sits on the rear panel. This also carries loudspeaker sockets able to accept bare wires, 4mm plugs and spade terminals. Balanced XLR inputs and unbalanced phono inputs are provided, each channel having its own input level trim control able to reduce volume to zero. These can be used to lower sensitivity (although at 1.25V it isn’t high) or adjust channel balance. The amplifier switches on and off silently.

At the heart of this amplifier lies something known as a Static Induction Transistor. Originally described by J. Nishizawa in Japan in 1975 it is in fact a Field Effect Transistor, with Drain, Source and Gate, as usual. Digital Do Main manufacture the 2SK77b high voltage / current output device used in their B-1a, as well as smaller signal devices. It seems that the Static Induction...
Transistor (SIT) is difficult to fabricate and its excellent properties are only really needed in high voltage transmitters, where it can replace valves, and audio amplifiers - not a sufficiently large market to sustain profitable manufacture. So the SIT has been in and out of use for a long time, never having quite managed to secure its future. Its voltage transfer characteristics are triode-like, it does not suffer thermal runaway and it is able to work up to 225 degrees C. All of this looks very good, but mismatching between devices will affect crossover distortion, which still exists, so feedback remains necessary. And also, the sound of 'triodes' isn't really something easily determined, as the few main types in use (300B, 211 and 845) all sound quite different and, in my experience (I use a 300B at home and 845 at work, so I suppose I am 'Mr Triode!') is nothing like any solid-state amplifier I have ever heard, including this one. Since the current density and dielectric within thermionic triodes both differ radically from any solid-state device, and since the latter don't suffer secondary emission, saying they sound the same is like saying a Mini and Ferrari are the same because they both have round wheels.

Best to forget simple but misleading comparisons like this; the B-1a can justify its existence without it and there is a need for solid-state amplifiers built around custom designed, linear audio transistors I believe. This is why I was so excited to hear about the B-1a in the first place, and why in audio it is a radical amplifier: this is the only amplifier I know to have output transistors optimised for audio use. By way of contrast, any 300B or KT88 based valve amplifier enjoys dedicated audio valves inside - almost an unfair advantage!

**SOUND QUALITY**

FET amplifiers of various flavours I have heard came across as dry in delivery, almost prim and proper and very much of the solid-state breed. And, broadly speaking, the B-1a is in this mould, although it is obviously a highly refined hi-fi product of its time, by which I mean that attention to component quality all through gives it a sense of being consummately well preened for its purpose. FET amps of the 1970s were nothing like this, mainly because apart from their V-FETs, general component quality was poor, as with other amplifiers of the era, and this compromised both clarity and precision.

The most striking feature of the B-1a I felt was a sense of intense insight and detailing quite beyond the almost - by comparison - approximate sound stage set up by modern transistor amplifiers. Dry in nature and constrained in a way a valve amplifier is not, the B-1a was at the same time intensely insightful, bringing a spotlight onto vocals that revealed every little inflection and nuance of delivery, as well as all the production details within the recording that act to enhance a studio recorded performance.

The 2sk77b output device, a vertically arranged static induction transistor designed for audio.

"this is the only amplifier that I know to have output transistors optimised for audio use..."
A single B-1a can be set to bridge mode (single channel) to double power. Channel level controls are provided, as well as balanced and unbalanced inputs.

Gabriele’s usually warm, dusky tones in ‘People May Come’ almost crackled at me as information in the midband and upper midband jumped from our Spendor S8e loudspeakers, projected forward in megaphonic fashion. Her own backing harmonies also leapt out and the smallest fades and echoes used to add depth and embellish the recording all became intensely etched and very obvious. The only reservation here came from a diminution of warmth and body, from a singer whose vocals rely these qualities.

Do you think Hugh Cornwell has a strong, deep but almost rasping voice as he heads The Stranglers? Well, the B-1a makes more of all the tiny details that make up his vocal delivery rather than standing back and presenting a singer whose delivery suits his idiom. In this the B-1a’s sense of analysis can detach performance, pulling it apart with a diminution of warmth and body.

There was a small but obvious de-emphasis, as it were, of upper treble that at times made the delivery almost creamy smooth in balance — until that is my attention was yanked back to the blare of a trumpet, the crash of cymbals or an attention grabbing vocal delivery much closer to my ear than I am used to. Not only does this amplifier possess clinical precision, it really does see into music and dynamically support it across midband and treble. As usual, the taut bass of a high damping factor amplifier is a mixed blessing, yet with the right loudspeakers - and Tannoy's Definition Series DC8s or 10s would match character-wise, even though they don’t need the power of the B-1a, unless you have a baronial hall full of merry souls to amuse perhaps. The B&W CM9s I review in this issue worked quite well, the B-1a’s slow roll down in upper treble acting to damp their treble unit just a tad, whilst their nicely balanced bass of good quality strengthened upper bass from the amplifier a little. Vinyl LP also proved a nice match, although I felt a need to step up from an Ortofon 2M Black to the moving coil Cadenza Bronze to gain transparency, then quality cuts like...
Mark Knopfler's 'Punish the Monkey', from the album 'Kill to Get Crimson', sounded wonderfully tidy and poised, guitar strings displaying a firm, cutting twang, hand drums having substance behind the outline of their sound. Knopfler's voice was starkly clear and another analysis, not shown, Revealed this was classic crossover distortion. At a low level however, this is not a problem. The B-1a produces plenty of power, 160 Watts into 8 Ohms and 240 Watts into 4 Ohms. It ran cool on the test bench, in spite of having big heatsinks. Input sensitivity was 1.25V through both unbalanced phono socket inputs and balanced XLR inputs (at full volume). The volume controls did not affect frequency response and performance figures were identical through either input. The B-1a turns in a good set of performance figures, free of weaknesses. Its peculiarly limited bandwidth and high damping factor suggest there is something different inside, NK

Power 160 Watts
Frequency response 1Hz-55kHz
Separation 97dB
Noise -116dB
Distortion 0.02%
Sensitivity 1.25V
Damping Factor 100

DISTORTION, 10kHz, 1W

The B-1a basic circuit topology, with phase splitting and gain from two differential pairs, and one pair of N Channel 2SK77 output devices. The amplifier is all direct coupled. Not shown here are protection circuits, servo circuits, power supply and suchlike.

Hamamatsu straight away to get a sample, but on this magazine we have a lot of respect for product from Japan. And what Dr Nishi told me at the High End Show in Munich, and what I read on the info CD he gave me, was enough to make reviewing this product a must. The B-1a is a very special amplifier and when UK samples arrive at importers ABC Audio, if you have the money and inclination it is worth a close audition. Their deep clarity and sense of ordered precision will I suspect make many rivals sound quite vague and win hearts.

A guard wheeling in the weighty B-1a in its flight case, after the Audio 09 show at Whittlebury, where it was on display.

The Yamaha B-1 MOSFET amplifier from 1974, after which the Digital Do Main B-1a is named.

The Yamaha B-1 MOSFET amplifier from 1974, after which the Digital Do Main B-1a is named.
Yamaha began its quest for sound superiority over 100 years ago - rather earlier than most of our hi-fi competitors. Since 1887 we've turned our attentions to all manner of musical instruments and professional audio equipment, but never lost sight of our original driving force - the creation and delivery of beautiful, natural sound. You'll hear the difference when you choose Yamaha for your home. Discover more at hifi.yamaha-europe.com

A century of making music distilled into our ultimate Hi-Fi: it could only be Yamaha

Yamaha

Powered by music
Multiple Choice

There's rarely been a time when prospective purchasers have been offered so much choice in the loudspeaker market. It seems that rather than technologies coming and going, most have simply come and stayed, so that it is possible to buy a loudspeaker in virtually any size you like, with any number of drivers of all sorts of different types and configured in a wide variety of ways...

With this in mind we felt it was high time to take a look at the various different ways of spending money on a speaker. We set a notional budget of £1,500 and came up with a diverse range of contenders.

The line up includes the Acoustic Energy Radiance 3 floorstanders, the Mowgan Audio Artio standmounters, the Audiosmile Kensai standmounters with slot port loading and a ribbon tweeter, Aurousal's VS floorstanders, which are based around full range drive units, and finally thrown a newcomer into the mix in the form of the Colisium Carillon, which is a conventionally ported standmounter using a ribbon tweeter.

We wondered how these differences would show themselves and if those denizens of deep thought back in the nineteen eighties, the Fun Boy Three and Bananarama, were correct in their assertion that "it ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it". Read on to find out...

CONTENDERS
Audiosmile Kensai £1,499
Acoustic Energy Radiance 3 £1,500
Colisium Carillon (Walnut) £1,540
Mowgan Audio Artio £1,585
Aurousal VS £1,600

REFERENCE SYSTEM
Garrard 301 turntable
Alphason HR-100S tonearm
Ortofon Kontrapunkt B cartridge
Marantz CD94 and CDA94 CD player/DAC
Anatek MC1 phono stage
Naim Supernait amplifier

Adam Smith investigates five different ways to spend £1,500 on a pair of loudspeakers...
Starting at the diminutive end of the size scale, we have the Audiosmile Kensais. Their positively petite dimensions do however contain some highly impressive engineering and drive units, like the 120mm magnesium coned bass/midrange driver and isoplanar ribbon tweeter, offering an "effective area equivalent to 2.5 times that of a conventional dome". The bass driver also features a copper phase plug and copper rings in the motor structure which reduces distortion, as Audiosmile rightly point out, but also has the added advantage of increasing the upper frequency range of the driver due to lowered motor assembly inductance. This is highly important when using a ribbon tweeter, as they generally do not work down the frequency range as low as a dome. The Kensais measure 250 x 150 x 200mm (HxWxD) and utilise an aperiodically damped slot port for bass loading, rather than the more common circular type. They are available with Beech or Black Walnut side panels, and white or black simulated leather for the remaining faces.

**SOUND QUALITY**
The Kensais are not like any small loudspeaker I have heard before. Whilst they have the traditional compact monitor strengths of detailing and fine imaging, this was rolled up in a package that is one of the most complete and polished I have heard in a long while. They do not try to trick you into thinking they are bigger than they are, but they set forth such a precise, detailed and completely encompassing performance that it really doesn't seem to matter.

Vocal and instrument details were stunning, with pianos in particular sounding as realistic as I have heard from any loudspeaker at the price, or even rather more expensive, and every single nuance within the soundstage was captured and laid forth immaculately. That soundstage was not cavernous, but the Kensais seemed able to strike just the right level of scale to offer the impression that I was getting up close and personal with the performers in question. Aided by a superb tweeter, this meant bags of fine detail allied to a smooth, effortless and captivating midrange.

At the bottom end, the Kensais continued to impress. Obviously they don't shake the floor or punch you in the chest like a larger design, but neither do they try to do things that the laws of physics would put a stop to. Their bass simply offers magnificent detail and a good sense of punch, allied to impeccable timing, and then as one ventures deeper and deeper, they simply quietly roll off without any fuss or strain. Double basses and bass guitars were vivid and blessed with a really three-dimensional form, and kick drums had surprising impact and drop-dead timing. All in all, supremely impressive as small standmounters go - but big bass fiends should look elsewhere.

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**
Frequency response of this ported miniature is reasonably even across the audio band, lacking the upward tilt toward high frequencies so common nowadays. All the same, frequencies below 200Hz roll downward slowly our published analysis, and a third octave analysis, show. So bass will be light unless the Kensai is used close to a wall, doubtless as intended by its designer. Output from the small bass unit rolls down below 80Hz but the front slot port is tuned to 43Hz and provides a good degree of damping so the Kensai should have well controlled bass.

A lift in the response curve from 2kHz-4kHz will improve vocal intelligibility and output from the treble unit looks encouragingly smooth and even, suggesting it will sound less resonant than many domes.

Like all miniatures the Kensai is insensitive, producing just 82dB SPL from one nominal watt (2.83V) of input, part of the reason being it uses a 6 Ohm (DCR) bass unit which pushes impedance up to a high 9 Ohms. So a powerful amplifier is needed for good volumes, at least 60 Watts. The long term 200mS decay spectrum was impressively clean, suggesting electrostatic levels of cleanliness.

The little Kensai measures very well. Don't expect massive bass, but it is super clean, very even and should give sophisticated results.

**FREQUENCY RESPONSE**

**IMPEDANCE**
Conventional as they come, the AEs are a three way, four drive unit design in a floorstanding enclosure. Bass duties are handled by a pair of 160mm pressed alloy drive units, each mounted in its own rear-ported enclosure and above this sits a similar 130mm drive unit which handles the midrange. At the top of the cabinet is a brand new tweeter, which bears very close visual resemblance to the Scanspeak Discovery unit. AE have however located it at the centre of their own new 'DXT' acoustic lens promising excellent directional capabilities across the frequency range. These units are housed in a neat but rather ordinary floorstanding cabinet with curved sides and this sits atop four outboard feet. Sadly, these were neither ordinary nor neat, looking to my eyes like an afterthought. Vital statistics are 920x230x297mm & 18kg.

SOUND QUALITY

Moving from the Audiosmiles to the AEs was quite a culture shock. With a big cabinet and much greater driver area, the Radiance 3s go much lower, with real weight and punch, whilst the upper bass is lithe and detailed. Unfortunately they're a little unbalanced, as a test track of mine that features a gradual wander down the fretboard of a bass guitar showed, where the intelligibility and leading edges of the upper notes became more and more blurred as things ventured lower. The Radiance 3s do go low, but become rather blobby and vague at the very bottom. Much as I am no great dissenter when it comes to ports in loudspeakers, I cannot help but wonder if those three on the back of the Radiance 3s are not helping this situation in some way here...

Higher up the frequency range, though, I had no such complaints, with the midrange driver doing sterling work and handling over seamlessly to the very smooth and inviting tweeter. There was no sign of any harshness here and the AEs' treble is a very fine thing to behold, combining detail and crispness with an assured sense of fluidity very neatly indeed. Across the mid, vocalists were placed nicely centre-stage and the image of their backing companions pushed off into the distance very nicely. The Radiance 3s pull you back from the action slightly, while puffing it up in front of you very neatly indeed!

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Our frequency response analysis shows a lack of peaking that means absence of local resonance. The tweeter in particular has an unusually even frequency response, suggesting it will lack most of the usual clutter from metal domes. However, a small lowering of output below 500Hz may give the Radiance 3 a dry balance and it should be used close to a rear wall. A small rise in output around 80Hz may add some extra bass zest.

The ports work over a very wide band and will damp the bass unit's resonance around 40Hz. So the Radiance 3 has well tailored acoustic damping and this is reflected in the impedance curve where the motional impedance element sitting above the DCR component (as it were) is quite small. Measurement showed a DCR of 5 Ohms and an impedance, with pink noise, of 6.5 Ohms. Together with a healthy sensitivity of 89dB SPL at 1m the Radiance 3 is an amenable amplifier load that produces plenty of volume from 40 Watts or more.

Spectral decay analysis shows little colouration, although the bass unit looks 'hot' around 80Hz where there's peaking and it overhangs too, but the lower midband is clean. Distortion below 100Hz, distortion stays below 2% all the way down to 40Hz at 90dB SPL. The ports give a similar result down to 40Hz, exhibiting more distortion below this frequency (5% at 30Hz). The Radiance 3 will have an even balance, treble should be smooth and clean and bass well controlled. Strong upper midrange output means detailing will be good and a small amount of midrange emphasis suggests well projected vocals.

VERDICT

Traditional big loudspeaker strengths with an extra sense of polish make for a highly musical floorstander.

ACOUSTIC ENERGY

RADIANCE 3

£1,500

Acoustic Energy

© +44 (0)1285 646580

www.acoustic-energy.co.uk

FOR

- sweet treble
- upper bass detail
- fine spatiality

AGAINST

- bloated bottom end
- ugly feet
A brand new loudspeaker from a brand new company, the Carillons show the second ribbon tweeter of the group, sourced from Fountek and unusually offering a claimed effective frequency response from 1.4kHz upwards thanks to its large diaphragm and low resonant frequency. This crosses over at 3.5kHz to a Hi-Vi research 6 inch bass/midrange driver which is ported to the front of the cabinet in the conventional manner. The cabinet itself is made from Valcromat, which is apparently a sustainable green product, and this can be finished in a wide range of veneers including Ash, Maple and Zebrano. More exotic versions are available for a £40 premium, such as the Birds Eye finish of the review samples, or a plain painted finish can be had for £200 less. The Carillons measure 430x210x260mm (HxWxD).

SOUND QUALITY

Firing up the Carillons showed me a very strong sense of central image, which really did fill the space in between the loudspeakers in a very forthright and confident manner. Vocal performances were nailed firmly in the centre of the proceedings, with surrounding and backing instruments clearly etched around, but I was less impressed with the expansiveness of the recorded acoustic. Images were resolutely locked into the fore-aft plane of the loudspeakers, but there was relatively little width beyond the physical limits of the loudspeakers. Everything was firmly and neatly tucked into the area enclosed by the cabinets, and there it tended to stay.

In pure resolution terms, the Carillons did well. Bass lines bounded along enthusiastically with a good measure of insight into the instrument being played, but there was some looseness right at the very bottom end, somewhat curtailing the efference of any punchy low end action. The upper bass fared better however, and handed over to a midrange that was deftly capable at picking out the minutiae of the recording studio or concert hall. Instrument detail was beyond reproach and, up at the very top of the frequency range, the ribbon tweeter offered the traditional strengths of smoothness, insight and fluidity, albeit with an occasional sense of blur that tended to merge, for example, a gently brushed jazz drumkit cymbal into a steady hiss rather than a series of distinguishable strokes. A genuinely interesting loudspeaker this, and one that deserves audition, but its style is not for all.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Getting a ribbon tweeter to integrate with a single bass/midrange driver, as in the Carillon, isn’t easy. Most ribbons do not go low enough, stopping at 4kHz or so, and most bass/midrange units cannot reach up that far. With overall level from the tweeter similar to that of the bass/midrange the Carillon has an impressively smooth frequency response. The bass/midrange unit handles most of the audio band so it is higher than the other, resulting in an enormous reactance: there will be a tuned, as one of the residual peaks graph suggesting it is also slightly off-tuned around 40Hz, our impedance measurement shows it wasn’t prominent, however, and the Carillon is otherwise colouration free. The port is narrow tuned around 40Hz, our impedance curve also shows, an impressive result, and distortion was low, 1% at 80Hz from driver and port, rising to 3% at 40Hz, again from both driver and port, so bass level and quality should be good.

The Carillon has some flaws, but otherwise turns in a good basic result, although low voltage sensitivity will demand high amplifier power. NK
MOWGAN AUDIO
ARTIO £1,585

Still content to quietly churn out high quality loudspeakers with little fuss, the Artio has been Mowgan Audio's entry-level design since the company was formed. The bass/mid driver is a seven inch item sourced from Eton in Germany, and uses their honeycomb structure cone allied to a well damped but highly flexible rubber surround. Above this is a 25mm tweeter featuring a fabric dome that is coated with four coats of a proprietary damping compound in order to control and optimise its behaviour throughout the frequency range. Unlike the other designs in the test, the Artios are 'handed' for optimum imaging, with the tweeters offset above the bass driver to a different side on each loudspeaker. The Artios measure 390x232x340mm, so they are quite large, and also nicely weighty at 9.4kg each.

SOUND QUALITY
The Artios are a pair of loudspeakers that really make you sit up and take notice, thanks to a bright open balance, with bags of top end detail. For those of you who are thinking 'harsh' at this point, let me assure you that nothing could be further from the truth as the Mowgans are as composed and couth as could be hoped for, but that rise in output around 15kHz that can be seen in the frequency response plot [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE] definitely adds a good sprinkling of crispness to proceedings. The result is captivating, but will require a modicum of care in choosing partnering equipment. The Artios are quite tuneable, offering plenty of weight in the lowest registers, but a simultaneous lack of body in the upper bass. Experimenting with position helped here, with the best results around eight inches from a rear wall, compared to the eighteen where my loudspeakers usually reside. The Artios are quite tuneable as a result, and once the best spot is found, the low end snaps into focus perfectly, offering a uniform sense of impact, timing and dexterity.

As a result, simpler studio recordings are intimate and soft, whilst grander orchestral gatherings are suitably well scaled and dynamic.

At the low end, the Artios require a little work to give of their best. Initially I felt they were a little unbalanced, offering plenty of weight in the lowest registers, but a simultaneous lack of body in the upper bass. Experimenting with positioning helped here, with the best results around eight inches from a rear wall, compared to the eighteen where my loudspeakers usually reside. The Artios are quite tuneable as a result, and once the best spot is found, the low end snaps into focus perfectly, offering a uniform sense of impact, timing and dexterity.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE
Our frequency response analysis of the Artio shows it has a fairly even balance across the audio band with no broadband emphases. However, there are some points of interest. A plateau lift of output from 600Hz to 1.2kHz will add a little to vocal presence, making the Artio sound conspiriously articulate. However, the port output trace and decay spectrum show energy here which may colour the sound, albeit only to a small degree our 200mS decay spectrum shows.

The peak at 15kHz will add a little hiss to treble when a lot of treble energy is present. The most obvious feature of our analysis though is a roll off in output below 250Hz, a sign that the loudspeaker is for wall placement. This sort of over damped response gives fast, tight bass against a wall, but benefits from a weighty sounding amplifier, like those from Leema or Naim. A powerful amplifier is needed due to a modest sensitivity of 86dB, due to high measured overall impedance; the Artio will need at least 60 Watts if played loud.

The impedance curve is flat across the audio band, unreactive and amplifier friendly, so the Artio should be consistent between amplifiers and get the best from them. The port is narrow tuned to 40Hz however, so large reactive residual peaks exists either side.

With port output 2dB less than driver forward output, when it is usually 6dB more, the port contributes less energy than most and bass will be on the lighter side. Distortion was low, less than 1% from the bass unit down to 40Hz and the port was linear too, producing 3% at 40Hz. Measurement suggests the Artio is for smaller rooms, and higher powers. It offers a tonally balanced sound and should come over well.

TENDECE
Dynamically ebullient loudspeakers that grip the listener and make music fun!

MOWGAN AUDIO
ARTIO £1,585
Mowgan Audio
+44(0)1389 711222
www.mowgan-audio.co.uk

FOR
- dynamics and pace
- excellent soundstaging
- crisp top end

AGAINST
- position-sensitive
- need smooth ancillaries
Robert Harley, The Absolute Sound.

"...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."

February, 2009

2008 Cables of the Year

The Absolute Sound

Magnum MA and Oracle MA

AUROUSAL VS
£1,600

The VS is the first floorstander from Aurousal. At the bass end, the drive units are loaded by a "reflex loaded straight quarter wave transmission line" (that look suspiciously like a port!) and this exits at the centre bottom of the front baffle, extending the response down to a claimed 30Hz, which is impressive for such small drivers in a relatively compact enclosure. Treble-wise, Aurousal have implemented an attempt to counter the fact that the full range drivers' output does tend to be directional at high frequencies, giving the impression of dullness unless listening right on the driver axis. To this end, the additional 25mm soft dome tweeter does not so much extend the frequency range upwards, as take what the main drive units already deliver and augment it over a wider lateral area. The tweeter can be switched on or off as required and have its level of operation adjusted. They're the largest at 1075x215x268mm & 20kg each.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE
The Aurousal gives some unusual but interesting results. First off is a near flat 4 Ohm impedance characteristic, making this a pure 4 Ohm loudspeaker (it measured out at 4.6 Ohms), one that is resistive as a load, does not store energy and will work well with all amplifiers, including valve amplifiers with a 4 Ohm tap. The red trace of port output in our frequency response analysis clearly shows port output is a maximum at 30Hz and it works up to 80Hz and beyond. The VS does go low, its port strongly exciting the 24Hz main axis. To this end, the additional 25mm soft dome tweeter does not so much extend the frequency range upwards, as take what the main drive units already deliver and augment it over a wider lateral area. The tweeter can be switched on or off as required and have its level of operation adjusted. They're the largest at 1075x215x268mm & 20kg each.

SOUND QUALITY
With the tweeter control switched off, I felt that I was locked into the sweet spot, so I fired up the additional tweeter at around 2/3 of maximum output, and this offered extra air plus improved dispersion. Best results were obtained exactly as the manual says, with the axes of the loudspeakers crossing in front of the listening position. This done, the sound seems to spread from behind their plane, stretching gently outwards with delicate sense of subtlety and order. Once again, that image doesn't project inwardly, but settles for giving a broader sonic view of the musical action.

At the low end, the twin drivers and vented enclosure do indeed offer an impression of authority. Unfortunately this bass seems to lack drive and this lessens the impact of kick drums and enthusiastically hammered orchestral tympani. Fortunately this is somewhat exacerbated by the delightfully well integrated frequency range above this, which confers control and evenness to the upper bass that carries through the midband and up into the treble. As a result, more complex performances are sewn together perfectly and kept in excellent rhythmical time, with the Aurousals never seeming to favour one area of action over another. A fine, even-handed all rounder, but headbangers should look elsewhere.
AND THERE WAS CHA'AM

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This was an intriguing review to perform, as it finally gave me an opportunity to assess the different ways in which modern designers approach their loudspeaker construction. This is a funny situation in many ways as there seems that there is no right or wrong way of doing things, just differing methods, all of which have their advantages and disadvantages. The end result is then determined more by the skills of the designer and how he or she approaches the inevitable compromises that are part and parcel of loudspeaker design. A look at the units on test would seem to suggest that, even at their relatively modest price point, these compromises are becoming not only well understood, but very well managed indeed.

Starting with the Coliseum Carillons, these turned in a promising performance in frequency terms, but one that was let down by a confined soundstage. This was a shame as in many ways they have the makings of a great pair of monitors, being the most revealing of all the units on test in terms of pointing out the flaws in recordings – which given the standards of the group is no small feat. I feel that their basic ingredients are well chosen, and that they’re undoubtedly good value for money, but for my proclivities they need additional finessing. We welcome this new name to the loudspeaker fray!

I’ve said in the past that Aurousal’s A 1s were the only full range design that I had heard that I could live with, and that list now numbers two, even though purists may be horrified by the addition of the second (albeit identical) driver, and the fill-in tweeter. The thing is though, both of these shift the loudspeakers’ performance up a gear by taking that excellent middle section common to both designs and polishing things up at the extremes of the frequency range. The V5S are still position-critical, and must be aligned as the manual says, which will seem strange to those who are reluctant to toe their loudspeakers in at all, but do this and they reward handsomely, and are one of the few loudspeakers at the price where even as the eyes can see the boxes, the brain is convinced the sound is not coming directly from them.

Less rare at this price is a loudspeaker that offers ebullience and dynamics, but few can do it in quite the way that the Mowgan Audio Artios do. These are big as standmounters go, and to go with this physical presence they have an aural stature that is hard to dismiss. Some cheaper designs feature a simple treble lift that sounds impressive in the showroom but soon becomes tiring, but the Mowgans are far better than this and extended listening merely reveals the conclusion that these are actually fabulously forthright and detailed loudspeakers, whose aim is simply to put you right at the heart of the music. Once again, positioning is more critical than some competitors and inappropriate matching could provoke that top end a little too far, but get it right and the end result is more than worth the effort.

Moving to our penultimate contender, I personally feel that the Acoustic Energy Radiance 3s are a big leap forward for the company. Their more affordable loudspeakers have never been anything less than utterly competent, with the odd real star tucked into the range, but I have found one or two models in the past to be a little bit ordinary. You could live with them quite happily, but they somehow never quite really captivated in the way a good design should. That is a distant memory with the Radiance 3s however, as I feel that they are very probably Acoustic Energy’s best affordable floorstander to date. They offer magnificent scale and depth to proceedings, allied to a revealing midrange and a delightfully lucid treble that almost has a slight whiff of ribbon-style control and poise to it. If only there were that last modicum of solidity and fine detail at the very low end of the bass, I would be awarding them a sneaky extra globe over Noel’s four in his original review last month.

So how can a pair of tiddlers like the Audiosmile Kensais possibly compare to the likes of the AEs then? Well not only do they compare, they actually surpass in a number of key areas. Let’s get the obvious points out of the way first, though – they don’t do deep bass, so don’t listen to them hoping that they might, nor do they try and pull off the trick of sounding like something six feet tall – they are small loudspeakers and their soundstage scale doesn’t quite compare to that from the AEs or the Mowgans. Frankly, however this doesn’t seem to matter once you start listening as they really do everything else so superbly that whatever you care to put through them is an absolute revelation and delight. Instrument detail is simply staggering at times and vocalists seem to be pouring their ‘innermost thoughts at you straight from the heart, rather than just singing lines half-heartedly from a lyric sheet. I cannot recall ever being quite so captivated by such a small loudspeaker before and can offer them nothing but unreserved praise.

The technology used in a loudspeaker at this price does not make it automatically better or worse than a differently-equipped competitor, after all my two favourites on this occasion were a big three-way floorstander and a tiny standmounter; surely more polar opposites than most. As far as quality loudspeaker designs go, it turns out that it all begins with what you do, rather than the way you do it...
CD Player
Integrated Amplifier
Power Amplifier

CD Player
Integrated Amplifier
Stereo Power Amplifier
Pre-Amplifier
Mono Power Amplifier

Colour: available in TITANIUM and BLACK
Talk to Antony Michaelson about his prodigious product portfolio and there are a few select designs about which he speaks with particular affection, the A1000 being one of them. This was one of the first British battleship integrateds. Of course, Japanese marques like Sansui once specialised in the breed - producing massive, usually heavily Class A, powerhouses with lavish looks and a fine feel - but here in the UK it wasn’t until the advent of the A1000 in the early nineties that super integrateds ever existed.

Michaelson’s monolith was a lavish affair; being a two-box design, the first being the amp itself and the second the power supply (11 kg and 7 kg respectively). It boasted 50W RMS in pure Class A from two sets of eight heavily heatsinked transistors, aspirated by two chunky toroidal transformers in the other box. Switch it on and within an hour most of the casework was too hot to handle despite all that elaborate heatsinking, such was its prodigious power consumption...

