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Set your music free with MartinLogan speakers, brought to you by Absolute Sounds — premier importer of the world's finest hi-fi.
Well it's official! The unofficial general election campaign has started, and the British public now has to endure months of 'he said, she said' type banter from our illustrious public servants, selflessly putting themselves up for re-election. So in the interests of journalistic balance, I shall attempt to be scrupulously apolitical in what I'm about to say; don't think of it as a comment on this government, but rather on politicians en masse...

My point concerns Digital Radio and the so-called 'analogue switch-off. You might remember that last autumn, the government announced its 'Digital Britain' report which laid down a projected date for FM radio switch-off of 2015. Given that it was so soon, many of us were recoiling in horror; the sheer awfulness of losing analogue in just five years was too nasty to contemplate!

My own feelings towards DAB are of general indifference; it's a mediocore technology that's already (in my home) largely been replaced by internet radio. Where it hasn't, I still listen to FM for sonic reasons or those of poor DAB reception. So by suddenly taking away the option of FM, the government would significantly impede my ability to listen to decent sound radio at home, or any radio out and about. I was crestfallen; how could this happen?

Well it seems that, errm, it's probably not going to happen after all now. As Steven Green remarks on p93, the powers that be have very quietly taken the switch off date out of the Digital Economy Bill. So the position is now, as the Malcolm Tucker character from the BBC political satire The Thick of It would put it to his minister of state, "just tell them it's going to happen, and then when it doesn't happen we can say we didn't tell them when it was going to happen"...

So, seeing as the brave new world of Digital Radio has suffered a legislative set-back, we thought we'd look at some old world analogue tuners. On p15, we round up some really nice ones which will give years of listening pleasure, including several FM-only designs. If these become obsolete within the decade then I will publicly eat my latest copy of the Radio Times!

Radio's a brilliant medium, and far too important to be left to politicians to screw up, so get out and vote with your chequebooks. So I implore you to invest in a good analogue tuner now — your country needs you to!

David Price, editor

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2020 vision - perfect perception with the new Q Acoustics 2020s.

Pure power from Musical Fidelity's Class A AMS50 amplifier.

Return of a classic - DPA CA-1 and SA-1 amplifier from Deltec.

The unusual Valvet L1/A1R amplifier.

The new Simon Yorke Series 10 turntable, a professional delight.

Budget giants - Usher's V-604 floorstander.
David Price tries the brand new, freshly relaunched DPA CA1/SA1 pre-power amplifier combination.

Noel Keywood auditions this superb, high-end, solid-state power amp.

An idiosyncratic and charismatic pre-power combination gets reviewed by Tony Bolton.

Paul Rigby tries a brand new solid-state headphone amplifier.

FM's not dead! Paul Rigby rounds up five mid-price stereo analogue tuners...

David Price reviews a brand new pair of budget mini-monitors.

Philips BDP7500

Noel Keywood auditions the latest Blu-ray star from Eindhoven.

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Paul Rigby rounds up the latest audiophile vinyl releases.

The team get to grips with matters music, hi-fi and life!

A comprehensive guide to UK hi-fi retailers.

Three pages of second-hand bargains.

what we hope to bring you in the next sizzling issue...

Martin Simpson's 'Prodigal Son' is remembered this month by Paul Rigby.

Paul Rigby with all the latest black plastic releases.

Adam Smith is beguiled by this high end vinyl spinning package.

Neville Roberts celebrates a superb mid-price tonearm.

David Price tries out a fine 'plug an play' budget turntable.

Haden Boardman tells the story of the classic Richard Allan / Sugden A21,
Aquarius replaced the company's GII Mini Sub and is the latest product in IsoTek's unique range of multi-award winning power conditioners that are designed and hand made in England using the finest materials and built to the highest of standards.

Formed in July 2001, IsoTek's vision has been to create high-quality mains power conditioners that stretch beyond current conventions. Through careful market analysis and extensive research, IsoTek has been able to launch products that dramatically improve the performance of all components used within an audio or visual environment, a fact that has been proved by countless international reviews and over 25 audio awards.

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"The whole auditioning process took about 30 seconds. Play a piece of music on GII Mini Sub. Play it again on Aquarius and wonder why you were so attached to the GII Mini Sub." "Very highly recommended"
Hi-Fi Plus. Issue 68.
ICONOGRAPHY

Icon Audio's Stereo 40 has been one of the company's most successful and longest running models, having been on the market for almost ten years. It has just had a significant upgrade, and now appears in Mark II I guise. The Western Electric 274B valve is employed for rectification, "bringing a new level of smoothness and delicacy, whilst retaining both the power and speed of previous Icon Audio solid-state rectified designs", the company says. The bespoke, hand-wound tertiary output transformers feature an extra winding that effectively compares input and output and cancels distortion. This allows the Stereo 40 MkIII to operate without global feedback, injecting more life and verve into the performance without the associated distortion that normally exists within low or no-feedback designs, it's claimed. Every amplifier is finished and tested by Icon Audio's team of engineers in Leicester, and can be specified with either EL84 or KT88 output valves. Extra cost options include premium or 'new old stock' valves as well as Jensen oil in paper capacitors. Prices are £1,099 for the EL34 version and £1,199 for the KT88 version. For more information, click on www.iconaudio.com.

DEF ARTICLE

Marantz's new £2,299 UD8004 universal High Definition player is said to "bring together the best of Blu-ray and reference quality CD replay". It uses a host of technology from the company's flagship reference universal player, squeezed into a smaller and less expensive package. Offering Blu-ray/CD/Super Audio/DVD-Audio playback, the Profile 2.0 design sports an Anchor Bay ABT20 processor. A newly developed, proprietary, high precision mechanism offers extraordinarily accurate disc reading. The tray is constructed from a polymeric alloy whose robust characteristics achieve an ultra-rigid platform that removes all vibration that degrades the picture signal. This mechanism is just as important in achieving the UD8004's impressive sound quality. Audio replay is handled by three separate audio circuit boards, featuring Current Feedback technology and all powered by their own transformer. These feature 192kHz/24bit Burr-Brown DACs, symmetrical circuit topology with short mirror imaged signal paths for precise stereo imaging, Marantz's proprietary HDAM-SA2 compact signal amplifiers, and customised components, before reaching the gold-plated outputs. Further improving performance is an audio 'pure direct' mode that turns off all non-critical electronics. The M1 chassis features a new aluminium/reinforced resin front panel allied to a dual layer top cover and bottom plate for rigidity. This helps minimise vibration for stable images and undisturbed audio reproduction. The design incorporates HDMI 1.3a connectivity for 36-bit Deep Color support, Profile 2.0 for BD-Live capability, built-in decoders for Dolby True HD and DTS HD High Definition audio format replay, and 24FPS capability. The player also sports a SD-Card slot ready for SD-HC (high capacity) cards, offering the playback of WMA, MP3, AVCHD and JPEG. For more information, click on www.marantz.co.uk.

BOX SET GO!

Pro-Ject's Stereo Box integrated amplifier is designed to meet the demands of the most discerning audiophile both in terms of looks, size and sound quality, the company says. It's a PWM Class D design, sports gold plated RCA connectors and a metal case. Claimed power output is 20W per channel, size 103x38.141mm and weight just 720g! Available in silver or black, there's also a matching tuner. For more information call +44(0)1235 511166 or call www.henleydesigns.co.uk.
**STEREO TYPES**

NAD's new 'Classic Series' hi-fi stereo pre and power amplifier combination is back to basics for this popular marque. The new C 165BEE stereo preamplifier, which also shares a lineage with the NAD Master Series M3 integrated amplifier, features an MC/MM input with three-position resistance and capacitance loading for phono cartridges, an upgraded headphone amp, and a heavy gauge steel chassis. It draws less than 1 Watt in standby mode. The recommended retail price is around £700. The new C275BEE stereo power amplifier delivers 150 Watts to each of two channels at 4 or 8 Ohms continuous power, and is bridgeable to 400W with the new matching NAD C375BEE power amp. Additional features include Automated Turn-On (ATO) Logic, and an eco-friendly power draw of less than 1 Watt in standby mode, the company says. Price is £900. For details, call +44(0) 1279 501111 or click on www.armourhe.co.uk.

**A MATTER OF FACT**

PMC's new Fact8 loudspeaker uses the company's Advanced Transmission Line technology and hand-built twin bass drivers "to provide an untainted mid range and phenomenal bass experience at all volume levels with no distortion", the company says. High frequencies are handled by a high-tech wide surround Sonomex soft-domed and feather-light tweeter. Controls at the rear of the speaker can tailor bass and treble to ensure they sound ultra-clear and crisp when partnered with any hi-fi electronics, ensuring they are the ideal match for any room. The speaker comes in a range of contemporary and beautiful, hand lacquered premier veneer finishes including Rich Walnut, Natural Oak, Tiger Ebony and Graphite Poplar - all hand selected and matched from sustainable forests. Price is £4,600. For more details, see www.pmc-speakers.com.

**JITTER BUG**

M2TECH's hiFace USB-S/PDIF interface comes to these shores via Purite Audio. This little device plugs into any spare USB port and creates an extremely low jitter digital output signal, using "kernel streaming to provide a bit perfect output from PCs", it is claimed. Proprietary drivers mean that it is capable of playing any file up to 24/192 resolution. Just add a DAC for a high end hi-fi source! Price is £100 including VAT and UK delivery. Presently, Windows XP, Vista and 7 Windows drivers are available, but Mac and Linux drivers will follow soon. For more information, see www.puriteaudio.co.uk.

**CASHBACK!**

Henley Designs and Roksan have announced the introduction of a new incentive scheme to reward brand loyalty. All Roksan K2 CD players and amplifiers purchased will qualify for a money-off voucher against their next K2 purchase; included in the box will be a voucher which when completed, may be produced at the dealer of the customer’s choice and redeemed against any K2 product. The following discounts will apply: £150 for the Integrated amplifier, CD player, loudspeakers and £100 for the power amplifier. Assuming that a customer purchases a K2 integrated amplifier he or she may at the same time, or at a later date, purchase another K2 item and claim the relevant discount off the new item. The customer and dealer simply complete their sections of the voucher and return it to Henley Designs, along with a copy of the customer’s purchase receipt for the new item. For more information call +44(0)1235 511166 or call www.henleydesigns.co.uk.

**REVOLUTION**

Apple Corps Ltd., the company owned by The Beatles and EMI Music, released the digitally remastered Beatles catalogue on December 7th in digital form via Beatles Stereo USB Apples. The limited edition product has a run of only 30,000, and comes with a "specifically designed Flash interface" that uses 16GB of capacity to provide the audio in both lossless FLAC 44.1kHz 24bit and MP3 320kbps formats. Priced at £200, it's compatible with both PC and Mac. This unique, apple-shaped USB drive has the remastered audio for The Beatles' 14 stereo titles, as well as all the remastered CDs' visual elements, including 13 mini-documentary films about the studio albums, replicated original UK art, rare photos and expanded liner notes.
**POWER PLAY**

The Densen B-350+ has at its heart a "huge" toroidal transformer, designed to have low mechanical vibration and to be very stiff in the delivery of voltage. The transformer contains separate outputs for each important stage of the amplifier. Working together with four rectifiers and over ten custom made power supply capacitors, the B-350 is "a true powerhouse", Densen says. The amplifier itself is a true non feedback amplifier, with a rated output of 125W into 8 ohms, and 250W into 4. The slim aluminium cabinet is relatively lightweight, thereby reducing stored energy for superior sound. The circuit itself uses surface mount devices with all components mounted with a precision of 0.02mm and soldered in an artificial atmosphere using nitrogen, to avoid oxidation over time. The parts are the best possible the company says, with resistors being Vishay metal film, the transistors being "ultrafast and precise" types, and the capacitors mostly Densen custom-made types optimised for the circuit in which they are operating. For more details, click on www.densen.dk.

**IT BITES!**

Celebrating the brand’s twenty fifth anniversary, Gryphon Audio Designs’ new Scorpio CD player "proudly flies in the face of current trends towards networked music servers and universal DVD or Blu-ray players", the company says! "Adding a second Compact Disc-only source component to the Gryphon line-up at a time when other brands are making a big song and dance out of abandoning the CD player altogether is just another instance of Gryphon’s willingness to pursue our own path when we perceive it to be the most direct path to better music in the home," explains Gryphon founder and CEO Flemming E. Rasmussen. "None of these trendy solutions can match a well engineered, dedicated CD player that reaps all the benefits of a mature, tried and true technology, built for music and nothing but music", he argues. It sports the same asynchronous 32-bit/192 kHz sample rate conversion found in the digital reference standard Gryphon Mikado Signature. Timing issues are addressed with two independent, specially designed, temperature-compensated crystal oscillators accurate to better than five parts per million. The fine European transport mechanism is specially constructed for silent running and effective vibration damping. Recommended list price is 6,950 Euros. For more details, click on www.gryphon-audio.com.

**NOISE ANNOYS**

News comes that the European Commission is calling for a suggested maximum volume to be set on MP3 players, to protect users’ hearing. The commission wants all MP3 players sold in the EU, including iPads, to share the same volume limits. This follows a report last year warning that up to 10 million people in the EU face permanent hearing loss from listening to loud music for prolonged periods. EU experts want the default maximum setting to be 85 decibels, according to BBC One’s Politics Show. Users would be able to override this setting to reach a top limit of 100dB. In January, a two-month consultation of all EU standardisation bodies will begin on these proposals, and there’s a final agreement expected in the spring. Some personal players examined in testing facilities have been found to reach 120 decibels, the equivalent of a jet taking off, and no safety default level currently applies, although manufacturers are obliged to print information about risks in the instruction manuals. Modern personal players are seen as more dangerous than stationary players or old-fashioned cassette or disk players because they can store hours of music and are often listened to while in traffic with the volume very high to drown out outside noise, it is claimed.

**HOUSE OF FUN**

Hi-fi buffs in the Manchester area and beyond will be interested to know of Brian and Trevor’s House of a brand new specialist hi-fi consultancy. For more information, click on www.brianandtrevorshouseofhifi.com.
It's a great story. For those whose memories fail them, Deltec Precision Audio Limited was one of those quintessentially British names of the nineteen-eighties, making specialist hi-fi that was both low in volume and unique.

Started in 1984 by Adrian Walker and Rob Watts, while both men were studying for a BSc in Electronics at UWIST (now called University of Cardiff) in 1980, the company began selling in 1984. It became famous for transistor amplification which had a distinctively clean yet musical sound. The products espoused the electronic and aesthetic minimalism which was the meme of the day; Adrian Walker comments of his classic DSP 50S preamplifier, "compared to all other preamplifiers in was like a piece of wire with gain!"

Adrian recalls the company's philosophy as being, "to create audiophile products that are sonically neutral, very transparent with exceptionally detailed treble, midrange and a fast, agile controlled bass", and this to my ears isn't far off the mark. DPA products always had a distinct sound; not Linn, not Naim, not Exposure, but DPA. Those who liked it loved it; at times in the nineties the company was more of a fanclub than a commercial manufacturer, it seemed...

Now, a whole decade since the demise of DPA Ltd., the company has relaunched again as Deltec Precision Audio, with the CAI stereo preamplifier you see before you, the SA1 stereo power amplifier (likewise) and the DPA MAI monoblock power amplifier. The company also has a new RF mains noise filter, the Power Plus, a new power cable, the Power Slink and an interconnect cable, the classic Black Slink. "We have a number of digital products in development to add to the above range", Walker adds.

Fascinatingly, if the CAI preamplifier had come out in 2000, it would be universally panned for its appalling styling. A dour black box, tidily made, it's devoid of fancy silver panels, chintzy detailing and big 'blingy' badges. Now though, it looks deliciously retro. DPA electronics always looked uber-cool in the eighties, and so it is now. They're so out of time and so of their time that perhaps the 'teenies' is their time.

As per company tradition, it's a minimalist preamp with the signal handling circuitry as simple and direct as possible. There are six line level inputs for sources, two record monitor outputs and two play monitor inputs (a lovely eighties touch; remember three head cassette decks?). As a concession to the nineties, there are twin outputs for bi-amping. The volume pot is a Penny and Giles affair, and the DH-0A37 voltage amplifier is a thick film hybrid designed and developed by Deltec. Physically much smaller than conventional PCB layout, it allows RF filtering and decoupling to be closer to active components, Walker says.

A specially constructed screened audio grade low noise toroidal transformer is used, and RF decoupling and filtering techniques have been applied to the supply inputs and outputs. The front panel is...
sculpted by precision machining from a solid billet of aluminium, and the control knobs come from a solid rod of the same. Surface parts are then hand gloss painted and lacquered to a high lustre. The fabricated envelope and chassis are accurately laser cut and folded, then finished in a finely anodised satinwood black. Case dimensions are 460x100x350mm.

It's impressively well done, aside from the fact that the casework is resonant; wrap it with your knuckles and it clangs like a bell, which is not ideal. The company would do well to damp it, I feel.

The matching new SA1 power amplifier is a 39W per channel [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE] stereo power amplifier for the princely sum of £2,800. In the best DPA traditions, this is not a lot of bang for your buck, but I'm sure they'd politely ask you to look elsewhere if you're into power games.

In a nutshell, it is Deltec's own DH-OA37 hybrid voltage amplifier. The output stage uses Current Mode Class A, claimed to offer "a ten fold improvement in distortion by the use of a high speed Class A driver and current amplification circuitry".

Loudspeaker output is via two WBT CE compliant binding posts. The power supply has RF filtering at every stage, and again a specially screened audio grade toroidal transformer is employed.

**SOUND QUALITY**

The sound of this pre-power was fascinating to me, insofar as it took me right back to my memories of hi-fi's last heyday back in the late eighties, when all the world seemed to be obsessed with finding a musical sounding transistor amplifier to compete with those from Naim (as was), but one which was smoother and more neutral. The DPA combo, in a nutshell, is precisely this, offering up a sound that's very finely etched, apparently bristling with detail and unerringly propulsive. It has a dark tonality, although little details like the leading edges of electric guitars suddenly jump out at you, as if they've been caught in the spotlight in a concert crowd. The result is a spry, crisp and dry sound that's both clinical in one sense yet emotionally expressive in another. The interesting thing is that so many modern transistor amplifiers simply don't do this sort of thing anymore, seeking to be warmer, smoother and more euphonic, almost as if they've had to be voiced more like valve amplifiers to gain market acceptance...

Genesis's 'Follow You, Follow Me' was a perfect example of the Deltec's distinctive sound. Phil Collins' vocal was as dry and clean as I've heard it, making even my reference (full Class A) Musical Fidelity AMS35i sound a tad thrummy and falsely full. Yet it wasn't coarse as such, rather it seemed a bit of make-up powder had been applied, to smooth it and take out just a touch of colour. At the same time, the percussive guitar work was carried with forensic accuracy; this pre-power seems really adept at picking out guitar tracks, and so it did here. It's superb on leading edges of notes, catching them very early on giving an almost LED-like 'on-off' quality, which makes for rhythms that almost get the spine tingling.

Likewise, it can pick out the difference between tracks in the mix really adeptly; the keyboard part on Al Stewart's 'Time Passages' was allowed to chime away in splendid isolation from the guitars and vocals, while the sumptuous strings throughout the song's bridge soared apparently a million miles away spatially from the saxophone solo. The DPA combo has an amazing ability to float everything in space very precisely, giving instruments/tracks their own allotted place in the mix which is never deviated from. In this respect its one of the tidiest sounding transistor amplifiers I've heard; other good amplifiers can do this trick too, but seem to be less precise (albeit large in physical...
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www.triangle-fr.com
Orchestra's 'Technopoli' was a joy with the DPA twosome faultlessly rendering this bouncy Japanese slice of early electronics. Its sinuous low frequencies pulsed in perfect time with an expansive midband, peppered with subtle detail about when each instrument started and stopped, and where it was located in the mix. Once again, I've heard this track carried in a more fulsome way; the Deltec combo seemingly losing that last few tenths of tonal colour and adding a touch of 'papery whiteness' to the proceeding, but it didn't detract from the song one jot. Rather musically satisfying in its way. It's not as 'louche', as colourful, as ebullient or emotionally gushing and forthcoming as the excellent Musical Fidelity reference I'm currently running for sure, but the strange thing is that you don't miss all the AMS35's 'hearts and flowers' stuff when the DPA combo is at its forensic best. It's amazingly detailed like a lot of Japanese high end, but really is lots of fun too. Indeed I am intrigued by how it makes its own 'third way': no syrupy sumptuousness or lo tubes but none of that 'analysis paralysis' you get from transistors either!

The SA1 isn't a powerful amplifier; it just seemed to be able to aspire my 91dB Yamaha NS1000Ms, but I wouldn't sign it up for speakers of dramatically lower efficiency. Bass lacks the 'sledgehammer' category, lacking the sheer motive force of some rival designs, but even if its quantity gets flagged up then there are no complaints about its quality. Unlike so many power amplifiers, even high end ones, it integrates beautifully; it simply doesn't come semi-detached from the rest of the music. In this respect it truly impressed me, and convinced me I'd take light and bright low frequencies every time over big bruiser power amps that can do nothing but advertise their size to the listener, at the expense of a cohesive musical experience.

Electronic music showed this in no uncertain terms; Yellow Magic

Deltecs won't, and will remind you that you're better off giving them something serious to work with.

CONCLUSION

The new Deltec combination is certainly one of the most distinctive amplifiers I've heard in a long while. Whilst currently being a fully paid up member of the Class A club, I really liked the DPA CA1/SA1 combination, even though I'd feared that I might not. As well as being massively detailed and clean, it's a rollickingly good listen, with a wonderful rhythmic poise that you simply don't hear very often from any amplifiers regardless of price. When the musical going gets tough, the Deltecs keep going rather than throwing a shrug and storming off, so to speak. Their particular combination of grace under pressure and propulsive rhythms, allied to subtlety and insight that's unexpected at the price, is an unusual one and well hearing for yourself. As such, the company's return is a most welcome one.

HISTORY

The original Deltec Precision Audio Ltd went bankrupt on May 29th 1992, but was reborn as DPA Ltd. Classic Deltec products have glossy grey casework, with the serial number on the rear as opposed to the base. Later DPA designs had a flat powder-coated faceplate and matt grey cases. Large DPA boxes had a black Perspex faceplate with polished stainless-steel casework. The last DPA products were manufactured in 1999, until the company in its current incarnation - Deltec Precision Audio - relaunched last year.

VÉRITÉ

This highly distinctive, charismatic and engaging sounding pre-power combo marks the company's welcome return.

DPA-CA1 £2,650
DPA-SA1 £2,800
Deltec Precision Audio Ltd.
C + 44(0) 1793 238 005
www.deltecprecisionaudio.com

FOR
- speed, grip, poise
- midband composure
- peppy, propulsive bass
- endearing musicality

AGAINST
- resonant casework
- needs smooth sources

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Power output of the SA-1 power amplifier measured 36 Watts into 8 Ohms and 70 Watts into 4 Ohms, showing line regulation that will likely give lively bass. High damping factor of 84 will help to impose control over bass.

Distortion was classic crossover both in the midband and at high frequencies, peaking at a high 0.4% from 4V - 5V at 10kHz. Our quoted value of 0.12% is for 1 Watt output at 10kHz into a 4 Ohm load, a revealing test and a fair distortion test. All the same, the SA-1 was unusual in its distortion behaviour and crossover distortion at the levels measured may well impact sound quality. There was some variability in levels generated as the circuits responded slowly to signal level changes.

The preamplifier measured well all round, having very low distortion, useful gain of x6 (15dB), plenty of output swing and adequate bandwidth at all volume control positions, although there was variation here. Our figure is the lowest value, at 1 o'clock.

Whilst the DPA CA1 preamp works well, the SA-1 power amplifier suffers crossover distortion, NK
"Tubular Bells and Cambridge Audio – a treat for your ears"
says music legend Mike Oldfield

The new Azur is here!

It’s time to take your music to the next level...

When Cambridge Audio launched its Azur hi-fi range, it created something of a stir.

Now Cambridge Audio is back in business with the new 650 series! Completely redesigned both aesthetically and under the hood, these exciting new models focus on our most closely guarded principles – explosive sonic performance, incredible value and timeless design.

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Planning to connect a PC, Mac or digital music player to your hi-fi? Then you can't do better than Cambridge Audio's incredible DacMagic.

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Cambridge Audio
Your music + our passion
Very hi-fi system needs a tuner; along with comedy, news, sport and chat, they let you painlessly explore the world of music at minimal cost. FM broadcasts offer the best sound quality, and despite what the DAB propagandists would have you believe, there are still plenty of FM tuners out there to choose from...

You can of course buy a tuner that covers Digital Radio as well but as things currently stand the sound quality is still second best compared to FM. Even FM broadcasts vary greatly in quality; most chart pop stations use a device called an 'Optimod' which makes the sound seem louder by compressing it and then broadcasting it at a uniformly high level. Some national stations, especially the likes of BBC Radio 3, can offer superlative sound quality however, and be a valuable window on the world, letting you get so much more from your hi-fi system.

By way of a tribute to the wonder of radio, we decided to line up five FM tuners (although the most expensive here, the NAD Master M4, also has DAB), in an effort to find out how much bang you get for your buck. All the tuners in this test were auditioned via a roof-top omni-directional FM antenna rather than relying on the various lengths of wire that some of the manufacturers include in the bottom of the boxes. Duly set up and fed by a decent twig, they all provided a refreshingly high level of enjoyment, as we shall see...

**THE CONTENDERS**

- **Cyrus FM6**
- **CRFFK Destiny**
- **Micromega FM-10**
- **Myryad MXT4000**
- **NAD M4**

A few months ago, the government's 'Digital Britain' report forecast a world with FM radio switched off by 2015. Happily, this doesn't now look at all realistic, meaning it's a fair bet that good old analogue radio will be giving fine sound well into the decade after this. With that in mind, we decided to round up some serious hi-fi radios. Tim Jarman is your guide...
The elegantly shaped Cyrus range is undoubtedly a design classic. The dimensions are instantly pleasing and functional, as is the backlit display and crisp acting control knobs. Cyrus make a big thing about their diecast enclosure, but the resin baseboard was less reassuring. Thin and resonant, it's not as nice as that found on pricier Cyrus boxes. I also noticed that the aerial sockets were loose as the wrong type of screws had been used. Hopefully this was a sample fault; it did not affect performance.

**SOUND QUALITY**
The FM6 uses a very similar OEM front end unit to the Naim NAT05 XS [see Hi-Fi World, February 2010] and in a similar manner this provides the left and right signals in raw form to the Cyrus circuit, which is more generous than the Naim inasmuch as it allows the AM section of the unit to be used as well! Continuing the unavoidable comparisons with the Naim XS, the little Cyrus brings to the fore more bass. It is nicely smooth and rounded, but you could never call it 'over full' all the same. The upfront, slightly papery midrange presentation is also similar, as is the excellent stereo decoder performance which with a strong aerial signal instantly gives a pleasingly open soundstage. But where the FM 6 does fall behind the more expensive NAT05 XS however is in the treble, which is slightly grittier and lacking in sophistication when compared directly.

Our frequency response measurement clearly shows the reason for this, Cyrus have decided not to roll the response of the FM 6 completely off at its main (amplifier) outputs at around 15kHz, something that is usually done to avoid the stereo pilot tone at 19kHz. Arguably, substantial response beyond 15kHz is pointless as no audio content is broadcast there, only the strong 19kHz pilot tone certainly adds a hard edge to programme material. There is a filter built in, and its output is available from a second set of phono sockets, but the manual recommends that these are used only for a cassette recorder (the operation of noise reduction systems like Dolby is adversely affected by excess 19kHz content).

Cyrus obviously likes the unfiltered sound; as it avoids any phase issues, but I preferred the sound through the filtered output, which did a good job in suppressing grittiness in the treble. Yet it was still not as finessed in doing this as the more complex Naim circuit. Feeding the unfiltered output of a stereo radio directly into an amplifier is unconventional; most will use the filtered option I suspect.

It was reassuring to find that Medium Wave stacked up well, with BBC Radio 5 coming through cleanly. You'd never call AM radio hi-fi but the presentation was enjoyable all the same; a good AM stage is well worth having I feel and it's fair to say that many so-called hi-fi tuners don't have one!

The FM6 is instantly likeable; it's a fine little package that offers good sound and superb aesthetics and ergonomics. It will certainly suit systems that are otherwise dry sounding, as well as all-Cyrus ones of course. At the price, only what is undoubtedly the cheapest looking remote control unit in this test detracts.
CREEK DESTINY £650

This is Creek's most expensive tuner, and is a brand new design. Whilst the quality of the cabinetwork is of a much higher standard than that of the cheaper Evolution model, some of the key parts inside are much the same. The front end unit (essentially a complete radio in a small metal box that provides raw left and right signals to the rest of the circuit for filtering, etc.) and the microcomputer that controls it appear identical, not only to the Evolution but to the Myryad MXT4000 as well. What sets the posh Creek aside however is what else is in there too. It uses the same power supply unit as the Destiny CD player, so you get three mains transformers (two of which are switched off by a relay when the tuner is in standby mode, saving power) and a twelve element mains filter circuit. No other tuner in this test has anything like as comprehensive an arrangement. Also impressive is the construction of the filter and buffer amplifier, which is studded with German Wima film capacitors of the highest quality. The Destiny's FM tuning works in 50kHz steps, which like those of the NAD M4 are finer than UK conditions require. This, along with a rotary encoder (the big knob) that is imprecise and sometimes overshoots or counts the wrong way when turned slowly, means tuning is fiddly. The encoder knob is also used for preset programme selection and this could be easier too; as things stand the action is awkward.

SOUND QUALITY
Whilst Creek's entry-level Evolution tuner is well liked, it is not completely to my taste. I found the sound a little on the bright side and it is also burdened with a high output level which makes matching a nuisance and calls for a quick hand on the volume control of the amp when switching between sources. It does come with a nicer remote control than the Destiny though; who'd have thought you'd be swapping metal for plastic as you move up the range?