On delivering this, the new AMS35i to me, Antony declared it to be the A1000’s spiritual successor, and you can see why. It’s pure Class A into 8 Ohms. He argues that many manufacturers assert their products to be ‘pure Class A’ amplifiers, but are actually simply Class AB amps biased just a bit more towards Class A. This is emphatically not the case with the 35i, he says, and the temperature rise of the massive heatsinks (about 35°C) is testimony to this. Suffice to say, after my review sample had been on for an hour, the central heating went off and I was contemplating making myself some cheese on toast right there in my listening room...

Boasting 35W RMS per channel into 8 Ohms [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE], the AMS35i is a dual mono amplifier, each ‘bank’ with its own separate transformer. The preamp also has separate power supplies with discrete windings on the transformer. The circuitry itself is said to be “a direct descendant of the Titan and AMS550 circuit designs and is very closely related to them”.

I have to say that this is one of the most attractive modern Musical Fidelity products I’ve seen for a while, looking purposeful and imposing (it’s not small at 483x148x475mm and 28.3 kg), yet subtle and classy too - especially in the black satin finish of our review sample. Whilst it lacks the silky perfection of Japanese esoterica, it’s certainly very well made and finished. The front panel is machined from solid, milspec aluminium billet, with an exclusive titanium G2 finish, in silver or black. The badge is made from medical grade stainless steel. The top and back are machined from solid and the heatsinks are custom made for maximum efficiency.

The front panel layout consists of a large, smooth operating central volume control, with smaller source selector buttons with individual blue LEDs. Round the back there are four RCA phono inputs (including a tape loop) and one balanced XLR, and one fixed (tape out) and one variable (pre out) RCA phono outputs, plus...
two pairs of 4mm speaker binding post outputs. The AMS35i's remote is “one of the single most expensive components” of the package.

Exquisitely machined from solid, it’s a handy thing to have in your dressing gown pocket should a midnight burglar decide he has as much right to own your hi-fi as you.

SOUND QUALITY

As with everyone here at Hi-Fi World, I am an ardent fan of valve amplifiers, but I personally must confess that I don’t listen to them very much at the moment. My World Audio Design KSB81 (heavily modded) is one of the most divine performers when in its comfort zone, but as valve aficionados will know, this is easier said than done. My own listening room is quite large and my choice of reference loudspeakers is demanding on any amplifier; while my N$1000M’s have a quoted 91dB sensitivity they’re a

a profoundly different quality to what people are used to. Music is suddenly crystal clear, almost icy so, like a frozen sea under blistering blue sky. All the grey ‘fug’ that the switching distortion of Class AB disappears at a stroke, and it’s like the sun has come out.

Still, just being Class A isn’t a guarantee of perfection. I very much like the £3,500 Sugden A4 for what it does to the music - which is to make it very clean and fun - but there’s certainly a bright upper midband there to be heard, especially through speakers such as mine which, like most metal driven speakers, aren’t backward in coming forward. It’s a great amp, the Sugden, but not perfect. Fascinating then to get the chance to try the Musical Fidelity AMS35i, which at £6,000 is surely the most expensive example of the integrated breed I’ve heard, and without doubt the most purposeful...

After about an hour’s warm up (whereas in Class AB of course). It has a richness and a sheen of switching distortion, which investing the humble transistor amplifier with

definitive increase the quality of the music. The AMS35i has the key benefit is the lack of switching distortion, which invests the humble transistor amplifier with
the amp, my room and then me - in that order), my first instinct was to reach for the nearest LP. Duly, Wings’ ‘London Town’ (“ah, Wings, the band the Beatles could have been”, to quote Alan Partridge) was cued up, and I sat back. As Musical Fidelity amplifiers go, this was one of the sweetest and most beguiling I’ve heard. Their kW stuff sounds impressive in my system, but the AMS35i sounded beautiful. There’s a smoothness, delicacy and warmth to this amplifier that I haven’t heard outside of a valve amplifier, and it was so pronounced that I’m still trying to fathom it weeks after first setting ears upon it.

‘London Town’ is a typical late seventies analogue recording (done mostly at Abbey Road Studios, of course). It has a richness and a sheen that’s simply not possible to hear anywhere now. I’m not sure if it was McCartney’s (and Denny Laine’s) choice of exotic cigarettes, but the song lilts along with an unusually relaxed gait, and immediately the AMS35i snapped over (whereas in Class AB of course) they switch on and off at higher outputs). The key benefit is the lack of switching distortion, which invests the humble transistor amplifier with

represents a distinct upping of the pace compared to the Wings track, and immediately the AMS35i snapped into life. The amplifier was able to ‘pick up its skirt and run’, so to speak, showing its natural speed to great effect. Even at high volume, with the Yamahas’ twelve inch cones flapping like flares in seventies Coca Cola advert, the big Musical Fidelity served up large dollops of clean power, stopping and starting like its very life depended on it. Despite all its low frequency travails, the Rickie Lee Jones sample was rendered with cut-glass clarity, and the sampled keyboard loops chimed cleanly and purposefully out of the mix. Despite its low rated power, this is as confident a 35W as I’ve heard,

stop-starts wasn’t forced or muddled. Instead the Musical Fidelity remained in confident control, happy to amble when the song demanded, then ready to rock when the song’s energetic, Hammond organ-driven bridge came to be.

Impressed as I was with the AMS35i's unforced musicality, this amplifier’s tonality really made its mark. The brass section that permeates the song was rendered with unexpected accuracy, the strings had a supernaturally silken sheen and McCartney’s vocals were carried with an almost disconcerting realism, overdubs and all. Tonally this amplifier is a smoothie alright, but only in the sense that it doesn’t add grain or grit.

Warping forward twelve years, and The Orb’s ‘Little Fluffy Clouds’, a classic slice of ambient house from 1990, was next on the turntable. With a heavy sequenced sampled drum loop driving the song, it

still

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Warping forward twelve years, and The Orb’s ‘Little Fluffy Clouds’, a classic slice of ambient house from 1990, was next on the turntable. With a heavy sequenced sampled drum loop driving the song, it represents a distinct upping of the pace compared to the Wings track, and immediately the AMS35i snapped into life. The amplifier was able to ‘pick up its skirt and run’, so to speak, showing its natural speed to great effect. Even at high volume, with the Yamahas’ twelve inch cones flapping like flares in seventies Coca Cola advert, the big Musical Fidelity served up large dollops of clean power, stopping and starting like its very life depended on it. Despite all its low frequency travails, the Rickie Lee Jones sample was rendered with cut-glass clarity, and the sampled keyboard loops chimed cleanly and purposefully out of the mix. Despite its low rated power, this is as confident a 35W as I’ve heard, with prodigious amounts of low frequencies served up. Compared to my reference Sugden, there seemed to be a whole extra octave of bass!

Time for...
"a beguiling, wonderfully open integrated with just enough power for a large room, this is bound to warm the cockles of your heart..."

a few too many clangy early digital keyboard sounds for my tastes. 'The Meeting Place' is quintessential XTC fare, Colin Moulding's vocals counter-pointed by chiming DX7s in a lovely melodic way, but it's hard work on most high end hi-fi systems. Not so on the AMS35i, which seemed to cut through the top layer of grime like an expensive car polish, letting the recording's true colour shine through. Although not exactly warm, this big integrated simply refused to 'take the bait' and go grainy, whereas I'm sorry to say that the (admittedly a lot cheaper) Sugden duly ran with it. This amp was able to unlock the recording, getting me closer to the song and its performer. Impressed as I was by its sweet sonority, all along the Musical Fidelity carried the song's rhythm with remarkable subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety.

Moving to a great slice of modern jazz funk with sky-high production values and masterful recording quality, and 'Meeting Place' is quintessential XTC fare, Colin Moulding's vocals counter-pointed by chiming DX7s in a lovely melodic way, but it's hard work on most high end hi-fi systems. Not so on the AMS35i, which seemed to cut through the top layer of grime like an expensive car polish, letting the recording's true colour shine through. Although not exactly warm, this big integrated simply refused to 'take the bait' and go grainy, whereas I'm sorry to say that the (admittedly a lot cheaper) Sugden duly ran with it. This amp was able to unlock the recording, getting me closer to the song and its performer. Impressed as I was by its sweet sonority, all along the Musical Fidelity carried the song's rhythm with remarkable subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety. On this track the drummer shows a certain Ringo subtlety.
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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that will transfer itself to the pulley and then onto the platter, and then up into your stylus.

Consequently, a proper power supply that can generate a clean and undistorted signal to drive your motor is an obvious step, and the latest to join the fray is the Stamford Audio Pegasus. This is rather more advanced than their current offboard Mose design, sporting no less than a two line LCD screen on which information is displayed! Two switches are fitted; one to allow you to step through the speed menu and the second to select the one you want, which starts the platter turning, or deselect it, which stops rotation. Speed options are fixed 33, 45 and 78 rpm plus a "Vari" option which starts you off at 78rpm but then allows for a good range of adjustment to suit those old shellac discs you'd forgotten up in the loft. Connection to your turntable is through an IEC socket, and Stamford also provided an IEC to UK mains socket adaptor lead, so you can just plug your deck right in.

Connected up to my Sonab 65S and setting the belt to the 45rpm pulley, I was pleased at how the Pegasus whipped it up to speed smartly and peering at a strobe disc sat on the platter showed that everything was rock steady at all three speeds. Spinning an LP revealed an eyebrow-raising difference; it was as if everything had just slipped into better focus, with the Pegasus seeming to sharpen details perfectly. Cymbals seemed snappier, drum beats more solid and the location of players within the soundstage was much more vivid, making them easier to locate. Classical recordings gained much more air and rhythmical precision, and some snappy funk courtesy of the Average White Band really picked itself up and flew from my loudspeakers. Pegasus is another success for Stamford Audio’s quest to have us all powering our turntables properly. Operationally a pleasant change from the ubiquitous black box with a couple of switches on the front, it also scores highly in both compatibility and sonic terms and can be heartily recommended. AS

[Contact: +44(0)845 6035781, www.stamfordaudio.co.uk]
Brainy and good looking!

According to the world’s press, this is one of the very best CD players, even at twice the price! And now the “made for high-end audio” digital “engine” in this CD 8 SE has just been awarded “Technology of the year” by Hi-Fi Plus. Recognition that reinforces the fact that each of our three CD models are recognised as “best in class” all around the world.

The new Cyrus 8 XP amplifier has just been awarded “group test winner” by What Hi-Fi. The XP platform is upgradeable from the £900 6XP all the way up to the amazing DAC equipped 8 XP dQx model with USB and SPDIF options, making this new amplifier range the darlings of both audiophiles and computer based music lovers alike.

The rack is the new HARK2. Like all Cyrus products it is expandable, so if you start with just a couple of our die-cast magnesium audio components, you can rest assured the rack will be able to expand all the way up to 8 boxes!

Our website has the contact details for our appointed retailers who will be happy to demonstrate why these new audio components set new standards.

Did you know?

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WIN A SUPERB SUGDEN MYSTRO INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER WORTH £1,225 IN THIS MONTH'S GREAT GIVEAWAY!

Here's your chance to win one of your favourite of the latest crop of integrated amplifiers, the Sugden Mystro reviewed in the November 2009 edition of Hi-Fi World magazine!

Here's what David Price said...

"This amplifier has radically new underpinnings, including some circuitry designed for a high end range coming next year, to sit above Masterclass. The Mystro is the first Sugden amplifier to include a Voltage Current Voltage (VCV) preamplifier stage, which includes a buffered input, voltage to current converter (Howland Current Pump) and current to voltage output stage. This produces a perfect current, says Sugden, independent of the volume control setting in the HCP stage. This current drives the virtual earth output stage, combined with a Class AB power amp stage, configured as dual mono, which we found to be running very low negative feedback on its multi emitter, bi-polar output devices. A large, clearly laid out printed circuit board house selected discrete audio components, together with individually selected, low noise, low distortion, high slew rate and high bandwidth op-amps. The power supply is a robust triple secondary wound toroidal transformer of 200va, smoothed by 6800uf capacitors. There's an MM phono stage, three stereo line inputs, and that's your lot. The slimline 430x340x90mm box is very good, and the metal casing is decent, explaining some of that 9kg weight, and the front fascia is sumptuous and sleek looking. Finish is excellent considering the price.

The Mystro has a joyful rhythmic snap. Kicking off with Sniff'n'the Tears' 'Driver's Seat', and I was impressed by the way the song powered along in such a bubbly way. Given that the A21a S2 is rhythmically no slouch at all, I was more than slightly surprised to find the Mystro an even more urgent, friskier sounding musical tool than its more expensive sibling. The song's basic guitar riff just seemed more spirited, the drums more impactful and the syncopation of the singer's voice more dramatic. Dynamic contrasts were no less vivid than the A21, with the kick drum and snares conveyed with gusto, while a surprisingly strong bass guitar sound underpinned the song in an unremittingly insistent way. Indeed, the new baby Sugden's bass truly surprised me; being large in stature and unexpectedly full bodied, it didn't bat an eyelid with my big Yamaha speakers (where the A21a S2 sounded less comfortable), and came over all big hearted and full of swagger. It so enjoys big, widescreen rock and pop music. I came away completely beguiled by this new Sugden. It just loves to make music, sounds utterly compelling in its delivery, and gives away almost nothing to any of its price rivals, including its talented A21a sibling."

For a chance to win this great new product, just answer the following four easy questions. Send your entries on a postcard only by 30th November 2009 to:

December 2009 Competition, Hi-Fi World magazine, Unit G4, Argo House, The Park Business Centre, Kilburn Park Road, London NW6 5LF.
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Q Series

'They're big - but not too big - and work well with both movies and music. They also look classy. Consider them highly recommended.'

Home Cinema Choice, April 2009
Back in 1999, Hi-Fi World started bundling a small magazine called Computer Audio World, which yours truly had the honour to edit. It was packed with tidbits about computer soundcards, MP3 encoders and CD burners - and how to get the best out of them all when using your PC as a sound source. The trouble was, most people weren't, and it's only now, a decade later, that it's truly normal to play out your music from your PC or Mac. The problem was then, and is now, that computers are notoriously noisy environments - and I don't just mean the cooling fans. They invariably have cheap switched mode power supplies which throw lots of electrical 'scunge' into the system, and as anyone who's ever really tried to get serious sound from their hi-fi will know, noise annoys - in fact, it destroys!

The answer then for computer audiophiles is to use an offboard soundcard such as the DevilSound. This is a lovely little thing; it's a very small and compact DAC that sports its own analogue output stage hard wired to high quality RCA phono leads, ready to feed your amplifier direct. It uses hi-fi best practice in many areas; it's a 16bit, NOS (non-oversampled) design running at 32, 44.1 and 48 kHz with no resampling or upsampling. It is said to contain special circuitry to regenerate clean power from the USB port, said to provide "extremely clean and stable positive and negative 5V power rails". It sports a Burr Brown PCM2706 digital receiver chip, bypassing its built-in DAC to generate a clean, low-jitter digital audio stream. This feeds a stereo pair of Analog Devices AD1851's, the best quality 'J' variants surface mounted and run in non-oversampled mode.

A single-stage op-amp output, which integrates a current to voltage (I/V) converter with a gentle low-pass filter, is employed. All in all, it's a very well engineered, and finely built thing, but so it should be at £235!

Sonicly it's impressive; I used it from my MacBook Pro, playing 16bit FLAC via Songbird and ITunes in ALAC, and in both instances the DevilSound significantly improved on the Mac's own analogue line/ headphone output. By comparison, the latter sounded hard, two dimensional, and rather chrome plated in the upper mid and treble, despite an obvious top-end roll off. This is standard computer audio sound, whereas the DevilSound bought real depth to the soundstage, pulled out a lot of glare and added a fuller and more tuneful bass. It's a great 'plug and play' package then, but at the price you have to remember it's competing against the likes of Cambridge Audio's DAC Magic (£200) which sound better still and offer real 24/96 play through. So where the DevilSound scores is its sheer compactness and portability. If you're a laptop using, travelling man it's superb, if not then look to the aforementioned Cambridge Audio or Musical Fidelity V-DAC. DP

[Contact: www.istereos.co.uk]

M.A.D. BALANCED POWER ISOLATION PLATFORM £895

An imaginative concept, this. Many people are looking for massy supports to isolate their equipment, and what's heavier than a vast toroidal transformer, a layer of granite and an oak box? This My Audio Design accessory is both a mains conditioner and an isolation platform. The balanced transformer is accurately wound on a German made silicon alloy core with "the finest laminated high purity copper wire" (also available as a Special Edition with 99.997% silver) onto two Clipsal sockets. It has two specially designed noise screens to remove unwanted high frequency interference in your mains power supply, it's claimed. The box is nicely finished from handcrafted English Oak and granite.

Sonically, I found the BPIP made a discernible difference to my system sound, even though I'm fortunate enough to live in a fairly quiet mains environment. The difference was even evident with something as rudimentary as a Cambridge Audio DV30 DVD player, there being a reduction in the hardness of its CD sound, a gentle widening of the soundstage and extension to stage depth. Running a high end Sony CD transport into a Stello DA100 Signature (two sockets are provided), things got even nicer, with an obvious reduction in upper midband 'sheen' and an increase in detail; the music flowed better and there wasn't the slightest slowing of the music or lessening of dynamics. A fine, quirky, interesting product worth trying. DP

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The quest to squeeze a half-decent noise from your basic Apple iPod has been a long and often painful affair. The market has been swamped with plastic trash: boxes that offer more form than substance and others that could easily be responsible for a space of UFO sightings.

The Geneva Model L is not one of these. In fact, it looks like it may have escaped from a Habitat showroom. Striking and a little daunting to look at, this standalone iPod dock... isn't. That is, the parent company, Geneva Lab, describes the unit as a 'sound system' because it also features a built-in CD player (with a grab slot) plus FM radio. Offering 50W of power, the single box also holds two 5.25" bass drivers and two 1" tweeters to form the company's own 'Embracing Sound' system, hopefully increasing the size of the soundstage. It's no surprise, therefore, that the 448x365x291mm of the soundstage. It's no surprise, therefore, that the Geneva Model L under review was presented in an attractive piano black (although red and white are also available).

A sturdy remote is supplied that includes basic commands only. Additional CD controls such as 'repeat', for example, would have been welcome. In addition, the six radio preset buttons are labelled P-R-E-S-E-T which, to my mind, is not funny and is not clever. What's wrong with numbers? A large, front mounted, LED display tells you what mode the Model L is in.

SOUND QUALITY
One of its principal operations might be to serve as an iPod dock and users, the world over, may primarily listen to MP3 files but the Model L won't thank you for it. In fact, it'll turn up its nose pretty quickly because MP3s of all stripes, via my iPod Classic, did not sound good, rather thin and a little harsh. So it was with a sense of relief that .wav files proved far more successful, but the Model L's particularly transparent nature never covered up for the intrinsic source. Yes, as we know all too well, iPods are ports for an external FM radio aerial and Line Out ports for a TV, computer, DVD or VHS player. The Model L under review was presented in an attractive piano black (although red and white are also available).

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On jazz, the Model L's tendency towards a slightly forward sound provided a crisp, clean midrange presentation – which could become less comfortable with a brighter sounding track - with fast and precise bass while lower midrange reproduction and instrumental separation was a standout on bass-heavy rock.

The difference in quality between the iPod and ye olde Compact Disc was obvious and welcome, as the CD produced a far fuller, more rounded presentation across all frequencies. The large increase in sound quality is, actually, a testament to the Model L as a sound reproducer while the enhanced sound stage was more convincing in CD mode.

FM radio sound quality, via a roof-mounted aerial, was especially pleasing, despite the rather clunky station scanning via the remote. Pop music, from local stations, was inherently musical triggering many a foot-tap while Radio 3's live, solo harp recital was a delight, despite a slight hum at high volumes – upper-mids and treble being particularly airy and light. Radio 2's closely-miked speaking voices were also well modulated, desk papers rustled and radio car interviews even featured their own type of hiss.

CONCLUSION
The Geneva Model L might be a few pounds short of £1,000 (with the stand) but there have been plenty of iPod docks out there – of whatever cost - which have still failed to deliver the goods commensurate to their respective price. The Geneva Model L, however, is worth the asking price, I feel. In fact, the company is right to call the box a sound system as some users, especially if space is tight or interior design is a priority, will only require a Model L as their primary sound system. Not quite the equal of hi-fi separates, but a nice device nevertheless.
Since the first time that the Beatles catalogue was remastered back in 1987, there have been tremendous technical improvements in analogue to digital converters. With this in mind, along with the fact that the original remasters weren’t exactly regarded as a resounding sonic success, the decision was taken to reremaster this great body of musical work.

Each box arrives with all albums carrying the original UK art, expanded booklets featuring original and new liner notes plus rare photos. Quicktime, mini-documentaries are included too which can be viewed via computer. All the Beatles albums are featured in the stereo box along with the Past Masters collection, now squeezed on one CD. The mono box set features all ten of the albums created in that format plus two additional CDs of ‘Mono Masters’ covering similar territory to the stereo tracks on the ‘Past Masters’ CDs. The mono albums, pressed in Japan, have been reproduced as mini-vinyl editions, complete with miniature versions of the sleeves plus all original inserts.

Project Coordinator Allan Rouse was very happy with the final remastered tracks. Producing a 24-bit/192kHz master to work from, he believed, “digital, now being what it is, the new digital masters sound very close to the original master tapes. In fact, if I sat them down here in the studio and compared the original analogue tapes to the 24bit/192kHz master, I would defy most people to tell the difference between the two.”

So, what do they sound like? It is interesting to hear how poor the original stereo mixing is and how long it took to get to grips with the subtleties of the process. ‘With The Beatles’, for example, is played with all of the vocals played out of one speaker and all the instruments out of the other. At this time, mono was the dominant format and, in fact, the stereo process was utilised more to achieve a good balance between vocals and instruments before the final mono mix was created.

The stereo version of Revolver is a proper stereo mix with integrated vocals and instruments. However, it is also extremely annoying. You can tell that, at this time, that stereo was the ‘in thing’ to play with. The engineers were having a whale of a time moving vocals and instruments around willy-nilly. However, because the effect has been handled like a technical toy, the stereo process is, in itself, distancing.

It’s only when you reach the later albums, such as ‘Abbey Road’, which reflected the contemporary dominance of stereo, that you can hear that the engineers have settled down, gotten used to the process and finally produced a mature album. ‘Abbey Road’, on purely ‘stereo’ grounds, is a joy to listen to; it provides subtlety and nuance, building a 3D soundstage instead of the flat two-dimensional sound that was the norm up until the release of Yellow Submarine (a crossover release which features a ‘fold down’ stereo process is, in itself, distracting.

My reason for babbling on about the original stereo mixes? To emphasise just how important the mono box is to us audiophiles. Frankly, if you have a decent hi-fi system, you are going to find the mono mixes on the albums first and directly comparing them with the same albums from the stereo box set, remaster or no remaster. Never mind the improved quality and better balance to many of the mono mixes themselves.

After all, The Beatles as a group and the back room staff gave up mono as the prime format up until the release of Yellow Submarine (a crossover release which features a ‘fold down’ vinyl pressing trick, providing a mono sound for people with mono system; which is why this album doesn’t appear in the mono box set) and Abbey Road (which was true stereo). Until that point, the mono master was treated more seriously while the stereo mix was an annoying afterthought. This is borne out by dozens of minor differences between the mono and stereo versions. Some tracks are longer in mono, contain the correct lyrics, more effects, extra guitar solo time, new instruments, corrected mistakes, and more.

My selection of the Esoteric as a front-end of choice reflects one of the pre-release criticisms of the stereo remasters: the revelation that some element of compression would be imposed on the mixes. The Esoteric duo has been known for its analytical approach to CD play so, if any peak limiting had been applied to the CDs, I was sure to hear it via the Esoterics.

Taking the remastered stereo albums first and directly comparing them with the same albums from the 1987 release series, I can confirm that all of the remastered albums sound louder. I can also confirm that the peak limiting has not been imposed to extremes. That is, there is no clipping. None of the albums have received the same sort of extreme peak limiting that often makes chart-bound albums practically unlistenable. The fact remains however that the entire stereo remastering process is somewhat of a Curate’s Egg. So why was limiting introduced?

“We could have gone a lot louder but we chose not to, actually. But I think what we’ve done helps...
the sound," said Rouse. "The limiting adds slightly more drive and there are, in fact, at least 20 stereo tracks that contain no EQ at all. There's also upwards of another (100 that might have a single dB of compression or a dB at a single frequency. Anything that needed a bit of assistance. Some songs, the middle portion of the song 'Yellow Submarine', for example, were EQ'd in sections because each portion required a different type of assistance."

During my listening tests and starting at 'With the Beatles', initially released in 1963, the general remastering is impressive. Ringo Starr, who was largely absent from the 1987 version of 'It Won't Be Long', is back with a vengeance on the remastered version as his bass drum acts as a driving force over the entire track while his drum fills, wholly hidden behind Harrison's clanging guitar on the 1987 version, can be heard for the first time on the remaster. Who knows, maybe Starr's reputation will have to be re-evaluated after the launch of the remasters!

Midrange frequencies now enjoy a greater clarity. Harrison's guitar benefits from greater definition and focus. His own clipped, stuttering, strumming on the same track is revealed properly for the first time here while more air and space separates the vocal harmonies and multitracked lead vocal.

'All I've Got To Do' actually improved bass added a real sense of pace. Again, you can discern the subtle compressive effects placed upon the track but no element of the song was in any way offensive. However, because the ear could pick up the compression, there was, of course, an edge taken off my enjoyment of the track as a whole, via the Esoteric duo.

Yet, on 'Abbey Road', 'Come Together' was superb. The remastering supplied the mature stereo mix with an entirely new life from the subwoofer — such as the new but delicate reverb found on Lennon's vocal — to the more dramatic — such as the new weight and power supplied by Starr's drums and Harrison's guitar. Midrange enhancements include the rendition of the organ which now exudes a multilayered complexity that just wasn't there before. "Here Comes The Sun" presents a series of sparkling treble tones, informative and communicative upper mids, thrilling lower mids, focused and believable upper bass frequencies and a lower bass that binds the lot together skillfully. I then ran the tracks through the Cyrus/Benchmark duo, which is much more balanced as a front-end, warming up the clinical Esoteric edges. As expected, any worrying compression elements were suitably less problematic with this new hardware source. Jarring edges were softened while harsh frequencies were quelled to such an extent that many listeners might wonder what all the fuss is about. That said however, even with this balanced system, I can still hear that compression has been added, even though it is presented in a far friendlier form.

'Revolver' (1966) proved intriguing. Played through the transparent Esoteric system, the rendition of 'Taxman' revealed a much busier performance than the original CD master. That is mostly because both the drums and bass play a much more active role and the greater midrange definition lifts the extra percussive effects, focusing more attention upon them. Here however, compression can be annoying. Via the Esoteric, the rhythm guitar line was a touch bright. At high volumes, it was even slightly oppressive. This single guitar was the only problem with the track however. The compression was hardly ruinous but the edge was certainly taken off the brilliance of the remastering, on this track especially.

The remastering was made for tracks like 'Tomorrow Never Knows', however. This complex, patchwork quilt-like track of treated vocals, backwards guitars, tape loops etc., was enhanced by the superior clarity. The track came to life during the remastered version while the improved bass added a real sense of pace. Again, you can discern the subtle compressive effects placed upon the track but no element of the song was in any way offensive. However, because the ear could pick up the compression, there was, of course, an edge taken off my enjoyment of the track as a whole, via the Esoteric duo.

And for the future? Can we expect a box-set version that, like the recent Neil Young archives, provides another version of the same boxes but are packed with tons of archival material on both audio and video that also throws in the Beatles films and more? Hmm, maybe. My enquiries to that effect didn't rule out such a project. As for vinyl fans? Well, I received the same reply: it's a definite maybe. I personally feel that a vinyl version will appear but it will be taken from the new 24bit/192kHz masters of the original master tapes that were used to create the CD versions. If so, I, for one can't wait.

THE END

For the dedicated Beatles fan, buy both box sets. For those looking after their pennies and anti-compression listeners, buy the mono box set and then purchase the remastered stereo 'Yellow Submarine', 'Abbey Road' and 'Let It Be' to complete the set. For those who might own a CD player that is rather clinical in its approach such as the Esoteric or, on the lower end of the scale, the Pioneer PD-D9, for example, buy the mono box then borrow one of the final three remastered CDs and see if the compression offends. If so, top up your collection with the 1987 era releases. For those who might describe themselves as more casual listeners with more balanced, warmer or sweeter CD systems or those looking to immediately transfer the CDs to iPod, buy the stereo box set only.

As for vinyl fans? Well, I received the same reply: it's a definite maybe. I personally feel that a vinyl version will appear but it will be taken from the new 24bit/192kHz masters of the original master tapes that were used to create the CD versions. If so, I, for one can't wait.
Noel Keywood recalls his experiences with B&W's latest large sub-£2,000 floorstanding loudspeaker, the CM9...

B&W say the CM Series sits between the 600 Series and the 800 Series, and regular readers will notice a distinct similarity between the CM9 and the 683 I reviewed in our March 09 issue. It isn't unreasonable to see the CM9 as a tuned up version of the 683 I found, with a smoother sounding tweeter, improved standard of finish and — inevitably — higher price tag of £1,760, or £860 more than the 683. Happily, the 683 was a good loudspeaker so improving upon it can justify a high end price, and by staying under £2,000 the CM9 is still a competitive modern floorstander. It is a product so judiciously balanced in all respects, from sound to build quality, that it's something of a yardstick against which other loudspeakers in this popular slot can be measured. It offers a nice, bright, shiny modern sound, without possessing the character of so many rivals that, in trying too hard perhaps, make selection very much a matter of taste.

Like the 683 the CM9 is a large floorstander distinguished by its eye catching yellow Kevlar midrange unit. This works from 350Hz to 4kHz — an unusual working range for a modern 3-way loudspeaker because it means the bass units are handling the lower midrange and there will be a character change here when crossing over from bass to midrange. Which is why, I suspect, B&W fit different bass units to the CM9, ones with a paper/Kevlar cone, instead of the aluminium/paper/Kevlar cones used in the 683. The Kevlar coned yellow FST midrange unit, with its direct cone edge termination (it has no roll surround) appears to be the same in both loudspeakers, appearance suggests, although it measures differently.

Both the 683 and CM9 have a 25mm (1in) aluminium dome tweeter and you could assume these behave identically too, but again they do not I found. The CM9 tweeter is more civilised than the 683 and it makes quite a difference. However, to be brutally frank the opposition are pedalling off into the sunset here, leaving B&W with a tweeter that is no great shakes all the same. Ribbons are appearing everywhere,
Audiosmile use a lovely isoplanar tweeter and the superb Vifa ring tweeter in Acoustic Energy’s Radiance 3 is gaining popularity fast. All give audibly better results than even the best aluminium domes so it is against this wider background the CM9 is judged.

Study the specs closely and you will find the CM9 is dimensionally very close to the 683, but B&W give it a plinth to add stability and raise it up a little. Fitting the plinth is part of the set up ceremony and it is best to keep a set of (supplied) clear moulded plastic protective covers on whilst doing so, because the exposed dome of B&W’s aluminium tweeter is readily damaged.

With the plinth fitted, spikes or soft plastic dome feet can be attached, to give a very stable loudspeaker! I found, much more so that the 683. The aluminium trim rings of the CM9 and its superbly veneered cabinet – only Monitor Audio do it better – do make for a professionally finished product that will sit in a modern lounge and look the part. Cloth grilles ease its visual alliance with more traditional surroundings. The rear carries a port and bi-wire terminals that accept 4mm plugs, bare wires or spades. Foam port bungs can be used to damp down bass, but we did not use them.

**SOUND QUALITY**

I started listening with a Stello CDT-100 CD transport feeding a DA-100 DAC and Icon MB845 valve monoblocks. B&W loudspeakers generally have an open and spacious sound, characterised by a modern light air to their presentation, but just off the discernible character of metal cone loudspeakers. The more I listen to and measure the B&W Kevlar cone units, however, the more aware I become of their own sound, and the CM9 driver very much reflects this. There is in its quality a peculiar "schhh" and in its decay spectrum some obvious modes, suggesting the origin. Add in some midband peaking linked into these effects and the lightening of vocal timbre that I heard whilst doing so, because the exposed dome of the fuller variety, such as the CM9’s performance, there seemed no wallow, nor the dissociated low frequency rumble that some ports give. Spinning my Angelique Kidjo torture tracks with overpowering bass down to 30Hz (we have measured it) showed the CM9s deliver nicely. They are judiciously balanced to give bass at just the right level, nicely integrated with the midband so bass lines stay firm, taut, tuneful and of consistent character, right down to the lowest notes. I suspect the easy handling of bass fundamentals from 40Hz upward and absence of port waffle contribute toward this. It is a big plus point for the CM9 though, as it was for the 683, and contributes strongly to a perception of ability that makes them a pleasing listen.

The light midband quality of the CM9 translated into plentiful amounts of insight and detail being generated. No matter where I sat there was little phasiness, inconsistency or softness to be heard; just a wide open upper midband that was airy and spacious. However, I did tilt them back on their spikes to intensify the midband very slightly. The downside is that the CM9s, like other B&Ws, have somewhat pronounced contrast. The Leema Pulse in this case went very well differentiated by solid-state and very well differentiated by valve power amplifiers with their characteristically zingy KT88 treble might be a better choice of valve amp. But that isn’t the whole story. Whilst extraordinarily shiny and highly detailed treble brought Carlos Santana’s guitar strings right out into my lap, density of vocal images was diminished and bass became more an outline than an instrument. All the same, plenty of dynamic life and good friendly amounts of punch when called upon do much to make for an attractive presentation that rivals can’t quite get a grip on. It is here that the CM9s score strongly, they sound so clean, even and tidy.

Moving from the Icon Audio MB845 valve power amplifiers to a transistor Leema Pulse in this case was an interesting contrast. The Leema has pronounced treble but it is sweet and very well differentiated by solid-state standards and worked surprisingly well with the CM9s, so much so that I mused whether Quad II eighty power amplifiers with their characteristically zingy KT88 treble might be a better choice of valve amp. But that isn’t the whole story. Whilst extraordinarily shiny and highly detailed treble brought Carlos Santana’s guitar strings right out into my lap, density of vocal images was diminished and bass became more an outline than an instrument. All the same, so spinning Santana’s Yaleo from Supernatural, a track full of activity from its Latin American rhythms, dense percussion and multi-track vocals the CM9s constructed a huge, open panorama of sound in front of me that seethed with detail and action. As I’ve noted before, B&Ws always sound deliciously open and airy and the CM9s were all of this. With a lot of treble energy to exercise the tweeter it hung on well, showing an even nature that was easy enough; the loudspeaker’s spikiness comes from its midrange unit. So the CM9 doesn’t offend up top when pushed; it is shiny and open, but not unpleasant. A nicely clean and concise lower midband and bass region with midband by any means.

These days we are getting many loudspeakers through with raised midbands (and all are projective with vocals), but emphasis like this has to be exploited with care or it becomes an upsetting influence and in the CM9s I believe B&W have allowed their grip on balance and tonality to slip too far. The 683 was smoother and better in this respect.

As the CD version of ‘Rehab’ ended and simple kick drum and plucked bass of ‘You Know I’m No Good’ entered, the CM9 started to show its mettle. Full, firm and lucid as bass from a cabinet of the size goes, the CM9 arguably offers one of the more conspicuously better bass performances available. There’s real depth yet no wallow, nor the dissociated low frequency rumble that some ports give. Spinning my Angelique Kidjo torture tracks with overpowering bass down to 30Hz (we have measured it) showed the CM9s deliver nicely. They are judiciously balanced to give bass at just the right level, nicely integrated with the midband so bass lines stay firm, taut, tuneful and of consistent character, right down to the lowest notes. I suspect the easy handling of bass fundamentals from 40Hz upward and absence of port waffle contribute toward this. It is a big plus point for the CM9 though, as it was for the 683, and contributes strongly to a perception of ability that makes them a pleasing listen.

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"it really does deliver a conspicuously shiny high fidelity sound, one that's overwhelmingly impressive..."
AMS35i Integrated Amplifier

New from Musical Fidelity. 35 wpc. Pure Class A.
the CM9s sounded spectacularly forthright with the Pulse and I can see listeners falling for this sound, even if I was more impressed than convinced (about its naturalness).

But it prompted me to swap the Creek OBH-22 passive preamp for an Icon Audio LA4 valve preamp and this showed the Creek was holding things back. Normally its damping influence is welcome, but the CM9s showed it was also suppressing speed and detailing. So the CM9s have real insight and are amplifier sensitive as a result, a sign of a good loudspeaker. In fact they are a great loudspeaker with some blemishes that need clearing, the midband peak being the most obvious.

Working through classical music from CD the CM9s were entertaining but not perfect. The midrange unit all but worked alone at times it seemed, giving Renee Fleming great presence but a light nature that I didn’t find very convincing. It was a pleasant listen, but presentationally unbalanced. Nigel Kennedy playing Max Bruch’s Violin Concerto No1 was light, airy and smooth, but an orchestral climax was over-lit in the midband. With a stronger orchestral contribution within a Sibelius piece, the CM9s reignited it seemed, as the bass/mids made their presence known but on balance the CM9s were least convincing with classical music from CD. This isn’t their forte.

The picture changed for the better with LP. The extra warmth, bass power and cohesiveness helped knit the CM9’s drive units and the loudspeaker really showed its mettle, turning in great performances from old and new recordings alike. The Who’s first album, ‘My Generation’, survived nicely in spite of its own “recorded through a baked bean tin” sound. The CM9s emphasised Daltrey’s voice a little, but the performance still held together and was enjoyable. Old Reggae tracks like the Pioneers’ ‘Long Shot Kick De Bucket’ (well, it always brings a smile to my face!) worked very nicely, supported by a nice firm bass line and great insight into the studio recorded harmonies that made for an atmospheric sound; I like to feel I’m in an old 1970s Jamaican studio – simple but effective – with this track and the CM9s delivered beautifully.

The CM9s worked equally well with modern material like Any Winehouse’s 12in 45rpm single of ‘Tears Dry on Their Own’, consistently sounding squeaky clean, well ordered, tonally even and free from obvious artifice, yet punchy and dynamic. From our Ortofon Cadenza Bronze cartridge through an Eastern Electric Minimax phono stage, LP sounded so good as to be consistently ahead of CD much of the time; the midband emphasis of the CM9 sat better with vinyl than CD.

CONCLUSION

The B&W CM9 leaves me with rather contradictory feelings. Use it with a good amplifier and source and it really does deliver a conspicuously shiny high fidelity sound, one that is overwhelmingly impressive even to casual listeners. And its strengths are real too; listen closely and you truly can hear right into a performance, yet the wide open, airy presentation has a nice flavour to it that it, a bit like the draft of sweet early morning air. But – er – cows leave things lying around and these can taint even the sweetest air. A little tidying would improve the CM9s even more, making this a great loudspeaker. Not entirely accurate it may be, but it is impressive in bucketloads and mightily capable too.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

In frequency response the CM9 is well balanced along the 0dB datum, from low frequencies to highs, so subjectively it will not have either excessive bass or treble, a common phenomenon these days. Even by B&W’s own standards, treble is more restrained than usual, and the tweeter less peaky in itself, so the CM9 should sound less bright than typical B&W’s, and also less coloured.

Due to the slow crossover slope used between midrange and treble units frequency response varies with microphone position due to phase addition/cancellation but there is some loss in the upper midrange as shown in our analysis, just enough to bring a smoothness to the sound, possibly at the expense of a little detail. Bass output is also in good check, so near-wall positioning is likely best. The lower bass limit is 60Hz, below which the CM9 cuts off sharply and this characteristic helps give a tighter, less waffly sound to low frequencies. Our impedance curve shows that the port works over a wide range and damps well. The port is tuned very low, to 26Hz (red trace), and output isn’t high either, so it will not add greatly to perceived bass.

Sensitivity was high at 89dB, partly because this is a 4 Ohm loudspeaker, a few reactive peaks taking the overall measured value to 5 Ohms. Valve amps should be set to 4 Ohms. As a load the CM9 is quite reasonable and will not demand too much current / power because of its sensitivity.

An analysis of signal decay over 200mS shows the CM9 is generally low on colouration, except at the peaking around 1kHz, where some overhang is evident in the decay plot and may add some colour.

B&W usually manage to keep bass distortion low and the CM9 was no exception, registering 2% from both bass drivers and port at 40Hz and not rising much below this frequency. Across the midband distortion was a very low 0.1%.

The CM9 has peculiarities and the midband peak is one of them. The treble unit looks to be improved, whilst bass looks dry and well engineered. It will have likely sound clear and bright, if characterful. 1/2K

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

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IMPEDANCE

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VERDICT

Fabulously impressive hi-fi sound with great strengths, but some will find the midband over-solicitous.

B&W CM9 £1,760
Bowers & Wilkins
C +44 (0) 1903 221 500
www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk

FOR
- clean, well ordered sound
- firm, even bass
- smooth treble

AGAINST
- forward upper midband
- diffuse imaging
- unbalanced with classical
Brennan is currently a single-product, internet-only proposition, and its marketing positioning centres closely on its developer's persona. Martin Brennan's back pages (see www.brennan.co.uk/contact) reveal his electronic engineering background to be the typical Cambridge, Sinclair-affiliated computer games development one, co-designing as he did the Atari Jaguar micro.

For a while now, the JB7 has been appearing in the back pages of music magazines, along with more lifestyle titles (and the New Statesman). In this way, Brennan is pushing the concept of CD collection conversion to those who may not be aware that this is well-trodden ground. To those of us who have been trying to find the best route to lossless CD ripping and playout these last five years, a closed-box limited-codec solution, no matter how attractively styled, is pretty much anathema...

But that price point is tempting enough for the affluent gadget seeker; a range of capacities are available from 80 through 160 to 320 GB, postage-inclusive price points ranging from £339 to £409. Not all are currently available, as the website reports that the year thus far has seen a 600% increase in business, and exhausted stocks of the 80GB unit. That stat alone reveals the demographic the device is catering to, namely small compressed audio collection territory. For those of the less-than-audiophile persuasion, Brennan speakers are available for £69, or in bundled packages.

It should be no secret that to my mind the most flexible, future-proof and high-performance system is separate storage, music serving software and a high-resolution-capable front end such as a Logitech Transporter or some flavour of Linn DS. But for those who don't wish to confront the complexities involved in running such a setup, particularly those on the networking side of the equation the Brennan JB7 may be the ideal solution. In many ways, the extent and limits of its functionality are analogous to the Arcam MS250 of a couple of years ago, albeit without the rudimentary network capabilities, and with the addition of amplification. Regrettably it shares that machine's ignorance of space-saving FLAC usage for lossless enthusiasts, and in this age of DRM-free iTunes Plus files, a criminal lack of .m4a file compatibility.

The one thing the JB7 does have in addition to usual CD storage and playout is the ability to record from a line input. So it could be used for convenient LP/Tape conversion, but the specs of the machine's AD/DA converters are not evident in all the smooth PR puff work. The only option is to hook the machine up and listen to and analyse the results...

GETTING GOING

The main unit comes shipped in a soft cloth bag ideal for mobile use, along with a box of cabling, remote control and manual. The unit itself is solidly built and reassuringly robust. It is barely bigger than your average Lacie d2 design hard-drive, which
"British company reinvents the hi-fi", says the marketing. The Brennan JB7 may look pretty in lifestyle magazines, but can it cut the mustard as a true hi-fi source? Patrick Cleasby decides...

is more or less what it is. But as is helpfully pointed out in the manual, it's "not really a CD player", the disc drive being intended for digital audio extraction as its primary purpose. However, rear ports provided, as well as the clip-type speaker terminals, are three simple 3.5mm stereo jack sockets - headphones, line in and line out. A gold-plated 3.5mm stereo to left-right phono Interconnect is provided.

The power supply is the expected laptop/hard drive-type, and the remote is the equally expected cheap Chinese-made, flat, plastic skinned touch button-type. The manual however, is an endearingly quirky annotated picture deal, highlighting some of the genuinely inventorty tweaks on the device. These include starting the box up while holding the 'next' key which kicks it immediately into random play mode, and the press and hold of the 'stop' button which is 'a kind of panic button'!

It is around this point that one of the most disappointing functionality gaps of the JB7 begins to dawn. If you have a non-internet connected ripping device, how does the audio data get conveniently tagged in the way iTunes users have been used to? You have a non-internet connected ripping device, and navigate across the room. The Brennan becomes apparent. The Brennan just plays away in an inoffensive manner. The line-out connection delivered a slightly flat presentation of the epic, widescreen soundfields of 'Boys and Girls'. So there is nothing terribly compelling about listening to the Brennan then, but it's not bad considering the price.

CONCLUSION

It is easy to see why the stylish looks of the Brennan JB7 have apparently made such a success of this machine. Admireable though Martin Brennan's enterprise is, it is to be hoped that he is working on a more hi-fi, higher capacity, network-capable successor to this appealing, quaint, but slightly aged design. The really essential development, once one has experienced Sonos or Squeezebox controllers, is a graphical, scrollable view of your library in your hand, rather than the type of fluorescent front-panel display we had five years ago in the Squeezeboxes and Soundbridges of yore.

BRENNAN JB7 320G
METALLIC
£399

FOR
- compact design
- ingenious operation
- USB integration
- indifferent sound

AGAINST
- Internet unaware
- MP3/WAV only
- no digital output

VERDICT

A worthy stab at a universal, easy to use hard disk music player, but it has various unresolved issues, particularly lack of FLAC and AAC. Fine value as a starter product, but you may soon outgrow it.
MUSICAL FIDELITY

M6i Integrated Amplifier
New from Musical Fidelity. 200 wpc. Dual mono power amps. Inbuilt, separate, dedicated preamp PSU. Balanced inputs.
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 RON KOORM, Letter of the Month winner in our November 2009 issue.

**Letter of the Month**

**THE MAINS THING**

I started off with a classic Linn Sondek front end back in the early 1980s. I had a Linn Asaka moving coil cartridge which was considered a poor man’s Linn Asak. The Sondek had a certain euphony to the sound which made every record sound emotive and engaging. I soon became tired of the bad tracking ability of the Asaka cartridge and the inherent high frequency distortion. I was also disappointed with the lack of consistency between recordings of the same artists from different record labels.

Being a full time electronics engineer, I could design and build the partnering preamps and power amps to the point where they could be considered blameless in comparison with the ancillary equipment. My amplifier is based on the Electrocompaniet SOW Class A design dating from the 1970s but with substantial power supply and component updates. The Electrocompaniet amplifier philosophy is also extolled in the current darTZeel amplifier designs using an ultra-wide bandwidth, low overall feedback concept. I incorporated a stepped attenuator into the input stage of my amplifier such as to remove the requirement for a separate line amplifier between DAC and amplifier.

My speakers are closed box, two way designs augmented by an active Isobarik closed box sub-bass loudspeaker. This uses an active Linkwitz-Riley crossover to boost the low frequency response down to 20Hz but still retains a box Q of 0.5. This produces a beautifully clean low end response which hardly excites room resonances.

When my cartridge stylus finally wore out I took the step into the digital domain with my first CD system. This comprised a Marantz CD63 CD player serving as a transport feeding an Audio Synthesis DAX DAC. The sound was very good but not as musically involving as the Linn Sondek front end.

I used this system for many years until I recently purchased the Cyrus CD XT SE transport and PSX-R power supply. This was a revelation in terms of musical performance and my system was now starting to sound like a good analogue turntable system.

Usher Be-10, one of the best conventional loudspeakers we have ever heard, up there with electrostatics — but with bass!

However, the most important updates to my system have been the recent introduction of a dedicated mains spur to my system connected via Kimber woven cable and a PS Audio Quintessence mains power conditioner, along with new interconnects. I actually preferred the Quintessence to the Power Plant Premier. The conditioner and CD transport/power supply are fed via Russ Andrews Reference power cords. The digital interconnect between the CD transport and DAC is a Kimber
Select KS2020 and the analogue interconnects to the amplifier are Kimber Select KS1021. The musicality, three dimensionality and level of detail now achieved from CD is a revelation to me and I continually play all my old CDs to hear instruments that had previously been a blur.

I have a pair of Stax Signature electrostatic headphones for monitoring purposes which provide a true insight into a particular recording. These headphones show the sound integration that can only be achieved when using a single transducer for the whole audio spectrum.

My point here is that you can design and build the audio electronics yourself to a point of perfection with the best components available. However, purchasing the best digital / analogue interconnects and mains power conditioner can transform a CD based system with a typical clinical and slightly clunky sound into something quite superb, with all the attributes of a good turntable front end.

I would be interested if you could review high end analogue / digital interconnects in a future Hi-Fi World publication to show how products like the Cyrus CD XT SE transport can really sound when used with the best interconnects.

Also, I would be interested if a future review could show the improvement a dedicated mains spur can provide in conjunction with a good mains power conditioner. I have had an interest in audio amplifier design for about thirty years but have only recently appreciated the significant improvement that interconnects and power conditioners can have on a system sound. It may take some persuading for other people to spend large sums of money on interconnects and conditioners but I am personally convinced.

One last point, your recent review on the Usher Be‐10 loudspeaker has convinced me that I should obtain a pair, probably second-hand, if they should ever materialise. In the meantime, would you consider that your own WD25T loudspeaker design could give me an insight into the performance that the Usher currently offers but at a far more affordable price.

One other advantage of a CD based system, you can buy CDs at car boot sales for no more than £1 each!

Geoff Le Good

Mains cables, conditioning and such like are always going to be a controversial topic. Geoff, because it is difficult to prove anything, if not for obvious reasons. In truth, an audio spectrum analyser can be used to look at noise of all sorts and I used one successfully when probing the effects of using a fully balanced mains transformer; finding it cut earth leakage currents significantly. However, in a careless moment, I misconnected and blew the front end of the £9k analyser immediately! A special interface is needed and a step down transformer is most obvious as one solution, but it will introduce its own problems.

Then there is the variability of supply lines, as I have mentioned many times before. Long power lines from which industrial and agricultural machinery are driven are known to be noisy and prone to large voltage fluctuations and in this circumstance mains conditioning will be influential, as Adam Smith has found living in a Hampshire Village. However, both the magazine and my home are fed from nearby St Johns Wood power station and mains conditioners have little impact, we find. The voltage is very high (246V as I write!) and stays that way, and the lines are clean, the spectrum analyser showed me before it blew up! So the impact of mains conditioning varies according to location, I believe. All the same, that you find it so beneficial is very interesting, and also that conditioning in your case eliminates the “clankiness” of CD. Most engineers believe otherwise as I am sure you well know, so your views are interesting and cautionary to the rest of us.

The WD25T will give good insight but it is a vastly different animal to the Be‐10; the former you can lift, the latter you cannot! As conventional loudspeakers go the Be‐10 is arguably one of the least coloured and most revealing. The WD25T is for medium sized rooms and offers a very tight, dry sound that is both neutral, balanced and revealing. Also, DIY is the final answer (well, sort of) as you can tweak to get the sort of sound you prefer – very suitable for engineers! NK

BUDGET COIL

I am considering upgrading from a twenty year old Planar 3 with absolutely no mods whatsoever and being quite happy with the house sound, figure the P5 (with TT PSU) and P7 are possible upgrades. The rest of the system is Naim based (122x, 150x, Stageline, B&W CD/M7se) and I use the dreaded Denon DL103 cartridge (which I know you hate but I am quite taken with it given cost vs. performance)! I “downgraded” to it from a Goldring Elite and it just sounded better (to my ears – everything just sounded more natural and easy) and only cost me €115 compared to nearly €350 which the Goldring cost. If you had the time to consider the TT upgrade options, I would be curious to hear your opinions on the options – I have heard the LP12 (not overly impressed to be honest, given the price) and the Gryodc (sounded different but still lacked a ‘wow’ factor that I expected to hear given the price difference) but the reference system was all Leema and Spendor S8s which is a million miles sound wise (I’m guessing) from what I have.

Mark Finucane

Hi Mark. For what it’s worth, my advice would be to get a Denon DL103R, which I found significantly better than the hazy 103, assuming that it is still available at a sensible price. It is currently listed at £280 or thereabouts, quite a hike up from the £130 or so for the normal DL103, which even I would admit is fair value. I am still not convinced budget moving coil cartridges are a good idea quite frankly, but if people like the DL103 then that’s fine. It’s
Hi Neils. David Price is our Yamaha NS1000 expert and can advise, but I suspect the Leema Pulse would be a good choice, or perhaps the powerful Tucana II that Tony Bolton likes so much.

I'm afraid to say that only Marantz seem to make a good sounding receiver by normal hi-fi standards, followed closely by Onkyo. Should you want to revive the idea of stereo + surround sound get an Onkyo PR-SC886 surround preamp and power amplifiers of choice to go with it (valve or transistor). Turn off the Centre channel and remove the Centre loudspeaker, then you can run in stereo or surround-sound: Yamaha make a very nice CD/SACD player in the CD-S2000 that gives top quality from SACD. NK

Noel's quite right here; the Leema Pulse is the best match at around £1,000, in my opinion, although in truth the NS1000Ms are one of the most revealing speakers around and they deserve something closer to five times that price. The Yams will simply tell you that the Leema is a nice, big and bouncy sounding transistor amp, a little mushy across the midband compared to the likes of Musical Fidelity's AMS35i (reviewed in this issue) for example, and a tad two dimensional. But most of the other rivals to the Leema will simply sound shrill, or flat, or both! If you must have an SACD player, go for the Marantz SA-8003 (£830). The Cyrus CD8 SE is better still as a CD player, but of course has no SACD functionality. Good luck with getting the Thorens back on the road; you'll find the Yams will enjoy the chance to reproduce vinyl!

DP

For Yamaha NS1000s, get a Musical Fidelity AMS35i, says NS1000 owner and aficionado, editor David Price.

Yamaha NS1000s, a Golden Oldie - look at those 12in woofers! - with a cult following.

I would also like you to recommend a CD/SACD player in the £500-£1,000 range, I'm only interested in two channel stereo, but it's okay if the player can do multichannel as well. I have looked at several brands, such as Marantz, Pioneer, Sony and Denon. I know they are all Japanese, but I guess it's where the big market for SACD is at the moment.

Niels Nielsen

I mainly listen to Rock, pop, easy listening, and acoustic music on CDs or SACD. I have an old Thorens 147D deck, but it's situated in the loft together with my LPs, and I haven't used it since I moved house three years ago, mainly due to lack of space in the living room. I might bring it back to life again, after hearing your demonstration at the National Audio show in Whittlebury last Saturday, but that will take some negotiation with the domestic controller.

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DP
The Tucana was Leema Acoustics' first hi-fi electronics product. Within a short time it established itself as a true reference amplifier winning many prestigious awards. The new Tucana II extends both the performance and features, to set a new world-wide benchmark.

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.

Leema Acoustics: Award winning hi-fi
Two lengths of sticky back hook and loop (Velcro stuff). Cut them off about 4½ inches long, peel off the backing, stick em together, cut into a strip about 8mm wide (3½ old money) as this makes it more pliable, job done.

It is more arm friendly than a bit of wire and looks the part too. I leave mine on my SME Series IV after a session as it’s far too easy to get distracted and give the arm a wallop with the dust cover on the next outing.

Keith Burford

PETITION

Thank you for starting the petition on the Number 10 website. I fear though that it has fallen on deaf ears (if they could hear then they’d know DAB was bad).

I got a reply suggesting that it would be a bad thing if the people who have DAB had to buy another technology. It made no mention of those of us who have FM receivers. There was no consideration of any other digital technology. The reply suggested that subjectively I may be receiving poor quality digital because I was in a “bad” area. I am an electronic engineer by trade (2. Ihonours degree from University of Ulster) and I can say, completely objectively that DAB is inferior to FM.

Those of us who care about high fidelity sound would welcome digital radio if it were 192kHz and 24-bits. DAB, as you know doesn’t measure up. I intend to write to all of the mainstream newspapers to express my disgust at this decision to bulldoze through an obsolete technology. I hope that you will support me in my quest to keep FM in the UK.

Peter Brett

Hi Peter - yes, it’s an amazing display of logic to say, effectively, "we’re replacing DAB because FM is old hat, but we won’t replace DAB which is also old hat with DAB+

because we don’t want to cause DAB owners any inconvenience!". Errm, excuse me, what about the analogue radios, which outnumber DAB radio listeners by a factor that makes even the government’s budget deficit look small? On reading the official reply to my Number 10 petition which recently expired (I asked for six months, and it was given one), my wife (who grew up in China in the nineteen eighties) told me “that’s the sort of nonsense the Communist Party bureaucrats tell local people when they’re bulldozing their houses for a new road!” George Orwell will be sighing from up high...

NOW HEAR THIS!

Adam Smith’s uneasy relationship with the Tesco “hi-fi” in the November issue made me smile and certainly got me thinking. One line, in particular, reminded me of my own musical epiphany this last couple of years; his suggestion that the music itself should matter ‘first and foremost’, a fact forgotten by more than a few hi-fi enthusiasts, struck a harmonious chord in this little corner of the audio firmament.

Two years ago, I lost pretty much all the hearing in my right ear. It was a result of years spent as one of those scarily-priced headphones any music is... (within an inch of its life down the tubes that would show how tight the bass was, or the lack of any mid-range honk. I’d forgotten about the music; that was just something you had to have to underline what a shrewd judge you were.

The two years since my op have proved to be a bit of a revelation. I spent some time at a friend’s house, where an old iPod feeding budget amp and speakers provided some fantastic music. They didn’t sit facing their kit with reverential looks on their faces, or worry whether speakers were too near the back wall. They just played music and got on with stuff. They chatted, ate and all the while this sublime soundtrack played in the background.

I’m still not sure what half the stuff I heard was, but I know I fell in love with music again. It prompted me to crank up the hi-fi at home and it’s been an almost permanently ever since. I haven’t tweaked, or meddled, haven’t cleaned any contacts or tightened plugs and the speakers remain resolutely in the same spot they’ve been for months. I’ve rediscovered vinyl and CDs that I’d forgotten I’d even bought, terrific pieces of music that just sound fantastic, even to my one, good ear.

This has been a difficult way to re-ignite my passion for music; ‘tough love’ if you like, and there are times I’m given a sharp reminder of what I’ve lost. I certainly won’t be listening through those scarily-priced headphones any time soon! I still read the magazines, of course (that’s an even harder habit to break!), but I’m sticking with the audio hand I’ve been dealt. A classic case of swings and roundabouts; the music is everything again. It’s worth reminding yourself of that once in while.

Chris Treece

Sorry to hear about the hearing loss, Chris, but glad you still enjoy music. The idea must be to get a good system, then simply enjoy it and both

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Benchmark DAC Pre "enjoyed endlessly since I bought it" says Bob Harvie.

editor David Price and I as publisher support this idea. We actually do not encourage continual upgrading and David has said repeatedly, spend what it takes to get a good sound — then enjoy your music. But hi-fi does have a starting point and a decent basic system isn’t truly cheap. If I put Q Acoustics 1050i loudspeakers (£350) with a Leema Pulse amplifier (£1,000) and Acoustics 1050i loudspeakers (£350) a starting point and a decent basic support this idea. We actually do not enjoy endless since I bought it. Very highly recommended. I know that Hi-Fi World praised the Benchmark, and rightly so, but I would endorse the view you offered and suggest that it offers even better value than one may suppose.