Listening to the new high end Destiny though, and the first piece of the good news is that the output level is far more sensibly set than it is with the Evolution and can be regarded as standard. The tonal balance is also greatly improved, the glare has been suppressed and there is a greater feeling of bass presence, giving a sound that overall can be described as more refined. Compared to the Myryad, the Creek proved to have better controlled treble and more bass but I did at times sense that the bass could get a bit out of hand and descend into boom in a way that the MXT4000 avoided. The Creek's other big strength is midrange insight, in this respect it was the best tuner in this test. As there is a lot of stereo image information in the midrange it will come as no surprise that the Destiny had one of the most vivid soundstages too. AM performance, as with the Myryad, was obscure by the extended bass response and fell short of the clarity displayed by the Cyrus, although it remained perfectly usable.

A well made, full bodied tuner that's ideal for those with a penchant for bass, or indeed brighter sounding systems. I have no reservations in recommending the Destiny for a serious audition. It will be a good partner for any well balanced, high quality system.
Bowers & Wilkins

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CM Series. Imagine sound so detailed, so startlingly lifelike, that you feel as though you could reach out and touch it. That’s what happens with a CM Series speaker. Each is packed with high-performance technologies made famous by our reference-standard 800 Series. It’ll bring you closer to the music you love than you ever thought possible. Listen and you’ll see.

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MICROMEGA FM-10 £700

This has a surprisingly sombre appearance for a French product. Bland it may be but the cabinet is certainly solid; there appears to be more metal in it than in an entire Renault 4!

Inside, Micromega have chosen not to go down the OEM receiver module route, instead they’ve used a small ‘tuner’ unit to feed an intermediate frequency amplifier, detector and stereo decoder circuit of their own design, based mainly around integrated circuits from Sanyo.

Micromega haven’t provided a remote control unit or much in the way of cables but they’ve tried to make up for this by including a pair of white gloves instead; whether this means that the surfaces are particularly sensitive to finger grease or that an unusually large number of Micromega owners are also snooker referees, I don’t know. The instructions are also only written in French, which is not a trivial point, as I was to find out later.

Donning the white gloves, one soon discovers that the controls are a tactile delight. The rotary encoder tuning knob is perfectly scaled, just the right amount of twiddling is required to tune between the stations, it is neither laborious nor imprecise. The six metal push buttons are also just about perfect in their feel and weighing, even if their marking and functions are less than clear to the new user.

SOUND QUALITY
The Micromega’s front panel has a little emblem that says ‘HD Audio’. It’s not clear exactly what this is (new owner Didier Hamid’s initials in reverse perhaps!) but the text looks a lot like the logo for HD television; let’s hope that the Micromega circuit conveys emotion better than HD TV conveys motion (e.g. not very well)! Our measurements show that the FM-10 has an extended and broadly flat bass response and a sloping off treble which kicks up again just before the 19kHz pilot tone filter cuts things off completely. This profile gives the Micromega a sound quality that is pure high end European; a wave of warm bass rolls out of the loudspeakers, bringing a toe tapping quality to music that so many tuners completely fail to capture. This is as nothing to the treble however, which is just about as creamy as I’ve heard from a modern design. Because the Micromega begins to roll off slightly earlier than is strictly necessary it doesn’t have the sparkle of some of the tuners in this test but what is there is simply sublime. Amongst all this the midrange does sound a little recessed, but that’s simply because it’s not brash or ‘in your face’ like many rivals. Soundstaging also nicely expansive, with fine depth perspective too.

Initially I was annoyed to find that whilst the FM-10 would tune into most of my favourite stations, it would instantly mute LBC Radio, even though I live outside the service area it normally comes in okay with just a little background hiss on most tuners. Searching through the menu I found that the tuner comes set to ‘cable’ mode from the factory, you have to change this to ‘antenna’ to retard the muting action. Doing this also reveals a digital signal strength meter; the only other tuner in this test to have this feature is the NAD at twice the price. Accessing the setting is easy, changing it is less so until you discover that the standby key is the one you have to use, Sacre Bleu! Confusing menus aside, the FM-10 impressed me a lot and can be especially recommended for use in systems that tend to sound a bit dry with other sources - but do invest in a good aerial.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE
A conspicuous weakness of the FM-10 was unusually low sensitivity. It needed no less than 3.8mV to reach full quieting (via Antenna), where most tuners need 1mV at most. Given the sort of signal level common from a decent aerial, around 0.6mV, this measured an audible -55dB, not a good result. The FM-10 needs a very good aerial and/or use close to a transmitter to get hiss suppressed to the decent -89db it is capable of.

With falling treble visible in the frequency response plot, measuring -26dB at 10kHz the sound balance will be on the warm side. Low frequency extension was good however, so the FM-10 may well sound quite full bodied. Distortion was very low, even at full modulation (i.e. music peaks) and pilot tone is effectively filtered out.

The signal strength indicator registered 0 only with aerial disconnected and maximum (9) with 1V or just a finger on the aerial socket. It was useless.

VERDICT
Outstanding sounding tuner with superlative construction quality at the price, but needs a good aerial to sing.

MICROMEGA FM-10 £700

Absolute Sounds (+44(0)20 8971 3909 www.absolutesounds.com

FOR
- bass richness
- treble refinement
- excellent build quality

AGAINST
- mediocre sensitivity
- confusing keys and menu
- instructions in French only
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- 2mm diameter silver-plated oxygen-free copper conductors
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- Silicone internal jacket
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- Vibration damping translucent PVC outer jacket

Chord Anthem 2
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- Internal and external Teflon insulation
- Ultra low mass silver-plated non-compression RCA/phono plugs
- Isolated signal return path
- Single material signal path
- Also available fitted with DIN and XLR plugs

www.chord.co.uk
NAD M4 £1,400

This chunky AM/FM/DAB tuner is a real heavyweight. Its thick alloy front panel casts the mind back to nineteen seventies Japanese exotica, as does the sheer amount of stuff inside. Indeed the M4 is the size it is in order to cram everything in; there are three large and well stocked printed circuit boards and two mains transformers for a start. The analogue side of things is taken care of by a beautifully constructed discrete front end followed by a pair of integrated circuits similar to those that the Micromega uses surrounded by reassuringly traditional looking circuitry. Being the only tuner here that also receives DAB, there’s a special section that’s dealt with by NAD’s own DB I DAB adaptor, a stand-alone unit that is mounted, fully encased, inside the main cabinet. As well as providing the usual line level analogue outputs, the M4 also has both optical and coaxial S/PDIF digital outputs which work on DAB only. If top quality is the aim you will still have to make analogue connections to use the FM section anyway. Tuning the M4 is a fiddly process, not least because the controls on the unit itself work in extremely small 1.25kHz steps. Despite being technically impressive, such fine steps are not needed in the UK and in any case a well designed automatic frequency control (AFC) circuit should have a pull-in range of around 1/-0.5kHz, making manual fine tuning unnecessary. Fortunately the remote control can be used to enter station frequencies directly using its numerical keys.

SOUND QUALITY

On paper the NAD has an almost perfect frequency response but when I listened I did feel it had a rather heavy sound. Despite being generous in scale, it failed to pick out important musical clues in the midband, and vocals sometimes appeared pushed back in the mix. Often a perfect response in the frequency domain comes at the cost of problems in the phase domain; I suspect that this is what is going on here. Indeed I discerned a rather mechanical quality to the NAD especially when compared to the embracingly fluid Micromega, for example. Ironically, not only does the M4 look like a high-end Japanese tuner, it sounds a bit like one too!

NAD pithily describe their DAB receiver as being of “CD-like quality”, but in fairness the DB I receiver gave a respectable account of itself, although vocals sounded a bit spitty and the bass a little clumsy when compared to FM and background pops and gurgles proved difficult to eradicate, despite trying the supplied antenna in positions all over my listening room.

Overall, the NAD M4 would certainly suit gadget lovers, and boasts a big if unsubtle sound across radio formats. Allied to the rock-solid build and five year UK warranty inspire, it’s an impressive package, but not the best here.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The NAD M4 frequency response is academically smooth, but a small amount (+0.5dB at 6kHz) of high frequency lift will improve detailing. This will be a very smooth sounding tuner, if a bit brighter in its tonal balance than many. A deep pilot tone filter at 19kHz reduces pilot to -76dB, keeping the tuner’s output hash free.

Distortion was very low, even at full modulation, a figure here of 0.16% being an unusually good result by current standards. At 50% modulation, our quoted value, it fell to just 0.05%.

Hiss was well suppressed, measuring -72dB, again as good as the best tuners in this group, and broader market.

Unfortunately, although the M4 has a 13 segment signal strength meter, it is little use, having been set to read maximum with an extremely weak signal of 8uV, to give the impression of weal sensitivity (the meter will read maximum with all stations, no matter how weak). Such meters should read maximum at full quieting 600uV with the M4.

VERDICT

Big, imposing, do-it-all design but not the class of the field despite its premium price.

NAD M4
NAD Electronics
+44(0)1905 831 6555
www.nadelectronics.com

FOR
- fully featured
- impressive styling
- sturdy construction

AGAINST
- heavy tonal balance
- ease of use

www.hi-fiworld.co.uk MARCH 2010 HI-FI WORLD
When designing the K1, the Vivid Audio engineers wanted to gain the bass response of a larger speaker yet retain the agility and speed of a smaller design. Through extensive research, they perfected a reaction-canceling bass loading system that, when combined with a newly developed crossover, delivers progressively focused power with increasing frequency. The result? All the bass expected of a much larger design yet with the coherent detail of a simple driver.

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"One of the finest loudspeakers on the planet"
HiFi Choice Awards
Best High-End Speaker
Micromega FM-10; surprise winner of the test, and a worthy one too!

First things first; there were no bad tuners in this test. Because of this, if you already have any other components in the manufacturer's range (the amplifier for example) then you may well find that the matching tuner is the best bet. Not only will this give a neat appearance and be a good match electrically, there is also a strong chance that if you liked the tonal balance of the other components then the tuner should also be right up your street. In some cases (for example the Myryad) the tuner can also add useful extra functions to the system as a whole as well.

The Cyrus is notable as the only model in this test that is both designed and built in the UK. This was evidenced through it being a thoughtfully styled and pleasantly performing product that was sullied slightly by Cyrus's advice about the choice of output sockets; I'd counsel that the filtered ones are the ones to use to get the best performance. Despite the technical similarities it isn't a half price, half size Naim NATOS XS, but it is the most visually appealing unit in this test, if you are not an obsessive radio listener and don't want to have to devote too much space to the tuner then it is surely ideal. Considering its modest £450 price and pleasing aesthetics, it has to be regarded as very fine value for money.

At the other end of the physical scale, the big NAD would be ideal for those that mourn the passing of the heavyweight Japanese tuners of the nineteen seventies. Complex and technically impressive, the M4 has the same strong points as the oriental greats of thirty years ago and should also be the longest lasting and most reliable model in this test, especially with the importer's generous five year guarantee. Unfortunately, despite the excellence displayed in its measured performance the sound quality is unremarkable, lacking as it does the lightness of touch of the best here. On the plus side you do get DAB coverage as well and if used with a more sensitive antenna than the one supplied this can be considered as a useful addition. The FM tuning resolution is excessive for UK use but this could theoretically be cured by a software tweak. I suspect? NAD owners seeking a do-it-all high end design should consider it.

Styling and ergonomics aside, the Myryad and Creek are difficult to separate; unsurprising as technically they are very similar. Without doing a direct A/B dem you would struggle to tell them apart sonically, but under the microscope the Creek just takes the honours. The Myryad is arguably better for spoken word programmes with its perfectly constructed bass but for music the Creek just pips it with that delicious midrange insight and polished treble. It is a touch bass heavy in a way that the Myryad isn't, and some listeners may prefer this. Try to audition both if you fancy either. The Creek is certainly more compact and more modern in appearance; this may just swing it if you can't decide between them aurally. Only the clumsy rotary encoder control counts against it. Either way, you get an excellent sounding analogue tuner that should give many years of pleasure.

Despite the excellence of the Creek and Myryad, this test still has a stand-out winner - the Micromega FM-10. The refinement of its sound is startling; it's a welcome return to form by the French marque. It reminds me of the days of European supremacy in electronics design, when the likes of Philips were pouring truly monumental sums of money into R&D and churning out genuinely mould-breaking products along the way. To be offered an alternative to the rather sterile sound that characterises so much of what is available today is a real tonic. To find that this comes from a realistically priced European design that uses bespoke circuitry rather than OEM modules only adds to the pleasure. Coupled with outstanding audio performance comes the best tactile experience of any of the models in this test; each control is perfectly weighted in its response. The cabinet is also nicely finished and importantly not overly large. The only blemish is low sensitivity and the need for a good aerial. Perhaps most tellingly, the FM-10 is the only tuner here that I will be genuinely sad to have to give back.

This test has another winner as well, the FM stereo broadcasting network. Never again will so much quality listening been given so freely and made so accessible. With comparatively simple equipment and complete privacy you can fill your every waking hour with top drawer entertainment; back it and treasure it whilst you can!
Biggy Talls

Top of their budget range, Usher's lofty V-604 floorstanding loudspeaker is a big hitter at a small price, finds Noel Keywood...

What fun the big Rigonda RR FS-100 loudspeakers were, in their short visit to the UK market. Usher's big V-604s reminded me of them. Like the FS-100s they are big, if not quite as big. Also like them they come in close to £1,000, in this case £1,150 to be precise. Also like the Russian Rigondas, the Taiwanese Ushers offer a lot of bang for the buck. Well engineered at heart, they offer a standard of reproduction that's in tune with rivals, with all the wallop you expect from such a big floorstander.

Being quick to jump on any aircraft flying East at the flimsiest of excuses, I found myself in Taiwan a year ago, visiting the Taipei Audio Fair and Usher's loudspeaker factory. Their export factory was almost alarmingly vast, having three floors connected by lifts able to carry 10 ton forklift trucks. Usher work on a huge scale as an OEM producer, but they have their own Usher brand and the V-604 sits at the top of their budget range. It represents very good value as it benefits from their extensive facilities. These include a huge anechoic chamber for development purposes and access to an enormous range of drive units. As a budget design the V-604, like Rigonda's FS-100, may not carry the swishest finish but it comes from an impressive background of ability in the field, if not one very visible in the West.

Standing 117cms high, compared to the 100cms or so of most floorstanders (3ft or 1m), the V-604 is 20% higher than most of the loudspeakers it will find itself compared to in a showroom. It looms larger and although not quite an RR FS-100, it doesn't fall too far short either. At 30kgs it's hefty too, so once in place it isn't the easiest loudspeaker to move. The front is 24cms wide and cabinet depth measured 33cms.
of the Drums' set up a rhythmic thump that shook our listening room firmly. Small repeated phrases were nicely conveyed, each note well differentiated, the big Ushers showing laconic ease in the way they could deliver a strong bass line with the bass player's intentions kept in place. That there's some emphasis to deep bass is discernible, but it isn't overpowering by any means; the V-604 just makes its case well known! By way of contrast other loudspeakers rather pale against it, but a small caveat is that the V-604s may well over drive a small room to boominess.

Substituting the MB845 valve amps for our resident Musical Fidelity AM550 Class A solid-state amplifier surprised me. Faced with a 4 Ohm load like the V-604s the big MF usually delivers a torrent of current and bass of sledgehammer proportions. But not this time. Quite the reverse in fact; its high damping factor seemed to dominate, tightening bass and exercising an iron grip over it to make the Ushers sound nicely balanced at low frequencies. They were still hefty but lows integrated a little better and were less wayward than with the MB845s. Treble was given bite however, and the 'speakers became more inclusive.

Moving to our also resident Leema Pulse, which being a £1,000 amplifier is most representative of what the Ushers may find themselves driven by in real life, I found looser bass than the AM550 but still nicely balanced and tuneful, suggesting the Ushers will work well with a good cross section of amplifiers.

What I was drawn to in these big Ushers was their smooth, yet densely wrought midband that fleshed out vocals beautifully. This gave Renee Fleming a wonderfully rich, dense delivery over quite a large centre stage area - the D'Appolito effect - that I found enterprising in its own way. There's a fine sense of clarity that allowed individual musical strands from the orchestra to be easily resolved, whilst she delivered a belting performance from Madame Butterfly centre stage. I guess, looking at the measured performance, some of her forwardness on the stage was due to midband emphasis, but this is quite common nowadays. It makes for a highly explicit vocal delivery, by lifting intelligibility. But that's the V-604; it has been engineered to be obvious, if not overwhelming - Usher know what they are doing alright, I usually prefer the MB845 over most else for vocals and here they were predictably superb, the V-604s looking right into what they were capable of delivering.

The same properties put Alison Goldfrapp under the spotlight too, every word of her sensually crooned 'Lovely to CU' from Goldfrapp's 'Supernature' CD being conveyed with crystal clarity. Again, she took up a large area in front of me, an effect that gave
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the loudspeaker's presentation great scale, as well as electric clarity. By this
I mean that there was a crystalline edge to the sound that helped light
up detail and boost the sense of insight into lightly hit cymbals and
sinking triangles, especially noticeable with the nifty stick work behind the
Zuox's 'Valerie', this time from LP. Big differences didn't exist between
CD from our Stello CDT-100 and DA-100 transport and DAC combo,
and a Rega Planar 3 with RB301 arm and Ortofon 2M Black cartridge.
However, to pull treble back a little I did swap out the Eastern Electric
Minimax valve phono stage and put in its place the darker sounding Icon
Audio PS3. The Ushers did a fine job with both LP and CD quite frankly,
always sounding smooth but intense across the midband with vocals,
making for strongly detailed and fleshed out rendition that brought
performances to life.

The tweeter often made its presence known and could bring a glassy hardness to treble
at times, but I am particularly sensitive to this sort of thing and know some listeners like
a bit of boost to strengthen incision, and lift detailing a tad. Well, the big Ushers have this
and quite whether it appeals or not is going to be down to taste I feel, since the degree of
emphasis is not overwhelming, either under measurement or subjectively. It is there though,
and it is clearly discernible and sometimes the glassiness it lent to high treble had me gripping
the edge of the settee a little!

However, raised treble only becomes subjectively obvious when there's strong high
frequency content in music, and classical microphone arrangements, especially in
orchestral works, commonly don't capture strong highs. So listening to Tchaikovsky's
'Marche Slave' for example, I was rarely aware of this phenomenon. Instead I noticed how the '604s
differentiated nicely between the brassiness of the horns, to the trilling of the
woodwind and flutes. Being low in colouration and neutral of
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The Times, 3 May 2009
If there's been one good deed that the so-called 'DAB revolution' has done, it is to force us all to reassess exactly what we want from radios. Of course, it's true to say that what we don't want is poor reception.

REVO HERITAGE £230

If there's been one good deed that the so-called 'DAB revolution' has done, it is to force us all to reassess exactly what we want from radios. Of course, it's true to say that what we don't want is poor reception.

Of course, it's true to say that what we don't want is poor reception, and you have the Revo Heritage. Think of it as a sort of 'greatest hits' of radios gone by, its small-to-medium size oblong case (described by Revo as "a contemporary reinterpretation of classic European table radios") is perfect for the job in hand; it doesn't get in the way, yet is big enough to pack a decent sized speaker. The real metal finish is superb as modern radios go, and the large OLED display is peerless. The Revo's radio section is excellent too; that big display, aided by a small joystick, makes navigating Internet radio a breeze, and it's easy to switch between sources. The unit is packed with features and yet doesn't seem gimmicky in the least. The only criticism is the sound quality; whilst the 7W speaker will fill up your kitchen with music, it's not quite as good as some of the top Vita rivals, for example, I'd have liked a tad more midband clarity considering that premium price. Still, it's a lovely radio all the same, and one of the few premium designs worth having. OP

[Contact: +44(0)1555 66 61 61, www.revo.co.uk]

The curious gurgling sound that Digital Radio makes as it struggles to rebuffer a dropped-out signal, and terrible sound quality from its MPEG2 codec, one that's seemingly as old as the solar system itself! On the upside, the instant tuning, where we simply select the station rather than have to worry about technicalities like radio frequencies, is a boon, as is the extensive radio text and station identification markers. Oh, and we also like the auxiliary inputs and iPod connectivity than some of the more recent DAB designs have come with...

Well, distill all the aforementioned down, add Internet radio, network music playback and FM for more choice and better sound, put everything in a highly classy package, and you have the Revo Heritage.

Think of it as a sort of 'greatest hits' of radios gone by, its small-to-medium size oblong case (described by Revo as "a contemporary reinterpretation of classic European table radios") is perfect for the job in hand; it doesn't get in the way, yet is big enough to pack a decent sized speaker. The real metal finish is superb as modern radios go, and the large OLED display is peerless. The Revo's radio section is excellent too; that big display, aided by a small joystick, makes navigating Internet radio a breeze, and it's easy to switch between sources. The unit is packed with features and yet doesn't seem gimmicky in the least. The only criticism is the sound quality; whilst the 7W speaker will fill up your kitchen with music, it's not quite as good as some of the top Vita rivals, for example, I'd have liked a tad more midband clarity considering that premium price. Still, it's a lovely radio all the same, and one of the few premium designs worth having. OP

[Contact: +44(0)1555 66 61 61, www.revo.co.uk]

ARCAM IRDOCK £140

When the original Arcam rDock surfaced a couple of years ago, it was undoubtedly the best sounding iPod dock around. Aside from the excellent build quality, it had a properly buffered audio output and a very clever system to switch off the battery charging - should you wish it - to give better sound when playing back. There was a clearly audible difference, and this feature alone seemed to justify the product's premium price tag. Since then however, there have been ever more iPod docks appear, and even some now offering direct digital output, such as Onkyo's ND-S1 (£150). So Arcam have replied with this new improved design which adds a remote handset and performance improvements.

The high quality cast aluminium enclosure is retained, now with better RF shielding and an RF choke fitted, while 'audiophile grade' op-amps are fitted and there's a wider compatibility with the latest generation iPod and iPhones, with 'intelligent charging' retained. The result is, once again, the finest sounding iPod dock we've tried, the rDock lending a subtlety smoother, warmer and more powerful sound to an Apple iPod Classic running ALAC lossless files. The rough edges get smooched off, and there's a greater sense of ease and musical fluidity. It's not dramatic, but it makes an iPod listenable through a hi-fi system, which is no mean feat. Obviously, if you have a high quality DAC, even better results can now be had running a digital output through the Onkyo ND-S1, but for those wanting a simple plug and play analogue iPod dock, this remains the ultimate. DP

[Contact: +44(0)1223 203 200, www.arcam.co.uk]
Power Station

Class A amplifiers are often huge and heavy but sound superb. Musical Fidelity take this formula to the limit with the massive AMS50 power amplifier, finds Noel Keywood...

Here's a power amplifier that will bewilder many but delight some. I was one of the 'some' delighted by it. But then, I enjoyed its charms whilst avoiding one of its drawbacks — an £8,900 price tag! If you have the money and are prepared to spend it on good sound quality, as many still are I'm constantly assured, then Musical Fidelity's new AMS50 Class A power amplifier is required listening. I've been using it now for many months across a wide range of loudspeakers and it has become my tool of choice for driving loudspeakers with a quality and equanimity I have been unable to find elsewhere in solid-state amplifiers.

Bewildering? Yes, I haven't mentioned yet that this monster power amplifier weighs a truly massive 60kgs, or 132lbs, and is a two or three person lift. But it produces just 40 Watts!

Adding bewilderment is the fact that although its power output is limited, it actually sounds very powerful. I'll attempt to explain this, insofar as any definitive explanation exists. On offer here is a pure Class A amplifier. Class A consumes maximum power all the time and both sides of the push-pull pair swing the full voltage cycle. There can be crossover discontinuity in Class A but it is usually benign, producing low order distortion harmonics only. I say 'can' however, because this depends on the circuit used. Single-ended working is Class A, but there is no crossover region.

The beauty of Class A is good sound quality, especially at low levels, where good designs have an easy lucidity and unstrained clarity that makes for relaxed listening. The big drawback of Class A is heat production, especially when the circuits are what is known as full Class A, as used in the AMS50, where each output pair shares the entire duty cycle. The output devices then stream heat and to keep them cool a lot of heatsinking is needed — and that's one reason the AMS50 is so heavy, Anthony Michaelson of Musical Fidelity told me. But it does run fairly cool.

The other reason is that it uses a massive mains transformer. However, knowing that Musical
Fidelity understand the need for quiet power lines and have in the
past used chokes to achieve this — valve amplifier practice — I couldn't
help but ask whether the AMS50 had chokes onboard, but was told
it hasn't. Whilst a choke version may well be produced, it's best to
understand that chokes compromise regulation, often seen as all important
in solid-state amplifiers. The big
AMS50 has superb regulation, as
you'd hope, and that allows it to
double its power output into a 4 Ohm
load, from 40 Watts into 8 Ohms to
76 Watts into a 4 Ohms. Since most
loudspeakers nowadays use 4 Ohm
bass units this is what the AMS50
will actually be delivering in use,
rather than 40 Watts, one reason it
seemingly goes louder than its spec.
suggests. Chokes will alter all this,
as well as make the amplifier even
heavier, so heavy lifting equipment
would probably be needed, but then
Musical Fidelity have made such
tings in the past! I'm thinking of
an A-470 I once used and its
bigger brother that even I had to keep away
from, an A-570.

Another reason it goes loud is
that modern loudspeakers need very
little power; a 4 Ohm floorstander
needs just 1 Watt for a loud 90dB
one metre away. This falls to 80dB or
so at a normal listening distance of 4
metres. The AMS50 would produce
98dB, 4 metres away from 76 Watts
—and that is very loud. I listen at
90dB maximum at home and rarely
use more than 10 Watts! I monitor
electrical power with a 'scope and loudness with a Brueil & Kjaer SPL
meter, to ensure I am not overly
stressing either loudspeakers or
amplifiers when reviewing them, and
to inform myself of course).

For those of you wondering, we
never supported Musical Fidelity's
recent campaign to persuade people
a lot of power is needed in the
home. True, powerful amplifiers often
sound that way, even though in most
circumstances only a fraction of their
output is being used, but the big
AMS50 also sounds powerful. It might
not deliver voltage swing but it can
deliver plenty of current.

Not only do its fully comple-
mentary push-pull output triple
bi-polars (they are not MOSFETs
I was told) share the load fully,
their work in bridged pairs. Bridge
amplifiers often sound quite chunky
yet smooth in what they do and the
AMS50 has this quality about it, plus
some. With bridge amplifiers both
positive and negative loudspeaker
terminals are 'live'; negative is only a
convention. On most conventional
ampls the loudspeaker negative
terminal goes to ground; on a bridge
amplifier it does not. If the negative
is grounded accidentally then the
channel goes silent; if the positive
is grounded sparks fly I found!
Protection circuits exist to avoid
damage.

There are two pairs of output
terminals per channel, provided to
make biwiring easier. They are chunky,
gold plated affairs that cater for
4mm banana plugs, spade terminals
favoured in the U.S., and bare wire.

In line with today's preferences
the AMS50 has balanced XLR inputs
in addition to unbalanced phono
inputs. The amplifier is unbalanced
internally, so the balanced input runs
through a balanced-to-unbalanced
receiver chip, as most do. What's
the benefit? It is to be able to use
balanced cabling, Sceptics — usually
electrical engineers! — need to listen
first before jumping to conclusions.
Just the fact that the signal line is
symmetric and earth currents passed
through an independent ground helps.
Then there's cancellation of common
mode interference, a subject that's off
the radar of high fidelity engineering

...balanced signal cabling is a sensible
one. For this review however I
used both a Creek OBH-22 passive
preamplifier and Icon Audio LA7
valve preamplifier, connected through
short, phono terminated unbalanced
cabling.

My initial interest and final
appreciation of this power amplifier
revolved around its ability to
match and drive a wide variety of
loudspeakers. Loudspeaker reviewing
demands use of a decent power
amplifier sufficiently neutral in
itself, yet of deep ability, such as a
blameless drive amplifier. The AMS50
turned out to be near perfect for
this purpose, suggesting it will give
consistently fine sound with whatever
loudspeaker it is partnered with.
It didn't quite score 100%; some
loudspeakers, like the Usher V-640s
in this issue, didn't suit it I felt. But
it got a lot closer than most solid-
state amplifiers at being able to get
the best from most loudspeakers
and regular readers will know I've
used the AMS50 for some months
now as a solid-state benchmark, a
reliable, top quality workhorse for

"the AMS50 has an array of qualities that
mark it out as superb, no matter what
speaker it is paired with..."
Tim Jarman tries out what could possibly be the very last ever new cassette deck on sale, the Sony TC-WE475...

No, this isn't the Olde Worlde page, the Sony TC-WE475 is a cassette deck that you can buy brand new. It's a proper cassette deck too, not one of those dreadful 'tape to USB' devices that cheap shops sell. It has two transports, both with auto reverse and their own digital memory tape counter, Dolby B and C, automatic or manual recording level control, type I (ferric), II (chrome) and IV (metal) tape compatibility with automatic selection, music search and much more, in fact it's what you might call 'fully loaded'.

Sony have been making cassette recorders for over forty years but don't run away with the idea that the TC-WE475 is the peak of the evolution of the species. Instead, see it as a rationalised model which covers the basic needs of the cassette user in the twenty first century. I was impressed to see that the review sample was made in Japan, this is always a good sign with Sony equipment...

Before delving into the details of the machine itself the first question is "why should you buy a cassette recorder at all?" There are many answers to this, the most obvious of which is to listen to a library of much loved recordings built up over the years, quality material laid down using high end machines in the heyday of cassette still lives on after all, even once the original recorders themselves become worn out or irreparable.

You may also, for example, wish to make fresh recordings to archive LPs. There's no point investing in an all-analogue system and then mangling the pure signals in a computer soundcard or suchlike; cassette is ideal for this. Similarly, if you are a classic car buff (and many audiophiles are) and wish to use the original audio equipment that came with your beloved vehicle a quality home cassette deck is essential, as it is if you want to use a Sony Walkman or other cassette personal stereo.

Why not buy a second-hand superdeck from the golden years? There are still plenty about and they can be amazingly cheap for what you get. Certainly when new some of them would have made the
TC-WE475 look decidedly 'Junior league' - but there's the catch, as I said, "when new". Old cassette decks often need major mechanical work and careful recalibration if they are going to even approach their original levels of performance - and that's before one gets involved in things like head wear and evolution of the cassette standard over the years.

The TC-WE475 on the other hand, being new, comes with a factory guarantee, new heads, belts, rollers, clutchers, etc., and is freshly calibrated to match the currently available tape types, all at a price that is much lower than the cost of a serious overhaul of an older model. In motorcycling terms it's like comparing a new Golf GTi with a twenty year old supercar, they can be bought for similar money but going for the new option and forgoing the chance to own something really exotic can involve far less pain in the long run, and is ultimately more satisfying.