I enjoy seeing the resurgence of vinyl, not least because it appears that a new generation have found out about its merits, but also because of the very fine sound I know it can offer. I am also supportive of the industry’s new support for the format, but it’s not for me. For the first time since first indulging in hi-fi over 35 years ago, I can get excellent sound quality from any piece of music in my large music collection, nearly instantly, every time, and just about anywhere I go.

PC Audio has not yet reached a stage where it is ready for the hi-fi mainstream, but it has come on a lot in the last year or so. If someone is prepared and competent enough to fiddle about with turntables, tonearms and cartridges, etc., then the benefits of PC audio should be well within their grasp. The rewards can be very satisfying, and the hi-fi community should welcome the Beresford warrants the 4 Globes you offered, and then some, because of the flexibility it affords alongside a very acceptable sound quality.

I use a Benchmark DAC1 Pre for my main domestic setup, and whilst this is not the same model as that you reviewed, I can only comment that the Benchmark is one of the best value pieces of hi-fi equipment on the market today. On sound quality alone it far out performs the Beresford, offering a very high quality and engaging sound. To those reading the review of DACs I would add that in going for the Benchmark you can be assured that you are comfortably inside the law of diminishing returns (or bang for the buck) threshold. My Benchmark DAC is one purchase I have enjoyed endlessly since I bought it. Very highly recommended. I know that Hi-Fi World praised the Benchmark, and rightly so, but I would endorse the view you offered and suggest that it offers even better value than one may suppose.

Living by Numbers

I was very interested in your group test review of DACs in the September issue of Hi-Fi World. Whilst the debate on digital versus vinyl rumbles on, and is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon, I firmly pin my colours to the mast and declare myself a digital devotee. I still remember the frustration with pops, clicks and bumps which manifested themselves with LPs; no matter how diligent one was in looking after the precious content. And having to change sides every twenty minutes just meant there were too many interruptions and distractions to allow enjoyment of the music to flow. As a consequence, my Linn turntable remains in a box in my garage, or loft, or wherever!

CD can be a fine medium, and my previous CD player, a piece of TEAC model (predecessor to the now highly regarded Esoteric models) plus my current player, a Unison Unico CD player offer very fine sound. However, I have moved on from CD and have embraced PC based music. I have managed to assemble a system which offers finer sound than any of my CD players, and dare I say it, better than that afforded by vinyl. Of course at the heart of the matter is the use of a DAC, and it is my experiences in getting to where I have that has prompted me to write.

First off, I will briefly explain the source components of my PC based system: a Dell Inspiron laptop with 500GB HDD; Windows Vista; WASAPI; JRiver Media Center (XMPlay is a handy-o-matic player which I also use), plus a Benchmark DAC1 Pre connected with USB. I have ripped all of my CDs to WMA lossless and recorded all of my LPs to WAV files using my Linn turntable and phono stage before retiring it to the garage — the WAV files were subsequently split, transcoded to WMA lossless and tagged. I would suggest that for the tweaking out there, PC audio offers unlimited opportunity to fiddle. I won’t recall the efforts I made trying to get ASIO to work with XP, configuring the different players, working out the benefits of USB via optical, etc., but suffice to say it has taken me some time to get to a position where I can relax and enjoy my music again.

On to the DAC Supertest and my comments on it: My first comment is that you reviewed the Beresford TC-7510, or should that be the TC-7520? To clarify, you should confirm that it is indeed the 7520 you reviewed despite your repeated references to 7510, since that is the model which offers a USB input (and is also the model shown in the photograph).

Your review of the Beresford was very fair and the description of performance offered sits very comfortably with me and my experiences of it (I own both the 7510 and 7520). However, readers may be interested to note that the story offered by you is not the whole story: the DAC chip on the Beresford 7520 can be easily changed out, and various users on a host of forums have reported significant improvements through doing so. However, more interesting is that nearly all users report large improvements in this unit’s performance following a period of burn in. Your comments on how the various DACs sounded after extended periods of use would be interesting. My use of the Beresford as a DAC is as a portable device. I travel a lot, and often do so for extended periods (i.e. more than a week or two). The Beresford is small enough that I can pop it in my suitcase alongside my trusted Sennheiser HD650s and the aforementioned laptop and voila, I have a stunning alternative to watching CNN in a hotel bedroom (I do find alternative alternatives as well, but that’s not for this magazine). So,
Hi Bob. We always like to hear about the other side of the coin.

On the matter of digital can I respectfully note that whilst you have wrestled a working digital system into place, even after conquering Asynchronous In Out systems and converting CD and LP to WMA lossless, that none of this relates to or improves audio quality per se. For better digital you need to use better code and here a move to 24bit, in say 24/48 format, clearly demonstrates that 16bit of CD is strictly limited in resolution. How to get higher resolution digital is still a bit fiddly at present but Linn, Naim and B&W offer high resolution music in 24bit FLAC form and Apple are going that way, perhaps? If you haven’t got a decent net connection able to download the 86MB that 5 minutes of music at 24/48 resolution represents, then life gets a little difficult because Blu-ray music repertoire is a bit limited at present. So as you say we are getting there, but I won’t tell you why violin invariably sounds rough on digital, about how much distortion you are really, really listening to – and all that.

If I did you might end up staggering around the world with a Dansette and a stack of LPs, and even I have to admit that isn’t a good idea. NK

POWER CRAZY

I have a pair of World Audio Kel 80 monoblocks, bought as non-working, or rather one of them wasn’t. I guessed (and hoped) from the information given to me that the fault was not too serious, and this turned out to be correct. As I live in the North West, I am only about half an hour’s travelling distance away from Haden Boardman’s home in Westhoughton, so I contacted him, and he has now repaired the faulty unit. I also enjoyed a couple of pleasant chats about hi-fi with Haden.

The amps had been heavily modified, something that Haden was none too keen on, as although the parts used were of high quality (Jenson PIO, Black Gate and Aerovox caps, Kiwirem resistors, etc.) some were not well installed, resulting in potential instability, which is probably what caused the fault. Haden has now rectified this, and amps are working well. However, I am not over keen on the sound; they have a "powerful" sound, good with driving music, but my preference is classical and some older rock and pop. I cannot abide the music of the current era! (probably a sign of my age!), I find my attention wandering when listening to them! I also have a Shanling MC30, and I think it is this that has ‘spoiled’ me; it is a very sweet sounding unit, low powered as you know, but it drives my Mission 752F speakers well enough; not ideally for rock, but fine for classical. It is currently driving Mission 721/1s in another room, but not as well as it drove the 752s.

So, I am now considering selling the KEL 80s, but the problem is – what should I ask for them? That is my question for you gentlemen. Hence my first sentence. I really have no idea what they might be worth. If they were, say, Icon Audio MB90s (or MB845s, I wish!), then I would have an RRP to go on, and maybe other sellers prices. But apart from these, I have never seen any KEL80s for sale. I can’t even remember what the kit cost when you sold it, or what they cost built.

The KEL 80s seem to have quite high output sensitivity, too high for my CJ PV10a pre-amp. The sound level is high with the volume control at 9 o’clock. A friend suggested that I use Rothwell’s attenuators between the pre and power amps, or a Kimber interconnect with attenuation. I may try this. I used to own the CJ MV55 power amp but found it a bit too warm and woolly. The MC30 was much cleaner and cleaner, even when driven from the PV10a (sometimes necessary as I have a lot of sources - MD and cassette included). I have found the PV10A to be very good; no complaints about that, the phono stage is particularly good. I use Ortofon T5 in-line transformers; they are amazing considering what they cost.

Just for info, the rest of my system is GyroDec (probably quite an old one), with twin belts and Gyropower PSU (not QC) OL modded RB250/ Ortofon Quartz, Arcam Alpha 8SE CDP (I like this a lot), Creek 3140 tuner, Nakamichi DR10 cassette, Sony MDS-JB920 MD recorder, and the aforementioned Mission 752F speakers. Cabling is all basic Kimber, PBJ interconnects, 4PR speaker, their cheapest mains cables, and their mains extension blocks with built-in conditioner. I have had most of this kit for years and it has served me well.

I don’t know what I would replace the KEL 80s with, perhaps I would use the MC30 as a power amp as I did before I bought them. I don’t really need 80W per channel, but I would like a bit more than the 3 Watts of the MC30 on some occasions. But no solid state amps, they leave me cold. I have the much praised NAD C315BEE and am less than impressed. It stays in the dining room!

Rod Theobald.

Rod, it is very difficult to quote a price. Once upon a time a Garrard 401 was junk; now they sell for £400 minimum. I would guess it would sell with a price in the low hundreds.

The KEL80 wasn’t the last word in finesse I have to admit; it was designed as a not too expensive solution for those who demanded power. I never got around to fine tuning one so do not know whether it had the potential to be improved or not, but from what you are saying it seems not.

If you want a really easy going purity of sound then the 300B triode is your valve. Amps that use them come in all shapes and sizes, but Icon Audio’s Stereo 300B II priced at £1,800 is less costly than most and a great one for you personally to audition, I feel. NK

PUFF OF LOGIC

Could you and the lads help resolve an argument currently raging around the office at coffee break please?
We work in software development and inevitably logic tends to inform, or corrupt, any discussion. The current debate takes the form of a syllogism.

1. Premise: The purpose of hi-fi is to recreate as closely as possible the original performance in your living room.

2. Premise: The more high-end you go the closer you come to recreating the original sound.

3. Conclusion: Therefore the closer you get to the high-end, the closer the sound gets to the original performance, until at the very top all systems sound the same.

I have an all valve system (Audio Note), my colleague all solid-state (Naim), both around £25k’s worth, and they certainly don’t sound the same. Therefore where does the argument fall down? Logic dictates that our systems should sound much more similar to each other than they do.

Zap.

Er...Zap, it falls down everywhere!

Your hi-fi system can only reproduce what was recorded, which in too many cases is far from the original sound, when that is either human voice or an unamplified instrument. Between source and hi-fi lies the recording chain, complete with dodgy mics and their preamps, bad ADCs and the heavy hand of the recording engineer who may like to add his own flavour to the sound, as well as compress it and peak limit it.

The more high-end you go the more interpretive hi-fi gets I find. This applies especially to loudspeakers. You and your friend have found this out, as your systems are chalk and cheese. Peter Quortrop of Audio Note is worth more than me when it comes to valve amps (!) but an Audio Note on song is a fine experience, if an expensive one. Your mate wouldn’t agree no doubt.

The conclusion is that you should relax, enjoy the music and stop thinking about it. It’s a bit like the meaning of life really: by the time you’ve worked it out - it’s too late! Best not to bother. NK

Logically, there should be only one ‘truth’, and the better hi-fi gets the closer it should take us to it. Therefore the better things are, the closer things should be. Well, as you rightly say they’re not. So using your logic, which has a certain grace, the answer is that even high end systems are a long way from the truth - and it follows that lower end systems are designed around human beings’ subjective notions of accuracy, and these vary wildly. A 3 Watt single-ended triode or a 500W Class AB solid-stater, see what I mean?

In the same way that we’ll never invent a camera that takes pictures as good as our eyesight, I suspect we’re a country mile away from anything approaching all-round-audio audiophile Nirvana. Logically though, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t give up the search. Hearing some serious high end systems gives you a fleeting glimpse of what’s possible; you suddenly start thinking ‘wow’ as the system breaks down the suspension of disbelief and suddenly you’re there with the musicians. It’s a fine feeling. No, more than that, it’s a blissful feeling, and one we shouldn’t stop chasing. That said, we shouldn’t obsess over the means; the end is what we’re there for, and even modest systems carefully chosen can get you closer to the original sound than you thought possible. DP

BREAK OUT!

I have valve based amplification powered by 300Bx, with my main source being a Rega P9 turntable, RB 1000 arm and Denon DL-304 cartridge playing through a Trichord Dino+ phono stage. I really am very happy with the sound of my system but...

Due to my son upgrading his home DJing turntables I’ve now inherited his old Denon DP-DJ101 turntable if I want it. It’s in good condition and sound working order. Out of interest I had a bit of a play with it and added a spare Rega Super Elys cartridge and was surprised how good it actually sounded. I know all about your enthusiasm for the Technics SL1200, but in your view is the Denon worth experimenting with?

If it can be done I was thinking of adding a basic OLI for now as it has the upgrade path, or may be even looking for something better second hand. Its more of a bit of fun really, something for me to play around with and see where it goes. Plus I like the idea of having another deck for some of my older records, but I don’t want to waste money that could be spent on more new music. Any Advice?

Steve W
Western Australia

Hi Steve. The Denon looks very tasty to me - and it even has 78rpm - do DJs really play these? It's layout is suspiciously Technics like, and I notice it is quartz-locked, which my measurements show usually does result in accurate speed with little variation about the mean. My simple suggestion is fit a Rega RB250, perhaps picked up second-hand, to see if there are any fitting problems (I have never used this deck so cannot comment). If it all works and sounds good, then you can consider upgrading. Bear in mind that phinn isolation is likely to be poor, even though it is a DJ deck, so use a good table and one with no mains powered unit on it as the Denon will likely pick up transformer mechanical hum (our big, heavy Pioneer PLC-590 Direct Drives do this and need serious isolation). You should hear the temporal grip of a Direct Drive at least. Whether it appeals to you is another matter. Generally they deliver a clean, tight and pacy sound I find - and why not enjoy experimenting with one? NK

I'd suggest you sell it and buy a second-hand Technics SL1200, which is far better made and far more upgradeable, with service parts likely available for at least another twenty years. The Denon is more of a
Denon DP-DJ101 turntable - buy a second-hand Technics SL1200, says David.

plasticky toy whereas the Technics is breathtakingly over engineered - and is alone in this respect in its price bracket. No other so-called 'DJ deck' comes close. DP

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

Although I am nowhere near high

really call them headphones!) just seems cheap earholebungs (well you can't

disappears. Imaging through even very

The fizz of the upper mid and treble

stopping and starting much cleaner.

and original AAA cell.

some 1.7 - 1.8 volts very close to a new

you a very nice noise free supply of

a diode will drop some 0.7volts and give

way!) and 100v 0.47uf polyester. The

connections. Use some capacitors

connect this up to the original battery

this instance) in series with the output,

fine although I use a BYV28 series in

Lion battery pack to create a 2.4 volt

this!

Making a twin battery Nicad or

players like the one in my pictures:

example here being a typical but not

improved by power supply modifications.

Something that anyone can try relatively
cheaply to prove it for themselves is the

humble MP3 player. I have never been a fan of iTunes and the iPod although the cheap MP3 players using the best quality encoding can be quite good, my

quality range...

Many amps are very compromised

in this respect. You only have to see the

power output of amps into 8 and the 4

ohms to see some fundamental failures

here. If its 50 Watts output at 8 then it

should be as close as possible to 100

at 4 ohms. Many amps don't even get

to 20W more into the lower load and

you have to ask how this will affect

dynamics, damping factor, headroom,

etc., and the knock on effects of this

right across the audio band. Indeed,

various work I have carried out over the

years seems to suggest that PSU design

is just as important as the real nuts

and bolts of the signal carrying circuitry.

Stiffness rules okay!

Performance gains can be

had across the board by capacitor

replacement, going for the next physical

value will improve the bass in most

instances assuming the same type,

value will improve the bass in most

instances assuming the same type,

value will improve the bass in most

instances assuming the same type,

value will improve the bass in most

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value will improve the bass in most

instances assuming the same type,

value will improve the bass in most

instances assuming the same type,
Hi lan - no, you're not. If you're mechanically competent and can do the work to a good standard, the OL motor mod will drastically improve your turntable - maybe not quite up to an Avid Diva II, but it will be far cheaper. I'd counsel you to give this a go. Also invest in the OL structural mod for your arm. DP

A small observation for you Ian: Rega have been busy improving the RB250 and 300, they are now up to RB251 and RB301 status. Our measurements show that the RB301 in particular is a very strong product and I'd encourage you to aim for an untuned RB301 as a minimum. By all means get a modded unit with better wiring, or perhaps an RB1000 arm. NK

Hi Colin. I asked James Whest of Whest Audio about this, because he gave me an interesting insight onto the view from the studio and the popularity of active loudspeakers in this environment the other day. Names he reeled off were Adam loudspeakers of course, who have a huge range and are very well engineered we find, from the models we have tested. Their Hell Air Motion transformers are quite forward but the sound is fast, clean and incisive in a way few can match. ATC are well known of course and James is a fan. He also recommended PMC (and anyone who attended our Whittlebury demos will know that Martin Colloms of Hi-Fi Critic is also a fan).

Tannoy make a wide range of active loudspeakers for Pro use, about which James said the good ones were very good, but they were a bit variable between models, so listening would be in order. Without a budget it is difficult to be specific but active loudspeakers are usually expensive, although in many cases the loudspeakers in passive form can be a bit variable between models, so listening would be in order. Without a budget it is difficult to be specific but active loudspeakers are usually expensive, although in many cases the loudspeakers in passive form can be expensive models.

I follow your reviews and think there must be an alternative to seriously consider? Any ideas? Budget, ideally up to £1,500. But, I would consider up to £3k if it means I do not have to upgrade this component again.

Your help would be very much appreciated as I have been trying to work this out for quite a while now. Listening taste is mainly jazz, popular and "contemporary" and includes a lot of strong vocal and acoustic instrumental work.

Colin Locke,
used together with an external active crossover, allowing your own amps to be used, James told me. However, this does then demand the crossover be set up, a process that usually requires measuring mic and spectrum analyser of some sort - expensive and a specialist process.

A solid-state alternative to the Naim Stage Line phono stage is the Wheat PS30.RDT, Anatek MCR-1 and also the A.N.T.Audio Kora 3T Ltd. All these were reviewed in our July 09 issue, available online. I hope this helps. NK

FIXING THE CASTLE
An avid hi-fi fan since the 70s, the golden age of discovery for hi-fi freaks, I still follow the latest developments and theories in audio through your magazine, though unlike many of your readers I can no longer afford these gems but have to scour your online guide for used components in my lifetime search for perfect sound.

In my travels I have done some great deals, met some great people but had to become something of a technician along the way to deal with life's little niggles, especially used gear that needs a little TLC sometimes. A year or two ago I bought a pair of Castle Howard S2 speakers, my dream purchase, for a fraction of the original cost, they sounded fabulous but after a while one of the tweeters developed an intermittent fault.

Convinced this was the problem I duly found an exact matching pair of tweeters on eBay USA and managed to buy them for about £15. When they arrived and I soldered them in things seemed okay for a little while but back came the fault. There was nothing else for it but to take the back off and have a look at the crossover/ post assembly, a bunch of capacitors but which one was causing the trouble? I put the plate back and lo and behold no sound at all coming from the offending tweeter, maybe I disturbed something... aha! Let's have another look, and there it was staring at me, nothing more than a broken solder joint!

A few minutes later all working perfectly! I have much satisfaction listening to them knowing I cured a fault but silly it was such a simple one - how many perfectly good hi-fi components get chucked out for want of a simple repair? I know the manufacturers have to keep pumping out new models but I bet most audiophiles are still using equipment twenty plus years old and just read the mag at bedtime...?

Steve Trowbridge

I really liked the Howards - big, easy sound with great bass, I recall. The Castle name was bought by International Audio Group, and it is likely a new range will appear in due course, a (rather large) dicky bird tells me. The Castle sound will be faithfully preserved I am glad to hear, because it relied to quite some extent on the use of carbon fibre drive units that I greatly prefer to all else. NK

However, I find much of the music I play - mainly rock concerts on Blu-ray - in surround-sound (about 80%) puts little energy into the rears and most of it is ambient crowd noise and such like, where quality hardly matters to be frank. So what you choose to use depends largely on the material you play.

Bear in mind that DVD video sound track is usually Dolby or DTS compressed and quality isn't very high. You need to move to Blu-ray for high quality music and high impact film sound tracks: just listen to the canon fire in 'Master and Commander', 'Far Side of the World' on Blu-ray to be frightened at what a modern system can do. Happily, Blu-ray players will play DVDs and CDs.

I prefer to remove the Centre loudspeaker altogether. Not only is it physically impossible to integrate, but the lowest quality 'speaker of the set up often handles the greatest amount of musical content, including vocals and drums. This can really hold things back. Also, when the Centre is mixed to be loud, as some producers like to do, you end up listening to mono from something that's little better than a shoebox with a few drivers stuffed into it! So I recommend you go into the receiver menus and switch the Centre channel off. You do not lose the channel, it is directed into Left and Right loudspeakers to give a phantom centre image, as in ordinary stereo. This gives much more balanced results and better sound all round. NK

SINGAPORE SOUND
My name's Amol and I just moved to Singapore from Tokyo. Currently, I have two large B&W 700 series speakers and one B&W 62 centre speaker and mainly play games and watch DVDs. These three speakers are attached to a Denon amp (I forget the model name as it is on a boat from Tokyo at the moment: it cost around £400 a year ago when I brought it in Japan).

Now that I live in bigger place, I would like to upgrade to full 5.1 surround sound that is in the market for two back speakers with stands, and a subwoofer. My questions are:
1) is there a big difference between the 686, 700 and 800 for the small speakers?
2) how important is it to spend more money on the back speakers?
3) are there other factors that I should consider?
4) which ones would you recommend?

Amol

Hi Amol. It's usual and best to keep all the speakers as alike as possible. So rear loudspeakers should also be from the 700 Series. With gaming and some music the rears will take a lot of sound, so the bigger the better.

PC AUDIO
Being a regular reader of the magazine, I am writing to suggest that it might be time to have a special edition devoted to PC computer audio. This would be of interest to those readers unable to afford the likes of the Naim HDX (£4,500) and the numerous other hard disk players/servers that are on the market. How does the sound of a dedicated music PC or indeed a MAC compare to these more expensive items of equipment? Music PCs from companies like Into Audio or Digital Village are occasionally reviewed in music industry magazines and they seem to offer the home user a large range of software to use to store and playback music in high definition DVD audio. Are the 'music' or 'audio' PCs or digital audio workstations only of use to musicians and recording engineers? Why not connect one of them up to the a system and the PC input of a Plasma screen and you have your very own audio/visual media centre! If you want to view rare videos of jazz and classical musicians on Youtube a 'music' centre connected to the internet
An Avid Volvere Sequel will give a very stable sound, says David.

FILLING A VOID

So I have a twenty year old VoYd Valdi with a Helius Aureus/Ottofon Quaser moving coil. I keep hearing that turntable technology has moved on and there seem to be a plethora of new makes and designs, so and I am really keen to know what would I need to do to improve on the current incumbent. I have enquired about a motor upgrade through Origin Live, but because the Valdi has two motors they don’t think it would be worth the expense. Historically the Valdi has been attached to an Audio Innovations 800 step transformer and a Audio Innovations 500 (with upgraded valves) and Smell KS, but I do admit to a twenty year itch, so a amplifier and speaker change may also be on the cards. I have around £4,500 to spend.

Tim Jury

Hi Tim - an Avid Volvere Sequel will give an altogether more stable and powerful sound than your VoYd, with more detail and a cleaner and more expansive soundstage. However, your Valdi is still very good - especially if you treat it to a decent modern moving coil such as an Ortofon Cadenza (pick the model according to your budget). It will, for relatively little outlay, give a sound that you literally will have to spend lots of money to improve on.

DP

TURNTABLE

Could you suggest some turntables to consider as a replacement for my fifteen year old GyroDec please, my first true hi-fi upgrade, which is starting to sound a little tired and perhaps off the pace compared with the rest of my system. My current system is: Audio Note (“AN”) 101 (low op/ mc), SME 4 (tonearm - silver wired), GyroDec with QC & old AC motor, AN-54L (step-up transformer), AN M3Phono preamp, AN Quest Silver (SET monoblocks), ANJ (Speakers) - all connected with AN-V silver cables. I am quite fond of Audio Note products which seem to suit my musical tastes, although I do use an old Naim NAT-03 tuner quite often and I deeply regret taking my Sony ST-5950 to the tip when I bought the NAT-03.

I’d like to keep the SME 4, my second upgrade from the RB300 supplied with the GyroDec, therefore I’m looking for a turntable that will work well with the SME 4 and also with an all-valve downstream system with silver wiring - the AN-54L is a silver wired step-up.

I have identified various options but really would appreciate your advice. My local dealer suggests upgrading the GyroDec to an Orbe platter plus new DC motor, this would also involve drilling the plinth - the overall cost almost the same as buying a new Gyro. An Orbe would be a logical option, I’m also considering an SME 10 or 20, or maybe even the Audio Note TT2 (although I’m not too sure how it would work with the SME 4).

I feel sure that there must be some other options but as you know it’s always difficult to get real advice from any dealer or indeed find a dealer with anything more than one or two of the usual suspects. I’m thinking of a budget up to £5,000 (ish) as a “cost of change” but I wouldn’t rule out an “absolutely perfect match” if it cost more.

Edward

Well, the sky’s the limit, but I think the latest spec Orbe SE would do the job nicely; possibly with an SME Series V for good measure (you can get a good part of this outlay back when selling your IV).The Orbe is a bigger jump from a Gyro than most think, especially if you’re running an old AC variant. It brings considerably more bass that’s tighter too, a more stable and open soundstage and superior dynamics, allied to a lovely wide open treble. It’s still very much ‘on the pace’, and you’re looking at least the likes of an Avid Volvere Sequel to improve on it.

DP

www.hifiworld.co.uk DECEMBER 2009 HI-FI WORLD
David Price is your guide to the first National Audio Show at Whittlebury Hall, near Silverstone, on the 26th and 27th of September. The Hi-Fi World team were there in full effect and a fine time was had by all...

The AstinTrew room was a particularly fine sounding one, showing Michael Osborn’s obvious system set up prowess. On dem was the latest AT2000plus integrated amplifier and AT3500plus CD player, while an AT2000 was given away in prize draw. Here, Michael (left) holds the hat while show promoter Justin Bird pulls out the name of the lucky winner (David Armitage from Northampton).

In the Revolver room, this menacing looking new tube amplifier, the Audio Black Knight was on display. Lurking somewhat incongruously either side were the new Revolver Screen 3 loudspeakers; they look ‘planar’ but use conventional drivers, and made a very nice noise, I hasten to add...

With blistering dynamics, incredible speed and massive insight, every visitor to the GT Audio room was left in no doubt that the Avantgarde Acoustics Duos were horn loudspeakers! Brilliant as they were though, they were too toppy for this reporter’s tastes - and that’s saying something...

A cluster of compact CM series boxes formed this B&W dem, with an interesting choice of amplification (Sugden’s IA4 and Mystro; precisely what yours truly is running in his reference system right now). A fine sound, despite the room’s diminutive dimensions.

A particularly nice new product was Clearaudio’s Concept - a true plug and play turntable (with cartridge pre-installed and aligned). I loved its retro 1970s styling, and it is surprisingly solid and well built too.

Remember Derek Dunlop’s original Systemdek, from way back when? Then came the Systemdek IIX, and now we have the brand new Systemdek 3D. Seen here, sporting an Audio Origami PU7 tonearm, it sounded superb. Hi-Fi World has the scoop, coming soon!

DECEMBER 2009
This turntable was one of the highlights of the show for this reporter, although it was a crying shame that it was a static display only! Brinkmann's Bardot is a high end direct drive, which although not exactly affordable isn't as expensive as you'd expect from this teutonic turntable specialist. Symmetry have promised Hi-Fi World an early review, so watch this space. Another brand gracing the Symmetry room was Esoteric; here is the C-03 and matching E-03 phonostage, and the SA-50 SACD player and matching G-03X master clock. Sadly they weren't plugged in to any loudspeakers, but I can confirm that the build quality, at least, is what you'd expect from this illustrious Japanese marque...

A&D Audio have become the official UK distributor of this; the Eminent Technology LTF-8b loudspeaker. Despite the cramped confines of the Whittlebury dem room, the sound was impressively open and expansive. Watch out for more about these speakers in the next issue...

Aha Mr Bond, we meet at last! In the Jordan Acoustics room was the enigmatic 'Johnny Seven' from Audio Origami, here well behind enemy lines, many miles away from his native Glasgow, with not a single can of Irn Bru to be seen! Ken Ishiwata was there too, demonstrating the new Marantz Pearl system...

Icon Audio's room was a bewildering array of products old and new, with David Shaw seemingly having an amplifier for every occasion! Pictured here is the Stereo 40/Ill, which looks to be a real winner, offering fine sound and super value for money. Still, for yours truly there was only one thing in the room - the mighty MB845 power amplifiers!

From Hong Kong to Whittlebury via Whitehall, the charming My Audio Design crew showed a range of their own products including the Balanced Power Isolation Platform reviewed on p33.

An exquisite looking and sounding set of high end loudspeakers from Lumen White, the Artisan. Products like this are conclusive proof that the art of speaker design has moved on since the nineteen seventies, despite so many derivative designs still on sale!

The Music First Audio room sported their usual confection of spiffing passive pre-amplifiers, plus an interesting looking Mono Transformer Volume Control (with remote operation) for the princely sum of £895.
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The extremely affable Peter Curran from Claro-Audio stands behind a brace of Clarity 09 turntables. The decks were lovely but your editor couldn’t stop eyeing up one of Peter’s clamps (oh matron!)

Spotted! Quad’s brand new Quad II Classic Integrated amplifier. It was (and still is) so new that I’m not sure I’m even allowed to tell you where I found it! It wasn’t plugged in so I can’t comment on the sonics, but I do love the sliding source selector - a lovely detail.

An inverted pyramid of perfection! The dCS room was brimming with the company’s latest Paganini digital delectations, including transport, DAC, clock and brand new upsampler. Watch out for a review in this journal soon...

Along with the superb Digital Do Main V-FET power amplifiers, ABC Audio had a range of other Japanese high end on show, including these Pioneer/TAD EX loudspeakers.

Dave Cawley of Sound Hi-Fi and ANT Audio’s Alex Nikitin stand either side of a rather lovely Akai GX625 open reel recorder, used to demonstrate Alex’s new headphone amplifier. This stand won the Hi-Fi World ‘Geek Chic’ Award for the use of the aforementioned magnetic film-based classic analogue source component!

Three amigos! Yours truly and Hi-Fi World publisher Noel Keywood get a hearty embrace from an effervescent Ricardo Franassovicci from Absolute Sounds, presumably for not blowing up the last Audio Research valve amp we reviewed! Note Ricardo’s uber-cool Joy Division ‘Unknown Pleasures’ T-shirt, which looks like it’s been through the washing machine a few times (hence could be an original 1970s garment)! His room sounded better still, with a beautiful sound emanating from Magico speakers.
Elegant, contemporary and organic in style, the new Definition range incorporates a wealth of high-tech features delivering a rich, articulate and expressive sound. Definition distils, refines and perfects Tannoy’s eight decades of loudspeaker expertise.
Ome companies seem to have been around since the dawn of (audio) time.Started in 1953, with one of the founding partners, Sidney Harman, still involved at the age of 90, Harman Kardon have built a reputation for creating well made and innovative products. The latest of these are the HK990 amplifier and partnering HD990 CD player under review here.

Priced at £1,000, the amplifier is a large and imposing beast measuring 165x440x435mm, and weighing a not inconsiderable 19.6kg. Its bulk is somewhat disguised by the curved edges of the cabinet and the horizontal divide across the front, where the brushed metal finish of the rest of the cabinet gives way to a high gloss black, which contains the display, and at the right hand side, the volume control.

Other functions are operated by a horizontal line of buttons which fit neatly into the gap between the two parts of the facia. Power is operated by a switch on the far left, then buttons control speakers 1 and 2, record out, source, input and speaker setup. These are followed by cursors and an enter button to allow navigation through the variety of control options, and a button for level setting. At the bottom right is a socket for headphones and also for inputting the set-up microphone if using the EzSet/EQ facility. I'd have preferred either a lighter colour for the button labels, or some form of backlighting, since they proved quite difficult to read under artificial light.

A quick glance at the back might cause you to think you were looking at a fully specified AV receiver, rather than a stereo amplifier. It is packed with sockets, including the very substantial speaker binding posts, and a plethora of connections for the six analogue and four digital inputs. The former are all unbalanced RCA phono sockets apart from one pair of balanced XLR sockets. The digital side consists of two pairs of optical inputs and a pair of coaxial. There is also a USB socket allowing information to pass from a computer, but not the other way, so recording direct to the hard-drive is not an option.

For those wishing to record there are two analogue outputs and one coaxial digital output. Alongside this are two subwoofer outputs and an HRS (High resolution Synchronisation) link. This allows Harman Kardon CD players to link themselves to the external clock of the amplifier to give a jitter-free connection. There's even an onboard phono stage that can be switched between moving magnet or moving coil settings via either the remote control or using the input select section at the front.

Internally the amp is equally well specified with dual toroidal transformers and up to 16,000 microFarads of filtering. There are two differential input stages with their own high voltage supply.
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The output stage transistors are 'ThermalTrak' units. These have two extra pins which are connected to internal temperature sensors which monitor and control the bias current of the output stage in real time. The DACs (Digital to Analogue Convertors) use proprietary RLS IV (fourth generation Real-time Linear Smoothing) technology through two stereo AD 1955 chips.

These same chips are used in the HD990 CD player alongside a 24bit/384kHz asynchronous sample rate convertor, and RLS III (3rd generation). The player shares the looks of the amp, but in a scaled down form, measuring a quite compact 63x440x332mm and weighs in at 3.9 kg. The split facia styling and location of the buttons between the two finishes ape the amplifier, the buttons controlling the usual functions of stop, play, etc. The draw the HRS jack to allow the transport onboard processors. Beside this is as DVD players and digi-boxes to allow external devices such as digital inputs (again coax and optical). These allow connections and, unusually, two digital outputs (again coax and optical) the back also contains a pair of XLR sockets for balanced connections and, unusually, two digital inputs (again coax and optical). These allow external devices such as DVD players and digi-boxes to be connected and decoded by the onboard processors. Beside this is the HRS jack to allow the transport to connect and synchronise with the amplifier's internal digital clock as described above. With such a range of options to choose from I ended up keeping life simple to start with, and connected everything up using normal RCA phono leads and letting the CD player's DAC do the conversion...

**SOUND QUALITY**

I have used Harman Kardon equipment before and have always found the sound to be very smooth and well mannered. These units kept up the family trait, but allied it with a huge amount of usable power that should satisfy all but the most stone deaf of listeners. Imagine having a 7 litre V8 engine under your right foot. You will probably never use all the power available, but the amount in reserve makes everything you do absolutely effortless, and so it was when listening to this system. Even at completely antisocial volume levels there was never a sign of any strain of lack of drive to the speakers.

A quick glance at the back might cause you to think you were looking at a fully specified AV receiver, rather than a stereo amplifier...

A dizzying variety of connections awaits the new HK990 owner wanting to hook it up to his system!

Apart from the expected analogue and digital outputs (coaxial and optical) the back also contains a pair of XLR sockets for balanced connections and, unusually, two digital inputs (again coax and optical). These allow external devices such as DVD players and digi-boxes to be connected and decoded by the onboard processors. Beside this is the HRS jack to allow the transport to connect and synchronise with that I could lay my hands on.

Some very powerful amps can make quiet and gentle music seem a bit overblown, with a solo voice sometimes appearing too big, as though the singer had just done a huge crash course of steroids. Here the HK990 displayed a pleasingly delicate touch, presenting a realistic difference in scale between the presence of one performer, and the intensity of a full orchestra or chorus. This all took place in a well defined, but not overly large soundstage that extended far back behind the speakers, but did not come very much forward into the room.

Swapping through the range of digital inputs produced some interesting results. I felt that the optical link gave a slightly softer, gentler sound, while the coaxial link (using an Atlas Opus '75 Ohm interconnect) had a bit more body and substance to the performance. The HRS link proved interesting, having a little more air than the coax, whilst retaining the impression of substance. Moving to the unbalanced analogue connection (using the CD player's DAC) added a bit more impression of stage depth to proceedings, and a slightly wider soundstage. I was using interconnects in the £500 to £700 per metre class, (Chord Co. Signature, and Black Rhodium Oratorio DCT) so given the more modest performance of cheaper interconnects, buyers may find that the digital links offer better reproduction than more affordable analogue leads.

Connecting other digital sources (digi-box and DVD player) to the coaxial links of the amp added a whole new dimension of definition, shape and texture to the sounds being played. The effect was rather like cleaning your smudged glasses and enjoying a sudden clarity in your vision. Compared with the resident Cambridge Audio DAC Magic 3 I felt the amplifier's DACs gave a very good account of themselves. The

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Superb build and finish allied to an effortlessly musical sound, makes the Inspire Eclipse a highly impressive debut.

"At all times, the Eclipse excelled at simply laying out the performance in a way that made me feel I was hearing the band exactly as they intended. All this comes about as a result of the Inspire's fine sense of uniformity and eveness across the midrange and treble. This flows together so well that overall effect is to imbue music with a lush expanse of detail and ebullient warmth, but with a delicious sprinkling of light top end and delicacy as a garnish. Acoustic instruments stand out as natural and full-bodied, whilst the Eclipse also captures the grittier style of electronic instruments and never leaves you in any doubt as to what is playing."

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Cambridge soundstage was wider, but not as deep, but both were well detailed and allowed the music to be displayed in an engaging manner. Considering the quality of the DAC Magic 3, that’s an impressive feat for a bundled, built-in DAC.

Moving over to vinyl seemed to bring out a different character within the amp. When playing digital I found the sound to be very correct, if occasionally a little careful and precise in its timing. Playing records from the Clearaudio Master Solution turntable, with an Ortofon Kontrapunkt II, connected to the moving coil sockets of the amp, seemed to liberate a certain element of joie de vivre that the digital side lacked. I found myself tapping my feet and jigging around the room to the music, whereas in digital mode I was more sofa-bound. There seemed to be more drive and energy behind rhythms. I compared CD and vinyl versions of Morcheeba’s album ‘Big Calm’, finding the latter had more presence and substance to it. The CD sound was good, but lacked a certain conviction when compared to vinyl.

Overall, the HK 990 and HD 990 proved a very capable pair that made music in a highly enjoyable way. If I was being picky, I would describe the digital sound as good, but slightly emotionally dry, and the analogue option as being a bit more red-blooded. Whichever source was chosen there was always the gloss of good audio manners across it which suited most genres of music that I tried from classical through to folk. However, if you like the wailing guitars and more aggressive sounds of rock, and the newer neo-punk bands, then you may find that this equipment minds its manners just a little too much, and smooths out the edge of the sound, which is part of the raison d’être of such music. I also felt that it preferred naturally aspirated music to electronics. The latter being relaid in a pleasant but not overly inspired way, whereas something like jazz or classical seemed to melt out of the speakers in a way that made me keep heading back to those sections of my collection in preference to some others.

"an excellent amplifier and CD combination, that offers enough connectivity options to satisfy most needs, and produces an enjoyable and musical sound..."

**CONCLUSION**

If this amp had been included in the recent integrated group test (HFW Oct 2009) then I think that I would have placed it in direct competition to the Cyrus 8 XPD, both sharing a smooth and solid sonic delivery. Pricewise, the closest competitor would have been the Leema Acoustics Pulse. The Harman Kardon had a little more power, but a more reserved presentation that I could live with, but as I have said before, the Leema sound just happens to hit my audio taste buds perfectly, I find the slight exuberance appealing.

Whatever your taste, this is an excellent amp and CD combination, that offers enough connection options to satisfy most people’s needs, and produces an enjoyable and musical sound. Recommended, both.

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**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

The HK990 produces 180 Watts into 8 Ohms and no less than 250W into 4 Ohms, so it has massive power and can drive anything loud, in any room - even a large American one. Harman says it has ultra wide bandwidth, a traditional boast of theirs, but happily it does not, reaching a sensible 65kHz (+1dB), and registering -60dB down at 100kHz, the upper limit for hi-res digital. At the low end it appears to be d.c. coupled, reproducing a 1Hz signal at full level, but Harman says it has d.c. servos to prevent d.c. drift. Although Harman say feedback is low, damning factor is quite high at 57 and distortion at high frequencies (10kHz) very low, so it certainly has plenty of feedback; I guess it all depends on what you mean by "low". No transistor amplifier has really low feedback, because they cannot work satisfactorily without it.

Distortion levels were very low at power levels and frequencies, the worst case result being just 0.05% -1dB below full output power at 10kHz - a gruelling test. At 1 Watt, 10kHz, there was no sign of crossover products, a very good result.

The optical digital input was linear, returning 0.24% distortion at -60dB from a 16bit input, and a minuscule 0.03% from 24bit. Frequency response was well tailored, with just the slightest roll down at high frequencies (-0.3dB at 19kHz), enough to ensure CD lacks sharpness or spit. So digital conversion reaches a high standard.

The HD-990 player similarly has slightly falling treble, just like the amplifier, very low jitter and a linear DAC that produced just 0.188% distortion at -60dB, just a bit better than the amplifier.

This combination measured well and has been thoroughly engineered. The option of balanced analogue output from the player is odd when there is a digital link with separate clock line, especially as balanced introduces a line transmitter and receiver chip to degrade sound, but Harman says this is the best connection method, but Direct must be selected to remove conversion to digital and back again. NK

- **Power** 180 Watts
- **Frequency response** 1Hz-65kHz
- **Noise** -98dB
- **Distortion** 0.005%

**AMPLIFIER DAC FREQUENCY RESPONSE**

- **Digital** Frequency response 5Hz-20.8kHz
  - **Separation** 101dB
  - **Noise** -98dB
  - **Distortion** (-60dB) 0.24%

**VERDICT**

Well equipped, swelle sounding silver disc spinne.

**HARMAN KARDON**

HD990

£500

Harman UK

(+ 44 (0)1707 278100

www.harman.com

**FOR**

- two digital inputs
- plays MP3 discs, etc.
- upsamples to 24bit

**AGAINST**

- slight firmness to the sound
- poor control labelling

**VERDICT**

Solid and powerful integrated amp with superb connectivity and a strong onboard digital convertor.

**HARMAN KARDON**

HK990

£1,000

Harman UK

(+ 44 (0)1707 278100

www.harman.com

**FOR**

- smooth and civilised
- decent onboard DAC and ADC
- huge power reserves
- good phone stage

**AGAINST**

- obscure switchgear
"Technically unique and with exceptional sound, this takes the science of cables to a new level."
Tesla Accelerator speaker cable review - Hi-Fi World, August 2009

ABC Audio

Enjoy the Music.com Readers Say
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

Enjoy the Music.com Contest Winner
In fact, the Axiom Audio EP500 works so well that my wife and I both stood mouths open (not kidding!) as it shook the rafters and window glass in our house. Amazing! Love that palpable, tight bass... Thank you again for the awesome prize! — Jeff Merth
Going For The One

With all the recent interest in The Beatles reissuing their complete back catalogue in remastered form, it seems the perfect time to try out the latest portable music player from Philips. What's the connection? Back in 1963, when the Fab Four had just had their first success in the album chart, Philips were starting a musical revolution of their own, kick-starting personal audio with the launch of their EL3300 Pocket Recorder. The derivatives of this, the seminal Compact Cassette machine, would go on to conquer the world and outsell The Beatles many times over. But in the intervening years Philips has failed to repeat this early success, certainly the 'Sky Master' and 'Moving Sound' models never really hit the big time and are largely forgotten now.

The good news though is that Philips is back on the scene with a new model in their GoGear range. The £159 Muse is a 16GB MP3 video player with a big colour display very much in the modern mould. As such it goes head to head with the big guns, Apple's iPod touch and Sony's X series Walkman in particular.

Comparisons with the X series are particularly apt as the Muse also includes built-in noise cancelling, using microphones built into the earbuds. Whilst this system is reasonably effective, unless it is important to you, you may be better off forgoing it in favour of using better headphones, earbuds don't suit everybody and are a bit like the 'best ride' pedals you get on a proper racing bike; fine for a quick go around the shop but the first upgrade you should make as soon as you get home.

To broaden the appeal of the Muse, Philips have offered a very impressive array of codecs to choose from, MP3, WMA, AAC, APE, FLAC, Ogg Vorbis, Real Audio and WAV are all there. On top of this Philips also include some useful analogue functionality with an RDS FM radio and a built-in microphone, both of which can record to MP3. Various sound modes are offered including ten preset EQ patterns and Philips's own FullSound 2 technology (essentially a loudness button), although I'm sure no Hi-Fi World reader needs reminding that the best results come from using quality headphones and switching all of these functions off.

Philips has broken with the modern trend of using a touchscreen for controlling the major functions of its new model. Instead the black section to the right of the display forms a neatly styled rocker panel that operates mechanical switches which offer perfect tactile feedback and are fast and accurate to use. I've never been a fan of touchscreens and so the Philips is a real tonic in this respect. Also excellent is the FM radio, it is very easy to tune and impressively sensitive, RDS data comes through quickly and accurately for example. In this respect the Philips is streets ahead of the Sony X Series, whose radio is not such a pleasure. The Sony trumps the Philips in the quality of its display however; the Muse uses an LCD type of the sort that you may encounter in a mobile 'phone, which is no match for the OLED beauty of the Sony.

**SOUND QUALITY**

So how does it fare as a music player? Unlike the Apple and the Sony there is no internet browser built in so all content transfer has to come from a PC. Windows Media Player II is included and the Muse will also work with non-DRM content from iTunes. With so many different formats to choose from it is difficult to know which to use so I picked MP3, 192 kbps and .wav as these are the most popular and offer the best possible quality respectively. Listening using Sony MDR-D55 headphones revealed a sound that was slightly richer than the classic cold, bland iPod presentation, perhaps at the cost of some extreme treble detail.

Being critical I felt that the bass was a little clumsy at times, falling over itself when there was too much going on. The headphone stage offers only 2.4mW, Sony's upmarket models have nearly double that and therefore can offer not only more volume (the Philips doesn't offer quite enough I feel) but better, tighter control as well. MP3s were handled with reasonable competence but as ever never sounded that exciting and had a cramped soundstage. Uncompressed .wav was better, sounding a bit like a mid price CD personal and making for a more interesting listen whilst confirming at the same time that the headphone stage is the limiting factor.

**CONCLUSION**

I really liked the Muse, it looks smart and functions well. It is also very easy to use and largely devoid of needless frills; could Philips be on the verge of being a real force in portable audio again? The only problem I can see is one of marketing, the fashion conscious will still gravitate to Apple and the quality conscious to Sony, so Philips will have to work hard to get a toehold in a very crowded market. One for the free thinker then, I wish it the very best!

**VERDICT**

Fine all round music maker with a good feature set and versatile playback options.

**PHILIPS GOGEAR MUSE**

**SAMUS16**

£159

Philips

CD: +44(0)207 949 0069

www.consumer.phillips.com

**FOR**

- fast, easy user interface
- excellent FM RDS radio
- wide choice of codecs

**AGAINST:**

- soft headphone stage
- average video quality
Stayin' Boogie nights: Sony's HMK-80B was the high end choice of seventies swingers!

It’s official, the music centre is back! From the Meridian F80 to the AuraNote Premier, hi-fi is morphing towards single, do-it-all designs packed with features for all the family. But hang on, haven’t they done that before? Yes, says Tim Jarman, as he remembers two iconic nineteen seventies music centres from Bang and Olufsen and Sony...

Any avid hi-fi trendspotter can’t fail to have noticed that this past year or two has seen the reappearance of all-in-one designs. Products such as the Naim Uniti show that it’s possible to combine all the sources you will ever need, and the amplification, into one small, domestically acceptable package and still achieve a satisfying musical experience.

Combination units are nothing new of course, as they first appeared in the nineteen thirties as the radiogram, which was a radio set, record player and loudspeaker all housed in one (often imposing) piece of furniture. The miniaturisation of electronic components and the realisation that better sound could be obtained by moving the loudspeakers out of the main unit and into cabinets of their own moved the game on considerably, leading by the early nineteen seventies to the most popular combination units of them all, the music centre...

Music centres simply combined a turntable, radio tuner and an amplifier in one low, wide unit. Some included tape recorders (either Compact Cassette or 8-track) as well to form a really complete suite of equipment. Sadly, most were utter rubbish. Cheap low-grade turntables (BSR and Garrard were frequently responsible here) with appalling ceramic cartridges were combined with gutless, poorly designed transistor amplifiers which in turn played through low quality loudspeakers; instant ear-ache for any hi-fi fan! However, some manufacturers tried a little harder, using circuits and technology from their hi-fi separates ranges to build high price, high performance music centres that offered combination unit convenience with top drawer quality, much as the top music servers of today attempt to do.

Music centres dominated the audio scene throughout the nineteen...
Easy listening: B&O Beocenter 3500 was de rigeur for cocktail sipping sophisticates!

seventies, but as the decade drew to a close they suddenly went from being desirable must-haves to unspeakably naff as far as the style-conscious buying public was concerned. Manufacturers soon realised that they could house the same basic equipment in tower and midi systems that in many cases were made to look like separate components and the public suddenly didn't want anything with wooden sides and a three foot wide clear plastic lid on top any more...

INSTANT REPLAY

For the hi-fi aficionado, the concept of a music centre was anathema; our separates philosophy unequivocally stated that you had to 'mix and match' the best components at the price for the best sound. Whilst this was true to a large extent, high end music centres of the time were nevertheless very well engineered pieces, sharing technology with the top of a manufacturer's separates range, so they shouldn't be dismissed out of hand. Indeed, the following two jewels in the music centre crown are a case in point. They're both very well made and finished, achieve a decent sound even by today's standards and the engineering inside bespeaks a real desire to get them to perform. More than just a pretty face, then...

However, don't think even the top ones sound alike. The Bang & Olufsen Beocenter 3500 (of 1973) and a Sony HMK-808 (1978) show the different companies' contrasting sonic and design philosophies. When new, both were eye-wateringly expensive. In 1975 the B&O cost £266, twice as much as a Linn LPI2 turntable complete with Grace arm, and the Sony was £444 in 1979 money, as much as a top Trinitron colour TV! As was typical with high-end music centres neither included loudspeakers either so you would be paying out another big wedge on top before you heard anything.

Fast forward to today and neither costs more than a few rounds of drinks. The trouble is that for this sort of money you don't get much, in this case the B&O was seized solid mechanically whilst the Sony worked a bit but sounded dreadful. To restore the original performance both were first repaired and fully overhauled, a complicated process as both are packed with what was at the time state of the art technology. The Beocenter was then fitted with a new SP12 elliptical stylus (only B&O cartridges can be used with this type of arm) and the Sony with a Goldring 2100 cartridge as the original Sony VL-34G was damaged beyond repair. The Sony has the additional complexity of a cassette deck to deal with but this too was revived and calibrated to accurately match Sony's own latest spec UX-Pro tape.

And so to business. Freshly revitalised, the B&O sounded, unsurprisingly perhaps, highly redolent of high end B&O from that period. Tracy Chapman's 'Talking 'Bout a Revolution' instantly revealed a refined character, with the solid impression of competence and authority. What was particularly impressive was the way that the cartridge was never caught out by sudden, sharp transients that can cause others to briefly spit, sound harsh or mistrack. The whole setup sounded smooth, effortless and all-of-a-piece. Predictable perhaps, as the designer of each part of the music centre knew what he was working with.

On the whole, the turntable's idler/belt drive worked well but some notes were not quite as pitch-steady as can be achieved with the best Japanese direct drive units. More energetic music did test the
Limited Edition Pearl Components
When they are gone - they are gone forever...

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.

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 pedal, hammer and skin in motion."
Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News Sept 09

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B&O's abilities, the Thompson Twins' 'Love On Your Side' was somewhat lacking in punch, as the Beocenter appeared to be trying to join all the notes together and smooth out the gaps between them. Like a good but overbearing music teacher it seemed to have its own idea about how the music should sound and then did its best to make it like that. However, listening to Fleetwood Mac's 'Isn't it Midnight' was sublime, I've never heard this particular track played so enjoyably on anything else: powerful and punchy the B&O was not, but it always beguiled.

The FM tuner was amazingly sensitive, getting usable stereo reception from a screwdriver pushed into the aerial socket! With a proper roof antenna it showed itself to be a clean and musical performer with plenty of warmth, although it didn't offer last word in fine detail. Imaging however was first rate, no doubt due in part to the simple, transparent all-discrete stereo decoder circuit used. It showed that the whole unit was engineered to a uniformly high standard; not the equal of top notch separates hi-fi perhaps but still impressive.

Switching to the Sony was as much of a cultural shift as moving house from Denmark to Japan. If the B&O was designed by musicians then the Sony came from engineers, sounding as it did instantly more analytical and precise. The decently engineered direct drive turntable extracted that characteristic DD beat from the Pet Shop Boys' 'Introspective' album and tracks like 'Always On My Mind' were positively bursting with energy and drive. The Goldring 2100 cartridge seemed to suit the Sony arm well and was positively tuneful and precise in fine detail. The cassette deck was the real surprise: correctly calibrated it made very competent recordings from both sources. The sound was slightly warmer than that of the turntable which meant that recordings from LPs lost some of their attack and energy but strangely in some ways this made them more pleasant.

One couldn't expect a basic tape deck to match the speed stability of a direct drive turntable but the Sony made a good stab at it, none of the recordings it made fell below my expectations in any way. Music cassette replay was a little dull, I suspected that the playback EQ curve did not match the latest specification perfectly and this slight flaw was exaggerated by the action of the Dolby circuit.

THE FINAL CUT

So there we have it, two machines of a long-forgotten design that couldn't be more different in character. The fact that we are able to review them sensibly in a magazine like this disproves the opinion that all music centres were rubbish. The trouble is that although they are cheap to buy they will, on the whole, need a lot of work to bring them back up to spec, so as an alternative to a basic modern system they are not a completely practical proposition. Music loving aesthetes would love the B&O, as it's as beautiful as a Citroen SM and as refined as lunch with Joanna Lumley. On the other hand, Escort RS2000 driving, medallion wearing seventies playboys dreaming of a night out at Stringfellows would surely have taken the Sony HMK80B; it really does sound as chunky as it looks. Both are excellent period pieces, well worth looking out for with a view to collect.

I wonder if we'll be able to say the same about today's variation on the music centre theme?

TECH TALK

The specifications read like those of a pretty serious hi-fi system. This comes as no surprise with the B&O as it is in simple terms a Beomaster 3000 receiver and a Beogram 3000 turntable (both second to the top of their respective ranges), combined into one unit with little or no modification to either. The turntable platter is supported by a precision needlepoint bearing and rides on a massive diecast aluminium sub chassis that also carries the arm. The subchassis floats on compliant springs and these, combined with the weight and bulk of the plinth give excellent isolation, so much so that B&O called it 'danceproof'! The arm is a straight aluminium tube which is dynamically balanced. Anti-skating is controlled by ramps machined into the bearings, a clever trick made possible by the fact that all B&O cartridges are of the same weight and size. The cartridge itself is a moving magnet SP10 or SP12, a development of the original B&O SP cartridge of the late nineteen fifties which was arguably the first modern MM design. Inside, a magnetic cross with the cantilever at its centre opposes four longitudinal coils in a compact, efficient arrangement that was used (in miniaturised form) right up to the end of B&O cartridge production. To drive the platter, a two-stage system employing both an idler and a belt is used. The motor is suspended on its own sprung subchassis to prevent any vibrations reaching the arm or platter. The amplifier is a beefy 40 Watt affair that uses the same 2N3055 output transistors as most of the classic designs of this period. Being a single rail design it is AC coupled to the loudspeakers via large capacitors, a common technique at the time. The FM-only tuner would have been considered advanced, employing as it does electronic tuning, ceramic filters and integrated circuits in its amplifying stages. The B&O cabinet work is amazing, most of it is solid aluminium and finished to a high degree of precision.

In contrast to the B&0, the Sony is entirely purpose-built. Very unusually for a music centre it employs a direct drive turntable, which is powered by a huge motor of Sony's own design. The motor is not quartz-locked but it is servo controlled, a magnetic pickup just behind the arm of the platter monitors the speed and corrects the power accordingly. Unlike the B&O the Sony does not have a suspended subchassis, instead the arm, motor, bearing and mechanism are all rigidly mounted on a pressed steel plate which is then spring mounted in the cabinet. The S-shaped arm is typical of the period and features a removable magnesium headshell. The phone stage is also of unusually high quality for a music centre, it is built around a specially selected low noise bi-polar operational amplifier chip as opposed to the usual couple of cheap transistors. The 35 Watt power amplifier runs from split rails and is therefore DC coupled throughout, still a modern specification today. Sony were pouring money into tape recorders when the HMK-80B was made so it comes as no surprise to find a specially made, carefully engineered unit fitted. High points include a quality permalloy head and feedback controlled DC servo motor, again both of Sony's own design. If you thought Sony only made small things the HMK80B will surprise you, it is truly vast (it dwarfs the B&O), and is extremely heavy!
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 £175

A masterpiece of minimalism, this is well worth the money. It contains a superb Ortofon OM3 moving magnet cartridge. Great sound for the price.

**REGA P2** 2008 £220

Some say the cheapest real hi-fi turntable money can buy. Excellent value for money, easy set up and fine sound.

**TECHNICS SL1200/II** 1973 £395

Slick build makes it a respectable performer, although the cheapo arm limits it. A Rega RB250 and it's suddenly a brilliant mid-price machine.

**REGA P3-24** 2008 £400

Semi-aristocratic audiophile deck with fine build. Bundled tonearm. Tweakable, and really sings with optional £150 outboard power supply.

**MICHELL TECNODEC 2003** £579

Superb introduction to Michell turntables. 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 that Michell Orbe does most of this at half the price.

**FUNK FIRM VECTOR II** 2009 £680

Innovative engineering gives a nimbly, pacey and musical sound that's one of the best at the price.

**MARANTZ TT-1551** 2005 £999

Cracking deck/arm/cartridge combination, this must surely be the best sounding plug and play package at this price point.

**MICHELL GYRODEC SE2005** £1005

Design icon with superlative build and finish. Sound is beautifully smooth, effortless and exceptionally expansive. No longer peerless at the price, but still a brilliant platform.

**AVID DIVA II** 2008 £1,200

Commanding performer with great speed, dynamics and detail allied to an expansive soundstage; surely one of the best to beat.

**ACOUSTIC SOLID CLASSIC WOOD** 2008 £1,350

Majoring on impact, punch and drive, this is an impactful 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 PLAYLET 2007** £1,500

Revolver spring back into the vinyl market. Like they’ve never been away, with a stylish and solidly built LP45C11 spindle. Welcome back!

**SCHEU ANALOG BLACK DIAMOND** 2007 £1,500

Stylish and highly capable turntable with seriously impressive bass. Comes with twisted 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 Michell disc spinner remains a commander performer with great speed, dynamics and detail allied to an expansive soundstage; surely the one to beat.

**LINN LP12SE** 1973 £3,510

Surely Mfi's most iconic turntable, the legendary Sondek goes from strength to strength. New Kell subchassis and Radikal DC motor add precision and grip to one of the world’s most musical disc spinners.

**SME MODEL 10A** 1995 £4,556

Exquisitely engineered deck and SME V tonearm combo that’s an extremely accomplished performer with classical music.

**CLEARAUDIO REFERENCE 2003** £4,000

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 - Michell Orbe does most of this at half the price, however.

**ACOUSTIC SOLID ONE** 2007 £4,000

Mega turntable, both in terms of sheer mass and sonic dynamics. Fit up to three arms and enjoy, just don’t damage your back moving it.