A double cassette deck is traditionally used to copy recordings and indeed the Sony can do this, at normal or double speed in the best eighties-tastic 'high speed dubbing' tradition. Even if you never do this, having two decks is still an advantage. Technically minded users can tweak the azimuth setting of the playback only deck to match their old, potentially misadjusted recordings whilst retaining the recording deck as a reference, thus ensuring that the playback only deck can be reset to the factory adjustment point with the minimum of fuss. The playback only deck also offers variable speed, so clean and fresh sounding recordings can easily be made from old ones made on recorders that suffered from a number of faults of inaccuracy.

Making new recordings is easy too: a 14 segment per channel level meter and the choice of either automatic or manual level control is a good level of specification and with auto reverse 1 1/2 hours of almost non-stop recording can be made on a C90 without further intervention. The auto reverse mechanism is rather basic however and waits for the tape to stop turning before reversing, older models sensed the presence of the transparent 'leader' tape and thus imposed a shorter gap in the programme material.

Recordings can be made on any of the three main tape types but given the current availability of new blank media type II cassettes such as TDK's SA are going to be the best choice. Sony have generously fitted Bang & Olufsen's HX Pro recording system to the TC-WE475. This automatically optimises the amount of recording bias used depending on the signal content and magnitude. Although contentious amongst the purists HX Pro does give improved results with basic tape types, so there's no need to go scouring ebay for unused packs of rare high end formulations!

**SOUND QUALITY**

I started listening to the TC-WE475 by playing back recordings made on a recently calibrated Sony TC-D5 Pro II. I was pleased to find the Dolby level and head azimuth adjustment were reasonably accurate although the speed of both decks was a little fast, 0.5% in the case of the playback one and 1.2% for the recording one. The error was at least consistent in both directions and could therefore...
AMS50 Power Amplifier

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be trimmed out by a competent dealer. A 1% speed error can be considered average for machines in this class and is not immediately objectionable. I found that the Sony gave a soft sound with some extreme treble detail absent. Imaging however was good, as was the rendering of fine midrange detail, this suggests that the nature of the sound is a characteristic of the replay amplifier rather than the effect of misaligned heads or poor Dolby tracking. The moulded plastic flywheels used in the mechanisms didn’t inspire much confidence but apart from a slight amount of ‘dirtiness’ around certain sustained notes I did not experience any particularly objectionable speed-related disturbances during my listening tests. Overall the sound was more laid back than pacy, the machine was clearly more at home with Carla Bruni than Kraftwerk!

I first tried recording on TDK SA tape without Dolby. This of course introduces background hiss but if the music you like is of a sustained high energy level the trade off against less processing in the crucial upper midband may be one that is worth making. Trust me, you won’t hear tape hiss at -57dB in the middle of a Metallica concert if you record it properly! Not wishing to deafen myself completely I opted instead for Depeche Mode and the album version of ‘Strangelove’. Throwing caution to the wind and allowing the peak signal to hit +4dB at times resulted in a well balanced recording that while lacking the sheen of the CD original, possibly as the result of the replay characteristic mentioned earlier, was nevertheless highly credible. I felt that the soundstage had contracted a little too but if all you are used to is compressed MP3 then this will blow you away. Predictably the run-up to the main part of the track was marred by tape noise but this soon became inaudible once things got going. Playing the recording back in the reference TC-DS Pro II demonstrated good compatibility and, predictably, a little more treble.

Calming down a little, cueing up Kate Bush’s ‘The Man I Love’ and turning the Dolby (B) back on revealed excellent record/replay tracking, another sure sign of an accurate factory setup. There was again a very slight dulling of the treble but it was scarcely worth worrying about, given how creamy smooth the rest of the presentation was. Once more compatibility with the TC-DS Pro II was good; for the price I can’t see anyone being anything other than delighted with the performance of this machine. Dolby C of course gave even less hiss but in my experience compatibility problems between recorders are worse with ‘C’ than ‘B’ and as many can only process the former anyway unless you are only going to play your recordings on the TC-WE475 I’d recommend sticking with ‘B’.

Before leaving the subject of recording it is worth mentioning that Sony are clearly confident that their HX-Pro circuit works correctly, the auto-level system allows the music to peak right up to 0dB on the meters and such devices normally have to allow for a bit of extra headroom on top as well. The quality-conscious should of course always use the manual setting; automatic level controls that adjust themselves continuously (like the Sony one does) all compress the dynamic range of the sound to some extent. Manual control allows one to set the peaks at +2dB (the recommended setting for type I and II cassettes) or +6dB (for type IV).

CONCLUSION

I can’t recommend the Sony TC-WE475 highly enough. It is well made, sensibly specified and works correctly in all the key areas. To use it is a joy, it makes you feel grown up in the same way a proper turntable does and the sound quality never failed to exceed my expectations. My only concerns centre around the durability of the heads and mechanisms. I suspect the heads are Permalloy and this is not as wear-resistant as the ferrite or Sendust types that one finds in older high-end machines, therefore the commendably accurate factory calibration may not stay that way forever. Not state of the art then, but nevertheless a very good recorder with many uses. Buy one whilst you can.

**MEASURED PERFORMANCE**

Replay frequency response was flat to 10kHz and fell a little above that frequency. Head azimuth was also well set, this shows, equalisation was correct and the head had few low frequency ‘contour effect’ bumps. Together with adjustable speed and good speed stability pre-recorded tapes will play well on the Sony. The OVU level was also in perfect accordance with IEC0dB level, as it needs to be. There was some small treble roll off with TDK D (IEC ferric) that will give warm-ish sounding recordings, but the advantage of ferric, especially high coercivity TDK AD and AR, is low distortion (0.6%), due to the low bias requirement, as the record head in Deck B was unhappy with chrome (thd=2.7%) and metal (thd=2.5%). Bias levels, as budget decks often are. Both chrome and metal tape gave flat, extended high frequency response and less hiss though, metal returning a -70dB hiss level with TDK-MA and Dolby C engaged.

The Sony was surprisingly well fattened and adjusted for high quality replay of prerecorded tapes, as well as the production of very good quality recordings. Its greatest weakness is a record head unable to accept high signal levels, so recordings made into the red will sound messy, especially with chrome and metal tapes. The OVU reference level is best used as a maximum for quality recordings. NK

**REPLAY**

- Frequency response 20Hz-18kHz
- Speed accuracy +0.85% (Pitch Off)

**RECORD/REPLAY**

- Frequency response
- Ferric (IEC) 16Hz-10kHz
- Chrome (IECII) 16Hz-18kHz
- Metal (IECV) 16Hz-20kHz

- Noise (IEC U, IV, Dolby out) -46, -50, -52dB
- Distortion (0dB, TDK AD) 0.6%
- Speed stability (W+t5, Wtd) 0.12%

**VERDICT**

An essential purchase for the committed cassette user, this deck performed way better than expected in every way.

**SONY TC-WE475** £130

Sony UK: +44 (0)1932 816000
www.sony.co.uk

**FOR**

- fine sound
- accurate factory alignment
- well specified
- easy to use

**AGAINST**

- basic transport
- auto reverse recording gap
The Philips new BDP7500 sits just above the £100 entry level players. Like most players this one spins more than just Blu-rays. It plays DVD video, upsampling it to high def. quality, and audio CD, plus a whole slew of other formats that you can see in the specification on p22 of the User Manual that you can download from www.consumer.philips.com/c/blu-ray-dvd/bdp7500b.htm. These include the ability to play CD and DVD RWs (rewrite-ables), so like its rivals the BDP7500 will spin all silver discs, except that notorious duo, DVD-A and SACD.

The higher price brings a wide variety of older format signal outputs, to broaden compatibility with older product. The BDP7500 has 7.1 format (seven channels and subwoofer) multichannel analogue outputs, for connection through phone plug terminated cables to a receiver. I was very surprised to see an onboard loudspeaker set up menu, to set loudspeaker size and distance, for use in conjunction with these outputs.

There are analogue stereo outputs, which receive a fixed internal mix down from multichannel programme, or a stereo mix from the disc (which is preferable). And both electrical and optical S/PDIF digital (stereo) outputs are fitted.

On board decoding is provided for all the latest movie soundtrack compression formats, including Dolby Digital Plus, TrueHD and DTS HD Master Audio. These are only needed in the player if the receiver doesn't have them, or if the analogue outputs are to be used.

On the video side, a composite output is provided, plus higher quality Component outputs and HDMI. Both Scart and S-Video are missing, at least on this European model. The BDP7500 should connect up to any receiver, no matter how old.

Headline features of the player mostly relate to video features I'm not especially concerned with here, notably Bonusview, which offers picture-in-picture, and BD Live (Profile 2) where the player can download content from the website of the movie producer. Yes, the BDP7500 has an ethernet socket for internet connection and this player connected seamlessly to my Netgear router, unlike the BDP3000 before it. Manual settings are not available. Nor is any MAC (hardware) address declared so it can be easily located on the router's client list, unlike Samsungs for example. So fiddling is impossible! My sample checked for internet connection and this player software version update successfully.

For BD Live content 1GB of memory is fitted, so content can be stored onboard, rather than on an external memory stick.

Philips fit a front USB 2 socket for memory sticks, so the player can access music and video files, including DIVX Ultra media files (compressed video), MP3 and WMA compressed music files can be played from this source, or PCM from a WAV file. There's no mention of AAC, Ogg Vorbis or FLAC though.

**PICTURE QUALITY**

Like the BDP3000, the 7500 delivered a richly detailed picture and was close. Draw open was reasonably low and detail in grass and trees in and around Duxford's parking aprons was superb, making a Samsung BDP-1600 look a little blurred. Test videos in a park from a steady tripod mounted camera confirmed excellent detailing in grass and trees. The picture had slightly enhanced black level, even with Black Level set to Normal and was 'contrasty'. This wasn't apparent in an SMPTE grey scale test chart from our HQV Blu-ray video test disc. With 0% luminance (full black) and +5% levels discernible, all seemed well enough set. This didn't change even with Black level set High, however, so it wasn't picking up what was visible. All HQV disc tests were passed with alacrity, jaggies being non existent, even when frame stepping.

The player upsamples DVD to Blu-ray resolution and I've always found this very effective, and it was on the BDP7500. I ran the complete gamut of tests from our HQV test disc. The Philips player was all but flawless. The player handles 24fps progressive film and output John Meyer's concert as such.

The player read Verbatim BD-Rs and Panasonic BD-REs without difficulty, as well as commercially duplicated Blu-ray discs. Loading times were fast, the heavy Java menu of John Meyer's 'Where The Light Is' loading in thirty seconds from Draw close. Draw open was reasonably speedy too.

**SOUND QUALITY**

Philips BDP3000, reviewed in our November 09 issue, would not play PCM in surround-sound, reproducing Andrea Bocelli's 'Live in Tuscany' Blu-ray in stereo only, for example.
So I popped the same disc into the BDP7500 and its 24/48, 5.1 PCM soundtrack played in full surround, via HDMI through a Marantz SR8002 receiver.

I thought the stereo gremlin had gone but a residue seems to remain. Set to Auto the player decoded all tracks of my 2L BD of 'Divertimenti', from the Trondheim Soloists, recorded in 24/192 PCM, DTS HD Master Audio and Dolby TrueHD. The Philips sent PCM to the receiver, as it should.

However, setting output to Bistream, meaning passing the native undecoded signal out to get the receiver to do the decoding, worked with PCM and DTS HD Master Audio, but not Dolby TrueHD, which locked into stereo again (even with the TV disconnected to eliminate HDMI influence). My Samsung correctly handles this track. Fortunately, the Philips did output Dolby TrueHD correctly at lower data rates, so 24/96 code from a Dolby Labs test disc played correctly, in full surround-sound via decoding in the receiver and commercial recordings such as the John Meyer concert in TrueHD 24/96 were fine. An Audio button on the remote switches between track formats during play, a convenience.

As this problem affects only 24/192 code most people will never encounter it, because very few 24/192 spec. discs exist, but Philips still lag Samsung here and should be able to ensure a European produced player of good quality. Properly on what is meant to be a high quality audio Blu-ray disc player it's best to use either Dolby Digital 5.1 surround-sound or stereo, but would not read high res. PCM content, as expected. But I tried just in case!

CONCLUSION
The new Philips BDP7500 worked well all round. I found it easy to use and both audio and picture quality were excellent. Only those expecting to output native 24/192 Dolby TrueHD for decoding in their receiver will be disappointed, but this will affect few users.

MEASURED PERFORMANCE
The BDP7500 has two sets of audio outputs and they run through different convertors. The stereo outputs exhibit strong filter ripple before reaching the usual 21kHz anti-alias limit. This reduces treble energy and gives a warmer sound, even though response reached 21kHz within 1dB limits. The multichannel analogue output was smooth to 43kHz with a 96kHz sample rate signal, a good result. With low distortion from both outputs, down to 0.07% at -60dB with 24bit resolution, the Philips offers good results from its analogue outputs.

The S/PDIF digital output was usefully free from jitter, measurement showed. Random jitter was a miniscule 10µS whilst signal related jitter hit just 40µS with a -60dB, 1kHz tone. Results via the HDMI connection are set by the receiver's performance.

The Philips measured well from its analogue outputs, showing it is well engineered. Jitter was low on its digital output too. NK

Frequency response (-1dB)
CD / DVD
4Hz - 21 / 43kHz

Distortion, CD (%)
0dB
-6dB
-6dB

-60dB
-80dB
2V

SELECTION 0000 £
Great picture quality and handles most discs and formats. A good value player with a wide range of abilities.

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FOR
- detailed picture
- fast loading
- easy to use

AGAINST
- no 24/192 TrueHD
- strong black contrasts

World Radio History www.world.co.uk
MARCH 2010 HI-FI WORLD
41
Dance with an Usher

Jordan Acoustics are proud to have been selected as one of a handful of Reference dealers for the revered loudspeaker brand Usher.

Top notch build quality and packed with technology, Usher has become a significant player in the UK high-end loudspeaker market in the last few years. Their use of beryllium and kevlar for their drive units really does add an extra dimension of realism. Those looking for that "air and space" to the top end should look no further. They are so good that Hi-Fi World recent announced the Be-10 as their loudspeaker of the year! Quite an achievement considering how densely populated the loudspeaker market is!

Our demo pair of Be-10's has just arrived so come and hear for yourself...

Hi-Fi World in a recent review of the Usher Dancer Be-10 wrote:

"It is unremittingly dynamic too, making music sound 'live' in a way that nearly all hi-fi loudspeakers fail to do. Its massive visceral punch, allied to real silky smoothness and sophistication (when given the right ancillaries to work with) makes it an exceptional loudspeaker by any definition, and a worthy winner of its Hi-Fi World Award."

Hi-Fi World Awards 2009
**Letter of the Month**

**CH-FI**

I write with regard to the letter from Niels Ostergaard and the responses from NK and DP. While I do agree in principle with NK’s remarks about consumer laws, it should be noted that many of the Chinese brands do have E.U. distributors and I would mention A.A.A.V.T (www.aavt.it) in Italy who distribute Yaqin, Yarland and Aria, among others.

Regarding DP’s remarks, while bowing to his obvious greater experience, his comments are highly generalised and certainly shouldn’t be taken to apply to all such brands. Many Chinese manufacturers produce products re-branded as much better known brands, e.g. Aria as Sophia Electric (Baby) and Korsun as Red Rose (Rosette). I myself have a Korsun U2, which I imported directly from Hong Kong and which I have found excellent quality, both for sound and build.

I would point Niels (and yourselves) to some of the online sites, such as TNT Audio and 6 Moons which often cover Chinese brands and highlight in particular the good reviews that Yarland have been getting recently. I, like Niels, would welcome more coverage of such equipment and would be happy to accept the constraint that it had to be available from an E.U. source.

Finally, DP’s comment about the ‘noise’ that Niels is getting from his equipment cannot be allowed to go unchallenged. While, I hope, it may have been somewhat ‘tongue in cheek’ (?), I don’t think it is acceptable to criticise another enthusiast’s choices or taste in this way, at least not without personal experience of the actual setup. Even then, sound quality is highly subjective and ‘one man’s meat …’ etc. regards,

Stephen Murphy.

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Hi Stephen - regularly visiting the People’s Republic as I do (for reasons of friends and family), I get plenty of chance to see Chinese hi-fi ‘at home’, and talk to Chinese hi-fi buffs and indeed Chinese hi-fi salesmen when I visit the fast growing network of hi-fi dealerships there. I’m afraid their indigenous product is not universally well regarded. There are, as you point out, some very good Chinese brands, but most - as a number of Chinese dealers have told me (even those who sell it) are poor. They’re highly derivative of Western designs, and often they manage to copy the ‘headline features’ like chunky casework and huge toroidal power transformers, but miss the subtle things which are just as important to sound such as high quality passive components. Indeed, at the last Whittlebury Show Ken Ishiwata and I were comparing notes; he told me that they simply lack designers who can ‘finesse’ their products, fine-tune what’s basically a box of decent bits into something half-decent. He believes they will moved forward, and in some cases have already done so, but it’s (if you pardon the phrase) rather like ‘the Wild West’ at the moment. As such, buying blind off eBay (or wherever) is risky. It’s great if you’re tweaky and you want a project, but don’t expect hi-fi heaven at a knock down price.

DP
Auranote "looks like my old Alba record player from the 60s!" says Eric. "No, it's retro chic" says David, "like Sophia Loren!"

TASMANIAN DEVIL
David Price drools over the AuraNote box in the Systems Shoot-out in the latest (well down here in Tas! anyway) issue. He cites all sorts of awards for the designer. But look at the thing — a bloody box with a few shiny knobs on it. It looks like my old Alba record player from the 60s! I've seen nice design from Chord and Lexicon and love the beauty of old SMEs and Stax arms. But function usually triumphs over form in our hobby.
To think that box is wonderful...come on. It was bad enough in the shoot-out but to follow up with your column... aarrghhh!
I admire your ears, Dave. They've brought me the truth on loads of gear over the years. But your eyes, mate, your poor eyes!
Eric McCormick
Hobart, Tasmania

Hi Eric - well, as they say, each unto their own! This AuraNote is - to my peepers - a deliciously retro (think Sophia Loren, Beatles 'White Album', Maserati Ghibli, James Bond!) take on a 'music box' and, importantly, beautifully built. It's certainly something a bit out of the ordinary, and along with my love of its style and build, I was delighted to hear that April Music had engineered it well on the inside too. I can see now that it's obviously not de rigueur in Tasmania, though! DP

BEATLES:
I read the article on the Beatles reissues with interest, and would like to produce a counter argument to some of the comments and views. I am a long term Beatles fan, and would generally applaud any initiative that improved the accessibility and quality of their back catalogue. For a wedding present I received the entire set of Beatles CDs, 15 years ago. Apart from the fact that the packaging was incredibly poor (over-enlarged copies of cover shots, no notes whatsoever - the exception being Sgt Peppers), I thought the sound was pretty good. Sure, these were 20 year old recordings re-issued at full price, but then EMI aren't a charity and have to please their shareholders.
I do, however, feel that they are really going too far with their recent releases in trying to fleece the public, by trying to get us all to buy them again!
These are just re-issues, the cost behind the new transfers must be minimal. Even if they had to get a couple of engineers to work with them, why the full price?
Furthermore, why muck around with the original? I may be cynical but I am sure that this is similar to the old show-room trick of increasing the volume in A/B comparisons. It sounds louder, it's better - must buy!
Secondly, the mono issues sound interesting, and probably worth a spin, to produce them as a stand alone full price set is really despicable.
By comparison, the really excellent 60s Beach Boys re-issues on Capitol include both the stereo and mono mixes on one disc, and I can see absolutely no reason why EMI didn't do this, except to try and extract more cash from their customers, once again. Perhaps this is one reason why the re-issues haven't really set the charts on fire, and if so it serves them right.
Your review highlights the dodgy quality of the early stereo mixes, especially Rubber Soul. I think this is missing the point - this is what the sixties sounded like. These are period pieces and not modern, multi tracked, digital stereo (which quite often sound ghostly anyway); listen to Run For Your Life on Rubber Soul, Lennon's vocals are blistering, miked up close, hissing out of the right speaker on their own. Staggering stuff!
I believe that recordings come out of copyright after 50 years. If so, I look forward to really creative re-issues from Naxos and Dutton Labs etc, at a decent cost and with full packaging!
Lastly, which ones should we buy?
I don't think we should replace any of the original 60s transfers, which to my ears sound clean and dry, a bit BBC 3 in their balance rather than Classic FM, but none the worse for that. Anyway, the guilt amongst us will have to start saving up for the re-mixes, which are undoubtedly being worked on even as we speak, in the depths of Abbey Road. They will be issued at full price, trust me.
Peter Norrie
Leicester

Hi Peter. I totally agree with your assertion that the stereo set is over priced. Both EMI and The Beatles' estate are maximising income before the copyright on their works expires. Why couldn't they have created a box set in the vein of Neil Young's recent 'Archives' release, packed with value-for-money rarities and (Blu-Ray) video? Then again, maybe that's to come...!
On purely sound terms, I would argue that, in fact, the eighties' releases "mucked around" with the sound to a greater degree. They may be more benign but the new re-issues restore much of the clarity, drive and energy of the original master tapes. The eighties releases masked a lot of original detail. The problem is that, in my view, the stereo 'enhancements' of the new reissues went too far in certain, but by no means all, areas.
As for the mono box set? No matter what the stereo box set provides, the mono box was always intended to be sold as an audiophile edition for purists and should be viewed as a separate entity. Think of it as a specialised Japanese collectable because, essentially, that's what it is.

Mentioning dodgy quality of the early Beatles stereo mixes, especially Rubber Soul, misses the point, says Peter Norrie.
Every major artist (s) has featured in similar sets sold, in the main, via specialist retailers for an awful lot of cash.

As for my comments on early 60s mixes! This is a perennial audiophile argument. Many original 60s stereo mixes were produced by inexperienced engineers on deficient equipment for playback on anemic Dansettes and transistor radios. We now have the technology to restore that music to the artists' original wishes. We should always take advantage of it. If you want a slice of the sixties, buy an original LP second-hand.

I have to say it's one disappointment after another with CD re-releases - certainly the ones I'm interested in. I think the record companies simply don't understand that compressing the signal and 'normalising' it right up to 0dB does not constitute an improvement in sound. Very often the packaging is also poor; the paper and/or cardboard might be good quality, shiny and with a nice new smell, but often the repro is bad, almost as if someone had put in on the office scanner! The Beatles boxset is sort of a nice idea (especially issuing the mono mixes) but done rather insensitively, methinks. I am now reading the same about the new Kraftwerk boxset release; 'The Catalogue', which only goes to depress me more... DP

VINYL QUEST

My present listening gear is as follows: Naim CDX CD player, NAC 102 preamp with NAPSC power supply, NAP 180 power amp, B&W DM603 floorstanders. Although a sensible option might have been to upgrade my speakers next, I have decided to hold off on this and spend money to reacquaint myself with vinyl instead. I am aware that some of you have seen the Technics SL1200, but for now vinyl seems to have become a necessity. In fact vinyl actually is a reality. I have been steadily collecting second hand vinyl and some new release stuff for months now. I think as much as a genuine interest in the sonic possibilities of a good vinyl system, I have also been reading up for some years to reacquaint myself with this aesthetically more pleasing, physically tactile medium; not to mention its connection to my own formative years of buying and loving music. I have spent some £400 and am now eagerly awaiting delivery of a Teddydnap power supply which will act as a HI-CAP type power supply to the 102 and as a power supply to a Naim Stageline phono amp.

Next up I need to decide on a vinyl turntable/tonearm set up. I have to confess I am at a total loss. Most puzzling I think is even where to begin in terms of allocating money in a balanced way to the constituent parts of the turntable, tone arm and cartridge. And I am really unsure of what budget I should begin serious consideration of potential purchases at. My one overriding requirement is that this set-up should not be significantly inferior to my CDX CD player. And this has to remain true when I upgrade the speakers too. I don't suddenly want new loudspeakers exposing the weakness of my vinyl set up when compared to CD. I have considered partnering a Rega Planar 3, new RB301 arm with power supply, with a really good MM cartridge such as the Dynavector DV10X 52003 or even the Ortofon 2M Black. This would cost in the region of £800-£900. Although I am aware that some claim that the Planar 3 is capable of shaming CD players for more expensive than itself, would I be right in assuming that the CDX would ultimately prove a substantially better all-round performer than this proposed set-up?

If that is correct how much more money would I seriously need to invest, in order to attain a level of vinyl playback which would not leave me feeling marginally disappointed? How about the Planar 5 with power supply? Is this a considerable improvement over the revamped Planar 3? The Planar 5 with one of the aforementioned cartridges would be costing me around £1100-£1200 mark. To be fair I was hoping to keep my spending to under £1500. Is that realistic?

And although I have already allocated money for the Stageline, I cant quite fully decide whether I should go for a MM or MC model? Help, I am confused!

If I need to I am prepared to extend my budget to higher level decks if you feel anything less would sound a poor second to the CDX. More expensive decks which have caught my eye include the Rega Planar 7, the Rega RB301 (or suchlike) to get it to give of its best. There are a number of specialists who can do this for you, and who advertise in HFW. If you wanted an off the shelf solution, then the Rega P3 is surely the best at the price. It is an inferior turntable to the Technics, with a superior arm, all in a lovely sleek package. Fitted with an Audio Technica AT-OC9.

"How can I get LP to sound better than my Naim CDX?" asks Timothy Cook.

Okay, here goes! The best value new turntable on the market is, in my humble opinion, the Technics SL1200. The trouble is that its tonearm isn't great, so you'd need to fit a Rega RB301 (or suchlike) to get it to give of its best. There are a number of specialists who can do this for you, and who advertise in HFW. If you wanted an off the shelf solution, then the Rega P3 is surely the best at the price. It is an inferior turntable to the Technics, with a superior arm, all in a lovely sleek package. Fitted with an Audio Technica AT-OC9.

MAIL

Timothy Cook

Wow, I'm impressed! The Technics SL1200 is a great turntable for the price. I'm happy with my current setup, but I'm curious about the Rega RB301. It seems like a solid choice, especially with its superior arm and power supply. However, I'm still a bit confused about the difference between MM and MC cartridges. Can you provide more guidance on that?

Timothy

While the Technics SL1200 is a fantastic turntable, the Rega RB301 is also a top-notch option. The RB301 offers a harder, more incisive sound, which can be appealing for some listeners. However, if you prefer a smoother, more rounded sound, you might want to consider the MM cartridge. It provides a warmer, more detailed sound, which can be particularly enjoyable for jazz and classical music.

Timothy

I appreciate the advice. I think I'll stick with the Technics SL1200 for now, but I'll definitely consider the Rega RB301 if I upgrade my setup in the future. Thanks for your help!

Timothy

You're welcome! If you have any other questions, feel free to ask. Happy listening!

Timothy

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in some respects, but its combination of qualities is still hard to beat. Were you to go this way, you'd make your CDX's laser last a lot longer! DP

Hi Timothy. I will make a few comments.

Firstly, the new Rega RB301 arm is very, very good – absurdly so at the price. The Planar 3 is a fine starting point, although it must be placed in a firm, vibration-free surface as its mass and isolation are minimal.

In view of the quality of your system and your obvious desire to have the best, a Moving Magnet (MM) cartridge will leave you hankering for what you will know to be better – a moving coil or MC cartridge. The question is – which one? An Ortofon Rondo Bronze comes to mind, or possibly an Audio Technica AT OC9-MU III, both costing around £500. I'll note quickly that the OC9 will be upgraded to MU III status soon.

And finally from me. I do not agree with the view that LP 'shames' digital. The two are different and good digital has its merits. I happen to prefer LP and with a top quality MC cartridge it is a lovely aural experience, natural, enveloping and deeply communicative. Digital is generally (and I am generalising) more pristine, colder and more mechanical, sometimes quite unconvincing. So I would not expect to 'shame' the CDX; it may just be however that you'll find LP a more convincing and fulfilling experience.

NK

LISTENING METHODS

I have been a hi-fi enthusiast for more years than I want to remember, having started back in the 1950s in the era of DIY loudspeakers and even amplifiers. I have been an avid reader of magazines but only came to Hi-fi World comparatively recently. And a refreshing experience it has been!

I realise that I am probably not your typical reader, being twice if not three times his average age, and also listening solely to classical music. Recently I upgraded some aspects of my modest kit which has always been devoted to giving me the highest standard of music reproduction that I can afford. A Quad CDP2, CD player (connected directly into a Quad 606 power amp), and Spendor A6 loudspeakers have done wonders for even my ageing hearing. But I have been wondering whether I am missing even greater things by not going in for downloading from the internet uncompressed files that can outdo even the high(fish?) standard of CDs. So I have spent much time searching for help to that end and have arrived at a position of complete bemusement. May I set out my needs and ask for your reaction as to whether I can satisfy them or whether I should just be content to soldier on with what is, after all, a modest but satisfying system?

My computer is in a separate room distant from my hi-fi set-up and this controls some of the following. The way I listen to classical music is to look at my rack of CDs and LPs and then decide which suits my mood at that moment. I take down the chosen disc whether silver or vinyl, put it on and sit rapt in the magical sound which results.

So I am not keen on storing my music on my computer for sending when needed to the hi-fi via wireless. What I really want to do is to download it off the net and make a disc of it in the computer for storage in my CD rack for future use. I thought I had found the solution to this from Oppo who were producing a wizard machine which would play almost anything (except FLAC for some reason) but they have now decided not to introduce their kit onto the UK market. So how do I now find a method of making a disc of superior digital quality onto which I can download the wonderful music out there from people like Passionato and others and then replay it on my hi-fi set-up? Linn have something mysterious called DS but try as I might I cannot find that it will actually play discs. Also, there is Squeezebox to which the same applies. There are DACs from Cambridge and others but they won't play discs, will they? And of course down the road there is, or ought to be, the need for Blu-ray capability since that seems to be the obvious way to upgrade the CD format.

So I need to find something to play discs that I have burned myself as FLAC or WAV files, as well as those of any format such as Blu-ray, HD audio and all the others. Does such a thing exist? At a relatively reasonable price?