**AVID VOLVERE SEQUEL2007** £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.

**MCINTOSH MT10** 2008 £8,995

Big, expensive, controversy-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 Ikeda 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 RB250 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 reworking! Surely the best overall performer under £500.

**ORIGIN LIVE SILVER** 2006 £599

This expertly finished Rega boasts a superebly even, transparent and tuneful sound. Gives away only a small degree of finesse and dimensionality to top arms.

**HADCOCK 242 SE** 2000 £669

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

**SME 309** 1989 £767

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

**SME SERIES IV** 1989 £1,127

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

**CAMBRIDGE AUDIO**

- **640C V2** 2006 £1,200
  - Superb entry level CD player; crisp, composed, musical sound plus fine build and ergonomics.

- **REGA APOLLO** 2006 £498
  - Highly rhythmic and beguiling performer, although lacks some warmth of tone. Superb ergonomics and design

- **RUSS ANDREWS DAC-1 USB** 2007 £599
  - Not just a USB gadget, but a truly accomplished upgrade DMC that makes the best of CDs, MP3s and digital radio.

- **CAMBRIDGE AUDIO 640H** 2005 £599.95
  - Fine sonics and decent build make this our favourite affordable HD music server.

- **MARANTZ SA7001 KI SIG2006 £600**
  - Brilliant CD/2/CH SACD spinner with a big, sweet, analogue-like sound - CD is totally competitive at the price with the best dedicated machines.

- **AUDIOLAB 8000CD** 2006 £450
  - Ultra clean and transparent sound with great detail retrieval, just a tad bright and analytical for some, though.

- **SHANLING CDT-80** 2005 £650
  - Very impressive mid-price machine with a big, sumptuous, expansive sound – better still when tubes are changed.

- **CAMBRIDGE AZUR 840C 2006 £800**
  - Well built CD player with a silky, yet detailed sound and a whole host of useful facilities. Excellent value for money.

- **NAIM CD5i** 2008 £895
  - Naim's new italic 'i' variant improves even further on the original mid-price classic, offering super tight, grippy and musical sound.

- **EASTERN ELECTRIC MINIMAX CD** 2005 £925
  - Highly accomplished tube-equipped all-rounder with a clean, open and musically lucid sound; superb value.

- **CYRUS CDS 5E** 2008 £1,200
  - New Serve Evolution mech makes this the most musically engaging machine at the price, with super: smooth tonality to boot. Optional PSX-R adds bass and dimensionality.

- **BENCHMARK DAC-1 USB2007£999**
  - Pro-biased DAC with useful range of inputs and impressive headphone outputs, too. Save £250 if you don't need the USB-equipped version.

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

EXPOSE 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 2x 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 player that delivers 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.

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

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

NAIM CDSS5/S55PS 2006 £14,000
Very probably the best CD player yet made - certainly the most expensive; a digital tour de force.

DIGITAL RECORDERS

SONY RCD-W3 2002 £250
Usual superb Sony ergonomics make for no-nonsense budget buy. Fine direct digital copiers, but analogue input poor. Middling sonic, but that's a digital output!

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

PHONO STAGES

CAMEBRIDGE AUDIO 640P 2009 £995
Excellent entry level design that raises the bar for budget phono stages. Crisp, smooth yet brightly lit sound on both MM and MC. That's a vast improvement on most budget inboards.

PROJECT PHONOBOX LE2004 £995
Great little box that improves on most bundled phono stages found in budget integrated amplifiers, adding detail and definition and a measure of smoothness too.

TRICHORD DINO 2002 £399
Great allrounder with switchable MM/MC. Fast, fluid and smooth like no others at the price.

JOILA JD9 2006 £600
Hybrid tube/solid state phono stage with a good range of adjustability. Excellent value for money and a fine, dynamic sound.

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

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

A.T. AUDIO KORA 3T LTD 2008 £775
Exceptionally musical and natural sounding all discrete transistor phono stage, with highly lucid, valve-like presentation.

ANATEK MCI 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 Delphiini 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 + NCPSU 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 Wheat.

ICON AUDIO PS3 2008 £995
One of the very best valve phono preamplifiers we've ever heard. A no-expenses spared approach.

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.

ICON AUDIO STEREO 25 2008 £300
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 finer musical points, wears its heart on its sleeve and has plenty of power to match.

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

CAMBRIDGE 840A V3 2007 £750
Version 2 addresses version 1's weaknesses to turn in a mightily accomplished performer, offering power, finesse and detail.

JUNGSON JA-88D 2006 £699
Stunning value for money Class A monster integrated, extreme power and clarity at a dazzlingly low price.

SUGDEN A21A S2 2007 £1,299
More power and greater transparency improve even further on the already impressive A21A to give truly impressive results.
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 S7F-80 2007 £1,199
Well built and surprisingly muscular valve integrated. Engagingly musical.

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

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

SUGDEN A21A 52 2008 £1,469
Crystalline clarity, dizzying speed and forensic detailing makes this a seminal design the most musical at the price, but power limited so needs sensitive speakers.

ANATEK AS0R 2007 £1,600
Simple integrated amplifier with spectacular bass grip and effortless dynamics.

UNISON RESEARCH 562002 £1,025
Tremendously musical and lush 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 soundstaging and build quality.

COPLAND CSA29 2006 £1,998
Unbelievably swift, sophisticated and smooth - both to listen to and look at - this is a truly desirable high end integrated.

NAIM SUPERNAIT 2007 £2,475
Technological and sonic tour de force from Naim that combines impressive functionality and connectivity with superb sound quality.

VINCENT SA-T1/SAT-T100 2006 £2,300
Impressively built and stylish pre/power combo that take any kind of music and make the best of it.

LUXMAN L-550A 2007 £2,800
Monstrous Class A integrated with powerful and revealing sound and a whole host of useful features, including a highly competent MM/MC phono stage.

AUDIO RESEARCH VS155 2003 £2,895
The Naim NAP250's tubular sheet ego, attributes of power allied to a strong bass and smooth midband makes this a brilliant all round amplifier. Lacks the subtlety and finesse of the low powered single-ended brigade but makes up for it with sheer brio.

LEEMA TUCANA 2007 £2,995
Leema's success story continues with this integrated amp that combines power, detail and grace musically in a solidly built package.

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

AV AMPLIFIERS

YAMAHA DSP-AXR61 SE2007 £700
Highly capable AV amplifier with mind-boggling array of surround sound options. Even has a decent MM phono stage!

ARCAM AVR350 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 £2,000
Huge behemoth festooned with facilities and sockets, plus two remotes! Fortunately it's a brilliantly flexible and powerful performer.

NAIM AV2/NAP 150/NAPV 175 2002 £4,190
Brilliant audiophile multichannel pre-power amplifier combo; not as good as 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/VAC-1 2003 £390
A truly exceptional headphone output stage, the best at the price and an essential audition.

MUSICAL FIDELITY X-CAN V8 2008 £350
Open and explicitly detailed sound plus serious bass wallop and the ability to drive anything to very high levels makes this a great partner for most mid-to-high end headphones.

SUGDEN HEADMASTER 2003 £600
Unusual combined preamplifier and headphone amplifier, this boasts a surprisingly smooth and open sound.

PREAMPAmIFIERS

CREW MARK 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?

MF AUDIO PASSIVE PR2003 £1,500
Effective pre with switchable gain via a transformer, and balanced operation. Open and incisive sound, yet makes most active rivals sound edgy by comparison. Silver version at the twice the price adds transparency.

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

NUFORCE P-9 2007 £3,200
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.

MUSICAL FIDELITY PRIMO 2009 £7,900
Staggeringly expensive, but one listen explains why. Wonderfully exuberant sound that can only come from a top quality tube design.

POWER AMPLIFIERS

ROKSAN KANDY LII 2008 £620
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 super value all the same. Lovely build, finish and Quad's legendary service are nice.

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

SUGDEN MUSIC MASTER 2003 £1,300
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.

NUFORCE REFERENCE 9SE V2 2006 £1,750
Brilliant value for money monoblocks with massive power and super-clean, three dimensional sound.
STANDARDS

ROTEL RB1092 2007 £1,595
Hugely powerful digital amp with neutral mid-range and a wonderfully spacious treble

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

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

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

QUAD II-40 2005 £3,230
Modern tube monoblock power amplifiers with plenty of power, liquid and open mid-range and spacious, airy treble. Explicit, engaging sound, but not as euphonic as some.

GRAAF GM20 OTL 2003 £3,300
Awesome output transformer-less valve power amp gives dazzling speed and incision, with an ethereal soundstaging and delicious midrange. A cupboard filler.

ELECTROCOMPANIET NEMO 2009 £4,450 (EACH)
Monoblock power amplifier with breathtakingly open and fast sound, and apparently infinite reserves of power. March 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 silty but dark tonality, blindingly dynamic, serious power and a compellingly musical sound. They don’t come much better than these.

LOUDSPEAKERS

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

B&W 686 2007 £779
B&W’s new baby standmounters offer a sophisticated and mature performance that belies both their dimensions and price tag.

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

MORDAUNT SHORT AVANT 914i 2007 £300
Another pair of stunning budget standmounters from Mordaunt Short. Detailed, punchy and crisp.

REVOLVER RW16 2004 £400
Outstanding standmounter with tonal accuracy and speed that totally belies its price; good sensitivity for a small box makes it great with valve amps too. A budget audiophile classic.

LEEMA XERO 2007 £650
Superb mini-monitors that belie their modest price tag with a bold and finessed performance.

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

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

WHARFEDALE OPUS 2-M1 2007 £999
Expert standmounter with impressive mid-range dome and fine integration across the frequency range.

RRE 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.

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

ONE THING AUDIO ELS57 2007 £1,450
One Thing Audio’s modifications keep the good old ELS57 at the very top of the game.

KIBRI NAIMA 2007 £1,550
Unusually-attractive bi-directional loudspeakers with an absolutely captivating performance. Huge soundstage and bags of clarity - brilliant!

GURU QM-10P 2007 £1,595
Quirky but adorable standmounters that are way off the pace in respect of detail and power, but incredibly 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 sublime, smooth and emotive.

MONITOR AUDIO G80 £2,400
Brilliant modern rock loudspeaker with a fantastically little and engaging sound, but partner carefully with a warm front end.

YAMAHA SOAVO I 2006 £2,000
Musical and transparent floorstanders with impressive dynamics and cohesion. Fine build and finish.

ISOPHON GALILEO 2007 £2,100
Big standmounters that really grip the music and offer quite startling dynamics and grip.

MONITOR AUDIO PL 100 2008 £1,300
The MA-boys pull out all the stops for their flagship 'Platinum' series standmounter with stunning results.

PMC OB1 2008 £2,950
Beautifully built, classily styled standmounters with exceptional image projection and a very clean, detailed sound.

MOWGAN AUDIO MBAON 2007 £3,995
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 M1 2006 £5,995
Sublime build and finish allied to an insightful, assured and even-handed musical performance makes these an essential high end audition.

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 CYGNIS 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 801/D 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.
GOLDRING DR150 2006 £70
Excellent build and fine sound makes these budget cans supertative value for money.

SENNHEISER PX-100 2002 £29
Cracking pair of lightweight open back cans ideal for personals, 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.

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

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

SENNHEISER HD-650 2004 £250
Not the best headphone in the world, but a superb all round reference all the same. Very crisp, detailed and even sound allied to superlative build and fine comfort makes all most people will ever want. Cable upgrade yields great results.

STAX SR-007T OMEGA BII/SSRM-007T 2006 £2,890
Simply the best headphones we've ever heard at any price, these sweetly translucent electrostatics are like no other headphone, or loudspeaker for that matter...

TECHLINK WIRES XS 2007 £20
Highly accomplished interconnects at an absurdly low price. Stunning value for money.

WIREWORLD OASIS 52003 £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.

MISSING LINK CRYO REFERENCE 2004 £800
Neat update of the original and best one-box stereo system; superbly musical sound beats equivalently priced separates.

TEAC DR-H300DAB 2008 £329
Nicely built and styled mid-level hi-fi with fine performance on all sources that even plays DVDs!

NAD C-715DAB 2008 £429
Small, neat looks cover a truly capable system that shows just what a compact design can achieve.

ARCAM SOLO MINI 2008 £650
Half the size and two-thirds the price of a full-sized Solo, the Mini gives very little away in terms of performance to its bigger brother.

ARCAM SOLO 2005 £1,249
Excellent all-in-one system, with a warm, smooth and balanced sound to match the features and style.
Remember the golden age of British broadcasting, when much of any weekday literally meant "nothing on the telly"? Before the mid nineteen eighties, lest we forget, there would be clusters of television programming. The Open University and schools programming would occupy the morning slots on the Beb, then there would be a gap, then the news, some children's stuff, and then another gap until the kids came home...

Between these slots, the test card appeared. Lovers of retro kitsch revere it, along with their beloved lava lamps, trim phones and teasesmaids, but I put it to you that what was really treasurable was the music. Without doubt, a good deal of it was pure 'cheesy listening', but there was nevertheless a lot of very high quality material, recorded by some very respected session musicians, bands and conductors, too. Indeed, the huge diversity of musical genres, and the quality of the performances will surprise many who simply switched off as soon as the test card appeared on their screens, at the time!

**TESTING TIMES**

Television started in the UK in 1936. As television programmes were not broadcast continuously throughout the day, something was required to be transmitted between the programmes to allow television dealers to demonstrate their products. It was quite a skilled job to set a TV up back then, with adjustments required for height, width, linearity, synchronisation, contrast and focus - and those settings often changed as sets were warmed up!

When colour came to Britain in the late sixties, things got more complex still, with the myriad of convergence, purity and linearity controls, all of which interacted with one another! The half-hour colour trade test films provided by companies like Shell with their imaginative titles of 'Paint' and 'Prospect for Plastics' and equally riveting episics from BP like 'The Tide of Traffic' were great for dealer showrooms, but of little use to television installers.

It was soon realised, therefore, that some form of test pattern to assist with the setting up of receivers was necessary. However, it was not until after the war that the first test card was actually broadcast. Not only was a video test pattern required, but an audio signal to accompany the picture was needed to check that the sound circuits were working. Of course, there was always the 440Hz tone (or for the musicians amongst you, the A above middle C) on BBC or 400Hz on ITA, but that did get a bit boring after a while. It was therefore decided that music should also be transmitted to accompany the test card.

**SOUND GALLERY**

The story starts in September 1955 when the BBC changed from the live playing of 78 records in random order to using music recorded on tapes. These were recordings of the 78s that were grouped under either a classical or light music theme.

For ITA the first trade test schedule commenced on Monday 17 June 1957 and, unlike with the BBC, it was always the practice to use commercially available records until they started using tapes in the late 1960s. The music played with the ITA test cards was all sourced from records that you could buy from your local record shop and spanned classical through to jazz and light orchestral.

In October 1959, the BBC started building a library of half-hour tapes to accompany the famous Test Card C image. They consisted of two or three tunes, similar in style, followed by a BBC Ident (the well-known BBC Chimes played on a celeste and consisting of 3 notes: B-B-C) and a thirty second silence. Tapes were known by the title of the first track as well as the BBC tape reference, for example "My Friends" aka Tape BLN22/XE1203a, which was the first of the BBC2 one-hour tapes and was transmitted between 13 June 1972 and 20 June 1973.

One of the problems for the BBC music compilers was the restrictions placed by the Musician's Union on the use of needle-time music, which meant that music recorded in the UK could not be used. As a consequence, the compilers had to go abroad for material and the first stop was France. These early tapes therefore exhibited a distinct French style with titles like 'La Foule', which was the first track of BBC TV Tape No. 1, and plenty of accordion music!

As more tapes were produced, music was sourced from further afield, for example, from Mozart Edition in Germany. The tapes...
played by the Queen's Hall Light Orchestra of which he was the conductor. Moving across to ITA music, this was sourced from commercial LPs with styles ranging from easy listening music such as Mantovani, Michel Legrand, Frank Chacksfield and Robert Farnon to classical pieces performed by the Halle Orchestra, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, to mention just a few. Many of these recordings are still available, albeit second-hand, from dealers such as GEMM.com.

November 1982 heralded the arrival of Channel 4 and this new channel was keen to establish an identity of its own. The music chosen to accompany test card transmissions was also very different from that of the BBC and ITA. Channel 4 used UK library LPs from publishers like KPM, Joseph Weinberger and Ready Music. Moog and ARP synthesisers were the order of the day and the music reflecting the modern era featured Reggae and funk music, interspersed with other styles. The first track of the first C4 test card tape entitled 'The Theme' was a synthesiser piece written by Val Podlasinski, who was an associate of Robert Moog. Other tracks featured works by Francis Monkman, Andy Clark, Richard Harvey, Bob Morgan and Keith Mansfield from the KPM 1000 series library, Anthony Mawer and David Snell (the Joseph Weinberger Programme Music label) and original piano compositions by Kathleen Crees in the style of classical composers sourced from a delightful Standard Music library LP. As the eighties progressed and improvements in the design of television sets meant that less work (if any) was required to set them up, the poor old test card was squeezed out to make room for the altogether inferior material that is daytime TV! Gaps between programmes were filled with CEEFAX in Vision on the BBC and the music used tended to be tapes of single albums. By the 1990s, BBC1 had completely filled its test card transmissions so on.

No article on test card music would be complete without a reference to the Test Card Circle. Members have access to a database that contains tracks used on '50s, '60s and '70s BBC tapes... were themed, with some devoted to classical music, such as on the 1962 BBC Tape 17 'Handel's Water Music' performed by the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra, supported by some Paganini etudes and topped off with some Vivaldi played by the Hague Residentie Orchestra.

The quality of this music was high with superb orchestras and composers such as Roger Rogerson, Heinz Kiessling, Werner Tautz and our own Frank Chacksfield and Syd Dale. Music was purchased by the BBC from a variety of music publishers and made into BBC LPs and the BBC Coded Music library. In 1972, tapes were doubled in length to one hour compilations and, generally speaking, separate tapes were produced for BBC1 and BBC2 use. As this music came from abroad, it was not commercially available here. These were not tin-pot recordings by third rate musicians. Many of the orchestras included the cream of library session musicians who were assembled abroad to record the music. One such orchestra was the Oscar Brandenburg Orchestra. In fact, Oscar Brandenburg was not a person, but a name conjured up from the OB nature of the recording – 'OB' standing for Outside Broadcast! At this point, I should also mention that equally high quality music was used for other purposes, such as programme theme tunes and as other interval music. The composer Syd Dale, for example, wrote a piece called 'Walk and Talk' that was the tune used as interlude music before the BBC transmitter turned off!

As the eighties progressed and improvements in the design of television sets meant that less work (if any) was required to set them up, the poor old test card was squeezed out to make room for the altogether inferior material that is daytime TV! Gaps between programmes were filled with CEEFAX in Vision on the BBC and the music used tended to be tapes of single albums. By the 1990s, BBC1 had completely filled its test card slots and there were only a few remaining slots on BBC2 for CEEFAX. Tragically, the test card was turned off!

WHAT'S GOING ON?
With the advent of organisations such as the Global Electronic Music Marketplace (www.gemm.com), it is possible to find quite a lot of this material. As radio stations turf out their old LPs, many find their way to these dealers where they become available to buy, often for the first time.

To cater for the resurgence in interest in light music, a number of CDs have been made in recent years containing remasters from the original source material used by the BBC. Collections of such CDs are available from Apollo Sound (www.apollosound.com) and two from Chandos Flyback and, in particular, the registered charity Winchester Hospital Radio (www.whr.org.uk). The WHR CDs are worthy of note as the sound quality of the remastered recordings is extremely high and often familiar tunes are heard in stereo for the first time.

CDs from overseas are easy to get hold of nowadays and a fine example of the Heinz Kiessling recordings used on BBC test cards are available from Bliss Records in Germany via the Brilliant Musik website at www.brilliant-musik.de.

Like the BBC, Channel 4 music was library music from a variety of music publishers and not, on the whole, commercially available. There were a few exceptions however, and Gordon Giltrap (www.giltrap.co.uk) released a great CD entitled 'Airwaves' in 2000 (La Cooka Ratcha LCVP108CD) that contained the tracks from the LP TIMI038 released by Themes International, including 'Heroes' used as track 2 of the first C4 test card tape, 'El Greco' as track 6 of the third tape and 'Rainbells', which was track 4 of the fifth tape.

As the IBA music was sourced from commercial LPs, much of this material is readily available in its original LP format from GEMM and the like. In addition, an increasing number of CDs are emerging containing reissues of the original material from Amazon. Just go to the CD section and search for Mantovani, Bert Kaempfert, Herb Alpert and so on.

No article on test card music would be complete without a reference to the Test Card Circle. Members have access to a database that they have compiled containing details of all the BBC trade test tapes from the start in 1959 until 1982. Apart from links to CDs of the music there is also a wealth of information on test cards which, if you are anything like me, you will find fascinating! Have a look at www.testcardcircle.org.uk for more information.

Sleeve of a Mozart Edition Library Music LP record containing tracks used on '50s and '60s BBC tapes...
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Jackie DeShannon
Laurel Canyon
RPM

A highly talented lady, why she hasn't been given more attention and plaudits is a mystery to many. She began as a pop singer in the fifties, was one of the rare artists to open for The Beatles on tour, dated Elvis, wrote a gamut of songs for the likes of Brenda Lee, Marianne Faithfull and Irma Thomas and more. She also cowrote songs with Jimmy Page and Randy Newman, recorded with Brian Wilson and Burt Bacharach, was one of the first artists to cross folk and rock and had Top 10 hits including 'Needles and Pins' and 'When You Walk Into the Room'.

This album, one of her best, was released in 1968, originally on the Imperial label. Laurel Canyon itself was quite a place at this time, occupied as it was by stars such as Joni Mitchell, Cass Elliot, Graham Nash and Carole King. DeShannon catches its mood and feel perfectly with a country-soul production that allowed her to deliver her music with a real edge, supported by the production techniques of soul legend Bobby Womack. "The making of the album was the first opportunity I had to record songs in a purely organic format or context," DeShannon said. "For once, there was not a lot of feedback from the record company. Everyone brought their unique artistry into the sessions. It was the mix I'd been looking for throughout my recording career."

The swamp-folk of the mountains is spread all over the album, enhanced by contributions from the likes of Dr John. This reissue includes eight bonus tracks. Also look out for other DeShannon albums via RPM: 'Songs', 'Breakin' It Up On the Beatles Tour!', 'For You', 'Are You Ready For This?' and 'Put A Little Love In Your Heart'.

Sweet Soul Music
Various
Bear Family

A superb series of soul compilations collected in a year-by-year format, each release is contained in a beautifully produced fold-out digipack which, when opened up to the full, features a thick booklet centrally placed. Spanning around ninety-pages, each booklet features a track-by-track overview with colour glossy pages including rare photographs, cover art, posters and labels and artist mini-biographies, all compiled by Bill Dahl. Talking to Dave Booth, the reissue producer of the series, he revealed that, "Sweet Soul Music has evolved from the original 'Blowin' The Fuse' series, which covered the years from 1945 to 1960. 'Sweet Soul Music', begins from 1961 to 1970."

Coming from Bear Family, you expect a level of production quality but also sound quality and that's certainly true here. Derived from a variety of sources such as published singles but, where appropriate, acetates and other rare sources, the final master is uniformly excellent. The final list is a great mixture of well known, 'pop-like' and more hardcore productions that provide an ideal cross-section of the soul genre. From the 1970 disc for example, includes Brook Benton's version of 'Rainy Night In Georgia' and James Brown's 'Get Up (I Feel Like Being A Sex Machine)' along with the likes of Tyrone Davis 'Turn Back the Hands Of Time' and Little Sister's 'You're The One Pt. I'.

The content was understandably contentious. That is, when Dave Booth had to decide what to leave out. Each package includes space for just one CD so a lot of judicious pruning and some painful decisions had to be carried out when deciding on the final mix. Booth admitted that he has subsequently received criticism from fans who protest that their favourite tracks have been left out. As he, himself, commented, however, "You can't please everyone!"
CLEO LANE & JOHN DANKWORTH
I Hear Music: A Celebration Of Their Life And Work
Salvo
One of the great stalwart teams in British jazz, husband and wife, Sir and Dame, Dankworth and Laine have had careers both together and as solo artists. This box set includes four CDs, contained within a long-form box that includes a booklet of over sixty pages featuring rare photographs, rare cover sleeves and full track information.

The CDs are themed into 'Early Years' from the mid-forties and the Johnny Dankworth (Club XI) Quartet, the Johnny Dankworth Seven to Johnny Dankworth & His Orchestra with and without Cleo Laine. The second disc examines Dankworth's later works with big bands and film theme work. Disc three looks at the works of Cleo Laine as a solo artist and working with stars such as Ray Charles, John Williams and Gerry Mulligan. The final disc is entitled 'Family Affair' and includes members of the family including the singer Jacqui Dankworth, Alec Dankworth (bassist and composer) and Emily Dankworth (the youngest vocalist of the family).

There are plenty of classic moments including Laine's renditions of some of the Great American Songbook material plus Dankworth's innovative arrangements. There's also some surprising inclusions. For example, did you know that Dankworth wrote the theme tunes for "The Frost Report" and "The Avengers"? How about the original theme tune for "Tomorrow's World"? "I was only asked to write it for one pilot programme," Dankworth explained, "so I didn't pay a huge amount of attention to it. I had no idea it would be on for so long but it must have been heard for many hundreds of times."

There is some excellent jazz here, while the movements in time provide interesting context and appreciation to how each artist evolved over the years. Recommended.

THE LAURIE RECORDS STORY 3
Girls & Girl Groups
Ace
The latest release in Ace's exploration of the Laurie record label has reached volume three. Formed in 1958, the label had a quick hit, '1 Wonder Why' by Dion & the Belmonts, which appears on Volume One of the story along with an additional host of hits. Volume Two, subtitled, 'The Ernie Maresca Years', highlighted the man who wrote many of Dion's hits. This volume concentrates on the female contingent of the label. Probably the best known female act on the label was The Chiffons who had several hits including 'He's So Fine'. This volume presents a number of their lesser known cuts including 'Love Me Like You're Gonna Lose Me' and 'If I Knew Then (What I Know Now)'.

Amongst the songs presented here are one or two mysteries including the improbably named Marie Antoinette who sings 'He's My Dream Boy'. A rare single from 1964 and one that comprises of a convoluted story including the connection that Marie Antoinette is the one and the same vocalist who appeared as Alice Wonder Land with another single released during the previous year.

The material created for the Laurie girls was top notch with several of the tracks produced by some of the famous Brill building songwriters such as Gerry Goffin and Carole King and singer-songwriter, Ellie Greenwich. With groups and vocalists appearing here ranging from The Summits, The Cheese Cakes, The Charmers, Beverly Warren and Dawn, this is an excellent collection of quality pop.

If you want to investigate the Laurie output in more depth, check out the additional CDs from Ace: 'The Belmonts: The Laurie, Sabina & United Artists Sides' (Volume One and Two), 'Laurie Vocal Groups: The Sixties Sound' and Laurie Vocal Groups: The Doo Wop Sound'.

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"digital music distribution has finally made it possible to bring serious advances in sound to everyone..."

david price

It's been a fascinating decade for hi-fi, hasn't it? There's been nothing of particular note in headline terms, no spectacular show-stopping new development that's defined the decade like Compact Disc did in the eighties, for example. Rather, there have been lots of subtle evolutions of ideas started in the decade before...

Whereas the nineties saw the decline of vinyl, the noughties saw its reappearance. Some thing it was merely a fad, like 'Cool Britannia' or the Millennium Bug, but it's now become an everyday reality again for many people. There are now more turntables launched every year than CD players, and seemingly more interest in the subject than the busted flush that was 'surround sound'. Two channel analogue is back, just like it was in the early moment. Now, Naim Label, Linn Records and B&W's Society of Sound are all doing hi res (24/96 or similar) downloads from subscription or pay websites. It's the reinvention of the nineteen eighties audiophile LP, the twenty first century equivalent of the nineteen sixties. The result is a thousand cheap drive units, almost everything has evolved. Drive units have got better, cabinets have improved and the integration between the two has honed closer to perfection even in 2009.

How about digital? We all know that the roots of modern digital lie in Pulse Code Modulation (PCM). It was originally seen in commercial music recording back in 1972 (as developed by Denon), but arrived courtesy of Sony in 1982 as the Compact Disc format, with the optical disc work done by Philips. The trouble is, CD then stayed the same for decades, effectively freezing most people's experience of digital in time and space, a bit like the British government is now attempting to do with DAB! CD uses an ancient 16bit, 44.1kHz sampling rate specification that's now as old hat as dad's old Sinclair Spectrum computer. Earlier this decade, attempts were made to stretch it via DVD-Audio, but we all know how that particular format went from being the new gold dream of audiophiles to the stuff of audiojumbles and eBay auctions...

So no, you'd definitely have to say digital has been something of disappointment in the past ten years. Or at least you would have done until very recently. Because all of a sudden, hi res digital has started coming back, not in disc form but down a telephone line like most other aspects of modern life. DVD-Audio failed, I'd suggest, not because nobody wanted it, but because most people didn't know it existed. Shops wouldn't stock it, simply because they could make more money per square foot flogging standard movie DVDs.

Now though, hi res digital is getting a second lease of life as a digitally downloaded computer music file, often held in FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec) format. Like MP3, there's been a groundswell of interest around hi res FLAC, with Linn Products very shrewdly aligning themselves to it from an early moment. Now, Naim Label, Linn Records and B&W's Society of Sound are all doing hi res (24/96 or similar) downloads from subscription or pay websites. It's the reinvention of the nineteen eighties audiophile LP, the twenty first century equivalent of Rega's 'Jazz at the Pawnshop'. As I write, there at doubtless hundreds of Networked Attached Storage hard drives clacking away quietly, either rendering FLAC files out to a wireless network or slowly filling up as both downloaded and ripped music files populate them ever more densely...