James Bruxner

Blu-ray authoring is in its infancy, but TMPG Authoring Works 4 does the job and TMPG (Japan) say it will author audio.

Hi James. Denon make a Blu-ray transport that will play all discs, and you can buy the Oppo BDP83 in the UK from CRT Projectors, who will be legally obliged to provide support if it fails. You would have to ask them about this. It is a U.S. Region A player but most Blu-ray discs are All Region or Worldwide so will play. However, this does not apply to commercial DVDs, which were generally zoned. The BDP83 works on 240V. A hack is available to make the player multi-region.

I have just learnt from Hi-Audio they are to import both a BDP83SE (£800) and something known as a BDP83SE NuForce (£1200). The latter comes from a tie up between Oppo and NuForce, both of which are Taiwanese. I'm told the respective MDs went to school together, are good friends and there's a lot of co-operation between Oppo and NuForce as a result. We hope to review the BDP83 NuForce very soon.

Authoring music to Blu-ray is in its infancy and something I have limited knowledge of. Blu-ray write-once discs (BD-R) currently cost around £8 each and I've already
Audio Technica AT 1010 on my TT-1000.

Absolute Sound and many other Hi-Fi expensive device and durable too.

Costing four times as much as a Linn to every modern high end turntable that compares well in sonic terms Yes, it is a very good turntable, one often uses the TT-1000, so it has to be a can give me some advice on this matter. see in your issue for December that Basically, it's a heavily tweaked Micro

I've reviewed for this magazine.

Ragnar Philip Rosenlund

regards

very good turntable.

I also read that your reference system use a SME 3009 Improved and an restored. I think my TT-1000 plays very

authoring music to Blu-ray, please let

Sony has Blu-print and the Vegas series, and Adobe has Moviemaker, but whether they can author audio to disc I am uncertain. If any readers have experience of authoring music to Blu-ray, please let us know. NK

MARANTZ TT-1000

Hallo! I live in Norway and buy your magazine every month. I have been a reader of Stereophile, Hi-Fi News, Absolute Sound and many other Hi-Fi magazines but now I only by Hi-Fi World.

I read that your editor David Price have a Marantz TT-1000 MKI. I also own this lovely turntable and I see in your issue for December that the editor's TT-1000 is recently been restored. I think my TT-1000 plays very good but I wishes to do some tweaks to make it play better. So wonder if you can give me some advice on this matter.

I use a SME 3009 Improved and an Audio Technica AT 1010 on my TT-1000. I also read that your reference system often uses the TT-1000, so it has to be a very good turntable.

regards

Ragnar Philip Rosenlund Norway

Yes, it is a very good turntable, one that compares well in sonic terms to every modern high end turntable I've reviewed for this magazine. Costing four times as much as a Linn LP12 when it first came out, it's an expensive device and durable too. Basically, it's a heavily tweaked Micro

Selki, which is a good thing as they're fairly straightforward to rebuild (as high end Japanese direct drives go)!

My own deck was serviced brilliantly by Richard Peachey of Vantage Audio of Taunton (www.vantageaudio.com, 0845 4294643). DP

EFFECTIVE MASS

I have recently upgraded my Goldring 1042 moving magnet (MM) cartridge to a MC and was originally considering Denon DL-103R or Audio-Technica AT-OC9ML/II. After deeper investigation into Arm Effective Mass and Resonant Frequency due reports that the Denon only being suitable for med to high mass arms I found that my Roksan Tabriz (standard model) at 11g mass would not be suitable. (cartridge/arm matching is very well explained @ http://www.theanalogdept.com/cartridge_arm_matching.htm)

My system consists of Meridian 502/557 pre/power amp, 507 24bit CD player, Sony ST-SDB900 Tuner, Manticore Mantra with Origin Live standard motor upgrade/Tabriz/AT33PTG via Cambridge 640P phono stage and Wilton Benech Ortor speakers with Chord Silver Siren/QED Silver Anniversary cables and own made screen power cables and junction box. Part of the reason for the upgrade was due to a recent upgrade to the 502 with a MC board on board which replaced my existing 551 which I presumed was due to lack of arm mass/resonance. However, it turns out it was a slight bit of distortion/resonance which I presumed was due to lack of arm mass which has now been eradicated so maybe the ATs aren't quite so tolerant as first thought. This

Marantz TT-1000 "plays very good but I wishes to do some tweaks" says Ragnar Philip Rosenlund from Norway.

Arm resonance - Ortofon

2M Black cartridge in Rega RB301 arm. At 10Hz this is an octave above warps in the 5Hz region; the arm will ride warps, not read them.

quite a bit of buying from auctions and selling on eBay to pay for salmon fishing trips and hi-fi so I know how to avoid the mishaps of buying through eBay.

It sounds superb and after being burned in sounds even better with great depth and separation, though one thing I will point out I have now installed a spacer under the cartridge seat which adds weight (5g) as I found that there was a slight bit of distortion/resonance which I presumed was due to lack of arm mass which has now been eradicated so maybe the ATs aren't quite so tolerant as first thought. This
increases the arm mass to 16 grams and still leaves plenty of movement on the counter balance weight.

My system is situated in our L shaped living/dining room which measures 7 x 9 metres, the 9m being the depth into the L section which is 4m wide, the speakers are toed in and 5 metre away from the corners firing across the room as I work on my computer with my back to them in the opening of the L section. I listen to it all day most days, to the wife's annoyance!

My music tastes being most types of music except classical via Radio 2/4, CDs and Analogue as the mood takes me, I also now listen to quite a bit of Spotify Premium (320kbps) which I read about in your or one of the other magazines and find it excellent and very user friendly, the only drawback being no licence to access The Beatles music. Hopefully, this will change in the near future once enough of the Beatles remastered music has been sold.

Mainly as a trial I invested in a Hong Kong eBay purchased 241/192 DAC supposedly made by or labelled Onky in the Eastern market. I got an audio electrician friend to peruse over the specifications which he thought was very good considering the price of £95 all in. It arrived after a couple of weeks and works a treat and once again was very easy to install through my highly upgraded Dell Studio 17 laptop running Vista.

I have just read the letter from Steve Trowbridge Dec 09 and I too like to buy old hi-fi and have a fiddle, probably my best purchases being my current Manticore Mantra bought complete but with broken RB250 arm and very dirty for £6, a JR149 Subwoofer bought for £22 refoamed and sold to a German hi-fi enthusiast for £380, a set of Quad 11/Quad amp & tuner/Garrard 301/SME 3009/V15/ Tannoy Lancaster corners bought for £185(!) and a QED A240 CD amp which I still have, as it sounds superb in my shed through my homemade LS5as.

As a matter of interest, in your opinion what would be the next upgrade step? If you say speaker cable, please note that they have to turn a few corners and measure 9 metres each and are bi-wire.

Keep up the good work.

regards

Alan Vincent
Rickmansworth,
Herts

Oh dear Alan! The notion that arm / cartridge matching is just about where low frequency resonance falls is overly simple and very outdated. Your Roksan Tabriz, at 11gms effective mass is actually just below the 12gms benchmark "normal" value nowadays and would suit an AT OC9 MLII well enough. Moving coil cartridges have lower compliance, higher tracking force and greater ability to tolerate massy arms, although nowadays even a large 12 inchere like SME's 312S comes in at 14gms.

Historically, cartridge manufacturers stopped pursuing high compliance in the cantilever hinge a long time ago, allowing arm effective mass to rise without arm/cartridge resonance sinking to dangerously low values (below 8Hz). This means the pairing ride over warps and do not try and trace them as a signal, something that would introduce excessive cantilever movement. I measure arm/cartridge resonance and these days it commonly hovers around 10Hz, which is acceptable. To be specific, a compliant Ortofon 2M Black cartridge in a Rega RB301 arm resonate at exactly 10Hz (vertical modulation). With a Ortofon Cadenza Black moving coil this figure rises to 12.5Hz. Since the Rega has an effective mass of 12gms the Roksan would have given a value much like the Cadenza, with an AT OC9MLII.

Arms have a characteristic sound determined by many other factors, including arm wiring, vibrational behaviour of the structure, geometry and such like. Silver wires arms can sound a bit zingy bright, whilst acrylic arms often sound well damped and neutral, and long arms just very smooth and easy going. I am generalising here of course, to about changing that. I sometimes play CDs and have a AH! Njoie Tjoeb 4000 player. My speaker cables and interconnects are cheap and cheerful so I really must upgrade them and I am thinking of going the D.N.M. route. This is just a gut feeling plus financial consideration of course. The problem is that I won't be able to audition them at home, so it's pot luck.

Now for the big one. I have always wanted to try and hopefully buy a Single...
Almarro 318B single-ended amplifier gives a great sound.

** ended Amp or amps which I understand could be a match made in heaven with Homs. Would you agree with that? The Almarro 318B has had great reviews and must be high on my shopping list. This is at the top end of my budget and at least I can audition it at home. The amount of heat it produces may be a bit of a concern though (35C).

Something like a 2A3 based Yamamoto could be interesting, as could some of the many 300B designs, but I guess they will be too expensive for me.

We listen mostly to Jazz, Classical, Opera, Big Bands and also 50's, 60's and 70's vocalists. Obviously I am looking for the most realistic reproduction possible.

very, very thanks in anticipation.

kindst regards,

Terry Mason

I have no experience of the Bob Crites crossovers so cannot comment. If funds are tight my tendency would be to remove the crossovers and rebuild them using quality Solen capacitors, or a brand you may prefer. I also like the neutral sound of carbon film resistors, but you may like to experiment as quality metal films can be good. Put the crossovers in Maplin plastic boxes, external to the loudspeakers so they are unaffected by vibration. Use good cable, again of your choice according to budget. You really should use at least budget loudspeaker cable from Chord or such like. I have tried Maplin Shark cable and found it sounds very vague.

Decca London? Ouch! Yes, I know its hair-trigger fast sound and great bass, but original London Blues mistracked terribly and left significant groove damage in their wake. This was inaudible with the Decca, but not with any cartridge that followed it. Later, improved Deccas overcame this to some extent, and hopefully this is what you have, or you are in for a shock. I suggest you buy a Goldring 1022GX which does a fine job at a very reasonable price.

Single-ended amplifiers are a world of their own and the sweetest thing you'll ever hear. The models you mention are all worthy contenders and I loved the Almarro. Just don't expect to turn your house into a disco, but then I suspect those days are over! You may be interested in the next letter, where I seem (regrettably) to have upset a dedicated SE user. Such things raise passions.

NK

** DARK NIGHT **

I was rather disappointed by Noel's review of the Silver Night. I don't think it gave a fair picture of using an SET amp and it could easily give the wrong impression.

Just as background, I have a WAD 300B Push-Pull (18W), Arcam power amps (solid state), Naim power amps, but my main system is the Audio Note Quest Silver SET (7W) and so I have a reasonable understanding and experience of the topic.

Noel gives the impression that the reason for choosing 2A3 valves is that they are cheaper than 300Bs. That's really not true if you compare like-for-like quality, for example, good quality meshplates, where the 2A3s are slightly more expensive. It is true that the cheapest 2A3 is cheaper than the cheapest 300B but few people would choose to run the cheapest valves.

Noel mentions distortion levels and this shows up the problem of relying on objective measurements. Yes, valve designs do have higher levels of distortion than solid state. But the distortion from solid state tends to be high order harmonics which even at low levels makes the sound harsh and is intrusive. Distortion in valves is of low order harmonics and is much less apparent and can even enrich the sound. And so comparing the objective measurement of THD between valves and solid state can give a very misleading impression.

Noel mentions using a passive pre to allow switching, but here again it is misleading. I have used the MF Audio passive pre (both copper & silver versions) with Naim and the WAD 300Bs and Audio Note Quest Silvers and whilst it is a very transparent pre it does seem to bleed the life out of the music when used with valves - it is very good with solid state. And so really the front end of a valve power amp should be a good valve pre-amp — try it with the WAD Pre II or III (I've got both) and it brings the music to life. Move up to an Audio Note M3 and it will really sing — but not a passive.

Noel mentions the lack of inputs well here again I think he's missing the point and being misleading. The volume pot is simply there for convenience and acts as a simple passive control (not ideal) in a one source system. In reality the pot would be turned up full (i.e. bypassed) and a good valve pre would be the front end.

There is also a question of horses for courses in terms of music choice. An SET power amp driven by a good valve pre creates and incredible musical experience on acoustic music, especially vinyl jazz albums. But if you really want to rock then get a Naim which boogies better — I've got both.

But the strangest comment in Noel's review was the Verdict with three globes... "It's inability to drive lower loads is unacceptable at this price." This is totally misleading and completely misunderstands SET amps. If you want more power then use a simple 300B Push-Pull (I have the WAD 300B PP) at 18W of valve-power it will drive all but the most insensitive speakers. BUT the sound does not have the delicacy of an SET. Noel seems to be looking at the Power Amp and Speakers as two separate and unrelated components and nothing could be further from the truth. You have to match speakers to power amp. Indeed Naim use their speakers to load the output stage of their power amps — including specifying a 3m long single run of speaker cable to ensure correct loading.

If you want to achieve the true beauty of sound and outright musicality that a SET power amp can give then you have to choose a speaker that has been designed with high sensitivity to work with SET amps. For example, a good quality single driver horn, or Audio Note ANJ or AN/E.

Therefore to really review an SET power amp you must review it in a system with a valve pre and high quality speakers designed to work with SET amps.
AMS CD-CD/DAC

Class A analogue stages. Mega technical performance.
Audion Silver Night single-ended amplifier. Just a two globe review from Noel, says Edward.

Therefor, sorry Noel, but this review is rather woolley and confused, written in a bit of a hurry perhaps? But only makes a two globe review.

regards,
Edward

Hi Edward.

I designed early WAD amps so am well acquainted with the characteristics of thermionic v solid-state. 2A3s have a lovely sound but produce half the power of a 300B as I clearly stated, so little power the Silver Night amp was unusable on the 4 Ohm tap.

A valve amp is load matched by the output transformer and can supply the same power into 4 Ohms as 8 Ohms. If it doesn’t the output transformer hasn’t been designed or wound properly. Most loudspeakers nowadays are 4 Ohms and a real world amp needs to be able to handle them, as can WAD amps and Almarros etc. The Silver Night simply could not, hence 3 Globes.

best regards
NK

Dear Noel,

Many thanks for your reply, I do appreciate you taking the time to reply in person to me. I do understand the points you’ve made, and of course accept your judgement.

My main point, perhaps not well expressed, was that SET power amps are specialist and niche products therefore they should be evaluated using niche speakers designed to work with SET amps rather than the majority of speakers which are really aimed at high power solid state amps.

My main criticism of Audion power amps is that they have solid state power supplies. I think this gives them a very “clean” and precise sound but it doesn’t engage – I find my mind wanders during prolonged listening. If I compare them with the lower-end Audio Note amps which have valve power supplies (e.g. Quest or Quest Silver) then I find I stay up all night listening. Of course there are other differences as you mentioned in the wiring methodology and component quality of the Audio Notes.

Final point on speakers: among the pairs of speakers I own (approx 24) I have a pair of Audio Note AN1S. They are rated at 93dB sensitivity and designed and developed to work specifically with AN Quest Silver SET amps. And the sound when coupled with the AN amps really is, in my view, outstanding in all respects – very musical. They are reasonable but not great when driven by WAD 300B PP monoblocks. But sound quite thin and horrible almost lacking all musical qualities when driven by Naim (NAP200 or 250) or Arcam (Delta 290 + 290P). They are also OK when driven by Audion Silver Nights but nothing special. Indeed Mission 753s sound far superior with the Naim & Arcam amps but poor with the SET or PP monoblocks.

It was this experience which led me to argue that power amps and speakers should really be seen as a single component. best regards, and thanks again for your response,
Edward

Edward - it's always nice to hear from a true enthusiast. You have 24 pairs of loudspeakers! Where do you keep them all? To be fair to me though (I) did clearly say I liked the Silver Night driving 8 Ohms loudspeakers. Even by SE standards it was very sweet. But it fell flat on its face with 4 Ohm loudspeakers and as most are 4 Ohms nowadays that would have been the common experience, which I feel obliged to report upon. NK

DAB IS OFF

I'm sure Steven Green would be interested in seeing and commenting on this, if he hasn't already,


The article appeared today, and has attracted lots of user comments, mainly referring to many of DAB's failings. But the main point is that Lord Carter is now contradicting his own report, saying there is no set date for FM switchoff.

Confused? I know I am. But FM lives on, and I'm glad it does. (I still don't think that the BBC should have a monopoly on drama etc, though.)

Best wishes,
Melvin Dover.

FM does indeed live on - as this month's group test shows! Don't believe the government's hype about FM switch off, I'll believe it when I see it! DP

FIXING A LEAK

I am enquiring about info on the output transformer for this amp. I have a TL12 plus but there is no L/S impedance selector on the top of the o/p trans. It looks exactly as the ones with such a selector ... underneath there is a row of three soldering pins and a further two. In connecting these pins as in the diagram I have i.e. 4 8 and 16 ohm taps. Can you tell me the ohmic resistance of the windings on the normal output transformer. In talks with people there is the suggestion that it is a 100

Leak TL12 Plus, a successor to the excellent TL12.

The number on the base is, the same white print as the mains transformer is 8382. I would be a happy man if you can help or perhaps point me in the right direction. Thanking you in anticipation.
Edward Ashton

We do not have a TL12 Plus available for a measurement of D.C. resistance, but output transformer secondaries use few turns of heavy gauge wire and typically measure around 0.5 Ohms. As you can see from the circuit diagram reproduced here there is a basic 4 Ohm winding, and a tapped 16 Ohm section. You can identify the latter by the feedback line that comes off it. The 4 Ohm...
Is the B-1A from Digital Do Main, the most affordable high-end amplifier in the world?

Or should we say amplifiers because you can join B-1A’s together when you want to increase performance and power. It protects your purchase and as your system grows so does your amplification and the performance!

**Hi-Fi Choice Dec 09 Issue**

“Many strive to build transistor amps with valve qualities, but few have succeeded to this degree. By re-creating the V-FET, DDM has built one of the most thrilling amplifiers on the market. The fact that the case design is so funky is a bonus."

Jason Kennedy

“Unusual and highly advanced power amplifier using special FETS, the B-1A is wonderfully detailed and concise.”

Noel Keywood

ABC Audio

t. 020 8462 1379

www.abc-audio.co.uk
Output stage of Leak TL12 Plus amplifier showing output taps.

winding will have the lowest DCR. Only if windings all measure out at many ohms would 1 be suspicious about the nature of the output transformer. Leak did make special versions for the BBC and perhaps some line drive types, but if there are many terminals then the likelihood is that these are provided for loudspeaker matching purposes. NK

OLD RECORDERS

Guys, As the grateful recipient of your recent “Geek Chic” award by using a reel to reel tape deck at the Whittlebury show, and then using a DAT Walkman at the A.O.S. bash, I have a question. To add to my eclectic collection I would like Elcaset and Minidisc. What are the most desirable home and also Walkman sized machines? I’m not averse to a bit of bling, direct drive motors, anything. Sony/Technics and solenoids.

regards

Dave Cowley

Hi Dave - you’re a compulsive gadget hoarder by the sound of it, so you’re in good company here! The 1977 Sony EL7 was of course the favourite Elcaset machine of its day; was the first machine with this; I remember reviewing one in ’97 and was amazed at its sound; very close to DAT, and much less fussy. These are now peanuts on eBay and are a great first step into Minidisc. As far as the portables went, the Sony MZ-R55 was the Rolls Royce of that time; it’s a fine sounding device and beautifully made with an all-metal case; a brand new iPod Classic looks cheap by comparison. These go for around £20 second-hand, and made in Japan, they’ve aged well.

There’s also the Sony MZ-RH1; this is still current and available new for £330 approx. It’s a Hi-MD, so plays old MDs plus newer high capacity ones; this one will do full uncompressed 16/44.1 digital recording in extremely high quality; it’s a brilliant outdoor recording tool. Read the full review in our July 2009 issue. DP

CABLE CHOICE

I have built a second system which comprises a Beogram 8000 with SMM20GEN, a Beomaster 6000 (thanks Tim and Adam) and Arcam One speakers (I know, off the pace, etc.). CDs are played through a Pioneer DV-717 (off the pace again, I know) or a Beogram CD-3300.

I also have an as-new condition Revox A77 to transfer some difficult CDs onto tape to make them listenable...

I really like this system, to the point where I wonder whether it is not better than my Technics SL-1200RB300/Expressimo/Golding 1022GX, Hiraga LeTube, Ampliton TS3000IGE 6CA7 all-valve setup with the same speakers)... plus it’s got remote! I am becoming a B&O fan, I’m afraid...

Anyway, what speaker cable should I use with the B&O/Arcam system? I was thinking DNM solid core, because my pockets are not too deep at the moment. Also, do you think the B&O DIN cables can limit the system’s abilities somehow?

Thanks so much for a really great mag I’ve been reading (and subscribing to) since August 1991!

Jacques Frantz
France

I’d go for Black Rhodium Tango cables; these are superb value at £12/m. Add some sexy shielded metal DIN speaker plugs at the amplifier end (available from Radiospares, 534-5392, £1.32 each), and you have the ultimate B&O cable loom! DP

VALVE PROBLEMS

I am need of your expertise as I have some questions regarding running a valve amplifier.

I have, for some time now, been interested in changing from my Primare A30.1 amplifier to a valve based amplifier. For a while I have listened to a few valve amplifiers and have been impressed with the way they present music from either CD & vinyl but am not sure how much “maintenance” they require.

I have been reading the various articles available about auto & manual bias adjustment and am a bit confused?

With manual bias, does this mean every few months I would have to attach a volt meter and readjust the
bias setting for the valves or does it only need adjusting when new valves are fitted?

I am also a bit concerned about every review comments on the sensitivity of the speakers attached. I am using KEF XQ20 standmounts, which have a stated 88dB sensitivity. If I purchased a valve amplifier with a rating of 35-40 watts per channel would this sufficient to drive my speakers? I would also say that I don’t/can’t listen too loud (about 30-40 max displayed on my current Primare, but this is 100Watts per channel) as my neighbours may need regular re-adjustment, every few months. I could purchase a valve amplifier with a rating of 30-40 watts per channel and it is difficult to live with repeating clicks. It is very simple to remove clicks but need adjusting when new valves are changed. Auto-bias amplifiers are most popular because they keep the valves balanced both initially, and as they age; no adjustment is needed.

Power valves have a life of a 2-3 thousand hours; small signal valves around 10,000 hours. Power valves like KT88s do a great job and are not overly expensive, hence their popularity. It sounds like the 40 Watts or so available would be fine for your purposes. Curiously, valve amps sound more lively and dynamic at low powers than solid-state amps so will suit you in this respect.

Although the Audio Research VS55i is more expensive new I would not label it clearly better than the other models you mention. It is tight and punchy, though, I tend to favour good KT88s WAD or Icon Audio are the ones to audition I feel.

CLICKS & POPS

I reached hi-fi nirvana many years ago. My recipe is a good moving coil pick up and Quad electrostatic speakers. There is a huge choice of bits and pieces to put between them but, within limits, they make relatively little difference to the emerging sound. I do, however, have a very sweet spot for a pair of WAD 300B PSE amplifiers, but like the Quads they are large, ugly and difficult to position. I have now the amplifiers mounted directly behind the speakers which, at least, means one can do without loudspeaker cables.

Like many of your readers, I prefer to listen to vinyl but a scratched record remains scratched for ever and ever and it is difficult to live with repeating clicks. It is very simple to remove clicks once the record has been digitized but one ends up with a clean CD which disappears inside a box when you want to listen to it - this is not like vinyl which revolves for all to see on a beautiful machine.

I see the ELP Company who make a laser turntable also have a declicking box to go with it. It is quite expensive, but is it any good? Why aren’t there masses of declicker boxes on the market? Many years ago a turntable manufacturer (I believe it was Garrard) offered built in declicking but it was apparently not a great success. Why?

Christopher Cook

Hi Christopher. I am glad you are a happy man music wise. But I am a little surprised that tick and pops upset you so, and a quiet CD is a better proposition than a noisy LP. Play vinyl with a cartridge that does not emphasise highs (i.e. has no treble peak in its response) and they should be hardly noticeable. The hissy, fizzy sound that afflicts LP is usually down to this, as well as groove damage and dirt. The Ortofon Cadenza Black I review in the next issue produced little obvious noise. Groove noise during low level passages was always cited as a strong reason for using CD, but not everyone agrees, including Rafael Todes who, from his experience playing in the Allegri String Quartet, for the London Philharmonic, et al, says vinyl is more natural. So it isn’t just audiophiles that claim vinyl is more natural; perhaps we are not all deluded after all!

Anyway, I did listen to the ELP laser turntable many moons ago and was terribly disappointed. Not only did it play groove noise and dirt, as widely reported (cartridge styli push muck out of the way) but it had the sonic properties of a poor CD player; the sound was coarse and flat, as if dominated by poor electronic circuitry. It made me realise how pure a moving coil cartridge is as a source, as you state. 

FRUSTRATING

My search for audio nirvana is proving frustrating the constant pain in my frontal lobe coming from the continued banging of my head against a brick wall. First things first, my system comprises the following: Technics SP10 Mk1 | Slatedeck plinth | SME V 1 | Denon DL304 | Trichord Dino for vinyl duties, Esoteric X03se CD spinner, Linn Klimax Kontral pre, AVS 125 power running active Keilidhs. Cables are Linn Silvers and Chord Odyssey.

Now I’ve heard many systems that get close to what I want, the stand outs being Quad electrostatics driven by Quad 11s and a rig pieced together using old Exposure amps into Proac 1SCs both different but both very special. How do I get from where I am now to...
that spacious, rich, wondrous experience both these systems gave me? I have a maximum budget of £4000 and I don’t mind buying used; my concern is I may need to ditch the lot to move forward. I should point out that the room in which this will be plonked is a small 4.5x3m, kind of rules out ESLs then. Any ideas?

many thanks,
Stuart Ainsworth

Hmmm! Linn’s clean and precise sounding amplification and speakers are excellent for those who love that sound, but folk who like “spacious, rich” systems should not apply!

I wonder how you came to own such things, with your seemingly opposite tastes? Don’t ditch the lot; your turntable and CD player are superb. I’d do this in stages, looking to move to a pair of Icon Audio MB845 power amplifiers (£2,499) driving a pair of One Thing Audio modded Quad ESL57s (from around £1,500) as painlessly as you can. Start with the MB845s, retaining your Linn preamp. Then get the modded Quads, then when you’ve got some more cash shell out for a MF Audio Silver Passive Preamplifier (£2,400), and finally an Icon Audio PS3 (£1,500) phono stage. By this time, you’ll have one of the biggest, warmest and most expansive systems known to man!

DP

The following letter was received from the manufacturers, in response to our review of the Klimo Tafelrunde turntable in the February 2010 edition of Hi-Fi World.

TAFELRUNDE TIPS

This turntable was sent to Hong Kong before being shipped to you. Some settings, like the tone arm ones, were not carried out as they are usually done on location at the factory.

The speed regulation is meant to be a very fine tuning of the speed. With a base frequency 50 Hz - the regulation at 50 mHz gives 0.1% change for every turn (50mHz / 50Hz = 50 mHz / 50,000mHz = 0.001 = 0.1%) - the regulation at 5 mHz gives 0.01% change for every turn (5mHz / 50Hz = 5 mHz / 50,000mHz = 0.0001 = 0.01%)

We are sorry for the inconvenience of 45 RPM not working. This is caused by a malfunction of the external power supply. This constitutes of: 1) power supply board, 1 control board, 1 amplifier board. Basically it transforms 220 VAC into DC, then it splits into two oscillating stages (one for 33 RPM and one for 45 RPM), then back again into one single amplifier driving the turntable at 115 VAC. The cause of the problem can be: bad connection of the flat cables inside; broken oscillator; broken quartz; broken PIC.

Liftover problems. This is the only regulation not covered extensively in the manual: we do apologize, but usually the set-up is carried out by a specialised dealer. You may regulate the liftover in three different points. First you may regulate the horizontal bar that actually lifts the tonearm: this is common to most of the tonearms lifts. I’ve included a picture showing the other two points A and B. By rotating these you should get the lifters in working conditions. We have never experienced this problem before.

Headshell offset was not factory set. In the instruction manuals there are instructions to carry out this adjustment: 1) Position the shell straight in relation to the arm tube (tighten the shell screw very slightly). The correct setting is the point on the template nearest the centre of the record (use the included template), obtained by sliding the base of the arm among the bars that enter in the rectangular plate. 2) Move the needle to the second point on the template (the point furthest from the centre of the record). At this point, the setting is not correct. To fix it, turn the shell until you have the correct setting at this point (tighten the shell screw again very slightly) 3) Move the needle to the first point, nearest the centre. At this point, the setting is not now correct. Then move the base of the arm along the bars which joins it with the pin again until you have the correct setting. 4) If you move the head to the point on the template furthest from the pin again, the situation in point 2 above returns. Turn the shell as described in point 2 above. Obviously, when we verify if the setting is correct, moving from the furthest point to the nearest one, and conversely, we must slightly move the template making the turntable rotating. Continue to repeat these two operations, moving from the point furthest from the point to nearest to the record, always moving the arm base when you check the head on the template at the point nearest to the record and modifying the angle between arm tube and shell when you check the head on the template furthest from the centre of the record. Repeat this operation 4/5 times. The setting is perfect at the two

Klimo Tafelrunde turntable, reviewed in our February 2010 issue.
points of the template where no move is required (neither the distance between the record player pin and arm nor shell angle moving required). You now have the right setting for the angle of the shell and the correct distance between arm pin and record player pin. The head is now set.

yours sincerely,
Luca Gombi

We included Luca's lengthy explanation for setting Lancellotto arm geometry for the sake of completeness. This is what we encountered in the instructions too, at which point it was time for the pub!

As explained in the review, we calculated correct head shell offset angle and overhang using Stephenson's equations and applied the result to minimise tracking error in the arm. This was checked using a protractor, to ensure the zeros in the graph were zero in practice – and they were. We sent the equations in a graphical spreadsheet to Luca in Italy, to explain and illustrate the process.

ITALIAN OR GERMAN?

In the Feb '10 issue much play is made of the Klimo record player being Italian whereas, Klimo is a German company Reutlingen. Dusan Klimo, actually, is of Slovakian origin and he moved to Germany in 1968. We started many years ago as their distributor, but the cooperation became closer and closer till this stage where, roughly, the electronic part is made in Germany and the mechanical part is made in Italy; the turntable is made in Italy". Luca Gombi

CANNED HEAT

The headphone review published in February's issue had me laughing out loud when I read it. Was the reviewer serious? I was surprised to see a Sennheiser PX100 used as a 'reference.' What does the reviewer normally use himself? Is he a headphone user?

Two amps used - both low output impedance, one being solid state and the other with a valve buffer. Is the reviewer aware of the differences that the output impedance can have on headphones?

The headphones chosen varied in price from £160 to £1,000. How is this a fair comparison given that cheaper headphones may have to make some compromises in comparison to a £1,000 pair of headphones (where it looks as though the compromises were made on its build/looks)

The headphones varied from wireless to open to closed to electrostat. Each designed in a totally different way. No mention of different impedances and sensitivities of the headphones. Choices of music seemed a little strange - a mono recording from 1938, a Beatles recording and an 80's recording.

What does the reviewer measure well and sound right. Did the reviewer manage to wear in the headphones for any time?

I have the same set up as the one the reviewer was using and switch between many headphones via an AKG cable. I have also had the Sennheiser PX100 for some time before settling down to them. It looks as though the PX100 has been designed to be used and make sure that they are fully 'loosened' by playing them for some time before reviewing.

Ian (Oxted)

Perhaps we should have said the Sennheiser PX100 was a 'benchmark' rather than a more difficult and nebulous concept to define, a 'reference.' We have this problem with loudspeakers, using Spendor 58es as benchmarks for quality, because they set good standards all round. This is quite different from saying they are quality references - and what is a reference is very subjective in any case. For example, I would nominate a good electrostatic or ribbon loudspeaker, because they measure well and sound right. However, most listeners prefer boxes, making my choice academic as far as everyday experience goes. A benchmark is a better everyday yardstick than a 'reference'.

A low impedance source does not interact with varying load impedance, which is why headphone amps have low output impedance, and why we used two headphone amps with low output impedance.

Sennheiser PX100 - more of a 'benchmark' than a 'reference'?
Headphones have either a very high non-flat impedance, like the Sennheiser HD650s, which vary from 50 Ohms to 500 Ohms, or a lower but flat impedance of around 40 Ohms (all the others in the group) which does not react significantly with a low output impedance source. We measured impedance and frequency response but impedance is of little consequence for the reasons stated and frequency response strictly non-flat unless a dummy head is used, which we do not have.

The review was a broad look across the price spectrum, an approach that is useful for spotting bargains. We run in all transducers, but commonly do not mention it, because it can be a little tedious to read about and consumes valuable page space. Cartridges are run in, however, loudspeakers often run very heavily with pink noise and the Monitor Audio De-tox CD, overnight and over weekends. Amps are run to settle their components too.

Finally, with transducers such as loudspeakers and headphones, there are so many variables that it is impossible to make any judgement of them except subjectively. We use the widest range of the most sophisticated measurements with loudspeakers, including swept distortion spectrums, decay spectrums and much more, measurements beyond the capabilities of many manufacturers, yet still we describe them in subjective terms. The same applies to headphones. So at the end of the day it is one person’s judgement. In this case that person was musically experienced, uses headphones, and used low output impedance sources to avoid interaction. The headphones had been measured too, to ensure they worked normally. NK

Hi Ian. The reason I asked Paul to use the Sennheiser PX100 as a reference is that, in my fifteen years of testing headphones for Hi-Fi World and The Sunday Times, I’ve yet to find anything anywhere near as good at its £40 retail price. Feed it a good source via the likes of a Musical Fidelity X-CANS v8 and you’ll see what I mean. As such, it’s an excellent choice; if any of the headphones tested weren’t as good (despite being far more expensive), then they’d be swiftly discounted from the running. Unsurprisingly, the PX100 is also extremely popular; a great many thousands have been sold; so why on earth not use an affordable, much loved and fine sounding product as a reference? Makes sense to me!

The reason we routinely run a spread of prices in group tests is to give a sense of perspective onto the subject. Obviously, we are not expecting the £160 phones to be better than the £1,000 ones, but an interesting question is ‘how much better is the most expensive than the cheapest?’ I think a ‘we tell you the best £1,000 headphone-type group test is too narrow in its remit, whereas our approach throws open the possibility of a surprise or an upset; sometimes the cheapest isn’t the worst. Again, different types were used, to give a sense of what is possible with different engineering philosophies. Paul very accurately conveyed the difference between the Stax electrostatics and the other dynamic headphones, I thought.

When auditioning, the music wasn’t limited to just that stated in the test; Paul chose to single out the tracks he did for the purposes of brevity in the write-up because again they epitomised key differences between the phones.

Paul had the headphones for over six weeks before he filed his report, so yes, he did have plenty of time to bed them all in, and importantly - time to experiment to see which ones suited the valve buffered Musical Fidelity phono stage and which suited the ANT Audio Amber 3T solid-state stage.

This magazine has been reviewing products for nearly two decades Ian, so we’re quite familiar with issues of running in; to audition an un-run-in ‘phone would be a schoolboy error! Please don’t assume this just because Paul’s subjective findings don’t tally with your own, obviously strongly held, views. If there was no difference of opinion about the relative merits of a product then there wouldn’t be any need for hi-fi magazines at all, so let’s accept informed subjective opinions for what they are, rather than attempt to discredit them. DP
Tony Bolton reviews an obscure alternative to the usual pre-power amplifier fare, the Valvet L1 and A1r...

Valvet Underground

Social class, that great bugbear of British society, raises its head in the most unusual places. One wouldn't think of the world of audio electronics as being subject to such things, but you would be wrong. Like the majority of the population, most amplifiers fall into the AB category. At the fringes of society are the cosmopolitan Class Ds, and at the top of the technical and social pile are the Class A amps. These are relatively rare beasts, that may not betray their breeding by outward appearance, but when listened to, display the impeccable accent and cut glass vowels of the higher social echelons.

Class A amps tend to be expensive and have quite low (often single figure) power outputs, which makes speaker matching vital to obtain reasonable listening levels and to find a transducer that will be responsive enough to display the sonic benefits of single ended operation.

A relatively new name on the audio scene is Valvet, based near Hamburg in Germany. The company was founded by Knut Cornils, who also designs all the products. It grew out of his dissatisfaction with commercially available designs so he decided to create his own. Several years later, the company has a range of three monoblocks and two pre-amplifiers available. They are divided into two categories, the high end "Blocks" and the more affordable "Bricks". This latter group contains the L1 preamp and the A1r power amp under review here.

Both the L1 and A1rs have similarly shaped extruded aluminium casework, which gets very hot as it acts as a heatsink for the electronics. The 120x60mm width and height are the same for both products, however the preamp (and its outboard power supply in matching casework) are 320mm deep. The power amps are 400mm deep. The unusual length of these may cause some awkwardness in siting them, since there has to be several centimetres of space left behind them for the cables.

Available finishes are black or silver anodised. The front panels have the same choices of finish, or can be chrome plated at extra charge. The backlighting of the V logo can be in red or green, or blue as in these examples. Apart from the logo, all of the units have plain fascias, except for the preamp, which has two metal knobs on the front. The left one selects source, and the right adjusts the volume (remote control of the volume is available for £120 extra). Internally there is one ECC 90 dual triode valve per channel, which is a more powerful version of the well known ECC 82. Power switches are located on the back panels of the L1 PSU, and the two monoblocks, alongside the IEC sockets. The preamp has numbered pairs of RCA phono sockets for the four line level inputs. Beside these are two pairs of output sockets. These are configured at the factory with either parallel outputs for bi-amping or with one set up as a tape loop output. The A1rs have a single phono socket input per unit, alongside two substantial speaker binding posts. Knut Cornils was quite secretive about the internals of the power amps - merely stating that the circuit is bipolar solid-state and does not use MOSFETs...

SOUND QUALITY

In deference to the rated 25W output [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE], I first tried the Valvets through my Kelly KT3...
speakers. These are a fairly easy load with a nominal 6 Ohm impedance and 95dB efficiency. I started off listening with a good jazz sesh, and spent a very pleasant day wandering through the genre, from the New Orleans style of the nineteen twenties through to the post-bop sounds of Dave Brubeck. I was immediately impressed with the speed and accuracy of the timing. The KT3s are no slouch in this department, but set a new speed record with the A1Rs connected. Music did not sound rushed, but it had a meticulously correct, and very snappy beat to it which made dance music live up to its name, and had me quite happily boogying along the record shelves selecting the next track until 'silly-o'clock' in the morning!

Apart from the zestful pacing I found myself enjoying the deep and rich tonal colours emanating from my speakers. Stringed instruments had a full and resonant sound that almost "tonal textures can be sensuous, rather like running your fingers through deep-pile velvet..."
Black Rhodium

"British Cables communicating more from your music, giving you greater appreciation"

"One of the best that I have heard at the price".  
Hi-Fi World July 06

"Plenty of insight into what's happening in those lower octaves."  
HiFi Choice Sept.2006

"Attractive openness about the sound and high frequencies stay refined"  
What HiFi? Feb 2008

"There's a great deal of detail on offer, effortlessly presented"  
"Bass is strong but immaculately controlled"  
HiFi Choice Best Buy October 2007  
HiFi Choice Silver Award 2007  
HiFi Choice Silver Award 2008

"It provided a noticeable improvement in both clarity and refinement over the whole audio spectrum with a wide range of music."

Hi-Fi World Aug 2007

Black Rhodium cables are designed and manufactured in England using advanced manufacturing techniques jointly developed by Black Rhodium and its suppliers to deliver much greater realism and pleasure to your music.

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www.audio-t.co.uk

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Northampton  
01604 637515  
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made me believe I could see the deep gloss of the polished wood bodies of violin and double bass, whilst clarinet and brass glowed through the mix. Given the age and recording standards of some of the records I played I was slightly surprised at what seemed to be a slight forwardness in the upper mid, it had the pleasant effect of pushing solo instruments and vocalists to the front, but on a couple of occasions, with the volume fairly high, caused me to question this seeming emphasis, as some trumpets, and a couple of female singers came across as nearly shouty. Returning to more normal listening levels restored some equilibrium but still maintained this slight spotlighting of certain frequencies.

The next day was spent in the classical environment, starting off with Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons' and finishing with Verdi's 'Aida', performed by Tibaldi and Bergonzini, with Von Karajan at the helm of the Vienna Philharmonic. This 1958 Decca recording was one of the showcases for stereo when it was introduced in June of that year, and still stands as a good demonstration of the medium's capabilities. Act 4 closes with 'O terra adio', where Aida and Radames are walled up in a tomb, with priests chanting outside and Amneris (contralto) providing a counterpart to the centre stage tenor and soprano. Imaging was excellent, with the soundstage spreading beyond the speakers and into the room almost as a physical entity, Voices appeared from a very dark silence, and then decayed back into silence again in a natural and unassumming way. This pensive piece did not feel rushed, or unnecessarily drawn out, but just flowed in a totally convincing way. Having discovered that the 25W output was a particularly muscular one I moved the Valvets downstairs and plugged them into the Chario Ursa Majors. These five foot tall monsters are rated at 91dB efficiency, but contain two 7 1/2 inch subwoofers in the bottom of each cabinet which can prove a little draining of some amplifiers' current capabilities when the volume is turned up. Hence the manufacturer's recommendation of a minimum 60W to drive them properly, I am pleased to say that the A1Rs gave a very good account of themselves. The Class A operation produced volume levels that seemed out of proportion to the somewhat modest output figures.

At high volume levels there was a tendency to a little forwardness in the upper mid, again provoked by sopranos and trumpets, and when pushed really hard there was some blurring of the edges of the sounds, but at more normal levels this continued to be perceived as a slight spotlighting of a performer, rather than a major sonic imbalance. Changing musical gear to more modern recordings and music, Amy Winehouse's LP 'Back to Black' proved highly enjoyable. The slight emphasis to her vocals, moving them out just in front of the band, to create a realistic staging of the performance. Guitars jangled as appropriate, and shakers and snare shuffled the rhythms along, driven by a deep and rich bass sound.

Some amplifiers are quite obvious in what they do, others repay long term listening as you get to know them, and become aware of the subtleties of a recording laid out for your perusal. The Valvets fall into the latter category. I initially perceived them as a warm friendly amplifier, and gradually came to appreciate the delicacy of the detailing that was pouring out of my speakers. There was space and air around sounds, supplemented by lots of fine detail. Little background noises in the studio, or in the case of the Aida LP, the different ambience of the seven different stages used for the recording, all came through in a pleasantly unobtrusive manner.

CONCLUSION

Everyone's idea of audio nirvana is different. If you want no holds barred raw studio sound then look elsewhere for an amp. If, however, you like good imaging, snappy and energizing timimg and tonal textures that can be sensuous, rather like running your fingers through deep-pile velvet, then try the Valvet L1 and A1R monoblocks. I would recommend extended listening to fully appreciate them, and to be aware that quick back to back comparisons with other amps will not show these unassuming "bricks" at their best. I gave them four globes, knowing that some readers will feel that I understated things and should have given five, whilst others will feel that I should have awarded three. These are amps that will polarise opinion. Some will love them, others will wonder what the fuss is about. Either way, have a listen - but don't blame me if your wallet is suddenly £3,300 lighter!

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

This small, light but very long solid-state Class A monoblock produces a modest 24 Watts into 8 Ohms and 36 Watts into 4 Ohms, at the levels of an EL34/KT88 valve amp that it supposedly mimics. Damping factor was very low, measuring 3, a bit lower than that of a feedback valve amp. (8). Although distortion levels were low at 1 Watt they rose very quickly, especially into a 4 Ohm load reaching 3% at 6W for example. Although the spectrum was dominated by second harmonic, upper harmonics falling in level steadily, a characteristic that is musical instrument like, these levels are far higher than that of a good valve amplifier, which will be producing 0.3% at most, one tenth the distortion. Distortion like this usually impairs clarity and cleanliness, due to intermodulation products. The power amplifier is direct coupled, bandwidth stretching from d.c. to 45kHz.

The valve preamplifier also distorts heavily at higher levels, producing 0.25% at 200mV in and 1% at 800mV in, but produces only second harmonic products. It can swing plenty of output, more than 34V, but again with high distortion. Frequency response exhibits bass roll off below 70Hz (-1dB) but is not volume dependant, high frequency output rolling down above 100kHz, a very high upper limit. Gain was a very useful x15.5 (+24dB), allowing low output sources like phone preamps to be used. NK

Power 24 Watts
Frequency response 70Hz-45kHz
Noise -103dB
Distortion 2%
Damping factor 3.2
Sensitivity 30mV

VERDICT: 4.00

VALVET L1 £1,450

Neat little tube preamplifier with impressive sonics.

FOR
- minimalist design
- dual triode valve per channel
- optional volume remote control

AGAINST:
- price

VERDICT: 4.00

VALVET A1R £1,850

Interestingly styled, fullsounding power amplifier that needs partnering with efficient speakers.

FOR
- vibrant timing
- full bodied sound
- fine imaging
- sleek design

AGAINST:
- low power

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MARCH 2010 HI-FI WORLD

61
WIN A SUPERB PAIR OF GRADO GS1000i HEADPHONES WORTH £1,000 IN THIS MONTH’S GREAT GIVEAWAY!

Here’s your chance to win one of the best modern headphones, Grado’s stunning GS1000i, as tested in February’s Hi-Fi World magazine! Here’s what Paul Rigby said: “Top of the price pile, the GS1000i have been produced as a dynamic open air design. The ‘i’ upgrade includes improved transducers and a new eight-conductor cable design. The upshot of the advances are intended to produce a better sense of control over all sound frequencies. Wooden earpieces are said to reduce harmful sonic resonances, but the most interesting aspect of the design to me is the very large, cave-like foam earpieces. Grado has apparently produced them to not only allow the ear to fit inside without any undue pressures but also to give the ears the best chance to find the aural ‘sweet spot’. I must admit, popping the Grados on my head, the headphones felt comfortable, despite the relatively heavy weight of 311g; long-term listening was a pleasure. The Grados produced an immense sense of midrange/treble clarity and detail along with lower bass power that provides a suitable support but never overpowers or dominates. They are transparent; there is no colour plastered on the music. The Beatles mono version of ‘Taxman’ showed that, despite the forward nature of the CD, the Grados maintained a sense of decorum while ducking and diving with all of Paul McCartney’s bass convolutions and, at the same time, keeping the boisterous rhythm guitar in check and not allowing it to dictate proceedings. During Kraftwerk’s ‘Numbers’, the GS1000is showed great precision in how the track was presented. The Grado GS1000i headphones certainly tick all of the boxes when it comes to exploring each section of the aural spectrum. Without any apparent sonic weakness, they are comfortable in the company of any music and take you joyously close to the original recording.”

For a chance to win this great pair of headphones, just answer the following four easy questions. Send your entries on a postcard only by 28th February 2010 to:
March Competition, Hi-Fi World magazine, Unit G4, Argo House, The Park Business Centre, Kilburn Park Road, London NW6 5LF

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- ONLY ONE ENTRY PER HOUSEHOLD
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- PURCHASE OF THE MAGAZINE IS NOT A PRE-CONDITION OF ENTRY
- NO CORRESPONDENCE WILL BE ENTERED INTO
- THE EDITOR’S DECISION IS FINAL
- NO EMPLOYEES OF AUDIO PUBLISHING LIMITED, OR OF ANY COMPANIES ASSOCIATED WITH THE PRODUCTION OR DISTRIBUTION OF THE PRIZES, MAY ENTER entries will be accepted on a postcard only

DECEMBER 2009 SUGDEN MYSTRO INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER WINNER:
Mr. S. Yousaf of Glasgow
David Price beholds the Q Acoustics 2020 mini monitors...

2020 Vision

Apart from a select few - such as the 1987 Mordaunt Short MS10, the Mission 760i from 1992 and the 1996 KEF Coda 9 - I don't like cheap speakers. Well, you wouldn't, would you? At this price point, it's less a question of how much they get right, and more about how little they can get wrong so as to sound bearable. The sad truth is of course that most get a lot wrong and are a chore to listen to. True, recently we've seen some fine exceptions - Wharfedale's Diamond 10.1s being a case in point - but by and large it's still the same old story...

Of course, this is just as you'd expect. The budgets involved in producing a £139.90 loudspeaker such as the new Q Acoustics 2020 are tiny; not much more than a fistful of dollars before you've factored in transportation, distribution and dealer margins. Anyone who can make something half decent with this sort of cash is more magician than engineer. Happily, all Q Acoustics speakers seem to emerge with a big hearted musicality, a clean and smooth tone and an almost perplexing lack of nasties.

And so it goes for the 2020. A usefully compact box at just 264.5x278x170mm, they're classic standmounters. Although not the most solid speakers yet made at just 5kg, there's little sign of crass cost cutting; everything seems to be as well hewn as it needs to be. There's a little 'surprise and delight' too in the detailing. The single rear port comes with an optional foam bung (to prevent yours truly having to reach for the sock drawer); this suddenly makes them usable in both near wall and free space environments. Underneath is a recessed 'cable tunnel' (sorry, I don't know what the official Q Acoustics phrase is for this) which means the biwired binding posts can be located underneat the speaker, making for a very clean and elegant looking rear, should the speakers be standing in the middle of the room. Clever stuff.

There's nothing technically remarkable about the 2020s; they're two-way bass reflex designs with a 125mm treated paper mid/bass unit and a 25mm cloth dome tweeter crossing over at 2.9kHz. Claimed frequency response is 64Hz - 22kHz [see MEASURED PERFORMANCE], and sensitivity is quoted at 88dB with a recommended power span of 25 to 75W. The graphite black finish of the review pair was good if not remarkable; I'd be tempted to shell out an extra £20 for the lavish piano black gloss version. A removable grille completes the picture; there's no strict rule but generally I prefer grilles off; in this case, in my room, they sounded smoother and more 'of a piece' when on. General construction standards are high though; about as good as you'll get at this price.

SOUND QUALITY

Nothing I've not come to expect from this brand, the 2020 proved at once couth, gently musical and satisfying to listen to over long periods. Their crowning glory is their
SOUND & VISION
THE BRISTOL SHOW

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

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ADMISSION

Adults £8.00; Students and Senior Citizens £4.00. Accompanied children under 16 free.

NEWS: The Show is known as THE place to see and hear all the latest products. Here are just a few things that you can see in Bristol, keeping checking the website as more news is being added on a weekly basis.

ARCHIVUS see the new A-R 300 T Series.

BECHOCOLATE brand from Belgium, launching the Purch on in one system.


CHORD ELECTRONICS - the Cyan Click and CPM 2800 digital amplifiers.

JVC - reveal the XVIEW LT-32WX50 LCD Monitor only 7mm deep.

KEF - the radical new Concept Blade is making its UK debut.

MONITOR AUDIO - demonstrating the new Apex Series A10AV2 3.5.1.

NAIM - UK launch of the UnitiQute, compact, digital streaming, all in one audio player.

PME - the fact8i880038toring its Show debut.

PROAC showing the new Studio 140 Mk2 loudspeaker.

REGA - the first outing for the Isis and Osiris reference CD player and amplifier. Also, bring along your Rega turntable and get it serviced by Rega’s trained staff. Visit the website to book your turntable in.

REL - New G1 (Gibraltar) Series subwoofers.

SENNHEISER - see and hear all the latest products.

SIM2 - Mica 30 LED projector.

VIENNA - the new Klimt Series KISS speaker.

For the very latest information please visit www.bristolshow.co.uk
vocal overdubs. The keyboard work
creamy tone to lead vocal Stevie
Nicks and all those ethereal backing
2020s again did well, giving a lovely
subtlety, or lack thereof. Here the
song also shows a

indeed, it’s hard to
find a harsh word to say
about this budget box, given their
modest position in the great hi-fi
scheme of things. Listening to Robert
Plant’s towering vocals on ‘The Big
Log’, and the way the 2020s threw
it confidently out into a large space
in such a nonchalant way, unsullied
by horrid ringing colourations from
the drive units or tragic cabinet
interventions seeking to derail the
musical process, was a joy. I had to
keep Kicking myself to remember
that these cost less than some
mid/bass unit working in
the price of the things.

The 2020s have a fine rock
sensibility; they’re good at the dual
concentric; Phil Collins’ vocals
were very believable and devoid of
chesty coloration that plagues most
products at this price.

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products at this price.
Much is written about music and the musicians who entertain us, and we rightly exalt great musicians. But there is an interlinked chain of participants, two of which are I believe crucial to our music scene in today's world. For centuries the music chain was a very short one — composers or songwriters, musicians and listeners, and the judgement on quality was immediate. Recording technologies have changed all this exponentially.

Today, we listen to most of our music from a recording and this gives recording engineers the opportunity to avoid poor acoustics, duff notes and off days. This, of course, means the chain has grown to include the recording engineers, the music distribution system (retailers or downloads), hi-fi manufacturers, hi-fi sellers and the hi-fi purchasers, the latter being the listeners. I should start by saying that hi-fi has become an adulterated term that no longer has its original meaning because it's applied to much equipment that certainly should not be termed high-fidelity.

It's said that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. However, I believe there are two particularly strong links that, if removed from the chain, would seriously damage the quality of recorded music. These are the audiophile, or hi-fi connoisseur, and the specialist hi-fi retailer, the latter in nearly all cases also being the former because it's their interest that has driven them into their particular business. These are the people who most appreciate how exciting and involving music can be and how it can deliver an emotional experience.

Hi-Fi Connoisseurs

So why is the hi-fi connoisseur so important to the music industry? By their nature, audiophiles are generally avid music lovers who enhance their enjoyment through listening to music at its very best quality level, which means playing great recordings through hi-end hi-fi to achieve the most outstanding results. Without the audiophile, the main driver for quality would probably be removed from the chain. Let's be honest, over recent years the majority of music listeners now settle for MP3 convenience and, therefore, mediocre sound quality. If the pendulum ever swings so far that all but a few listen to highly compressed formats such as MP3, music producers will not waste their resources on producing high quality recordings because it would be commercially unnecessary, even if their recording engineers wanted to achieve the best they could. After all, an MP3 or AAC file, the iTunes default format, downloaded at 128 kbps (the most popular download speed), is about one-eleventh the size of a full resolution CD track, 1411 kbps, so the quality is inevitably far inferior. Information is irretrievably lost and the full dynamic range is lacking. Using an iPod while jogging does not really raise a quality issue but playing low-resolution tracks through an iPod docking station that feeds into a decent hi-fi system, is a disaster area. It's rubbish quality made louder. Fortunately, there is still significant demand from audiophiles committed to sound quality to sustain the production of high quality recordings, but it would be a tragedy if there weren't. For example, most classical recordings downloaded as an MP3 or AAC file are a complete waste of time because there is so much information missing that they are reduced to just the essence of a tune.

Specialist Hi-Fi Retailers

Just as essential a link in the chain as the hi-fi connoisseur is the specialist hi-fi retailer and the two are rightly dependent on each other. Without the specialist retailer the hi-end hi-fi manufacturer would have to rely on the internet and hi-fi magazine reviewers to try and assess the relative merits of different brands for their potential customers — a notoriously unreliable decision making process. Specialist hi-fi retailers are constantly being offered new products for assessment and potential stocking and, as it is also their hobby as well as their livelihood, they are greatly interested in achieving the best performance and seeking out the most outstanding combinations. More than that though is their relationship with audiophiles for, if they are to stay in business, they must satisfy the most discerning customers in the industry. The reality is that audiophiles and specialist hi-fi retailers are essential to each other.
What are the future prospects of maintaining high quality music recordings? We must hope that audiophiles, or hi-fi connoisseurs, or perhaps most accurately described, music lovers, will continue to drive the demand for quality. But another important reason for hope within the mass-market is that there is no longer any overriding reason for MP3 and AAC to have such a following. These formats were designed to overcome very slow download speeds pre-broadband and small, expensive memory capacity but the trade-off has been quantity at the expense of quality. Download speeds and memory capacity are not significant factors for most people now and will be increasingly irrelevant with time. Full resolution, CD quality, downloads are already available and should become the norm as long as the general public can be made aware of the tremendous quality benefit. This has happened with HD TV so we know this awareness can grow rapidly. In the meantime, we must highly value hi-fi connoisseurs and specialist hi-fi retailers, of which the ones listed on this page represent the UK’s finest. Specialist dealers know how to choose the products that combine as a superb system and how to get the best out of it by expert installation in the home. If there’s a price premium over an internet purchase, it’s probably a small one, but it’s unquestionably worth the difference.

LISTED BELOW IS OUR SELECTION OF THE BEST HI-FI DEALERS IN THE UK.

They have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards hi-fi that will give years of musical enjoyment and total satisfaction.

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**Ashford, Kent**

**SOUND CRAFT Hi-Fi**

40 High Street.

01233 624441

**Chelmsford**

**RAYLEIGH Hi-Fi**

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01245 265245

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01628 633995

**Rayleigh, Essex**

**RAYLEIGH Hi-Fi**

44a High Street.

01268 779762

**Southend-on-Sea**

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01702 435255

**Southampton**

**PHASE 3 Hi-Fi**

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**London**

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**N1**

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**SW11**

**ORANGES & LEMONS**

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**SOUTH WEST**

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01225 333310

**Exeter**

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01392 491194

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**MIDLANDS**

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01295 272158

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**Leicester**

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0116 262 3754

**Nottingham**

**SOUND ORGANISATION**

2 Gillygate.

0114 275 6273

**Oxford**

**LINTONE AUDIO**

7-11 Park Lane, Gateshead.

0191 477 4167

**Sheffield**

**MOORGATE ACOUSTICS**

184 Fitzwilliam Street.

0114 275 6273

**York**

**SOUND ORGANISATION**

2 Gillygate.

0114 275 6273

**SCOTLAND**

**Aberdeen**

**HOT BURN Hi-Fi**

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01224 585713/572729

**Edinburgh**

**LOUD & CLEAR**

Bonnington Mill, 72 Newhaven Road.

0131 555 3963

**Glasgow**

**LOUD & CLEAR**

520 St Vincent St, Finnieston.

0141 221 0221

**Glasgow**

**GLASGOW AUDIO**

35 Great Western Road.

0141 332 2200/1707
Forever Change

Arguably the most uplifting, the most complex, the most challenging and, certainly, the most derided of all musical forms, Paul Rigby, spins a quick history of what's come to be called 'progressive rock'...

To attempt to tell the story of 'progressive rock' in a few pages is surely to invite accusations of hubris, and yet hubris was just one of the charges levelled at its principal proponents and creators. Never has a genre of music been so divisive in public, artistic and media circles and yet, simultaneously, never has one been so responsible for forging so many diverse elements of musical history into one new form and giving life to so many variations of its own basic form: a single celled musical genre, splitting and multiplying into new, independent, genres! So where did 'prog' come from? Why did it appear in the first place? Who were those early sonic explorers?

"If you go right back, the term was used by Richard Strauss, to describe Elgar's 'Dream of Gerontius' premiered in the Fatherland in the early 1900s," offered ex-Genesis guitarist Steve Hackett. "Strauss described the work as 'progressive'. The term has been with us for over a hundred years. Maybe because it was programmed music in that it tried to tell a story, as psychedelic as you can get. It's your first concept album, in a way:"

"If you go right back, the term was used by Richard Strauss, to describe Elgar's 'Dream of Gerontius' premiered in the Fatherland in the early 1900s," offered ex-Genesis guitarist Steve Hackett. "Strauss described the work as 'progressive'. The term has been with us for over a hundred years. Maybe because it was programmed music in that it tried to tell a story, as psychedelic as you can get. It's your first concept album, in a way:"

This early Elgar piece is by no means anachronistic to 'modern' Prog. It, in fact, explains a lot. It explains how 'long form' music was used to tell a story. Up until 1968, the most popular musical structure was the 'short form' - the three minute pop ditty consisting of a verse, chorus, bridge, chorus - or variations thereof. During the period between 1968 and 1970, psychedelic explorations evolved, as Carl Palmer, drummer for prog legends, ELP, remembers. "In 1968, I was in a band called The Crazy World Of Arthur Brown. We had a big single called 'Fire' which was No.1 in the USA - as well as the album. At that time, we were experiencing a lot of rock'n'roll theatre, where people were dressing up and performing on stage, which was more than just music." Arthur Brown, you might recall, was often regaled in a wonderfully affected outfit topped with a 'fire hat' - "I am the god of hellfire...", etc.