So in the last few weeks of 2009, perhaps digital will mark itself out as the stand out event of the decade. Digital music distribution has finally made it possible to bring serious advances in sound to everyone (who's interested), when it could never happen as a disc-based physical format. Where's that going to leave us in 2019? I'd love to know!
CD replay is technically difficult, more like RF engineering than audio, and not all manufacturers have the necessary skills.

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JUST LISTEN AND YOU'LL KNOW
"Why did that Ampex master tape become sticky in the first place? The answer is... whales!"

Paul Rigby

In this issue, I'm tying up some of the loose ends created by columns gone by and utilising a remarkable company as the tool to do it. That company is Delmark Records (www.delmark.com), a label that concentrates upon American jazz and blues. Born in 1953 and based in Chicago, USA, it was founded and is still owned by one of the industry's true veterans, Bob Koester. Delmark is famous for being one of the oldest independent record labels in the world. Responsible for recording classic jazz and digging up a range of legendary blues singers, the label is also a labour of love. "I produce music I like and believe in," Koester stated. "If I don't like an artist, I don't record them."

Often, an independent record label is, by inference, an extension of the owner's personality, reflecting his ambitions. For example, after its initial launch, Koester was so determined to record the music he loved, he asked his early partner, also a detective, to track down several elusive blues legends, bringing them to the label to record in the studio. This is why Delmark has the legendary Speckled Red on its roster via his 'Dirty Dozens' album, for example.

Being an independent means that money is tight and the company remains small. This does mean, however, that the label can tackle projects that the majors wouldn't touch in a million years. Talking to Steve Wagner, Delmark's general manager, he talked about the company's size and, generally, what 'company size' can do to you. "If you expand a company past a certain point, you have to employ a certain amount of people to run it. It then becomes a 'machine' and you have to feed the machine to keep it working," he told me.

This means that, as a larger company, you have to create and sell albums by artists which will be guaranteed to sell a certain amount of records to cover overheads and other costs. If not, the project is not worth it. This is largely why many niche artists never appear on major labels unless they break out to become national and international figures and why smaller labels are essential for the artistic and creative health of the music industry and also national cultural identity.

Delmark is not only national in its approach, it is also local being keen to promote new, contemporary jazz and blues. It's very active in the Chicago area, recording live albums for CD and performances to DVD. I talked about the live recording environment in the last issue, with jazzman John Surman. Delmark's Wagner readjusted my point that live performances suffer from a lack of detail. "I can find the aural 'sweet spot' in my studio but live? In any live room I'm stuck with the stage, obviously, which limits things. I've also got to work with the video director and the group set-up," he told me.

Hence, another reason that live performances feature less sound detail is you. You will insist on turning up to spoil the acoustics of the room and having your heroes stand on raised platforms away from the room's sweet spot so that you can see them and having whopping great boomy speakers blaring out so that you can hear them half a mile away. I dunno, some people!

One of the jewels of Delmark is its archive. Any company which can include Big Joe Williams' 'Piney Wood Blues', Sleepy John Estes', 'The Legend Of Sleepy John Estes' and Junior Wells' 'Hoodoo Man Blues' with Buddy Guy as part of its catalogue has to be careful with its masters. However, as I've mentioned in the past, it's not so much these particular masters that cause the problem but those later master tapes during the seventies, largely from Ampex, that resulted in the infamous 'sticky' tape phenomenon. As I've mentioned in the past, such tape is prone to shedding oxide so, to play the tape, engineers have to bake it in a special oven in order to make it playable again...

What's always puzzled me, however, is how and why the tape became sticky in the first place. Wagner had the answer, "whales," he said, a little mysteriously... "The tape in the earlier days actually integrated whale oil into the chemical structure which enhanced its lifespan", he told me. However, when the call went out that whales were becoming endangered, the industry dropped the whale oil and reconfigured its tape recipe. The changed recipe was not as efficient however, which has resulted in those sticky tape problems. So now you know who to blame for that dodgy reissue of your favourite seventies outfit; a sea-faring mammal!

That growing archive is a precious thing, however and when you hear founder/owner, Koester, declare that, "I see the company more as a hobby," you realise that, in a way, you're peeking into and are able to enjoy one man's personal collection. It's a bit like turning up at a chap's house and asking to play with his prized model trains. It might be a hobby to Koester but it's also one that we can all appreciate, indulge in and enjoy.
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"it's a disgrace that the BBC and the BBC Trust make such wholly inaccurate statements about DAB's audio quality..."

steven green

I've had a major grievance for a long time with the way BBC executives who appear on the radio to defend DAB misrepresent important facts. Probably the best example of this occurred in 2003, when Simon Nelson, who was the BBC Controller in charge of digital radio at the time, claimed that,"for the vast majority of people, the sound quality they're getting through their digital radio set is vastly superior to that which they've ever had through their analogue radio". The opposite is in fact true, and since the Digital Britain report set a date for FM to be switched off (albeit that there's more chance of me winning the lottery than there is of FM being switched off in 2015, and I don't play the lottery), BBC representatives have made a number of similarly inaccurate claims...

The most significant recent example of this occurred when Tim Davie, the BBC's Director of Radio, appeared on Radio 4's 'Feedback' programme to answer questions about the plans to switch off FM. And when he was asked, "do you accept at the moment DAB is often inferior to the existing sound?", Tim Davie's response was that:"DAB doesn't have the coverage of FM at this point. And it's really straightforward that the quality of your audio is related to reception, but the quality as well: even when you are getting what is supposed to be the best quality, there are some of our listeners who think that it still doesn't measure up to what they're getting already through the analogue system." But Tim Davie simply repeated his original claim that "the quality of sound is based on where you are and the distance from a transmitter." That is simply untrue.

The correct answer is that DAB delivers poor audio quality because the bit rates being used are too low to provide good audio quality. And the reason why the bit rates are too low is because the broadcasters, in particular the BBC, chose to squeeze too many stations onto the multiplexes. The distance to the transmitter only affects reception quality, and it has no effect whatsoever on DAB's audio quality for anybody that has good DAB reception quality. As the broadcasters claim that 90% of people already have DAB coverage, even if the figure that actually have good DAB reception quality is significantly lower than that, I think it's fair to say that Tim Davie misrepresented the vast majority of 'Feedback' listeners with his comments.

If it wasn't bad enough that the person in charge of BBC Radio couldn't admit the truth about DAB's audio quality, Sir Michael Lyons, the Chairman of the BBC Trust, which is the organisation that supposedly regulates the BBC, and claims to represent the interests of the public, also said on 'Feedback' that DAB would deliver "improved" audio quality compared to FM, with the caveat that this would only be possible "when you've actually got the same sort of coverage as you've got on FM".

The comments mentioned above are both highly inaccurate, but the prize for the most outrageous comment has to go to Tony Moretta, the chief executive of the Digital Radio Development Bureau (DRDB), which is co-funded by the BBC and commercial radio to promote DAB, and its Vice-Chair is Tim Davie (so the BBC is jointly-responsible for Moretta's actions). Moretta has been wheeled out to defend DAB on BBC Radio on a number of occasions, and the inaccurate statements he's made are far too numerous to list here, so I'll just select some of the most outrageous ones.

First of all, when it was put to him that DAB is less advanced than DAB+, which a number of European countries have adopted, he said, "I think that's unfortunately one of the major urban myths about DAB"!

Also on the subject of DAB+ he said that Germany and Australia had not rejected using DAB in favour of DAB+. And when asked about whether DAB+ was better than DAB, he said,"we don't believe it will make much difference to the vast majority of consumers", and when pressed about how much difference, he said,"well, the benefit is very, very marginal. You can potentially get slightly better audio quality [using DAB+]".

Needless to say, all of the above comments are complete and utter nonsense...

I honestly think it's an absolute disgrace that people at the top of the BBC and the BBC Trust consider it acceptable to make such wholly inaccurate and misleading statements about DAB's audio quality, or for people from organisations co-funded by licence fee money, such as the DRDB, to do the same. The people involved have clearly never bothered to look into the technical facts of the matter, or if they have done so then the only remaining conclusion is that they lied. Whichever is the case, it is completely unacceptable.

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"if you want a long and happy life then don't compare LP to CD, I could say..."

By the time this column makes it to print, the Audio 09 hi-fi show at Whittlebury Hall, Northants, will be a fading memory. If I'm lucky the criticism will be fading too! Let me explain.

Audio shows are always fun to attend and Whittlebury seemed to please a lot of people, but not all. I was busy upstairs in the Interlogos Suite working with Martin Colloms and Peter Comeau on the talks we were giving and this always was an 'interesting' experience, if for me not an entirely successful one this year. My comparison of LP to CD, received well at Manchester 07, didn't go down so well. Oh dear...

This year, as with Manchester 07, we were nearly scuppered by a curiously left field phenomenon: loudspeaker run in. For Manchester 07 I asked Tannoy for their mighty Westminster Royals on song, driven by a quality valve amp, are a wonderful experience but 'ours' didn't sound right and it turned out they had been specially built for the demo and were not run in! We had no time to run them in. Luckily, B&W had supplied a well used pair of 801Ds that worked perfectly and went down well with the audience.

This year we were going to use a complete Electrocompaniet system but the Nordic Tone loudspeakers being built for us in Norway could not be completed in time, so we had to move to Plan B: sharpish. This was to use a system Martin Colloms had ordered for his demo, which relied on a pair of PMC IB2 Studio Monitors (£8000), sitting on tall stands to fire over the heads of the audience. It seemed good to me, but when we arrived Friday they didn't sound right: incohesive, indistinct in the bass and sharp in the mid. We panicked and borrowed a pair of floorstanders but by 10.30am Saturday morning the IB2s were beginning to sound better and we learnt later they too had been specially built and were not run in. Doh!

I am not a fan of studio monitors which, these days, commonly feature big midrange domes that are forward and sharp sounding, due to measurable and well understood break up modes. James Henriot of Whwest Audio tells me that when sitting distant from them in a studio monitoring environment the problem isn't evident and Martin Colloms seemed smitten by the PMCs. On balance, bass apart, I thought the PMCs did a good job because we got a very consistent and revealing sound right to the back of the room, my main concern. But that wasn't good enough for our Advertising Manager, Debi Silver, who thought the sound was so bad she had to leave! Ouch.

What loudspeaker would I have chosen? My preference is for electro-statics, but they are not ideal for PA work (public address) because of the high sound pressure levels needed and Quads, Princesounds and Martin Logans do not come with stands. Tannoy Yorkminsters would work well but they do not come with stands either, so that leaves B&W 801Ds that worked well for us in Manchester and seemed to please the audience, when we conducted a straw poll. Whatever we ran, someone would be unhappy, but it is important to use a speaker that an audience agrees is decent under specific conditions of use.

Others were distinctly unhappy about my comparison of LP to CD however, for reasons I fully understand - and don't understand! There were many problems here. I chose ten albums I own on both formats in an open comparison and in some cases the LPs sounded worse than CD. I wasn't trying to show that LP always sounds better; only making an open comparison between the two formats. Two people told me that other listeners around them were distinctly unhappy about this though, it didn't go down well at all. In future I will get demo LPs specially cut where I can control the whole process, then use them as a definitive comparison. I have already been promised a special half speed cut of Eleanor McEvoy on decent vinyl and a comparative CD. Next time I will be more selective and choose only good LPs, just to stay clear of the vinyl lynch mob! I understand their sensitivities though, because I prefer vinyl played properly to CD.

I used an affordable arm and cartridge (SME M2 10 + Ortofon 2M Black) to avoid being accused of unfair bias toward LP. But this did not go down well with vinyl lovers either who felt I was selling LP down the river by not demonstrating it to the best of its abilities with a good moving coil! Again, I understand this and will take two turntables next time, affordable and amazing.

Complicating everything, James of Whwest Audio tells me he felt there was something wrong with LP replay and I suspect the output level control of our PS1.2 phono stage, which must be kept at maximum. I forgot this and we used it to equalise LP replay level to CD. Whoops!

Which all goes to show many things. If you want a long and happy life don't compare LP to CD I could say, but the truth is that there are many complexities and everything needs to be better thought through and implemented than I managed this year. Apologies to all who were upset, but as Annie once said ominously "I'll be back"!

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adam smith

My obsession with turntables is well known to readers of this magazine, but what’s less well understood is my relationship with loudspeakers. I spent a number of years wearing an Acoustic Engineer’s hat, designing drive units, complete enclosures and active subwoofers. Yet I never tire of examining exactly how different people approach loudspeaker design; the aspects that they prioritise in order to obtain the best sound possible, and the way in which they approach the inevitable compromises when trying to make something affordable and stylish that covers every area of the frequency range with equal skill. In fact, I could quite easily become a loudspeaker hoarder alongside my turntable collection, but am assured by my nearest and dearest that this would be a very bad idea if I wish all parts of my anatomy to remain in the condition and position that Mother Nature intended [the nation can relax, then! Ed.]

As a result of this, I thoroughly enjoyed working through this month’s group test contenders and taking the chance to re-examine some of those longstanding theories that have been expounded over the years. After all, we have all been conditioned to believe for so long that floorstanders are ‘better’ than standmounters, ribbon tweeters are ‘better’ than domes and sealed boxes are more often than not ‘better’ than ported ones, but I have never been convinced it’s that simple. When talking turntables I often ask questions like whether direct drive is better than belt drive and I have always answered that I believe the best way of driving a platter is by a well designed and properly implemented system, regardless of whether a rubber band or a servo controller is involved. Equally with loudspeakers, I believe it is folly to follow the statements like those I have made above, as a loudspeaker encompasses so much more than just the raw materials that make it up.

The aforementioned group test was a perfect example of this as my general preference is for loudspeakers that are on the large side (“the bigger and uglier the better”) as the wife succinctly puts it. So no one was more surprised than me when I discovered that the loudspeaker I would choose to live with from this month’s selection was the one that would sit cheerfully on my upturned palm; the Audiosmile Kensal!

These units spotlight exactly how a loudspeaker design should be approached, in my opinion. They use very high quality drive units in a simple and yet effective construction and they have been voiced to really play to their strengths, but simultaneously making sure that the inevitable weaknesses, in this case, loudness and low bass, are carefully controlled and not allowed to overshadow the good parts. To my ears, this has worked a treat.

Eagle-eyed readers may also have noticed an omission from the test this month as well. After all, it was intended as an exploration of different loudspeaker design methods to encompass domes and ribbons, and small and large boxes, amongst others, but one extra angle I had hoped to cover was to include a sealed box loudspeaker. However, upon researching models I was very surprised indeed by just how few there are around these days, so the test remained an infinite baffle-free zone. What brought this home to me even more was leafing through my 1978 Hi-Fi Year Book recently to put a name to a loudspeaker found at a car boot sale by a friend. I was astonished at the page after page of infinite baffle designs I saw as I searched, from the likes of Acoustic Research, Richard Allan, Celestion, Decca, Eagle, Mission, Tangent and Yamaha, to name but eight. It seems that the closed box has seriously fallen out of favour in recent times and ports appear to be the way everyone is going.

As to why this might be, I can only surmise that it is through cost-cutting and ease of design. After all, a sealed box requires very careful matching of driver properties to box dimensions and the two have to be designed in conjunction from the beginning. If for some reason a driver cannot easily be made to the specification that stems from the enclosure requirements, then any alterations made will impact back on the enclosure as well. Frankly, a ported design is a lot simpler and if your overall system doesn’t quite sound quite right, it’s a damn sight easier to chop a bit off the port tube, or stuff a different diameter one into the hole from which it came!

This is not being quite fair however, as designing a ported enclosure that really and truly gels completely with its drivers is actually every bit as challenging as coming up with a successful infinite baffle type, but the ported variety is definitely much more forgiving in terms of getting things ‘approximately’ right. As with so many things in life, the good old 80/20 rule can be applied again, in that a ported design can be brought to about 80% of its potential in around 20% of the time it takes to attain the ideal and fully optimised design. I just worry sometimes that some manufacturers are not quite allowing the remaining 80% of the time to fill that last 20% of potential...
FEELING BLUE?
Reissue label Monk, is offering a range of classic guitar blues tracks on a new range of vinyl LPs — the first time that they've been on the format for many years, if at all. As such, they represent an excellent archive and provide, for the first time, an analogue tint during reproduction. They include two albums from Charlie Patton «Electrically Recorded: Jesus Is A Dying Bed Maker» and «Electrically Recorded: High Water Everywhere» were both recorded in Grafton, Wisconsin, USA in October 1929 — the year he began his brief recorded output.


LIVE ON VINYL
Two new live double albums have appeared on Audio Fidelity's "Live On Vinyl" imprint, pressed on 180gm virgin vinyl. Mastered by Steve Hoffman, Jethro Tull's 'Live At Montreux 2003' features classics like 'Aqualung' and 'Living In the Past'. Cat Stevens' 'Majikat' is from his Earth Tour in 1976 and includes 'Moonshadow' and 'Father & Son'.
45 EDITIONS

Classic Records in the USA, has continued to exploit its latest vinyl technology, dividing albums into two, single-sided discs played at 45rpm on 200gm vinyl for the ultimate in sound reproduction. Sheer decadence! The first is Norah Jones' debut release, 'Come Away With Me' (2002), a low-key affair, quickly followed up by Lorna Hunt's 'All In One Day' (1999) - followers of Joni Mitchell should take a listen to this lady.

PURE SOUND

Responsible for some of the best sounding reissues currently on the market – all are pressed by the audiophile-friendly outfit, Pallas, in Germany – UK-based Pure Pleasure has a range of fascinating releases this month including Jefferson Airplane's 'Bless Its Pointed Little Head' (1969), the band's first live album featuring rearranged favourites. Also, there's Quicksilver Messenger Service's 'Happy Trails', the band's second release and the last to feature the original quartet, and Mary Black's 'Full Tide' which is a reissue of the 2005 album that was never properly marketed but fans need to hear it as Black's performances are sparkling. Also look out for Duke Ellington and Count Basie's 'First Time! The Count Meets The Duke' (1962), J.B. Lenoir's startling 'Alabama Blues!' (1965) and Buddy Guy's 'The Blues Giant', a controversial recording because of the long track lengths and rock-infused direction.

FOUR FROM FIDELITY

Mobile Fidelity has a reputation for going the extra mile with its reissues as well as delaying releases in order to make sure that each LP is just right. So we should be thankful that four albums have made it through the door.

Linda Ronstadt's 'Hasten Down The Wind' (1976) was a pop/country cross-over featuring songs of varying quality. The Cars' self-titled debut (1978) is a superb rock album from the new wave era featuring hits such as 'My Best Friend's Girl' and 'Just What I Needed'.

Jazz legend, Art Pepper's 'The Way It Was!' is a collection of tracks, released in 1972, from material recorded in 1957-1960 and is a quality album while Little Feat's 'Sailin' Shoes' was the band's superb second album release that is vastly different from their debut: less raw, more foot tappin' songs.

...AND FINALLY

Look out for the Arctic Monkeys' new album on vinyl. 'Humbug' has been pressed on 180gm virgin vinyl and comes with a MP3 voucher. Trinidadian poet/novelist, Anthony Joseph & the Spasm Band's 'Bird Head Son' was recorded live in the studio with no overdubs and it shows as the jazz/funk/rock music is full of verve and life. In the same theme, 'Nigeria Special' takes rock, blues and afro rarities from 1970-1976 and spreads them over two albums.
Carbon Mating

It's not only the marriage of carbon fibre and ebony wood that makes the new flagship Origin Live Enterprise C tonearm different to its predecessor, finds David Price...

The new Enterprise is, according to Origin Live's Mark Baker, the company's "last tonearm", at least for the foreseeable future. He sees its competitors as several European made arms costing around £12,000 rather than anything more affordable and closer to home. He suggests to me that he could have positioned his arm in that same market segment, but decided not to."Origin Live have fought hard to avoid sending the arm completely into the stratospheric price league - which could so easily have happened", he confides. Still, its four thousand pound plus price tag is stiff, I feel. He answers that, as is the case with all high end hi-fi, part of the cost of the tonearm is in "the endless number of prototype parts and countless hours of testing needed to deliver the right balance of attributes".

Well, this newest Enterprise is certainly a well made product, with a fine finish and an attractive look. My only criticism is that, at the not inconsiderable sum it sells for, OL could have taken more effort to make it easier, and indeed nicer, to set up. After all, unlike the SME Series V or Graham Phantom for example, there's no dial-in tracking force, VTA, azimuth or cartridge adjustment. Instead, we're back to moving weights along the arm end stub and securing it with an alien bolt, and fiddling with the cartridge body in the headshell slides. Not exactly a premium analogue experience!

"I know", says Mark, "but you've got to remember these things cost money that could go on the real build of the arm. The production Enterprise C is designed with sound quality in mind, and this means that certain sacrifices are made regarding ease of set up. To be honest this does not always sit well with dealers and reviewers who need to change their cartridges every other day. However, for an owner, that extra five minutes required to set the counterweight translates into years of added listening pleasure".

He's right - it certainly doesn't sit well with alien key wielding hi-fi hacks. I always grumble about this, but then again I suppose if you buy a Lotus, you can't expect comfy seats, can you? What I am sure has got to go is the low rent packaging and a rather arcane and very heavily text-based instruction sheet. It's not as good as the instruction booklets SME were supplying forty years ago. But I'm assured this is changing, now that the new arm has reached full series production...

The new Enterprise's performance soon began to justify its price when installed on my turntable. The best way to characterise OL designs, I'd wager, is 'uni pivots without tears'. They're a long way from that ultra precise and controlled, almost overdamped SME sound. But that's
not to say they can't do the 'hi-fi' bit too, because they're always as impressive to listen to as they are musically satisfying. "Unipivots have the advantage of very low friction along with good isolation; the sound is more transparent than conventional bearing arms", Mark tells me. "However, Unipivots never seem to have quite sufficient weight or grip in the very low octaves when compared to gimbal arms and this comes down to low frequency stability of the arm which is not prevented from rocking".

Agreed. This point was forcibly rammed home to me when, as a mere babe back in the late eighties, I went to audition the new Naim Aro unipivot against the new Linn Ekos (conventional) on my Linn Sondek LP12. I ended up wanting the best of both worlds, not quite satisfied with either...

The answer, as far as Origin Live are concerned, is the dual pivot bearing, where vertical movement of the arm is handled by the dual pivot and horizontal movement by conventional bearings. "It is interesting that three different high end arms (including the OL Enterprise) introduced dual pivot at almost exactly the same time – this idea almost certainly arrived simultaneously via original thinking because dual pivot is the ultimate system to pivot an arm", he argues. "It is very low friction like unipivot but unlike unipivot, it prevents the arm from rocking. Some may argue that air or magnetic bearings are the ultimate, but 'earthing' vibration is important to kill resonance. Completely disconnecting the arm tube from everything, via magnets or air, removes the earth path. A simple illustration is to hold a tuning fork as it rings, and then touch it on a surface to instantly stop the ringing".

The new Enterprise C retains the dual pivot bearings introduced earlier, but brings a new arm tube material, which Mark argues, "affects performance more than anything else. The effect of differential arm tube resonances amplified 8,000 times by the cartridge, destroys sound quality in a way that is almost unimaginable". He compares the resonant waves coming off a tonearm as a microscopic level to be "like watching the Atlantic sea in a hurricane". The cartridge's accuracy reading the grooves of the record is determined by arm vibration, which is why Hi-Fi World uses an accelerometer to measure resonant modes; something he has watched with great interest. "Resonance can occur in torsional modes, main bending (vertical and horizontal) modes, and elastic elongation and spring back also occurs not to mention the effects of wall ripple in radial and axial directions. As if this was not enough, the resonance needs to be controlled evenly (evenly is the difficult bit) across the entire audible frequency band", he says.

As a result of this, the new Enterprise employs a very rigid structure to form the tube, including carbon fibre and ebony wood for damping, although "this is only the tip of the iceberg", as there are many other facets that Mark would prefer to keep quiet about. He argues that there's no one ideal arm tube material, and that it's wrong to obsess about arm tubes to the exclusion of other aspects of the design... - which seems to be becoming the vogue - but says they are still of fundamental importance.

One of the things he always talks about is decoupling, which is why he likes floating rather than rigid bearings for example, along with not hard-tightening certain arms on to arm boards. As for headshells, the Enterprise's headshell mounting plate is glued to the tube for strength, but bolted to the cartridge mount to slightly decouple it. It's very rigid, yet designed in an unusual way. "General wisdom dictates that an arm should be designed such that the cartridge tip is level with an arm's pivot point. This is done to minimise moments of inertia in vertical movement, but in the new Enterprise, the cartridge tip is brought slightly below the arm's pivot point. The secondary reason why this is an advantage was explained, when someone who has been measuring cartridge cantilever distortion, pointed out that because a cartridge cantilever (and suspension) is not horizontal but mounted at an angle, tracking distortion is actually reduced by effectively raising the pivot point (measurably so)".

points out. The RS Labs RS-1 is an arm that appears to take this argument to its logical conclusion, Mark observes.

Inside the arm, copper Litz wire is used, whereas outside Origin Live's new Linear Flow 2 cable is used, with RCA phono or XLR fittings offered. A fully balanced design, it uses a combination of over 5 dielectric insulators to ensure an even response across the audible frequency range. Great care has been taken to optimise key electrical characteristics such as impedance, inductance and capacitance. High purity copper was ultimately selected for its "more natural" tonal balance, regarded as being superior to silver in this application.

GETTING GOING

As I've said, installing the Enterprise wasn't the tactile pleasure that some arms can be, with particular criticism going to the fiddly VTA adjuster and annoying counterweight locking arrangement. But all this was a mere stroll in the park on a warm spring afternoon compared to the living hell that some unipivots or air bearing designs can be, so I shall air it by!

After about an hour, the arm was on the deck, and the cartridge in the arm. I used my usual reference Ortofon Windfeld, and later a Lyra Titan I, as it's a fave of Mark Baker. "Zyx and Dynavector are our default choice as being very even handed but Lyra and many others are also great", he told me.

Kicking of with Bob Scaggs 'Lido Shuffle', and my first reaction was one of surprise at how superb the Lyra sounded. I found myself transfixed by its emotional insight, wonderfully propulsive midband and a joyfully deep and expansive soundstage. The music was audaciously powerful yet filigree detailed at the same time. But then I remembered I wasn't reviewing the cartridge, but the tonearm.

Several days later, with the same album track and the Ortofon MC Windfeld now installed, my reaction was the same. How delightful that cartridge sounded, and wasn't the phono stage superb! Once again, I
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had to remind myself of the Origin Live tonearm’s presence...

At the risk of putting the cart before the horses, this epitomises the new Enterprise’s sound. It is as pure as the proverbial freshly fallen frozen water. The new armtube is an instantly recognisable change to the product; whereas the earlier incarnation of the Enterprise had sounded a little warmer in the bass and more lively across the upper midband and treble, the new tube is like pressing an acove noise cancelling button. Everything snaps back to a flat response, to so speak, with the euphonic colourations of the previous arm removed. But the to showcase its exceptionally delicate and atmospheric high end to best effect; anyone who thinks DVD-Audio 24/96 treble is natural should hear this!

Moving to the darker, electric rock strains of My Bloody Valentine’s ‘Isn’t Anything’, and my favourite track ‘When You Sleep’ showed the innate sophistication of this arm. By anyone else’s standards, this song is a four minute long feedback drenched wall of noise, and it isn’t exactly easy to listen to. But the new OL arm managed to sycthe through the dense mix, pulling out Kevin Shields’ plaintive vocals with ease, and rendering them with a coffee-cream smoothness. By way of comparison, hear this on a stock Rega RB300 through my reference Yamaha NS1000Ms at high volumes and you’ll be running for the door. This arm has a dark, velvety tonality that’s much closer to the SMEV than OL arms of yore, and yet it doesn’t sound quite so damped; whereas the SME is almost too controlled, the OL seems to get things just right.

The soundstaging of this arm isn’t quite as tightly defined as the SME Series V. Whereas the latter has an architectural precision about where every instrument or strand in the mix goes, the OL sounds fractionally more diffuse, but more expansive too. As my fave DG pressing of Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony showed, the SME seeks to push everything into its own

"It returns a dazzlingly fast and musical sound, yet with breathtaking clarity and sweetness too..."
Leema Acoustics' flagship Agena is an exceptionally flexible phono stage, says Tony Bolton...

This new phono stage comes clothed in Leema's trademark alloy casing with cooling fins along both sides, and its plethora of controls across the front panel and I kg weight hint that this is not just another plug in and play product. A glance at the back confirms this, where there are two RCA phono unbalanced inputs, an optional XLR balanced input, RCA and XLR output sockets, along with a USB socket, S/PDIF digital output, and a pair of RCA sockets labelled 'monitor'.

Along with all the appropriate switchgear for these inputs, the facia also contains a display, cursor pad for navigating the different setup options, mono, mute and standby buttons. Another button labelled Sleep Lock powers down the display, LEDs and processing functions, leaving only analogue circuitry in action. I felt that it made a small but useful improvement to the detail and texture of the sound.

The moving magnet and RIAA equalisation sections use NE5534 op-amps; the moving coil stages are fully discrete and use multiple, hand matched input devices. The output stage uses NE5532 op-amps. The USB and S/PDIF sockets connect to a Burr Brown PCM2906, 16bit delta-sigma Analogue to Digital Converter/ Digital to Analogue Converter. This allows for direct connection of your computer to the Agena via either of these sockets for archiving purposes.

The three analogue inputs have programming which allows two different headshell settings to be memorised for each input, each being configurable for two levels of MM gain and resistance, and MC settings from 20 Ohms to 1 kOhm resistance, capacitance from 100pF to 1560pF, and gain from 1.6mV to 135μV.