Even The Beatles were bedecked in their Sgt. Pepper finery. Others joined in wearing, at the very least, their Edwardian frills and paisley accessories. Music was becoming a visual feast. The likes of Peter Gabriel (Genesis), Ian Anderson (Jethro Tull) and future members of ELP were taking notes.

Music was also becoming serious. Even blues-based outfits such as Cream were becoming more introspective, introducing more and longer solos into both their live and album releases. Deke Leonard, singer and lead guitarist with Man, often described as a prog outfit, but who preferred to be looked upon as space rock practitioners, experienced the change first hand, "When we
Deke Leonard

Angra's Rafael Bittencourt

was only, originally, a rehearsal piece, not something we'd ever play live. The whole thing was twenty minutes long. When we eventually played it on stage, it was greeted with open arms."

Hence, there was now a realisation that, quite apart from the blues-based extensions, as pushed by the likes of Cream, with its blues structures and long guitar solos, you could experiment, widen your vision and try new things, as Clive Jones who played flute and clarinet with the prog outfit, Black Widow, confirmed, "Prog allowed you to experiment more with songs, you could give them three or four different time changes, it also allowed the realistic use of lots of different instruments and offered the opportunity to solo with those different instruments. There was certainly a lot more freedom to be had."

The democratisation of instruments often became a signature feature of bands themselves — some almost rose to iconic status: Jethro Tull's flute and Van Der Graaf Generator's double saxophone being just two examples.

Prog fell onto hard times during the punk explosion, in 1977. Fashion, by its very nature, changes in a cyclical manner, which marketing departments of record labels smile upon as they bring in a fresh injection of new income. Prog's stars, especially those resident in the UK, such as Yes, Camel, Barclay James Harvest and Genesis, suffered as a consequence.

New and upcoming artists didn't ignore prog totally, however; some modified it to their own ends. This neo-prog was lead by outfits such as Marillion, Saga and, it may surprise some, Kate Bush, whilst former prog members found they needed to adapt their prog stylings to retain a living. ELP's Carl Palmer and Yes' Steve Howe joined the power/pop/prog rock of Asia, for example, experiencing major success in a land then ruled by MTV. Success, that is, until the corporate takeover of the media began to marginalise creative work in a detrimental manner. "We started having silly things said to us such as one Geffen (their label at that time) guy who said to us, 'Every second line of a song must be at least twenty seconds.' We said that the intro would be as long as we think it should be but that we could cut it for a radio edit, if required — but they... “
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Cards accepted: Visa, Maestro (Switch), Mastercard, Solo and Delta.
THE MAJORS
Of course, the major labels’ back catalogues are still awash with classic prog. Warners has a full selection of Yes material, now in an extended format with extra tracks. It can also offer CDs by Rush and Dream Theater. Universal has reissued the first two albums from Soft Machine, 'The Soft Machine Volume One', which offers elaborate psychodelic fantasies amongst the early prog fumbllings and 'Volume Two' which features Kevin Ayers and leans towards classic Canterbury prog. Also look out for the new edition of Camel’s self-titled debut with extra tracks plus 'Strangely Strange But Oddly Normal', an Island Anthology including tracks from the likes of Jethro Tull, ELP and Quintessence.

Sanctuary, on the other hand, is distributing the whole ELP catalogue including deluxe editions of 'The Works Volumes 1 & 2', which focused on solo pieces from each member of the band, plus 'Welcome Back My Friends...' a triple live album taken from the 1973-1974 tour. EMI is positively heaving with prog releases. It wasn’t too long ago that it reissued the entire Gentle Giant discography online as digital releases along with extra tracks but the company has a wide selection of great tracks from the likes of Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull, Barclay James Harvest, Egg, Marillion, Van Der Graff Generator, Hawkwind (space rockers, I know, but there’s prog in there too), Hatfield & the North and so on.

THE INDIES
Prog is everywhere – if you look. There are many classic albums that should keep any prog fan happy for some time to come and much praise has to be given to the smaller indie labels for keeping these albums alive and available. For example, Esoteric is run by Mark Powell, a reissue consultant for many of the major labels. For those acts/albums which are assumed will not sell in quantities, Powell guides them through his company. This is where you will find the electronic prog outfit, Barclay James Harvest (such their stripped 'Live' album that revealed their true skills), Egg’s self-titled piece that exhibited a Canterbury influence and will appeal to ELP fans, Camel’s 'Breathless' successfully added a pop ethos to the prog overtures and Jonesy’s self-titled album combined jazz and complex prog tracks.

Similarly, Voiceprint has established an enviable reputation for an extended catalogue featuring the likes of After Crying, Galahad and Gentle Giant. This is where Judas’s ‘As Daylight Fades’ can be found, Man’s ‘Greasy Truckers’ Party’ can be purchased and The Gong’s ‘Tree In Fire’ can be grabbed. In addition, don’t neglect the excellent reissue label Hux. As well as featuring the likes of Focus, Caravan, Gentle Giant and Gryphon, Hux also feature projects such as rare takes from the BBC. Soft Machine’s ‘1967-1971’ BBC takes, for example or Pentangle’s ‘Lost Broadcasts’ from 1968-1972.

ON VINYL
Vinyl is resplendent with prog – which is fortunate because the genre sounds best on this format. I have already reviewed high quality releases such as the Genesis box set, ‘1970-75’ (Virgin/EMI), in the Classic Cuts column and the ‘Something’s Coming: The BBC Recordings 1969-1970’ (Lillith), via Yes, appeared in the January 2010 issue. Other new issues are already in the offing including a superb Jethro Tull box set from Classic Records, featuring the album, ‘Aqualung’ spread over four LPs and pressed in its original clarity process, which is played at 45rpm. The label also features albums by Peter Gabriel and Genesis. Sigur Ros’s new issue of ‘Takk’ (Smekkleysa) has just appeared as a three LP set while Yes’s ‘Relayer’ has been released via Friday Music. A new label, Music On Vinyl, has released Moody Blues’ ‘Live At The Isle Of Wight’, a live album that apparently featured the support of Justin Hayward plus Kevin Ayers’ ‘Unfairground’, a recently released album (2007) from this legendary artist including members of Teenage Fanclub and Gorky’s Zygotic Mynci as well as stalwarts such as Robert Wyatt and Phil Manzanera.

On DVD
On DVD, look no further than Eagle Vision, which has a wide variety of discs on offer from classic outfits. For example ELP’s ‘Birth of a Band: Live At The Isle of Wight 1970’ is still available, as is Steve Hackett’s ‘Once Above A Time’, which features behind-the-stage bonus features. Eagle Vision also has a selection of bonus editions featuring DVD and CDs in the same case: both Tangerine Dream’s ‘Live In America, 1992’ and Jethro Tull’s ‘Living With The Past’ are just two examples. Both sets are packed with extra DVD features too.

CONTACTS
Deke Leonard/Man: www.manband-archive.com
Steve Hackett: www.stevehackett.com
Clive Jones/Black Widow: www.blackwidow.co.uk
Carl Palmer: www.carlpalmer.com
Angra: www.angra.net
To find prog on vinyl contact:
Diverse Vinyl: +44(0) 1633 256261
www.diversevinyl.com
Stanford Audio: 0845 603 5781
www.stanfordaudio.co.uk
Prog Rock.co.uk: www.progrock.co.uk
Contact progrock.co.uk
On CD/DVD contact Amazon at www.amazon.co.uk or check out specialist CD label sites such as: Hux: www.huxrecords.com

VOICEPRINT:
www.voiceprint.co.uk
ECLECTIC DISCS:
www.artist-shop.com/esoteric
For a general overview of classic and underground prog bands, take a look at Prog Archives: www.progarcs.com
Roksan

Warranty Notification

Effective 1st November 2009, all Roksan electronics and turntables supplied via authorised dealers are to be covered by a 5 year parts and labour warranty.* As a gesture to existing customers, this will also be extended to all current owners of K2 products.

In an age where product longevity and second hand resale values are constantly under threat, Roksan wish to reward their loyal customers by allowing their warranty to be transferrable from owner to owner. Thus, the warranty stays with the product from initial date of sale to 5 years old as long as it remains within the country of origin.

* terms available upon request

Distributed in the UK by:

Henley Designs

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CAMBRIDGE AUDIO SONATA
DV30 £200

If it’s possible to make such a thing as a niche DVD player, this is it. The DV30 is instantly apparently holed beneath the water line because it is not a Blu-ray player. Why on earth buy a DVD spinner that plays only old formats, you ask? And it’s a tricky question, but the DV30 does answer it, in a way. The reason is that it’s a Cambridge Audio design, with some very clever fettling work done to the audio side by the company’s arch tweaker Matt Bramble. He himself confided to Hi-Fi World that he was surprised by how good the DV30 has ended up, sonically, and he’s right. Used as a CD player, the latest Wolfson WB8746 DACs he’s fitted (and carefully laid out on the board with better than expected passive components and lots of attention paid to signal routing and grounding), gives a surprisingly svelte musical performance. It’s not going to knock the top Cambridge Audio CD player off its perch, but suffice to say the DV30 doesn’t sound plain nasty like most DVD spinners at its lowly price point. There’s a decent amount of detail, at least an attempt made at throwing out a soundstage with a degree of depth, and a reasonable musical gait to the way rhythms are handled. It’s also tonally smooth too, with no nasties up top. The overall effect is of a digital player that’s just listenable in a serious system, one that’s not so obstructive with the music that it has you running for the stop button.

The figure of eight IEC socket at the back means you can use an audiophile power lead (not logical if you don’t have one already, I know, but it certainly helps if you do), and the Cambridge also really enjoyed a pair of Missing Link Cryo Reference interconnects which smoothed things even more. Most rival machines are so bad they simply don’t reward any tweaking. The 1080p upscaling video quality is superb at the price (remembering the fact that it’s not Blu-ray, of course), with a clarity, crispness and colour that high end Denons would struggle to provide five years back. It’s a decent transport then, via HDMI. The half size dimensions of the DV30 (270x285x67mm) are welcome (why have a full size machine when most are full of air?) and the build is decent for its price; I particularly liked the chunky brushed aluminium front panel, and the metallised remote feels nicer than that of most high end hi-fi CD players. It supports CD, DVD-V, CD-R/RW, DVD-R/RW, DVD+R/RW, DivX and MP4 formats. So providing you’re not desperate to invest in Blu-ray, which really only comes into its own on truly large TVs, and want a fine do-it-all disc player that sounds better than it should, this is one to consider. It’s an unusual machine alright, but not unendearing. DP

[Contact: +44 (0)845 900 1230
www.cambridgeaudio.com]
collective excellence

"With a sense of great power plus extraordinary insight and resolution, it paints a strongly lit canvas of sound on which instruments and singers are portrayed with striking clarity. If you want to hear a rather special kind of valve amplifier this is one worth auditioning."

The Emille Labs KE-40L Review by Noel Keywood, Hi-Fi World August 2009 issue

specialists

Almarro, Dr Feickert, Emillé, Marten
ModWright, Raysonic, Tri

these products are available exclusively through the dealers below

Acoustic Arts
01582 485 316

AngelSound Audio
01923 352 479

Mayflower Sounds
01302 711 528
In this heavily revised section, you'll find the great and the good from audio's glorious past. Most are seminal designs which have earned their place in hi-fi history, but you'll also see some oddities which aren't classic as such, but are great used buys. The year of introduction is given, alongside the original UK launch price. Think we've overlooked something? Then write in and let us know!

**Digital**

- **Cambridge Audio CD1** 1986 £1500
  - Inspired Stan Curtis redesign of Philips CD104, complete with switchable digital filter.
  - Lean but tight and musical performer.

- **Cambridge Audio CD4SE** 1998 £200
  - A touch soft in the treble and tonally light, but outstanding in every other respect.

- **Linna Karik III** 1995 £1775
  - The final Karik was a gem. Superb transport gives a brilliantly tight, grippy dynamic sound, albeit tonally dry.

- **Marantz CD73** 1983 £700
  - A riot of gold brushed aluminium and LEDs, this distinctive machine squeezed every last ounce from its 16x4 DAC, superbly musical.

- **Marantz SA-1** 2000 £5,000
  - The greatest argument for SACD. This sublime Ken Ishiwata design is utterly musically convincing with both CD and SACD, beating most audiophile CD spinners hands down.

- **Meridian 207** 1988 £995
  - Beautifully built two-box with pre-amp stage.
  - Very musical although not as refined as modern Bitstream gear. No digital output.

- **Musical Fidelity Trivista** 2002 £4000
  - When playing SACDs, the sweetest, most lucid and lyrical digital disc spinner we've heard. Old school stereo, pure DSF design.
  - CD sound is up in the £1000 class, too!

- **Technics SL-P1200** 1997 £800
  - CD version of the Technics SL-1300 turntable. Massively built to withstand the rigours of 'pro' use and laden with facilities - a great eighty icon.

- **Yamaha CD-X1** 1993 £340
  - Nicely built, 16x2 machine with a very sharp and detailed sound; sometimes too much so.
  - Excellent ergonomics, unlike almost every other rival of the time.

**DACs**

- **Cambridge Audio DACMagic** 1995 £99
  - Good value upgrade for budget CD players with extensive facilities and detailed sonics.

- **DCS Elgar** 1997 £8500
  - Extremely open and natural performer, albeit extremely pricey - superb.

- **DPA Little Bit 3** 1996 £299
  - Rich, clean, rhythmic and punchy sound transforms budget CD players.

- **Pink Triangle DACapo** 1993 £N/A
  - Exquisite; the warmest and most lyrical 16-bit digital audio we have ever heard. Clever plug-in digital filter modules really worked!

**Compact Disc Transports**

- **Teac VRDS-Ti** 1994 £600
  - Warm and expansive sound made this a mid price hit. Well built, with a slick mech.

- **QED Digit** 1991 £90
  - Budget bitstream performer with tweaks aplenty. Positron PSU upgrade makes it smooth, but now past it.
**TURNTABLES**

**ARISTON RD115 1972 £94**
Modern evolution of Thorens' original belt drive paradigm, Scotland's original superdeck was warm and musical, albeit soft. Still capable of fine results today.

**ADC ACCUTRAC 4000I 1976 £300**
Bonkers 1970s direct drive that uses an infra red beam to allow track selection and programming. More of a visual and operational delight than a sonic stunner.

**PIONEER PL12D 1973 £36**
The beginning of the end for the British turntable industry. When vinyl was the leading source, this bought new standards of noise performance and stability to the class, plus a low friction S-shaped tonearm. Later PL112D was off the pace compared to rivals.

**MARANTZ TT1000 1978 £8/4/ **
Beautiful Seventies high end belt drive with sweet and clean sound. Rare in Europe, but big in Japan.

**MICHELL GYRODEC 1981 £599**
Thanks to its stunning visuals, this bold design wasn't accorded the respect it deserved until recently. Early examples sound cold and mechanical, but now right on the pace. Clear, solid and architectural sound.

**TECHNICS SP10 1973 £400**
Seminal Japanese engineering. Sounds depend on plinths, but a well mounted SP10L will give any modern a hard time, especially in respect of bass power and midband accuracy.

**REGA PLANAR 3 1978 £79**
Brilliantly simple but clean and musical performer, complete with Acos-derived S-shaped tonearm. 1983 saw the arrival of the RB300, which added real at the expense of warmth. Superb budget buy.

**GARRARD 301/401 1952 £19**
Heavy metal - tremendously strong and articulate with only a veiled treble to let it down. In many respects, better than the seventies 'superdecks' that succeeded it.

**GRACE G707 1974 £58**
This early Japanese example of the tonearm art has a smooth, lyrical sound. Imported by Linn, fitted to early LP12s. Sonically way off the pace now, though.

**REGA RB300 1983 £88**
Inspired budget esoterica. Detailed, tight, neutral sound but tonally grey sounding in absolute terms. Responds well to tweaking, and its cheaper RB250 brother better still.

**SME 3009 1959 £18**
Once state of the art, but long since bet- tered. Musical enough, but weak at fre- quency extremes and veiled in the midband. Legendary serviceability and building has made it a cult, used prices unjustifiably high.

**TECHNICS SP10 1973 £400**
First outing for Sony's impressive 'Biotracer' electronic tonearm. Built like a tank with a clean and tidy sound, albeit lacking involvement. Scarily complicated and with no spares support - buy with caution!

**TOWNSEND ROCK 1979 £6/N/A**
The product of academic research by the Cranfield Institute, this novel machine has an extremely clean and fluid sound. Substantially modified through the years, and capable of superb results even today.

**TRIO LO-7D 1978 £600**
The best 'all-in-one' turntable package ever made, Trio/Kenwood threw their 'engineering best practice book' at this one with startling results. Clean, powerful and three-dimension- al sound, ultimately limited by the tonearm.

**TONEARMS**

**ACOS LUSTRE GST-1 1975 £46**
The archetypal S-shaped Seventies arm; good, provocative and involving sound in its day, but ragged and undynamic now.

**ALPHASON HR1005 1981 £150**
First class arm, practically up to present-day standards. Buy carefully though, as there is no service available now. Totally under priced when new, exceptional.

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**SME SERIES III 1979 £113**
Clever variable mass design complete with Titanium Nitride tube tried to be all things to all men, and failed. Charming nonetheless, with a warm and inoffensive sound.

**HADCOCK GH228 1976 £46**
Evergreen unipivot with lovely sweet, fluid sound. Excellent service backup.

**SME SERIES III 1979 £113**
Clever variable mass design complete with Titanium Nitride tube tried to be all things to all men, and failed. Charming nonetheless, with a warm and inoffensive sound.

**LINN ITTOK LVII 1978 £253**
Arguably the first 'superarm'; Japanese design to Linn specs made for a muscular, rhythmic sound with real dynamics. Now off the pace, but the final LVII version worth seeking out.

**NAIM ARO 1986 £875**
Truly endearing and charismatic performer - wonderfully engaging mid-band makes up for softened frequency extremes.
TECHNICS EPA-501 1979 £ N/A
Popular partner for late seventies Technics motor units. Nice build and Titanium Nitride tube can't compensate for middling sound.

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIERS/COMBOS
DELTEC 1987 £1900
Fast, dry and with excellent transience, this first DPA integrated is the real deal for eighties obsessives. Ridiculously punchy 80W per channel from a tiny, half-size box. Radical, cool and more than a little strange.

ROGERS A75 1978 £220
The preocoustical Audiolab 8000a – lots of sensible facilities, a goodly power output and nice sound in one box. The later A730 and A100 versions offered improved sonic and were seriously sweet and open to listen to.

EXPOSURE VII/VIII 1985 £625
Seminal mid-eighties Exposure pre-power, offering most of what rival Naim amps did with just that little bit extra smoothness and sweetness. Still, it's by no means 'sweet' by today's standards, being lean, punchy, musical. It's also possessed of that quintessentially eighties look – frumpy black steel boxes with rough silk screened logos!

SUGDEN C51/PSI 1976 £130
Soft sounding early Sugden combo with a plethora of facilities and filters, complete with seventies-tastic DIN sockers. A sweet and endearing performer as you'd expect, but lacking in power and poor load driving ability, so partner carefully.

VTL MINIMAL/50W MONOBLOCK 1985 £1,300
Vacuum Tube Logic was one of the Europe’s biggest tube names in the eighties, and it shows. Rugged, professional build and finish allied to a lively and punchy sound (albeit with limited power) make them an excellent general purpose tool.

MISSION CYRUS 2 1984 £299
Classic eighties minimalism combines arresting styling with clean, open, lively sound. Further upgradeable with PSX power supply.

MCINTOSH MA6800 1995 £3735
Effortlessly sweet, strong and powerful with seminal styling to match.

SUGDEN A21 1969 £ N/A
Class A transistor integrated with an eminently likeable smoothness and musicality. Limited inputs via DIN sockets.

MISSION CYRUS 2 1984 £299
Classic eighties minimalism combines arresting styling with clean, open, lively sound.

CLASSICS

MUSICAL FIDELITY A11 1985 £350
Beguiling Class A integrated with exquisite styling. Questionable reliability.

NAIM NAIT 1984 £350
Superb rhythms and dynamics make it truly musical, but tonally monochromatic. Fine phono stage, very low power.

NAD 2020 1979 £69
Brilliantly smooth, sweet and punchy at the price and even has a better phono stage than you'd expect. The archetypal budget super-amp.

CHAPMAN 305 1960 £40
Smooth pre/power combo with a sweet and open sound. Not quite up to Leak/Quad standards but considerably cheaper second-hand.

MOTIV MC-8 1986 £2,500
Minimalist FET-based preampifier from the Yank valve specialists is brilliantly neutral and smooth with a spyry light balance in the mould of Sugden high end stuff. Something of a curio, but worthwhile nonetheless.

MISSION CYRUS 2 1984 £299
Classic eighties minimalism combines arresting styling with clean, open, lively sound.

LEAK POINT ONE STEREO 1958 £ N/A
Good for their time, but way off the pace these days. Use of EF86 pentode valve for high gain rules out ultra performance. Not the highest-fi!

CROFT MICRO 1986 £150
Budget valve pre-amp with exceptionally transparent performance.

NAIM NAC32.5 1978 £ N/A
The Salisbury company came of age with this, their classic high end pre. Brilliantly fast and incisive sound that's a joy with vinyl but a tad forward for digital.

LECON AC-1 1973 £ N/A
Amazing styling courtesy of Allan Boothroyd can't disguise its rather cloudy sound, but a design classic nonetheless.

RYMANS 22 1958 £25
The partner to the much vaunted Quad II monoblocks - cloudy and vague sound means it's for anachrophiles only.

QUAD 33 1968 £43
Better than the 22, but Quad's first tranny pre isn't outstanding. Responds well to tweaking/ rebuilding though...

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Minimalist FET-based preampifier from the Yank valve specialists is brilliantly neutral and smooth with a spyry light balance in the mould of Sugden high end stuff. Something of a curio, but worthwhile nonetheless.

HINN LK-1 1986 £409
A brave attempt by the Glasgow boys to bring remote controlled user-friendly to hair-shirt audiophile hi-fi. Didn't quite work, but not half bad for under £100.

MARTINEZ ACA 1 1973 £ N/A
The archetypal budget super-amp.

QUAD 33 1968 £43
Better than the 22, but Quad's first tranny pre isn't outstanding. Responds well to tweaking/ rebuilding though...

LEAK STEREO 60 1958 £N/A
Leak's biggest valve power amp offers 35 Watts per channel and more low end weight than the smaller Stereo 20. Despite concerns over reliability their rarity means high prices are the order of the day.

AMPLIFIERS

ROGERS CADET III 1965 £34
Sweet sounding valve integrated, uses ECL86 output valves, even has a half useable phono stage. Sweet, warm a good introduction to valves.

CREEK CAS4140 1983 loses tone controls, gains grip.

CROFT MICRO 1986 £150
Budget valve pre-amp with exceptionally transparent performance.

DELTEC 1987 £150
Simple design with easily available components, solid build quality and fine sound make for a surprisingly overlooked bargain. Not exactly stylish, however.

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CAS4040 1983 £150
Sweet and musical feature-packed integrated; with limited power) make them an excellent general purpose tool.

ROGERS A75 1978 £220
The preocoustical Audiolab 8000a – lots of sensible facilities, a goodly power output and nice sound in one box. The later A730 and A100 versions offered improved sonic and were seriously sweet and open to listen to.

CAS4040 1983 £150
Sweet and musical feature-packed integrated; with limited power) make them an excellent general purpose tool.
**LEAK STEREO 20** 1958 £31
Excellent workaday classic valve amplifier with decent power and drive. Surprisingly modern sounding if rebuilt sympathetically. Irrespressibly musical and fluid.

**LECSON API** 1973 £N/A
Madcap cylindrical styling alluded to its 'tower of power' pretensions, but it wasn't. Poor build, but decently clean sounding when working.

**MARANTZ MODEL 9** 1997 £8000
Authentic reproduction monoblocks still more than cut the sonic mustard. Highly expensive and highly sought after.

**MICHELL ELECTO** 1997 £1989
Crisp, clean and beautifully controlled with gorgeous styling. Partnered with the £1650 Orca this sounds delicious!

**LEAK POINT ONE, TL10, TL12.1** 1949 £28
Early classics that are getting expensive. Overhauling is de rigueur before use, using original parts if possible. Surprisingly crisp and musical sound, that's far more modern than Quad IIs. Deeply impressive when in fine fettle.

**MUSICAL FIDELITY**

**XA200** 1996 £1000PR
200W of sweet smooth transistor stomp in a grooved tube! Under-rated oddity.

**QUAD II** 1952 £22
The all-time classic valve amplifier, with a deliciously fluid and lyrical voice. In other respects though, it sounds hopelessly dated. Low power and hard to partner properly.

**CREEK CAS3140** 1985 £199
Reputedly the best of the classic Jap analogues, this combines sleek ergonomics, high sensitivity and an explicit, detailed sound. 

**LEAK TROUGHLINE** 1956 £25
Series I an interesting ornament but limited to 88-100MHz only. II and III are arguably the best-sounding tuners ever. Adaptation for stereo easy via phono multiplex socket. Fed by a modern outboard decoder they're deliciously lucid with true dimensionality.

**LEAK ST-8** 1978 £353
Marantz's finest radio moment. Warm, organic sound plus an oscilloscope for checking the signal strength and multipath.

**ROGERS T75** 1977 £125
Superb mid-price British audiophile design, complete with understated black fascia. Fine sound in the true Rogers mould — smooth and sweet with fine dimensionality.

**RADFORD STA25 RENAISSANCE** 1986 £977
At the time, very possibly the least cool amplifier on the planet — and we're not talking heat dissipation here. This reworking of Radford's original late sixties design was possessed of a wonderfully rich, old school valve sound with enough power (25W) and lots of subtlety.

**RADFORD STA25 RENAISSANCE** 1996 £55
Bolster proof build, but wallop. Off the pace, but enduring nonetheless. Some pipe smoking slipper wearers swear by them!

**B&O's first serious FM stereo tuner was at the time...**

**MARANTZ ST-8** 1978 £353
Marantz's finest radio moment. Warm, organic sound plus an oscilloscope for checking the signal strength and multipath.

**CREEK CAS3140** 1985 £199
Excellent detail, separation and dynamics. Brilliantly musical at the price. T40 continued the theme...

**NAD 4010** 1979 £79
Tremendously smooth and natural sound allied to low prices and good availability. Make this budget analogue esoteric. Needs a good antenna to work properly, however.

**NA1M NAT03** 1993 £595
The warm, atmospheric sound is further proof of Naim's proficiency with tuners.

**PIONEER TX-9500** 1976 £295
Another of the serious classic solid-state. Boasts the usual high end Jap package of fine sound, brilliant sensitivity and superb build.

**YAMAHA CT7000** 1977 £444
Reputedly the best of the classic Jap analogues, this combines sleek ergonomics, high sensitivity and an explicit, detailed sound.

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Marantz's finest radio moment. Warm, organic sound plus an oscilloscope for checking the signal strength and multipath.

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**CLASSICS**

**REVOX B760 1975 £520**
More of a semi-pro machine than a domestic bit of kit, the Revox offers superlative measured performance although the sound isn’t quite as staggering as the numbers. Fine nonetheless, and surely the most durable tuner here?

**SANSUI TU-9900 1976 £300**
A flagship Japanese tuner designed to steal sales from the likes of Accuphase and Revox, it boasts superlative RF performance and an extremely smooth and lucid sound, along with very fine build and finish.

**SONY ST-5950 1977 £222**
One of the first Dolby FM-equipped tuners, a format that came to nought. Still, it was Sony’s most expensive tuner to date, and boasted a very good sound quality allied to brilliant ergonomics.

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**SONY TC-8 1977 £N/A**
A competitor to the Akai 4000D open reel machine, the Sony offered better sound quality and is still no slouch by modern standards.

**SURELLA MODEL 1 1973 £1300**
Possibly the ultimate FM tuner. Massive in terms of technology, size and features dedicated to extracting every ounce of performance from radio, including impressive multi-purpose oscilloscope display.

**TECHNICS ST-8080 1976 £180**
National Panasonic’s specialist hi-fi brand was a big hitter back then, and this is no exception. Superb FM stage makes for a very clean and smooth listen with lots of detail and depth.

**ANALOGUE RECORDERS**

**YAMAHA TC-800GL 1977 £179**
Early classic with ski-slope styling courtesy of Mario Bellini. Middling sonics by modern standards, but cool nonetheless!

**REVOX A77 1968 £145**
The first domestic open reel that the pros used at home. Superbly made, but sonically off the pace these days. B77 better, but couldn’t match the Japanese.

**PIONEER CTF-950 1978 £400**
Not up to modern standards sonically, but a great symbol of the cassette deck art nonetheless.

**SONY WM-D6C 1985 £290**
Single capstan transport on a par with Swiss watch, single record/play back with a true audiophile sound and HDCD compatibility.

**DIGITAL RECORDERS**

**SONY MDS-JESSES 2000 £900**
The best sounding MD deck ever, thanks to awesome build and heroic ATRAC-DSP Type R coding.

**PIONEER PDR-555RW 1999 £480**
For a moment, this was the CD recorder to have. Clean and detailed.

**MARANTZ DR-17 1999 £1100**
Probably the best sounding CD recorder made; built like a brick outhouse with a true audiophile sound and HDCD compatibility.

**KONDOU DM-9090 1997 £999**
Super clean sound makes this an amazing portable, but fragile.

**LOUDSPEAKERS**

**ACOUSTIC RESEARCH**

**ARI8S 1978 £125**
Yank designed, British built loudspeaker became a budget staple for many rock fans, thanks to the great speed from the paper drivers, although finesse was most definitely not their forte...

**BBC LS3/5A 1972 £88**
Extremely low colouration design is amazing in some respects — articulation, stage depth, clarity — and useless in others (both frequency extremes). Came in wide variety of guises from various manufacturers building it under licence. Partner with Rogers AB1 subwoofers for an extra two octaves of bass!

**HH ELECTRONICS TPA 50D**

**AMPLIFIERS 1973 £110**
Simple design with easily available components, solid build quality and fine sound make for a surprisingly overlooked bargain. Not exactly stylish, however.
LOWTHER PM6A 1957 £18 EACH
This seminal full-range driver is still manufactured. High sensitivity, as fitted to many classic horn designs.

TANNY WESTMINSTER 1985 £4500
Folded horn monsters which certainly sound good if you have the space. Not the last word in tautness but can drive large rooms and image like few others.

MAGNEPLANAR SMGA 198X £800 EACH
Technological loudspeaker with genuinely musical abilities; fast, smooth, open, dry.

LEAK SANDWICH 1961 £39 EACH
Warm sounding infinite baffle that, with a reasonably powerful amplifier can sound quite satisfying.

JR 149 1977 £120
Infamous cylindrical speaker that was ignored for decades but now back in fashion! Based on classic KEF T27 / B110 combo as seen in the BBC LS3/5a. Doesn't play loud, needs a powerful transistor amplifier, but rewards with fine clarity and imaging.

MISSION 770 1980 £375
Back in its day, it was an innovative product and one of the first of the polypropylene designs. Warm, smooth, clean and powerful sound.

QUAD ESL57 1956 £45 EACH
Wonderfully open and neutral sound puts box loudspeakers to shame. Properly serviced they give superb midband performance, although frequency extremes less impressive. Ideally, use in stacked pairs or with subwoofers and supertweeters.

SPENDOR BC1 1976 £240
Celestion HF1300 tweeter meets bespoke Spendor Bextrene mid-bass unit – and the result is a beautifully warm yet well focused sound. A little bass bloom necessitates careful low-end mounting, but these prove that the seventies did have some fine designs after all!

MISSION 752 1995 £495
Cracking Henry Azima-designed floorstanders combined HDA drive units and metal dome tweeters with surprisingly warm results. Beryllium tweeter characteristics makes them great for valves.

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KEF R105 1977 £785
Three way Bextrene-based floorstander (complete with casters!) give a truly wideband listen and massive (500W) power handling. A very neutral, spacious and polite sounding design, but rhythmically well off the pace. The quintessential nineteen seventies loudspeaker.

CELESTION SL6 1984 £350
Smallest two way design complete with aluminium dome tweeter and plastic mid-bass unit set the blueprint for nineteen eighties loudspeakers. Very open and clean sounding, albeit coarse at high frequencies and limp in the bass. Speakers would never be the same again...

YAMAHA NS1000 1977 £532
High-tech Beryllium midband and tweeter domes and brash 12" woofers in massive sealed mirror image cabs equals stunning transients, speed and wallop allied to superb transparency and ultra low distortion. Partner carefully!

IMF TLS80 1976 £550
Warm and powerful nineteen seventies behemoth with transmission loading and a mixture of KEF and Celestion drive units. Impressively physical wideband sound but rhythms aren't its forte.
Ear Ear!

I t’s all very well buying a great set of headphones, but where are you going to plug them in? Are you thinking about inserting the phono plug of your new Grado GS1000s into the headphone socket of your integrated amp? Think again, my friend. The better the headphones, the worse in relative terms they will sound via a basic headphone link. It’s at this time that you need to seriously consider investing in a separate amplifier, specifically for headphone use...

There are plenty of units around and, building upon their success with the Kora 3T phono stage, A.N.T. has now released a new example called the Amber 3T which sits in a chassis very similar in style to the Kora 3T. It arrives in two flavours: the basic edition with a green LED, Panasonic FM series capacitors and a switch-mode univoltage power supply or the Special Edition reviewed here, with an amber LED, that sports a very natty 27mm Alps Blue Velvet volume knob, a tiny, adjustable, FET biasing knob around the back of the chassis, upgraded ELNA Starget output capacitors and a linear power supply.

The front of the Amber 3T chassis features that Alps pot, the power LED and a full size, quarter inch headphone socket. Around the back is the biasing knob, a socket for an external power supply, two monitor and two input ports.

SOUND QUALITY

Heaving a pair of Sennheiser HD650s onto my shell-likes, I plunged ‘head-long’, as it were, into theoodle haircuts and mascara-covered mugs of early eighties-era Yes and the highly complex arrangement of ‘Changes’ from the album ‘90125’ (Audio Fidelity; the best master of this album currently available). The Amber 3T offered a balanced performance with a distinct analogue tone. Granted, it was not as warm as the Musical Fidelity X-Can V8P (£400) or as sharp as the Musical Fidelity V-Can (£100) but sat somewhere in the middle. The V-Can shines very brightly on the master providing an almost clinical rendition. The ANT doesn’t go that far but still retains an exciting midrange interpretation and the promise of more comfortable, long-term listening.

The X-Can, on the other hand, could be accused of ‘going soft’ on this dynamic rock track, lacking the speed and drive present via the Amber 3T, which also excels in its broad soundstage and deep bass response.

Switching to the more contemporary electronic sounds, with noticeable synth distortion, of Haxan and ‘Centre Of The Universe’ (Bronnt Industries Kapital, Static Caravan), the Amber 3T doesn’t lose that kid glove treatment that is sometimes necessary to successfully convey a low-key, ambient wash atmosphere but it sharpens the image, when compared with the rather smudged X-Can, that offers a water colour to the Amber 3T’s sharp focus photograph. The V-Can, on the other hand could again be accused of being clinical in comparison, responding to the synth distortions with a brightly lit output. So as it stands, the Amber 3T is the king of the CD output!

Moving to the higher resolution of vinyl and Crosby, Stills & Nash’s self-titled album, a 45rpm edition via Classic Records appeared to place a gentle frown upon the Amber 3T, denoting its confidence a tad while the X-Can suddenly sprang to life. The Amber 3T did reveal its solid-state DNA during vinyl play, suffering just a hint of upper-mid hardness during harmonic climaxes while the X-Can revealed in the extra information, proving more tonally appealing.

Bass flowered, however, on the Amber 3T, improving on the already impressive, detailed, output of the V-Can with an added layer of warmth that enhanced the upper mids and treble response, combining excellent detail retrieval with a lively, more confident presentation.

CONCLUSION

While the ANT Audio Amber 3T doesn’t quite have the maturity and self-assuredness of the X-Can on vinyl, it does offer the most performance of any all-transistor headphone amplifier I have yet heard, featuring a sense of smoothness and warmth that most solid-staters wouldn’t recognise. This extra sumptuousness works well on vinyl but brilliantly on CD, lifting most CD playback to a whole new audiophile level. Highly recommended, then.
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My conversion to the world of the vacuum tube was pretty much complete by the time I was twenty one. My early teenage years had been spent building ever bigger transistor amplifiers, until the discovery of a dusty old Radford valve amp stopped all of that. Oh what openness and dynamics! And as for that thermionic glow...

But then, into my arms a good friend thrust a rather quirky wooden boxed Sugden A21 transistor amplifier. Intrigued I plugged it in, and there began a twenty year long admiration for the marque. Introduced in 1968 as the Richard Allan A21 to celebrate twenty one years of that particular Yorkshire company's history; the A21 is, of course, still in production today.

Early transistor hi-fi amplifiers have a justified reputation for sounding rubbish. Germanium transistors are horrid devices that should be mashed by the nearest sledgehammer whenever you come across one. No offence to Leak Stereo 30 fans, but they do little for me. The Quad 303 has a reputation with some, it may be silicon, but overall to me it is soapy, soft and soggy.

Now the ten watt per channel A21 was launched on quite a different ticket. Jim Sugden, its creator, was a talented electronics engineer who started life marketing professional test equipment. His early demonstrations involved playing pure test tones on his amplifiers and those of his rivals, with the distortion clearly audible on his competitors’ designs.

The tie in with Richard Allan was short-lived and bizarre. J.E. Sugden & Co already existed and traded. The year previous an amplifier called the Si 402 had been supposedly manufactured (although I have never actually seen one), and Mr Sugden had written quite a good article arguing Class A and Silicon as the way ahead.

While researching this article it became quite clear that in the mid to late nineteen sixties the original post war D.T.N.Williamson valve KT66 amplifier was still considered the reference. Also there seemed to be some kind of mild war going on in the published world between the electronics and high fidelity press. The other well known Class A addict was of course John Linsley Hood; who at a similar time was pushing, frankly, a quite similar amplifier. But no mention in the electronics magazines at this time for Sugden. No doubt about it, it was Jim Sugden who first marketed and sold a Class A amplifier.

The A21 was not the only amp marketed by Jim Sugden. Also sold was the A41 pre-power amplifier, (later replaced by the A51). Circuit-wise it was all very similar; effectively three stages, all capacitor coupled, with low overall feedback applied. What is impressive for the age is the dual mono construction; and internally the preamp section is completely separate; with two power amplifiers bolted to the back of the case with shared mains transformer (separate windings per channel). The output stage is a classic single ended push pull circuit, using two BD151 per channel. The earliest versions have unusual three pin DIN inputs for everything except tape (standard five pin), a mains outlet for tuner (another stonking Sugden product when fitted with the Motorola MCPI340 PLL decoder chip – covered some years back in Hi-Fi World) and four millimetre banana sockets for speaker terminals. Build is impressive; think military levels.

The first changes to the design came with the Series Two in 1969. The original A21 delivered ten Watts in to six ohm loads, while the Series Two delivers twelve into eight ohm speakers. A change of output transistors to BD738 necessitated a change in supply rail to one with slightly higher voltage, but marginally less current; we are splitting hairs here. Conventional five pin DIN sockets, a headphone socket, and a change to the output bias circuitry, incorporating an extra transistor with adjustable bias, which replaced a couple of diodes to make component choice less fiddly on manufacture (and possibly less noisy in operation), were the only tweaks to the original classic design.

As mentioned before, there is very little between both the A21s, the A41 and the A51 in terms of design and overall sound. All use a near identical circuit. In theory the A41 and the A51 offer more power, but this is only true with speakers of higher impedance. Also, a more sophisticated power supply is utilised. In today's world of low four ohm average loads, there is no real advantage of the larger Sugdens;
some pundits regard the earlier Series One A21 as the hot ticket...

Well, of course being pure Class A all of these amplifiers run hot, consuming the same power from the mains supply if playing music or not; hence the rather large heatsinks. Sadly, Class A was (temporarily) removed from the A21’s operation by the mid nineteen seventies Series Three. The demand for more power, less efficient speakers, saw the introduction of Class B operation. In comparison to the early amplifiers they simply sound flat. From the front, they look identical to Series Two, but they run hand warm, rather than finger burning hot, and you cannot see the transistors exposed on the rear heatsinks, they have a little black cover over them. Avoid! Find the later A28 hybrid Class AB design if you need more power, or go for a new next generation A21...

**SOUND QUALITY**

Plugging a decent source in to an early original Richard Allan A21, and using a combination of original Quad ESL63a, LS3/5A and Diatone P610 loudspeakers proved the point that the earliest A21 is still valid. Even given the challenge of a much more modern B&W 686 loudspeaker this little amplifier displayed guts and soul that few amplifiers can match at any price. Sheer musicality that any A21 owner can instantly recognise, even in the latest version...

Ten Watts is not a massive amount of power, but within its remit, carefully matched to speakers, I can think of no other vintage transistor amplifier that comes close to this level of performance. On digital sources, a comparison was made to a new rival amplifier costing well over the two thousand pound mark, with around twenty times the rated power; as well as comparison to the latest Sugden A21.

The newer amplifiers are much cleaner, especially in the bass. The early Sugden’s Achilles heal is its capacitor-coupled output stage. On the wrong speakers, and the wrong music material the sound will appear bloated and fat. The usual ABBA (‘Day Before You Came’), Jimmy Smith (‘Organ Grinders Swing’) and a K&D session (‘Heroes’ remix) tracks played incredibly well through both the early A21s in to the given choice of speakers. They were totally engaging. Only that ‘damp bass’ mildly spoiled anything. Treble seemed to have more edge on the earlier Series One compared to Series Two, and I would say the earlier amp had more overall attack, and a tiny bit more joie de vivre.

Comparison to the latest Sugden A21s S2 amplifier revealed a surprising amount of house sound. The new amp had more power; although still no giant, it could play louder, and was cleaner, lighter on its feet, more dynamic when needed, more sophisticated, more modern. But there really is something quite special about the early amplifiers; and despite my initial doubts about differences between the two, I do think the earlier S1 had a very marginal edge over the later S2. It could simply be down to electrical condition of the amplifiers, but if anything the later S2 used was in better physical condition (after all, the Richard Allan had literally been rescued off the tip).

Quality of components used in these amplifiers is high by the standards of the era. An A21 cost a similar amount to a pair of Quad II valve amps; not cheap. However, electrolytic capacitors have never been a favourite coupling device of mine, especially in the output stage. In addition they age badly and should all be replaced by something more modern and better. These output capacitors have a significant effect on the sound; even modern types have sonic signatures I am not keen on. While replacing these, it is worth bypassing them with smaller non-electrolytic capacitors. The matching pair of power supply reservoir capacitors have a similar effect on the sound, and should be given the same treatment. If you are on original capacitors, change them now! Any amp that sounds a bit strangled and distorted will need these four large capacitors changing; fit the best you can. Reliability wise, other than worn preamp controls, this is the only issue; these things are bombproof.

Using the onboard phono stage revealed just how far we have come in semiconductor development. The preamp section is frankly not that good, certainly sub-2010 standards, and the phono stage is bordering on rubbish. These early transistor preamp circuits cannot seem to do low level detail, whereas the power amp section clearly gets away with it. As an experiment the entire preamp section was bypassed; an easy trick to do, it uses a small four pin plug; a thick wire was instantly removed, leaving only the bass lacking by modern standards. I do love the simple input switching arrangement.

I do not like the combined mains/ volume control one bit, nor the tone controls. But by fitting an ALPS blue 47K potentiometer in place of the original volume control, bypassing the entire preamp section, it was amazingly hard to fault.

Second-hand these little amps can turn up in ‘boot sales’ (or your local tip!) for not a lot of money. There are a surprising amount of them about. However, there is already quite a strong global following for these Class A amplifiers; the average price for an early A21 seems to hover around the £200 mark on certain websites; and as more leave the country, so prices are bound to rise.

The ‘new’ A21 remains something of a bargain, and in my opinion one of the few transistor amps worth owning. The older amplifiers are limited in power, and are getting tired. Even so, they can show much more modern devices something about soul and passion that most transistor amplifiers totally miss out on, frankly more similar to valve sound than solid state; certainly more Williamson than Audiolab. They tend to be incredibly reliable, even given my hatred of the electrolytic capacitors; they tend to hang together; and frankly even at a couple of hundred quid, these amps are a bit of a bargain. With preamp bypassed and better capacitors, their ten Watts performance is simply awesome, in certain areas bettering the current model.

"I can think of no other vintage transistor integrated that comes close..."

**CONCLUSION**

Jim Sugden got this amplifier incredibly right; it is bombproof and a sonic delight. By the end of the 1970s Sugden got fed up with the audio industry and sold out to the current owners, and he has never been seen since. The current owners have done an amazing job by reintroducing Class A operation, keeping the Jim Sugden design ethos alive and in servicing all of these old amplifiers that keep turning up at car boot sales. A solid recommendation and a fine second hand buy!
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"I managed to assuage my new listening room's deviant sonic behaviour with a 'smash and grab' raid on Ikea..."

david price

They say that moving house is second only to divorce in the amount of stress it generates. So I'm pleased to say that my recent relocation to the wilds of Wiltshire hasn't been too traumatic. In truth, the most annoying part of my move was catching a cold, and therefore not being able to set my system up properly, as I explained last month. To recap, I'd just got it all unpacked, and was about to set it up when Mother Nature intervened by giving me a nasty dose of the sniffles, thus rendering my finely tuned auditory capabilities null and void. My cold was such that I could hardly hear myself sneeze, so hi-fi fettling simply wasn't going to be a practical proposition for a week or two.

Well, despite the intervention of one of the coldest winters since 1981 with more snow than Val d'Isere surrounding our new cottage, the good news is that I finally put down the Lemsip a couple of weeks later, and with my newly decoked lugholes began to set my system up. As I'd noted, the new listening room is dramatically different to the last. Whereas my old place had a wonderfully wide front room, but with a low ceiling, the new one has a wonderfully wide front room, but with a high ceiling, the new one has been designed to house a Yamaha NS 1000M loudspeaker user will instantly know this to be a good thing!

Still, the room isn't without its resonances; there's definitely something going on. But happily I have managed to assuage its deviant sonic behaviour by mounting a full on frontal assault - or was it more of a 'smash and grab' raid? - on IKEA. One icy afternoon just before the new year, I emerged from the Bristol branch floundering under the weight of countless furry rugs, sheepskins and scatter cushions. These were then duly deployed in critical areas of the listening room, and lo and behold, my system sound improved in leaps and bounds! As well as the obvious sonic benefits, I like to think of my Yuletide spending spree as part of my patriotic duty as an Englishman, to 'reflate' our ailing retail sector.

Large amounts of soft, fluffy furnishings duly procured - making my listening room look curiously reminiscent of a set from Barbarella - the next task was the simple expedient of subly positioning my loudspeakers. Well, it would be simple, were they not to weigh (along with their sand-filled Custom Design stands) the best part of fifty kilos apiece. But the removal men had just dumped them where I'd asked them (i.e. "over there please mate"), and I really had to face up and risk life and limb (and back) to get them positioned properly...

You see, they both stand either side of a fireplace, and had been pushed back too far into the recesses going back to the room's rear wall. Needless to say, moving them out slightly, toeing them in very subtly and then sitting on each one for five minutes (so as to bed the speaker stand spikes into the floor) has worked wonders. The NS1000Ms' treble and midband level pads sit almost exactly where they did in the old house now, telling me I've got the tonal balance of the room close to where it should be, whilst its echoic properties are - if anything - now slightly better than before.

Finally, the rest of my system came off the floor and onto the superb Quadraspire stands they'd previously resided on. The Musical Fidelity AMS35i amp got its own dedicated suitable closest to the speakers (a mere seven metres away!), and the vexed issue of cables then reared its ugly head. Obviously, my last 'installation' of the system had been arranged around the geography of my old listening room, but now suddenly I was finding I couldn't use that 0.5m Silver Arrow interconnect, or that I'm Silvermann power IEC. My amp is now powered by the longest cable I have in the house - a 4m Clearer Audio Copperline - and very good it is too for a cheapie.

Intriguingly, right behind the amplifier sits a mains socket of the type you don't normally see in this country; a 15A type D. The house has several of these, which I last saw when I lived in Hong Kong in the late eighties. Given that the plugs aren't fused, I am wondering about the suitability for hi-fi applications; I can't see why not as almost all foreign plugs aren't fused either (any advice much appreciated), but a short 0.5m power cable run from this socket right into the back of the amplifier would surely be a nice way to give the Musical Fidelity its juice!

Next begins the laborious process of fine tuning. Whilst the prospect of listening to umpteen different mains cables and interconnects hardly fills me with relish, I'll grudgingly admit that they do make a big difference, but the trick is getting the right combination. In the same way that motorbikes suddenly 'come on song' when you've got the right mix of tyres, tyre pressures, damper preload and rider weight, so too hi-fi never fails to hit a 'sweet spot' when you've slavishly tweaked everything to within an inch of its life. The trouble is of course that, at my old house my system had the cumulative benefit of six years of trial-and-error experimentation, whereas now in my new place I am well and truly luck to square one. Forget broken cutlery, lost belongings and distressed pets; for me, this is why I don't want to move again in a month of Sundays!
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R
ight, I'm going to sound like your Dad, wagging a warning finger into your face, but that old chestnut, "don't believe everything you read", is true and you should always remember it...

It's an odd psychological response, but speaking as a journalist of over twenty years experience, I do continue to find it incredible that if I stood next to you at the bus stop and declared that Tapioca Pudding was a cure for cancer you'd run home to your wife declaring, "Hey Martha, you have no idea how many cranks take bus rides these days. Lemme tell ya, there was this guy, today!" But, if I wrote the same in a newspaper or a magazine you may well declare, "Hey Martha! You passing Tescos today? Get me some Tapioca! Whaddya mean? There might be something in it!"

People behave like Pavlov's Dog. Print something on a piece of paper and it must be true. Why? Because it's written down. Why should that make it true? Because it's written down. We always remember it... I'm a big fan of vinyl and have trumpeted that 180gm vinyl sounds better than standard weight vinyl. I admit it - I initially fell into the same trap. And then, one day, I had a real good listen and now I'm not so sure.

It feels great, there's 'perceived value' for money when buying a heavyweight vinyl album and there also possible benefits in the reduction of warping but sound quality improvements? The jury is still out and, to be honest, I'm not convinced. More so, I use an Avid Acusus turntable with a clamp. Thinner records mould better to the turntable with the clamp than thicker, heavier records. So, for clamped decks, will thinner records sound better as they're more integrated within the turntable chain of components?

Here's the second example. If you see a CD for sale - a new CD, that is - and it declares that the music within has been remastered, will you buy that in preference to the same CD that has not been remastered? Most people will always go for the remastered version. However, remastering is not always desirable or necessary. In fact, I'd lay odds that some albums are remastered purely for marketing reasons.

Take the new series of Perfect 10 reissues that parade the very best of the Rounder Records label in celebration of its 40th anniversary. The first batch of ten (more will follow in March) includes 'best of...' compilations from great artists such as Johnny Adams, Johnny Copeland, Clarence 'Gatemouth' Brown, Mississippi John Hurt, Solomon Burke and Ruth Brown. You'd think that the first thing Rounder would do would be to remaster the lot wouldn't you? Well, they haven't done so and, you know what, they don't need it because the original mastering was pretty darned good to begin with.

Producer for the original recordings Scott Billington, speaking from the Rounder studios in the USA, confirmed that these recordings are not "tricked out" in any way. "We used really good microphones, most of the recordings were analogue-based so we used 2" tape, run at 30 ips. Even using ProTools, I still mix to tape. There's something so pleasing about how sounds react with analogue tape. Analogue tape is almost an 'effect', it compresses the sound a little bit without unpleasant artefacts - I hate to hear compressors switching on and off. It's more pleasant than listening to raw, digital files."

Which is why these Rounder reissues - which have experienced precisely zero remastering - sound so good today. Because they were created properly in the first place. Just the fact that they haven't gone through the horrible 'make it louder' mastering should make the series appealing to music fans of this magazine.

So remember to think and think again when you hear the 'facts' about hi-fi, music and life in general. Always question. Never forget, the expert in the broadsheet is but a piece of paper away from being a crank at a bus stop. There are no blacks and whites, only greys and variations along a scale.

If, on the other hand, I've done nothing more than confuse the hell out of you and rocked your certainties about life in general then I can only advise you to keep reading Hi-Fi World. Where the crap is cut, the facts are solid and the real truth is revealed about Tapioca Pudding. You heard it here first!
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"the Government's plans will leave the UK lagging behind in digital radio technologies used..."

Steven Green

The House of Lords Select Committee on Communications has launched an inquiry into digital switchover of TV and radio. On the digital radio side, the inquiry is seeking views on "the current state of the Government's plans for switchover to digital radio", and on "the outstanding technical issues, including the appropriateness of DAB as the digital radio standard". The inquiry will close for written submissions on 1st February (see http://tinyurl.com/9bsow5 for more details), and below is a summary of the points I will be making in my submission.

First of all, the main justifications for digital radio switchover to take place are completely flawed. One of the main arguments put forward by the broadcasters is that radio somehow "needs to go digital" to avoid being left behind other industries that are switching to digital. In reality, the UK is seven to eight years ahead of every other large country on earth in terms of the sales and development of digital terrestrial radio. For instance, none of the other large Western European countries have even commercially launched digital radio yet, and the commercial radio broadcasters in both France and Germany have been vociferously arguing against the need to launch digital radio in recent months. It is simply dishonest to suggest that radio needs to go digital in the UK when digital radio hasn't even been commercially launched yet in the vast majority of countries on earth!

Furthermore, I have yet to see the broadcasters provide a shred of evidence to show that the public is in favour of FM being switched off, whereas there is a significant amount of evidence that points to the contrary. Firstly, there was a huge outcry from listeners when the 2015 FM switch-off date was first announced last summer (a date for FM to be switched off has conveniently disappeared altogether from the Digital Economy Bill, by the way). And a market research survey conducted by Ofcom last year showed that 91% of people were "satisfied" with the amount of choice that they could already receive on the radio, and only 3% of people were "dissatisfied". In my opinion, the public does not want FM to be switched off at all.

The other main justification put forward is that the cost of transmitting on both analogue and digital is supposedly crippling the broadcasters financially. Yet it only costs from around £5,000 per year to broadcast a small local station on FM up to around £60,000 per year to cover a large city on FM, whereas it costs around £100,000 per year to broadcast on a local DAB multiplex (£200,000+ in London!). Do they seriously expect us to believe that the industry's finances?

Turning to the technical side of things, the official line is that the UK is sticking with DAB for the foreseeable future, despite the fact that DAB is a completely outdated system that delivers lower audio quality than FM, a lot of people suffer from poor reception quality, and around 100 smaller UK radio stations can't afford to transmit on DAB because the jump in transmission costs is too high. Switching to DAB+ would either solve or hugely improve upon each of these problems.

Technology hasn't stood still over the last few years, either. For example, the new DVB-T2 system (the successor to the transmission standard used for Freeview, but which is also suitable for broadcasting radio to mobiles/portables/fixed receivers) is ten times as efficient as DAB, and it is over three times as efficient as DAB+. The DRM+ digital radio standard was also standardised last year, and DRM+ would be the ideal digital system for stations with small coverage areas to use. Neither DVB-T2 nor DRM+ were mentioned at all in any of the reports published by the broadcasters or the Government on the subject of digital radio switchover, and I would expect that the consequences of the decision to accelerate the move towards digital radio switchover now will be that the UK will end up using technologies that are one generation behind the rest of the world - i.e. we will end up using DAB+, whereas the rest of the world will end up using DVB-T2 or an equivalent next-generation digital radio system.

Last but not least, there's the issue with the broadcasters excluding Internet radio from the recommendations they made to Government about the future of digital radio. The broadcasters did this to kill off the threat posed by Internet radio, and in order to push as many people as possible onto the DAB platform where their stations face the least amount of competition. A more blatant piece of protectionism would be hard to find.

In summary, the Government's plans for digital radio switchover are an excellent example of the kind of short-term decision-making that got us into the DAB mess in the first place; they will leave the UK lagging behind the rest of the world in terms of the digital radio technologies used; the only people to benefit are the big broadcasters and the receiver manufacturers; and the UK public is expected to foot the several billion pound bill, in return for which the audio quality will be reduced. How kind!...
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"I look forward to seeing puzzled commuters, as they ponder this latest tube ad, on the Tube..."

noel

Sitting on a Bakerloo line underground train recently I was amused to see that the dear old thermionic valve - tube to our U.S. readers - had finally made it to overground status, if you see what I mean. Opposite me was an advertisement for a valve adorned Fatman i-Tube iPod docking station!

That tubes should suddenly become a part of modern cool, instead of an energy chewing anachronism Grandad had to put up with, made me smile wryly. Did all the iPod wielding, earpiece studded commuters around me, peering intently into tiny screens whilst solemnly pressing buttons, really relate to this yesteryear technology? It would seem so because the very same docks are available in HMV’s gadget shop at their flagship store on London’s Oxford Street.

But more amazing than this by a long margin - and so bizarre that I had to write a column about it - is an announcement by Panasonic. Yes, the mighty Panasonic, a corporate leviathan I would have thought was immune, even blind, to the whims of the outside world. Perhaps I am being unfair, as they do actually make very nice products and I fell deeply in love (sad, I know) with my first ever camcorder, a Panasonic NV-GS708. But even its name speaks of numb corporatism, of an organisation so vast it can’t even come up with a name that relates to purpose and is memorable to buyers. All the same, Fatman is going to have to move over because now Panasonic have caught ‘thermonic disease’, and have issued a product statement that almost unbelievably links Blu-ray to valves!

Huh?

On reading this I wondered if, perchance, drinking too much coffee to try and keep my brain cells on their toes might have unexpected consequences if taken too far. Could Panasonic, a world leader in vacuum cleaners, really be talking about valves? Would anyone in that giant organisation really be aware of the modern day existence of such things? And why would they try and relate them to Blu-ray players, for heaven’s sake? I have a tendency to prattle on endlessly about the wonders of the tube if provoked, but to date I haven’t quite tried to link them to Blu-ray players. They must be drinking very strong coffee in Japan. This is what the product statement says -

"The DMP-BD85 is the king of Panasonic’s new 2D Blu-ray players. Audio is where the BD85 really shines. It decodes the usual assortment of audio formats but adds a HDMI Jitter Purifier to ensure clear robust bass sounds. It’s also got a built-in Digital Tube Simulator, that helps reproduce those warm tube amplifier sounds. The BD85 even has 7.1 channel analog outputs to complete the audio experience."

So now we can own a Blu-ray player with the sound of a ‘warm’ tube amplifier; courtesy of Panasonic’s Digital Tube Simulator. Hah! I nearly died laughing.

Of course, the simple truth is that Japan never quite forgot the ‘tube sound’, Lux making many historical bridging products in classics like their SQ-38 and a 40 Watt Lux power amplifier I used happily for a long time. Then Lux designer Tim de Paravicini returned to the UK from his sojourn in Japan and designed the EAR PL509. He brought his knowledge and experience back and confirmed my suspicion that when engineered properly valve amplifiers had something transistor amplifiers did not have - and it wasn’t a ‘warm’ sound!

The myth of warm sound lives on however, a property originally induced by lousy output transformers that saturated and had a rolled off frequency response, due to excessive winding capacitance. But that’s another story.

That the ‘tube sound’ has become so widely acknowledged that Panasonic - of all companies - should try and incorporate it into Blu-ray players is extraordinary to me. I never thought I would ever see the day and cannot imagine what we are going to get next on this trip back to an early technology that just happens to give superb results. I just hope it isn’t an E.U. ban because of energy consumption!

What is also interesting here though is that Panasonic have finally twigged that good sound quality is important and sells BD players. Good on them! At least they are awake to what’s going on in Blu-ray, unlike all rivals except Oppo. Up to now the audio capabilities of Blu-ray players have been assessed and summarised by whether Dolby TrueHD and DTS HD Master Audio are on their Features tick list. Not any more if this product statement is read and understood by other manufacturers and AV journos around the world. Panasonic now relegate these commercial compression schemes to ‘the usual assortment of audio formats’ - ouch! Their importance has been downgraded, rightly in my view, because they do nothing for audio quality, only add to a player’s cost through royalty fees. I’m not sure Blu-ray in dual layer, 50GB format needs audio compression; PCM should do.