SOUND QUALITY
Navigating the menu system proved very easy and I soon had two inputs configured for the Ortofon Kontrapunkt a (MC) and the MusicMaker III (moving iron, so the same setting as normal MM). Initially I would describe the sound as good, but a little tight. After a few hours listening things began to loosen up and open out, with bass notes beginning to exhibit better extension, and the treble reaching upwards more smoothly. The sound seemed to have stabilised after about thirty hours usage when I began to really explore the Agena's capabilities.

It's quite an honest sounding machine that certainly doesn't try to paint a rosy hue over the proceedings, but neither does it give you the other extreme of relentless spotlighting of every single detail, which can get rather wearing to listen to for long periods. Instead, it tried to find a middle path, a task that I feel it succeeded in.

A good example of this being the way it handled a moderate condition mid 1950s HMV copy of Jascha Heifetz playing the Bruch Violin Concerto No.1 in G Minor and Mozart's 5th Violin Concerto in A Major, 'Turkish'. Listening first in stereo, then switching to mono, the size of the soundstage didn't alter, merely losing the pops and crackles along each side. The condition of the groove walls were not flattered, but neither were they given more than passing notice. The detailing of the recording was excellent. I felt that I could look into the performance, and enjoy the London Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Sir Malcolm Sargent in their full scale and glory, without the feeling of peering into a slightly murky box that some phono stages impart to such elderly and well used recordings.

The soundstage was impressively deep, and occupied most of the area between the speakers. The Agena arrived whilst I was working on the Tucana II/ Stello Ai500 review, so found itself connected to both of these amps, as well as spending an evening feeding Editor DP's reference Sugden Masterclass Class A integrated amp. The size and scale of the soundstage when fed through pure Class A electronics really showed off the Agena's ability to create a vibrant sonic picture. Changing to a 1981 stereo recording of Trevor Pinnock (now CBE) playing Scarlatti Harpsichord Sonatas and I found myself sitting opposite a close miked instrument, each creak of the pedals, and the wooden mechanism flowing in concord with the music. The piece ended with a subtle movement of wood against wood as the sustain pedal was released after the last notes had completely decayed.
I was slightly concerned that the seemingly open nature of the Agena might have caused a few undignified jangles from the harpsichord, but I need not have worried. The forwardness of the sound remained within acceptable boundaries. Well lit enough to be detailed but not overexposed to the point of rawness. It was a point of balance maintained well enough to make the LP thoroughly enjoyable and absorbing, rather than the trial that it can be through overly forward equipment.

Coming a little more up to date found me playing the Mamas and the Papas live at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival on a good condition, original Dunhill stereo pressing. Here there were no holds barred in the flow of detail. The (organised?) chaos of the event, and the excitement of the group fell out of the Ursa Majors in waves. The detail came alive with a tingle of energy that seemed to envelope all of the right spots for me. It displayed great detail and real emotion, although others might find it a little too boisterous in some systems, preferring the cooler, less emotionally intense sound produced by the rival Whist.

Curious to see just how well behaved the Leema was, I swapped Hadcock arm tubes and plugged in the one permanently equipped with a modified Denon DL103 moving coil cartridge. This sports a .32 truncated conical stylus for 78 reproduction. The shape misses the bottom of the groove where most shellac surface noise lurks, and combined with the gentle but effective high frequency filter made listening to an evening's worth of '20s, '30s and '40s jazz records a satisfying experience.

Good condition '50s recordings were played without the filter and offered microgroove levels of insight and detail. The higher recording levels of 78s proved no problem for the Agena, unlike some systems, preferring the quieter than the 0.08uV or so that is usual. It especially suits super low output moving coils. N/K

CONCLUSION

Expensive yes, but the Leema/Agena has a host of facilities that will be useful to some, plus sound quality that hit all of the right spots for me. It displayed great detail and real emotion, although others might find it a little too boisterous in some systems, preferring the cooler, less emotionally intense sound produced by the rival Whist.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Gain with MM was low at x63 (36dB) and x126 (42dB) with 4mV and 2mV settings respectively. Insensitive amplifiers (e.g. Arcams at 500mV) need double these values, so volume control settings will be high. Gain with MC had a far wider range, from x277 (49dB) up to a usefully high x3174 (70dB) and input noise was also extremely low at the highest gain setting, measuring 0.005uV IEC A Weighted, around 4dB quieter than the 0.08uV or so that is common.

Equalisation was accurate, giving flat frequency response from 8Hz to past 100kHz (-1dB). There is no warp filter, so low bass will sound extended. A small amount of lift toward high frequencies (+0.2dB) can be seen in our frequency response analysis, so the Agena will not sound warm by any means.

Output overload was a common 9V, usually set by the supply rails of internal ICs. Input overload values were satisfactory as a result, lower than the Agena measured well and sound accurate and silent in use. It especially suits super low output moving coils. N/K

FREQUENCY RESPONSE

Gain settings giving the highest overload margin.

The Agena measured well and will sound accurate and silent in use. It especially suits super low output moving coils. N/K

Frequency response 8Hz-100kHz
Separation 71dB
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Sensitivity (MM/MC) x126 / x3174
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Surely the real area of excitement in the past few years has been analogue. The leaps that turntables, tonearms and cartridges have made in the past two decades are manifold. The reason for this of course that it's an infinite system, theoretically limited down to the atomic level. Equipment that can trace ever more accurately the minute undulations of the record groove keeps appearing, bringing ever higher replay quality from black plastic. This is down to advances in good old fashioned mechanical engineering; the use of ever more appropriate materials in ever more intelligent ways is bearing fruit. Turntable bearings, suspension systems, drive and speed control systems, tonearm tube materials and wiring, and cartridge body, generator and suspension systems, plus ever better stylus and cantilevers, have taken us closer than ever to what's really in the groove.

One designer who understands this more than most is Jonathan Carr. An American living in Tokyo, I knew him during my residence in Japan in the nineties. On visiting his apartment and hearing his system (s), I'd never fail to be amazed by the breadth of his knowledge of analogue systems, and his unfaltering interest in materials technology. It is he, along with his expert cartridge builder Yoshinori Mishima, who form Lyra.

The company was launched in Japan at a time when vinyl's star was very much on the descendent and every body was leaving the market, it's now one of the most experienced cartridge brands of the modern age.

The Titan i is the fourth generation of Lyra flagship, and shows all of Jonathan's accumulated experience. The body is machined from a single piece of lightweight titanium alloy, shaped to minimise standing waves and thus resonance.

The internal body structures are said to be "too intricate to be formed by mechanical means", and so a non-contact process known as electrical discharge machining is used. This makes for an extremely rigid yet light structure, which has a "clearly defined reference pivot" for the cantilever, meaning the body can 'sink' the vibrations from the stylus out into the tonearm, sparing the critical signal generator area and its magnetic gap and signal generator coils.

For similar reasons, the front magnet carrier of the Titan i is both non-magnetic and non-conductive. This is said to prevent dynamically induced variable eddy currents that would otherwise interfere with the primary magnetic field and distort the signal generation process. Two symmetrical disc magnets are used in the generator system, and the signal coils are wound from high-purity 6N copper over a chemically-refined high-purity iron core, gold-plated to reduce eddy currents. The cartridge uses a very short suspension wire, and the cantilever assembly of the Titan i has been mounted directly to the body, obviating the need for intermediate mounting methods such as pole-pieces or subcarriers.

The cantilever is made from a "compound structure", designed to speed the transmission of energy down it yet damp itself in other planes. It comprises a solid boron core, an outer diamond layer and an additional metal jacket for reinforcement. Both it and the insides of the body have been shaped so that when the two components are joined to each other, a double-knife-edge system is created, which concentrates as much pressure as possible on the joint area and thereby achieves a type of cold weld, says Lyra. This minimises the number of mechanical joints between the cantilever and tonearm, and maximises mechanical energy transfer away from the stylus and generator area. The Lyra-designed, Ogura made stylus rides at the tip of a low-mass diamond block.

**SOUND QUALITY**

I installed the Titan i in both SME Series V and Origin Live Enterprise C tonearms, on both Sony TT-SB000 and Marantz TT-1000 turntables. It's not especially difficult to fit, and I do like the excellent stylus guard, which can only go on (or come off) one way and protects the cartridge, and indeed much of the body too, during fitting. In my thirty years of installing cartridges, I've caused more damage when removing or fitting stylus guards than I have any other way, so this is an important point. The best venue for the Titan i turned out to be in the Marantz/Origin Live deck, tracking at 1.75g.

I've been fortunate enough to have experienced a good number of high end moving coils in my time, but it's fair to say that none have impressed me as much as this one. Generally it's a case of loving what a particular moving coil does in one respect, such as the Koetsu's beguiling musicality or the Ortofon Windfeld's analysis, but for me the Lyra Titan i just did everything I could want from a cartridge straight out of the box. It is such a conspicuously gifted performer that, aside from marvelling at its amazing twenty first century high resolution analogue sound, you start wondering why you've never heard the rest of your system in this way before. And as one who's becoming increasingly seduced by high end digital, thanks to my few weeks spent with dCS's Paganini DAC, suddenly analogue delivered a crushing counterpunch!

Simply put, the Titan has a wonderfully open, expansive and fast sound. But it's not at the expense of...
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harshness or lack of subtlety. Its trick is to give you everything that's great about state-of-the-art, high resolution vinyl playback with absolutely none of the usual drawbacks. Normally a blindingly fast and incisive MC gets some of this character through an artificial edge, a certain 'zing' to give it some swing, if you like. Yet here we have a dizzyingly fast, spectacularly dynamic transducer that's as sweet as a baby with chocolate around its mouth. Yes, you can have it all!

Having spent a good long time with the cartridge, I can cite countless examples of its breathtaking all round ability. Boz Scaggs', 'Lido Shuffle' sounds like a decently recorded late seventies AOR tune through most moving coils, but the Titan i unwrapped it like a parcel to expose a far more sophisticated production. On a superficial level, it has immense clarity; suddenly you feel the mist has lifted to reveal a revealing autumn morning in all its glory. But with that comes delicious subtlety too, as it's not as if the Lyra gets this clarity by turning the contrast up a touch too much. Suddenly I could peer right into the back of the vocal booth, hear every last vocal inflection, languish in the grain of the singer's voice and get behind what via most other moving coils sounds like a nasal wine.

At the same time, the Lyra unfolds layer after layer of detail about the mix, and all the instruments used. It's like you can hear right into the original multi-track, snapping your focus on to any one of twenty (or more) tracks and hear right into the original multi-instruments used. It's like you can detail about the mix, and all the

### SPECIFICATIONS

- **Cantilever:** Diamond coated boron rod and natural diamond,
- **Output voltage:** 0.5 mV (5.0cm/sec., zero to peak, 45 degrees)
- **Internal impedance:** 5.5 ohms
- **Cartridge weight:** 10.5 gms
- **Recommended tracking force:** 1.6 - 1.15 g
- **Frequency response of the Titan i:**
  - 20Hz - 20kHz
- **Vertical tracking angle:** 24 degrees
- **Angle of 24 degrees, close to the 22 degree ideal and somewhat more accurate than most rivals. Output was healthy enough at 0.6mV at 5cms/sec rms so preamp hiss will be inaudible. The Titan measures well, with the exception of tracking ability, which was mediocre. Raising VTF a little from 1.75gms to 2gms helped to lessen this weakness.**
- **Tracking force:** 1.75gms
- **Weight:** 10.5gms
- **Vertical tracking angle:** 24 degrees
- **Frequency response:** 20Hz - 20kHz
- **Channel separation:** 30dB
- **Tracking ability (500Hz):**
  - lateral: 45um
  - vertical: 45um
  - lateral (1kHz): 15cms/sec.
  - vertical (1kHz):
    - Transference (45um)
      - lateral: 0.5%
      - vertical: 2.5%
      - Output (5cms/sec rms):
        - 0.6mV

### FREQUENCY RESPONSE

**Frequency response of the Titan i is impressively even all the way to 20kHz with grain:**

- **Gain:** +4dB
- **Transference (45um):**
  - lateral: 120um
  - vertical: 120um
- **Tracking improvement:**
  - 60um, a worthwhile improvement. At 1kHz performance was again poor, the limit being just 15cms/sec. where rival MCs manage 25cms/sec. At 2gms it managed 18cms/sec - just. The Titan is not a good tracker and occasional mistracking may be heard in use, especially at the recommended lower VTF of 1.65gms.

#### CONCLUSION

I could go on. Every type of music I've tried with the Lyra Titan i has shown it to be an exceptional performer. It is so neutral and detailed and open and expansive, yet is never cerebral or matter of fact. It's infectiously rhythmic and so expressively dynamic, yet never unsubtle or clumsy, and remains completely devoid of bluster. It invests the music with a creamy, silky sweetness yet you couldn't even call it coloured, and it's so gifted at getting right into the tonal patina of an instrument or conveying the grain of the voice. It's one of the most viceless moving coil cartridges I've ever heard, and yet could never be accused of being bland. This is, to my ears at least, a very special moving coil cartridge, which when given a suitably capable turntable and tonearm shows just how far digital has so go before it even comes close to what analogue is capable of. Its beautifully honed design shows that the venerable LP is capable of stellar sound.
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By its very nature, the world of vinyl is supported by a gamut of turntable accessories, storage options and gizmos. Paul Rigby rounds up some of the best new ones on offer...

**MOBILE FIDELITY ORIGINAL MASTER SLEEVES £19.95 (PACK OF 50)**

The importance of a good quality inner sleeve is difficult to overstate. It seems such a simple change to make to any record but it's one that can hold the balance to its future.

A paper inner sleeve is better than nothing, but does nothing to eradicate static which attracts dust and grime into the sleeve. Add that dust to the inherently harsh physical make-up of paper and you have an excellent, fine-grain, sandpaper constantly attacking your precious vinyl and increasing the chance that surface noise will become a permanent fixture to future replay! These Mobile Fidelity sleeves are made from soft plastic with a paper insert within one half to act as a stiffener. Because of their construction, they act as an anti-static agent and will not scratch the vinyl surface.

**TIPTONIC STYLUS CLEANER £10.95**

From time to time, the stylus on your turntable is going to become dirty. The causes are manifold but if your stylus has to plough through a dirty record or a basically clean record but one that's been left in a dusty room for a while then it will accumulate dust and grime. Over time, other contaminants may begin to coat the fine stylus tip, lowering its capacity to read all of the relevant groove information. Hence, frequent stylus tip examinations are recommended and, if dirty, attention from a good quality cleaner such as the TipTonic is recommended. Arriving with a firm brush — that type that ladies used to use on their eyelashes — the liquid is contained in a 15ml, ready dispenser. Brushing from the rear to the front in gentle sweeps, the liquid quickly dissolves any gunk that happens to be sticking to your stylus.

**CLEAN-IT BLUE HORIZON £19.95**

If there is one thing you can guarantee about the sockets on the back of your turntable, it's that they will collect dirt and muck over time impairing the quality of the contacts themselves. Every socket on the rear of your hi-fi is liable to electrical contaminant build-up that reduces the purity of the electrical contact which threatens to reduce the overall sound quality of your system. Arriving with an applicator brush and small cloth, the Clean-IT system not only removes this harmful gunk but improves the connection between a plug and socket made from different metal types. In use, you 'paint' on the clear liquid and then rub with the cloth. I actually used up the cloth during my first run, there was so much dirt coming off both the sockets and cables. Reportedly, the 10ml bottle will last for around 100 applications. Highly recommended.

**COVERS 33 7" STORAGE CASE £31.99**

Long-term CD storage is pretty common, ranging from veneer-covered furniture to those ugly, skeletal, wire-frames while, for 12" LPs, I'm reduced to scouring office catalogues for easily convertible book shelves. Storing 7" vinyl is more problematic, partly because of its size but also because of its sleeve fragility, which is easily squashed if not properly stored. This 7" storage box is a portable, 2-lane affair that allows you to pack in 200 singles. It even includes a detachable
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.

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lid so it's ideal if you attend record fairs or want to take the box around to your friends for them to shuffle through. Once closed, the lid features two clasps that can each be locked with attendant keys while the whole thing can be easily carried via a strong handle. The box measures 42 x 22.7 x 33cm. Internally, it spans 40 x 19.8 x 29.8cm.

AVID HI-FI LEVEL 45
£40
I've seen good quality level gauge accessories from the likes of Clearaudio and 45 adaptors from Nagaoka and even, in the past, 180gm weights - but I've never seen all three offered as a single tool. The Level 45, consisting of two bits of metal, arrives in a small neat cardboard box. Inside is a basic, yet beautifully milled, 45 adaptor to enable you to play jukebox 45s as it serves as the stabilising spindle holder. Sitting next to it is a Precision Level - a bubble level with target-like measuring that easily handles all dimensions. The neat, unseem, third tool emerges when you place the 45 adaptor on the turntable spindle then place the Level on top. Combined, they weigh almost exactly 180gm - the weight of a quality LP. This means that you can almost exactly 180gm - the weight of the turntable spindle then place the adaptors, which are well printed, elevate any singles collection providing both form and context where they may have been little or none before. They also look great, restoring the 7" to its former glory. A brilliant idea that should be investigated by all collectors.

DECENT WALL SHELF
£249, DOUBLE SHELF: £349
Especially useful if your hi-fi room is based upon a suspended wooden floor that causes the needle to bounce from its groove if you even dare to shift your weight in your chair. The One Decent Wall Shelf is based around a steel frame. Unlike many other designs, however, no glass or MDF is used which some observers believe adversely affects the sound. Using acrylic instead, the shelf features a top isolation plinth, measuring 25mm thick, and decoupled from a lower shelf provided in the kit. The top shelf will carry up to 40kg when properly fixed to the wall, enough for virtually all turntables on the market. In use, the presentation appeared more focused and confident, as designed - otherwise a portion of that sound quality will be lost. For example, if the turntable's arm is not set up properly, you can introduce unnecessary distortion plus excessive stylus wear. This simple piece of formed card allows you to monitor that potential problem. Simply place one hole over the turntable spindle, lift the turntable arm (which has been 'zeroed' of tracking force and anti-skating) then point the arrow directly at the vertical point axis of the arm. Move the arm and cartridge until the stylus aligns to the appointed dot on the grid pattern. If the alignment is matched then you're sorted. If not, you will need to adjust your turntable arm's position. A quick and easy method of improving your vinyl sound quality.

THE ZAPPER
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If you are concerned about the accuracy of the speed of your turntable or if you have a turntable that features a variable speed option, this little gizmo might just be what you need. Set for a highly accurate 50Hz source, the accessory consists of a stroboscope disc and a light source. The principle element is a black box with a single button on the top and a small red light positioned at the front - powered by two ‘pencil’ batteries. Press the button to emit a stream of light. In use, you place the paper disc over your turntable spindle and run the platter at the appointed speed - the disc features a stroboscope pattern for both 33 1/3RPM and 45RPM. All you need to do is point the Zapper at the strobe, press the button and monitor the accuracy from the illuminated strobe pattern. Straightforward but effective.
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Website: www.alternativeaudio.co.uk
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**Digital**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>47 labs Dumpty S/H</td>
<td>1425</td>
<td>799</td>
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<tr>
<td>47 labs Gemini Progression dual mono DAC x-demo</td>
<td>3884</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Copland CDA823 X-demo</td>
<td>2300</td>
<td>1750</td>
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<td>dCS Pas SACD/CD Player latest version Black S/H</td>
<td>6999</td>
<td>2499</td>
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<td>Krell Evolution 505 cd/sacd x-demo</td>
<td>8598</td>
<td>6799</td>
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<tr>
<td>Krell Showcase DVD x-demo</td>
<td>3698</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>living Control Room Box 4 BNIB</td>
<td>1712</td>
<td>1199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>living Control Music Box 3 BNIB</td>
<td>2887</td>
<td>1995</td>
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<tr>
<td>Naim Audio CD555/PS555 Reference CD player S/H</td>
<td>14000</td>
<td>9500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orpheus Zero CD Player S/H</td>
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<td>Orelle CD100EVO S/H</td>
<td>1500</td>
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<td>Roksan Kandy CD MKI S/H</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>199</td>
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<td>Theta Pro Basic II DAC with Oscom/Balanced S/H</td>
<td>2990</td>
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**Analogue**

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<th>Item Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Koetsu MCR-1 Transformer S/H</td>
<td>3333</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kuzma Stabi XL4/313-x-demo</td>
<td>17945</td>
<td>12999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kuzma Stabi S/ Stogi S double arm version X-demo</td>
<td>2795</td>
<td>1950</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark Levinson No320s Phono Module x-demo</td>
<td>995</td>
<td>649</td>
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<td>Lehmann Black Cube Twin BNIB</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>599</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lehmann Black Cube Linear BNIB</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>950</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roksan Xerxes DX2/KPS/DSU Standard Power Supply</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>640</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vyd Valdi with Origin Live motors and PSU S/H</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>549</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vdh Grasshopper GLAIII 600 hrs S/H</td>
<td>2500</td>
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**Preamplifiers**

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<th>Item Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Audio Research SP17 stereo preamplifier x-demo</td>
<td>2749</td>
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<tr>
<td>Karan Acoustics KAL preamplifier S/H</td>
<td>3720</td>
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**Amplifiers**

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<tr>
<td>Audio research VT60 S/H</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>799</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anatek A50R Remote class A integrated x-demo</td>
<td>1850</td>
<td>999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gryphon DM100 Dual mono power amplifier S/H</td>
<td>15000</td>
<td>3999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Krell Evo 402 400w stereo power amplifier Black x-demo</td>
<td>12900</td>
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<tr>
<td>Krell Evo 302 300w stereo power amplifier Black x-demo</td>
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**Loudspeakers**

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<tr>
<td>Avalon Opus Cherry S/H</td>
<td>16000</td>
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<td>Korus Essence Floor stander zebrano x-demo</td>
<td>2800</td>
<td>1350</td>
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<td>Martin Logan Vista Dark cherry x-demo</td>
<td>3490</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martin Logan Fresno pair inc stands S/H</td>
<td>1500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martin Logan Vantage dark cherry x-demo</td>
<td>5149</td>
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<td>Martin Logan Purity x-demo</td>
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<td>Rega R1 Cherry x-demo</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>198</td>
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<td>Sonus faber Cremona Elipsa Maple x-demo</td>
<td>12980</td>
<td>7999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wilson Audio Wit Loudspeakers S/H</td>
<td>18000</td>
<td>2750</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wilson Audio System 8 obsidian black S/H</td>
<td>23998</td>
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**Cables and Accessories**

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<tr>
<td>Attacama Equinox 3 tier stand x-demo</td>
<td>375</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attacama Europa Reference 8.3 tier S/H</td>
<td>550</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cardas Cables Golden Cross 3m speaker cables</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cardas Cables Golden Cross 6m set of RCA interconnects</td>
<td>2830</td>
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<td>Densen De-magic BNIB</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electrocompaniet ECS 1M6 feet x4 BNIB</td>
<td>189</td>
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<td>Eichmann Express 4 interconnects BNIB</td>
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<td>Madrigal MDC1 1m AES/EBU 110 ohm Digital Cable S/H</td>
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<td>Siltech HF9 AES/EBU 1m Digital S/H</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spectral MI-350 20ft interconnect S/H</td>
<td>2100</td>
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<td>Spectral MH-750 2x2.5m Speaker cables S/H</td>
<td>1050</td>
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<td>Target R4 stands 60cm S/H</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>175</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transparent Reference SC 2x10ft x-demo</td>
<td>6192</td>
<td>3399</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transparent Balanced Reference 2x30ft x-demo</td>
<td>6345</td>
<td>3499</td>
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**Tuners & Tape decks, power supplies**

<table>
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<th>Item Description</th>
<th>Was</th>
<th>Now</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magnum Dynalab FTR remote/Tuner for Etude S/H</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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20 METRES of Maplins Type 512 high quality OFC loudspeaker cable. £20. Tel: 0151 677 3521 (Wirral)

WANTED: AIWA XKS-9000 stereo cassette deck. Domestic used only (ie) little used. Tel: Peter 0794 184 2605


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UNISON RESEARCH Unico ‘R’ FM/RDS/SAM volume, £475 (current new price £1275) Mint and boxed. Superb sound. Rare remote controls for Quad 99 and Primare CD10 systems. Offers? Tel: 023 8073 8935

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MISSION 774 tonaortm £65. Linn armboard if required £15. Mordaunt Short HS201 Pearlspeakers (black) £50 Tel: 020 8646 9055 (Bromley, SE London)

REGA RB250 £50 ono & P&P Tel: 01823 279 595

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DYNAMIC CONTOUR 1-8/11 systems. Offers? Tel: 023 8703 8935

KEF 104.2 (rosewood) floorstanding loudspeakers (£1800) £275. Hydra built with Hainm 4 in 1 mains leads (£160) £80. LAT International ICY00 silver interconnect with Naim DIN 1/2 metre (£170) £80. Tel: 0872 955 688 (junction 7, M6)

TANNOY DUAL Concentrics 10" Monitor Golds, mint condition. £600. Sansui 1001 SP 3 way speakers, tone controls, £150. Optimum speaker stands, glass, wood, 17" high, (cost £170) £50. Tel: 01453 220 214 (Coventry)

WANTED: Hi-Fi Yearbooks also old ‘Tape Recorder Magazines’. Also Sony TC 800 or Telefunken mains/ battery reel to reel recorder. Tel: 0784 757 3031

LINN AKI Arm to arm, OCC cartridge, immaculate, £325. Naim Nait Si amp, boxed, instructions, remote, immaculate, £475. Project Phono Box II MCM/M, boxed, mint, £45. Tel: 0772 962 0621

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The first issue of the new decade is an appropriately special one, carrying the Hi-Fi World Awards Special in which you'll find all this past year's favourite digital and analogue source products, our best pre, power and integrated amplifiers, our top loudspeakers and most loved accessories. It's going to be an interesting read! In addition to this, we've got a host of other great products, including the Eminent Technology LFT-8B electrostatic loudspeakers, DCS's new Paganini upsampler and an in-depth valve rolling feature. Here's just some of what we hope to bring you:

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FREE READER CLASSIFIED ADS COPY DEADLINES
JANUARY 2010 - 5TH NOVEMBER 2009
FEBRUARY 2010 - 3RD DECEMBER 2009
When the 'Rite of Spring' was first performed in Paris in May 1913, there were boos after the first few bars of the Bassoon solo, degenerating into public arguments in the subsequent bars and by the end of the work, there were fist fights in the aisles — the police were called and Diaghilev, the Ballet company's promoter repeatedly turned the lights on and off in an attempt to restore order! Stravinsky left the theatre crying, and so the 20th Century's most controversial piece was born...

While this work changed the course of musical history, it took years for Stravinsky's language to achieve universal acceptance. It is now considered a classic. The work is about a sacrifice of a virgin in Pagan Russia; it's a ballet in two distinct parts, the first section being 'The Adoration of The Earth' and the second entitled 'The Sacrifice' where a young girl dances herself to death.

One of the reasons that the work inspired such anger, I believe, is the musical language of discord Stravinsky uses. There is virtually no use of the language of previous centuries (i.e. classical beauty and symmetry), but instead brutal harmonic clashes and driving rhythms in highly irregular sequences give the work a dazzling sense of timelessness (some of the tunes were supposedly from Lithuanian Folk Music).

The recording cut to LP here was made by the composer with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra in 1961. The sessions were not plain sailing. There were many corners which Stravinsky couldn't precisely fix, and this was left to his sidekick Robert Craft to patch up later.

The striking thing about this recording at a technical level, is the openness of soundstage the listener experiences. Spatially, every instrument can be precisely located; there is a weight to the string sound that gives a depth of field not found on Rattle's EMI recording found on CD, made in 1989. The latter feels like listening through a tunnel in contrast of the openness of Stravinsky's interpretation. Although the recording is a tad dry, the sheer detail creates the force of over a hundred musicians onstage and brings the complexity of the score to life.

There is something else that makes this recording so extraordinary. It was conceived as a ballet, with a sense of continuous narrative, and I really sense in Stravinsky's hands, the drive to tell the story from the first note till the last chord. There are no 'quick wins', or sound bites found in other interpretations, just the inevitable momentum of the gruesome story...

Stravinsky was not considered a great conductor. There were people around in 1961 that had a greater command of conducting technique than he, but the sense of spring and rhythm he brings to this recording is exceptional. The ping-pong rhythms in the last section feel as springy as rubber, which creates the immense sense of excitement of the final dance.

There is also a sense in which Stravinsky is not making points with the score in a way so many conductors do, he doesn't overlay the 'Rondes Printanières', but lets the music develop organically, which could be so easily vulgarised. In contrasting this with Rattle's recording made twenty eight years later on CD, the latter's dynamic range is not as good, the clarity of the score is wanting, and the rhythmic precision is sloppier. There is less sense of the ballet's story and the recording is altogether less involving.

The Columbia engineers have placed the listener in the first few rows of the hall, with some discrete spot-miking on the solo instruments to enhance the clarity of the musical line. In contrast, the Rattle recording has less difference in this respect, and the spotlight on individual contributions are less bright.

The Stravinsky recording is very much like a master tape, there has been precious little processing and the sound is detailed, honest and raw. The Rattle recording may have a more pleasing veneer, but some of the complexity of sound has been lost in the mastering process.

All in all then, this recording offers an historic insight into Stravinsky's conception of this seminal work, and is recorded with an integrity and truthfulness which make it truly a classic. Followers of classical music would do well to make a point of seeking out an original pressing of this on vinyl.
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 DANCER mini experience.

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- Dimensions (w x d x h): 31 cm x 36.5 cm x 105 cm

**DANCER mini two**
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- 1.25" dome tweeter
- Two 7" woofers
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- Nominal impedance: 4 ohms
- Frequency response @ -3 dB: 28 Hz - 40 kHz
- Dimensions (w x d x h): 34 cm x 48 cm x 123 cm

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