Add in Panasonic’s use of HDMI Jitter reduction (jitter is induced by the video content) in addition to ‘tube sound’ and - voila! - you have a Blu-ray player that looks very tasty audio wise. I wonder if it’ll be so overground it’ll make it to the Underground! I look forward to seeing a lot of commuters with puzzled expressions on their faces as they ponder this latest tube ad, on the Tube.
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It's been an interesting month at Smith Towers, and not all of it involving vinyl either. However, I can safely say that all of the following events can be directly linked to one person — a certain Mr H. Boardman of this parish! On the vinyl front, I am thrilled to report that I am now the proud owner of a Sony PSB-80 Biotracer turntable, and not any old one but the very one that graced the Olde World pages of Hi-Fi World back in March 2007. "Big deal," I hear you cry, but the problem was that, not long after the Sony's return from the office for photography for that very feature, it stopped working and, in that typical over-complicated nineteen seventies electronics type way, obstinately refused to start again...

However, last year, Haden began the great clear out of his abode as he is moving to new premises later this year and the Sony was offered to me. Naturally I couldn't say no as, if nothing else, it would make a lovely paperweight (although I'd need a bigger desk...) and so it came my way around a year ago. I tentatively poked round inside it, scared by its fearsome reputation more than anything else but, with no service manual around and other things to do, it was carefully put into storage. However, just before Christmas, another fellow Hi-Fi World scribe, Tim Jarman, invited me to spend the day and IC or two and some repairs to a brace of new capacitors, didn't even break a sweat and after a few technical jobs, given that Tim hands it back to me at John Howes' Audiojumble in February (Sunday 14th — get the date in your diaries)!

Other things have been happening right in the Smith abode however, involving large loudspeakers, much to my good lady wife's distress, and I also have Haden to thank for these. Back last June he rang me to say, "I have a pair of distressed B&O Beovox MS150 speakers that are in a bit of a state. If you don't want them, they're going to the tip". Now this was like a red rag to a bull, so duly expressed my interest and finally gathered them up in October last year. "Bit of a state" wasn't kidding either — the cabinets were scratched, there was a thick layer of dust on them and the foam surrounds of the bass driver and subwoofer on each were long gone. However, these were B&O's last big passive loudspeakers before they moved to active technology and are very impressive. Statistics like power handling capacity of a genuine 150 Watts, a four way design incorporating a monitor-quality Peerless ten inch subwoofer driver and a weight of over 30kg per cabinet tell only a part of the story. So I knew these had to be saved and, at the time of writing, I have completed woofer and subwoofer restoration and I am just in the process of specifying new crossover components and wiring, before screwing them all back together. But of course, this opened up a new can of worms...

You see, I had been planning to perform a similar task of recappping and rewiring on my own reference Ferrograph S1 loudspeakers but had never managed to work up the enthusiasm to start pulling them apart. The placing of an order for components for the B&Os was just the impetus I needed, however, and so I pointed my screwdrivers in the direction of the S1s. I now have the list of components I need, but I also have a KEF B139 with a terminal panel that disintegrated in my hand, a resistor on the crossover PCB that now only has one leg after it came apart as I leaned it to one side to read the value on it, and a couple of PCB pins dangling in mid air with midrange and tweeter wires still connected to them, after they parted company with the rest of the PCB as I dismounted it. I suspect this is nature's way of telling me I should have attended to my loudspeakers sooner, but at least secure in the knowledge that they can't fail to sound even better once reassembled!

I would love to end here by saying that this is the end of my transducer travails but no, sadly not. You see, last October's Audiojumble saw me whiling away a quiet ten minutes perusing the long printed list of an enthusiast's 'stock' that had to be passed onto a new home before he could move house — yes, it was that Mr. Boardman fella again (he's a bad influence on me, clearly!). I am pleased to report that I did resist the lure of the several items of Bang & Olufsen on there but then I spotted a loudspeaker name and model number I knew very well. They conjured up memories of the pair I used to own and I am at least secure in the knowledge that they can't fail to sound even better once reassembled!
SIMON YORKE S10 100
Adam Smith is beguiled by this high end vinyl spinning package.

REGA RB1000 105
Neville Roberts celebrates a superb mid-price tonearm.

INSPIRE 12 110
David Price tries out a fine 'plug and play' budget turntable.

news

PURE DUO
Jazz and blues from Pure Pleasure (www.purepleasurerecords.com) this month spans the ages. Bluesman Eddie Boyd, came to London to record '7936 South Rhodes', an LP featuring the early incarnation of Fleetwood Mac (i.e. Peter Green, John McVie and Mick Fleetwood) where both Boyd and Green excel. Next, the sultry sounds of Stacey Kent, a lady with a voice to send shivers up and down the spine. "In Love Again" (2002) covers the works of, composer, Richard Rodgers in an innovative manner.

GENRES A GO-GO
New from the Doxy label are four new LPs covering a gamut of styles. One of the first female country and rockabilly singers, Wanda Jackson, recorded this self-titled album in 1958 mixing country, pop and ballads in her recognised rockabilly style. The album exhibited her many recording talents, "The Meeting Of The Soul Brothers" might alert you to some early sixties Detroit outfit but, in fact, it was the 1957 release of a relatively unlikely pairing: the great Ray Charles (who doesn't sing but does play sax) and jazzman Milt Jackson (who plays guitar for the first time on record). One for the collectors. Also look out for Harry Smith's 'American Folk Music Volume Two: Social Music' and John Coltrane's jazz piece, 'Africa'.

BACK ON BLACK TRIO
Three excellent rock albums from the Back On Black (www.backonblack.com) vinyl label include Deep Purple's 'Live At Montreux 1996' including Ian Gillan, Roger Glover, Jon Lord, Steve Morse and Ian Paice. A 2LP set, two tracks actually come from a 2000 gig, 'Sometimes I Feel Like Screaming' and 'Fools'. Next is UFO's 'Strangers In The Night' a great name for a live album and, yes, a great album — one of the very best live works but little known. Starring Michael Schenker, it was originally released in 1979. Finally, The Black Label Society's 'Skullage' is a two LP, twelve-track compilation with four extra tracks including the vinyl-only 'Slightly Amped', a live cut via a Lehigh Valley gig.

WALK BEFORE YOU KRALL
Based upon the album released in 2006, Diana Krall's 'From This Moment On' (Classic Records/Verve, www.classicrecords.com) presents her Peggy Lee-like credentials as a cool interpreter of the Great American Songbook with classics such as 'Willow Weep For Me'. In fact, Krall's ballad work is superb here. It's made even sweeter by the superior 'Clarity' mastering employed by Classic Records.
IT’S A MAN THING

Four diverse but equally creative male artists to present to you; a barrage of blokes, in fact! The first is a brand new album from Tom Waits, ‘Glitter And Doom Live’ (Anti) on 180gm vinyl, is taken from his recent tours to the USA and Europe. It splices together performances from the whole tour. Although the edits can be a little odd, it’s still an enjoyable set. Bill Evans at the Montreux Jazz Festival (Speakers Corner, www.speakerscorner.de) is a 1968 release that mixes originals and standards – the highlight is the interaction between Evans and bassist Eddie Gomez.

Now two from Mobile Fidelity (www.mofi.com). Tenor Sax jazzman, Michael Brecker’s 2007 release, ‘Pilgrimage’, includes talents such as Herbie Hancock, Pat Metheny and Brad Mehldau. Fans of this fusion master will be surprised to hear his take on straight ahead jazz. Finally, Beck’s ‘Sea Change’ (2002) was a soft, almost melancholic release – his own magnum opus, a many layered piece that rewards repeated listening.

THEY’RE ACE!

...no, they really are! Ace Records (www.acerecords.co.uk), that is. The company doesn’t often release vinyl but, when it does, they’re always interesting. Take ‘Harlem Bush Music Uhuru’ via Gary Bartz NTU Troop, featuring the sax playing man himself, a student of Charlie Mingus. This re-release of an original 1970 album includes the funk-driven bass from Ron Carter and vocals from Andy Bey. Next is ‘Jungle Fire!’ from Pucho & The Latin Soul Brothers. A soul/latin release, it includes some excellent funk-based vibes derived from catchy songs via Motown men, Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong. Also look out for Idris Muhammad’s ‘Black Rhythm Revolution’, his 1970 debut and frenetic guitarist, and Link Wray’s ‘Early Recordings’ from 1963-1964, including the ‘Batman Theme’ and Ivan “Boogaloo Joe” Jones’s funky ‘Black Whip’.

...AND FINALLY

Direct from Diverse Vinyl’s (www.diversevinyl.com) own imprint is The Duke & The King’s ‘Nothing Gold Can Stay’. Created by Felice Brother, Simone, the album might be low-key but it arrives with quality lyrics and bountiful harmonies. Next, a rather bizarre compilation of Swedish/Australian rock from the likes of The Specimens and Rio Grande: six from each country, via Bootleg Booze Records (www.bootlegbooze.com). Four hundred copies will be available in black vinyl and one hundred copies will be sold with an accompanying logoed canvas bag. Also, don’t forget to check out Slayer’s latest album via Sony Music. ‘World Painted Blood’ is the band’s eleventh album featuring, wait for it, melody!

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Yorkie Star

Simon Yorke's new high end S10 turntable is a veritable vinyl feast, says Adam Smith...

We have often mentioned in the pages of Hi-Fi World that the meeting point between the professional audio market and the domestic one can be a rather uncomfortable one, particularly in terms of amplification and loudspeakers. But what of the sources? Here things are slightly different as, if one considers some of the all-time classic turntables for a moment and makes an audiophile's dream wish list, one might come up with the likes of the Garrard 301 and 401, the Technics SP10 and, of course, rarities like the Sony PS-X9 and the EMT 948 and 950. However, these were all intended for professional use and have been found in recording studios and radio stations across the globe for many years. Simply put, it seems that the crossover of high quality professional and domestic sources is much more noticeable because, regardless of what you want to do with the results, it's getting the information off the record that counts.

Fast forwarding to today, it is a simple but sad fact that the professional turntable is no longer the necessity it once was. CD, MiniDisc and now HDD have all taken its place, and most radio stations nowadays resemble more of a computer server room than a showroom for the very best audio equipment. However, these were all intended for professional use and have been found in recording studios and radio stations across the globe for many years. Simply put, it seems that the crossover of high quality professional and domestic sources is much more noticeable because, regardless of what you want to do with the results, it's getting the information off the record that counts.

Fast forwarding to today, it is a simple but sad fact that the professional turntable is no longer the necessity it once was. CD, MiniDisc and now HDD have all taken its place, and most radio stations nowadays resemble more of a computer server room than a showroom for the very best audio equipment. There is still, however, the need to preserve the recordings that are stacked away in the record libraries across the world, and for this most people in the know turn not to a huge company in the 'Silicon Valley' of Japan, but rather closer to home and the agreeable location of Alicante in Spain.

It is here that Simon Yorke bases his operation, following a move away from England a few years back, and with him taking great delight in telling me that the temperature when he shipped the S10 turntable was a balmy 17 degrees whilst we in the UK shivered under the weight of winter snow and ice; I can see why he did it!

All Simon Yorke record players (not 'turntables') are hand made to order by Simon and his son Spencer and a read of the words of wisdom on the website (the aptly named 'www.recordplayer.com') gives an insight into the man, his ethos and the driving force behind his creations.

I take time to mention the professional connection as, although to the untrained eye the S10 may appear to be a rather fancier version of the S9 that I reviewed back in the May 2007 issue of Hi-Fi World, the opposite is true, as the S10 is actually a slightly more 'domesticated' version of the full-blown professional 'CAT' Compact Archival Turntables that Simon makes for record libraries and archival centres all over the world. Although lacking the computer-controlled 16-100rpm abilities of the latter, the S10 still, as Simon puts it, "comes in many guises", with a platter of up to 20 inches in diameter and arms of up to 16 inches in length. For this review however, we were supplied the most usual home version, with twelve inch platter and a nine inch 57.1 tonearm plus spare arm wand for easy cartridge changing.

As standard then, the S10 offers 33, 45 and 78rpm speeds with individual fine adjustment from a belt drive system that will also spin the platter in either direction. The platter itself is an 8kg sandwich variety, consisting of layers of stainless steel and aluminium separated by a graphite disc, plus a further graphite disc as a record mat. Switches on the motor controller are unlabelled, so it's worth remembering that it's the left hand one that selects platter direction — flicking this inadvertently is not a problem if your Ortofon happens to be an OM Pro S, but less good if it's a Kontrapunkt! The S7.1 arm is a unipivot device but with a handy bracket that limits its free movement in the...
"one of the most revealing record players I have ever encountered..."

lateral plane; naturally this does not affect it when playing but makes it feel far less wobbly than most when being handled. Its output cables plug into a termination box that, as standard, has phono sockets, but Simon Yorke Designs can supply a balanced XLR version on request.

A certain amount of assembly is required for the record player, but the instructions for both deck and arm are clear, concise and easy to follow. It is also worth mentioning that build quality and finish are both stunning and the whole unit is an absolute pleasure to assemble, giving the feeling that every single aspect of it has been carefully thought about and designed to integrate perfectly.

As an example, I did question the fact that the two metal halves of the platter have different finishes; one matt and one shiny. It was only when I sat down to begin listening that I realised this matches exactly the finish of the two layers of the main base — shame on me!

SOUND QUALITY

As editor DP put it in his EAT Forte review in the May 2009 issue, at this price level the question is not of good or bad, but what kind of good? So, with this in mind and remembering how much I enjoyed the S9 model, I sat back as stylus hit groove expecting to be bowled over, and was a little disappointed to find that, whilst I was in some respects, I wasn't in others. To cut a long story short however, it turned out not to be the fault of the S10 in the end, but the spitty treble and rather flabby bass actually turned out to be my ageing Ortofon Kontrapunkt b being rather unhappy in the S7 I arm. I was rather surprised by this and, given that I have found so far the Ortofon works well in arms that previously housed my Audio Technica AT-OC9MLII, it was with some trepidation that I bolted the latter in. Fortunately, the results of this pairing were simply divine.

Some turntables have an immediate sonic signature, be it the bass of a Garrard, the wide soundstage of a Michell or the precision of an Avid and some, such as the Roksan Xerxes seem initially to lack the wow factor of these designs but it gradually becomes clear that they are quite simply superbly competent in pretty much all areas. The S10 actually seems to lie in between these points as I found that it never put a foot wrong once it was in its stride but, equally, it had a couple of little gems up its sleeve.
### Speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Price</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wilson Benesch ACT 1 speakers</td>
<td>£1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tannoy Westminster Royal SE speakers, ex-demo, mint, (£20,000) only</td>
<td>£12000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tannoy Definition DC8 speakers, piano black, mint/boxed</td>
<td>£1595</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tannoy Sterling Ex demo AS NEW (£2800) offered for only</td>
<td>£2250</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tannoy ST-300 super tweeters ex demo</td>
<td>£995</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dynaudio Audience 7 speakers with stands</td>
<td>£395</td>
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<tr>
<td>B&amp;W M-1 speakers, black, Mintboxed</td>
<td>£1995</td>
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<tr>
<td>B&amp;W VM1 speakers with stands, black, Mintboxed</td>
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<td>Ruark Tallman speakers, as new</td>
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<td>Wilson Benesch ACT 1 speakers (new)</td>
<td>£1995</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tannoy Caspian remote controlled int amp</td>
<td>£895</td>
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<tr>
<td>Union Research F3XH power amp, 30wpc, mint (£2295) only</td>
<td>£185</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rayconic SP100 Mk2 integrated valve amp (£2000) NEW</td>
<td>£1500</td>
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### Amplifiers

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<tr>
<td>Wavac MD-805M monos (£16500) as new</td>
<td>£12000</td>
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<td>Amarro A51813 (£995)</td>
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<td>TRI-TRV-M0005SE amplifier (new)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Median 551 integrated amp</td>
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<tr>
<td>Union Research F3XH power amp, 30wpc, mint (£2295) only</td>
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### CD Players & Transports

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<tr>
<td>CEC TLOX belt drive transport AS NEW only</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEC TL-1N transport with DA-1N DAC, AS NEW only</td>
<td>£7995</td>
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<td>Raysonic CD228, two chassis CD player, balanced, (£3700) NEW</td>
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<td>Rapsonic CD626</td>
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<td>Rayconic SP100 Mk2 integrated valve amp (£2000) NEW</td>
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### Turntables, Cartridges & Tonearms

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<tr>
<td>Kuzma Airline (£7200) mint condition</td>
<td>£195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuzma Stogi Reference 313 VTA 12inch tone arm boxed as new only</td>
<td>£4995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuzma 4 point tone-arm, as new, (£4500)</td>
<td>£125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuzma Ebony record clamp, as new (£165)</td>
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- **Tannoy Westminster Royal SE speakers**
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- **Tannoy Sterling Ex demo AS NEW**
- **Wilson Benesch ACT 1 speakers (new)**
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- **Rayconic SP100 Mk2 integrated valve amp (£2000) NEW**

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- **Kuzma Stogi Reference 313 VTA 12inch tone arm boxed as new only (£4995)**
- **Kuzma 4 point tone-arm, as new (£4500) (£125)**
- **Kuzma Ebony record clamp, as new (£165)**

### All Used Cartridges are Checked Under a Microscope Before Being Offered for Sale.
The first of these showed itself during my standard equipment warm-up period, when I always let any review item play away to itself for a good few days before taking time to really listen to it, but the S10 captured my attention more than any other simply by the amount of detail and impact that it offered at low volumes. More often than not, when the volume control drops, the deepest bass tends to fade away and subtle high frequency details drift quietly off into the background; this is simple physics explained by the Fletcher-Munson loudness curves that show how the ear is more sensitive to midrange at low levels, but somehow the S10 manages to ignore these laws and keep everything absolutely vivid, no matter how low the listening level.

In fact, 'vivid' was a word I kept jotting down in my listening notes, as I spent a thoroughly captivating few weeks with the S10. Pushing the volume control back to normal listening levels revealed an intimacy, scale and sheer sense of effortlessness that is rarely heard in a domestic environment. We at Hi-Fi World have encountered turntables that spread the sonic image off into the distance, and ones that pull things in closer but arrange all the performers within that space brilliantly. The S10 seems to do both at the same time, and I am still recovering from the shock of hearing Patsy Cline apparently singing 'Crazy' straight out of my phono stage on the shelf in front of me!

The S10 has no time for things like listening room boundaries or the limits of the recording studio, and playing my favourite LPs on it was like switching from a standard television picture to a widescreen one; it seems to simply conjure up so much more detail than I had heard before and slot it all into place. The action from the Winter suite of Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons' zipped round the front of my listening room like a hyperactive mosquito through the S10, with strings and brass blessed with real organic, lifelike form and body. Even with a cartridge like the AT-OC9MLII, which can be a little exuberant at times, the top end was sweet and fluid, but oh so taut and precise — almost CD-like in some ways, but in the very best sense.

Down at the low end of things, the S10 also held firm in its sense of poise and control. Bass was magnificently deep and authoritative, which was an impression I received even through the unhappy Ortofon cartridge, but with the Audio Technica fitted, everything just simply fell into place. The S10 offered a metronomic sense of timing and pace to the synth bass line from the Kane Gang's 'Motor Town' and served up a suitably grungy rendition of Metallica's 'The Day That Never Comes'. However, with some simple acoustic bass from Charlie Haden, I could hear every single string pluck, the slightest movement of finger upon fretboard and the fabulous decay of each note through the instrument's body, but without the S10 ever losing sight of the overall result of these, namely the tune being played, it may have the ability to dissect a bass line with surgical precision, but it certainly knows how to put it all back together again before it reaches your ears.

CONCLUSION

It is easy to detect the professional archival DNA lurking within the Simon Yorke S10 when listening to it, as it is one of the most revealing record players I have ever encountered. However, this does not mean that it is all insight and no music, as it has the ability to take these two requirements of ultimate musical satisfaction and blend them together like virtually no other turntable I have heard before. 15,000 is no small amount to pay for such a device, but I strongly suspect that, if the Simon Yorke S10 and S7.1 cannot find something within the grooves of your records, then it most likely isn't there.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Garrard 301 turntable
Alphason HR-100S arm (Cardas wired)
Ortofon Kontrapunkt b and Audio Technica AT-OC9MLII cartridges
Anatek MC1 phono stage
Naim Supernait amplifier
Ferrograph S1 loudspeakers

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Clamping a cartridge to an arm tube direct, as in the new Simon Yorke Series 10 tested here, might look Heath Robinson against more structurally sophisticated solutions from Rega and SME, but measurement consistently shows it is devastatingly effective. The tapered Simon Yorke arm tube has a well damped main mode at 250Hz our analysis shows, but the usual accompanying third order mode, which in this case would lie at 750Hz. Instead the Simon Yorke arm is vibrationally silent, both here and at high frequencies where headshells develop strong modal patterns. The lack of peaks at right in our trace clearly shows a very quiet high frequency performance and this translates into a smooth sounding, deep midband and tractile Bass, dynamics, instrument separation and stage width across the lower midband should be good from this arm.

The turntable was speed stable and accurate (-0.2% slow) as delivered (it is adjustable), wow and flutter measuring a low 0.15% unweighted, our analysis shows. The IEC weighted value was just 0.055%, so the S10 runs smoothly enough. The new Series 10 turntable and arm are well developed our measurements show. It's up with the best. UK

ARM VIBRATION

The Audio Salon
Tel. 0845 4000 400
www.audioSalon.co.uk

VERDICT

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At over seven times the cost of the venerable RB251, is the flagship of the Rega tonearm range worth its premium price? Neville Roberts investigates the RB1000...

Ask yourself which company has made the greatest difference to the art of vinyl replay? Garrard, Thorens, Dual, Linn, SME, Ortofon? For my money, it would have to be Rega. Of course, they’ve sold bucketloads of excellent budget turntables for decades, but their real contribution of course was the now ubiquitous RB300 tonearm. Launched in 1983, as a significant upgrade to the Planar 3 turntable, it grew legs and ran away. Indeed, it ran all over the hi-fi landscape! The world’s first budget superarm, it is fair to say, even now nearly three decades later there are many wondering about whether to get one (or its RB301 equivalent), or have their existing one tweaked. Put simply, it isn’t just a tonearm, it’s a phenomenon.

Of course, Rega haven’t stood still since the time The Police were at Number One with ‘Every Breath You Take’; the company – after denying there was much that could be done to improve the RB300 for many years – duly built a number of variations on the theme. The RB1000 is the ultimate; a development of the RB900, it benefits from more stringent quality control, a top quality finish and improved bearing specifications. The arm tube is polished aluminium with no external coating applied and is fitted with a new style rotary bias control. The arm wiring is a continuous run from cartridge tags to phono plugs and is a low capacitance and high performance audio cable made by Klotz. The phono connectors are Neutrik ProFi Gold featuring a “ground before signal” function, achieved by a special spring-loaded shell element which protrudes out of the shell around the centre pin.

It is manufactured using modern computerised CNC engineering centres and assembled and checked by hand. The bearings are of an extremely high quality and are hand-graded; in fact, they are of a type normally found in navigational gyroscopes. The precision stainless steel shaft onto which these bearings fit is ground to a tolerance of within 5 microns. The bearings are selected and fitted onto shafts by hand and this results in the fit between the shaft, bearing and one piece arm tube all being interference fits with zero tolerance.

The base has a 3 point stainless steel mounting block and vertical bearing housing, which is CNC machined from solid stainless steel. This holds the second set of bearings which are hand fitted and into which the vertical shaft is fitted. These are also interference fits. Incidentally, this base is the same as on the RB700, but is ever so slightly larger than on the rest of the range. The arm pillar tube is a slightly larger diameter too.

As with all Rega arms, no provision is made for fine adjustment of the VTA; other than by the use of optional shims fitted underneath the 3 point fixing. Evidently, Roy Gandy is not a great believer in VTA adjustment, other than what is basically required to suit a particular make of cartridge. However, there are many – including myself – who believe that VTA fine-tuning is one of the many essential adjustments required for an optimal tonearm/cartridge.
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Linn Ittok Arm
the original, however. The stock shows you what was wrong with - particularly for those who listen to of unflusteredness, that was special and obviously detailed, with a very Tracking ability was the same as I was fitted to the arm being tested. fixings arms is ISOkinetik. These are a form of VTA adjusters for the older focus and everything sounds clear. strongly from the off. Indeed, there is why it was recommended so cost just £90!), it is superb, which tidy presentation. It is quite dynamic to be around 10Hz, which is ideal. with a Lyra Clavis DC moving coil resonances was checked and found to be around 10Hz, which is ideal. Tracking ability was the same as I usually get with this cartridge at 80 microns, as one would expect.

The stock RB300 has a dry and tidy presentation. It is quite dynamic and obviously detailed, with a very accurate image placement and a decent sense of depth. Considering its price (the original 1983 model cost just £90!), it is superb, which is why it was recommended so strongly from the off. Indeed, there were some respects in which the RB300 was better than the (then) superarm to beat, the Linn Ittok. The Rega simply had a tidiness, a sense of unflusteredness, that was special - particularly for those who listen to classical music.

The AO modded RB250 shows you what was wrong with the original, however. The stock Rega is tidy alright, but it's almost too constrained, it seeks to put everything into a box and keep it there. Tonally, it's obviously too dry for its own good; you can't tell the difference between the rich sound of a nineteen seventies Stax recording (i.e. Isaac Hayes's 'Hot Buttered Soul') and the clinical precision of an early eighties Sony PCM-F1 digital one (think Madonna's first album). The AO modded RB250 unlocks the flavour of a recording, and also its groove. There's real rhythmic alacrity here, whereas the stock arm sounds like it's being timed by a metronome with only one beat. Ditto dynamics; the AO modded RB250 lifts a veil, letting the emotion of the music run free whereas the stock Rega arm keeps it all under lock and key.

As such then, the Rega RB300/301 is a great entry-level arm, and the AO RB250 modded arm is a superb progressive, really pushing the basic design to another level. Why then should one want a Rega RB1000 at £998, does it really take the Rega platform up to SME levels, or is it just a mere sideshow, pushing a good arm a little further than it should go? Well, to find out, I slipped a copy of my old favourite Stravinsky's 'The Firebird Suite' (The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra - Telarc digital recording DG-10039) onto the turntable. The results were superb; it was as if the orchestra was singing to me. I was sure that a couple of extra musicians had somehow slipped into the orchestra while I was changing over the arm. There's a whole new level of ambient detail, and a sense of ease and naturalness that the cheaper arms have. The AO modded RB250 unlocks the flavour of a recording, and also its groove. The AO modded RB250 lifts a veil, letting the emotion of the music run free whereas the stock Rega arm keeps it all under lock and key.

My three LP set of Laurent Garnier's 'Tales of a Kleptomaniac' (Plas Recordings PIASR 160 TLP) is a great piece of classic techno; especially on the first LP, there is an amazing synth bass line, but with some acoustic saxophone, trumpet, trombone and guitar mixed in for good measure. Here the RB1000 served up an incredibly tight bass, and while my woofers were massaging my kneecaps, the top end was coming through with crystalline clarity. Again, this whole new dimension of finesse and insight showed the RB1000 to be a revelation. Interestingly, there was no tendency for the top end to be swamped by the bass — it was all there — power and detail faithfully reproduced. Moving back onto home territory with some baroque music, I once again had the impression that I was hearing more from my records that I had been used to. Since the arm was the only thing that I had changed; this was the only possible variable that could have made the difference. The RB1000 has an unmistakable openness to the sound and the performance is more 'lifelike' when compared to the more junior arms of the range. Although the 1000 will set you back a lot more than an upgraded basic model, the result is something with just that bit more refinement in both looks and performance.

There's plenty to say about the RB1000's rhythmic ability too; it has an ease that you simply wouldn't recognise in the RB301; there's a far less mechanical quality to the way it strings together the tune. Granted, it's not as organic as some; this arm will never be confused with a good unipivot, but there's no sense of it having a 'technical sound' in the way the cheaper Rega arms have. The interplay between hi-hat cymbals and snare drums on The Smiths' 'Girl Afraid' was deeply satisfying, the Rega really getting into the groove where the cheaper RB300/301 would sound more dispassionate and analytical.

"there's an unmistakable openness to the sound, and it's more lifelike compared to more junior Rega arms..."

CONCLUSION
Rega arms are not for everyone; committed users of Hadcock unipivots should pass over the chance of an audition. But if you like a really well balanced and fully rounded presentation - namely one that doesn't major on one facet of the music to the exclusion of all others - the Rega RB1000 could well be for you. It is a jack of all trades, and master of some. There's an enjoyably
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Rega Research has stamped itself indelibly on the British hi-fi landscape. As a young man, Roy Gandy, had the vision of designing a turntable that was better made and more reliable than the ones he had been selling as a part-time hi-fi retailer. So in 1973 he formed a partnership with a colleague, Tony Relph, and registered the company name ‘Rega’ (formed from the first two letters of their respective surnames). Although this partnership did not survive for long, the company nevertheless continued with Gandy at the helm and, in 1975, the Rega Planar 2 turntable was launched and quickly established itself in the market as one of the finest budget turntables around. By 1980, Rega was employing thirteen staff, including to twelve countries and had twenty UK dealerships.

In 1976, Gandy turned his attention to designing and manufacturing his own tonearm. To this end, he found a casting company that worked with him to develop an entirely new production method that enabled the accurate casting of the one-piece arm tube. All this culminated with the launch in 1983 of his Rega award-winning ‘Britain’ series of arms and the legendary RB300 and RB250 (prior to this, Rega had used Japanese and Danish manufactured arms on their turntables).

The lower-cost RB250 used the same arm tube as the RB300, but saved money by not including a tracking force adjuster and by utilising a lower-cost plastic end stub to hold the counterweight, rather than the stainless steel end stub of the RB300. The RB300 can be easily identified by the combination of black arm tube and silver counterweight together with the large tracking force adjuster on the side of vertical pivot. Although the RB250 requires the tracking force to be set using the counterbalance weight position, this does have the advantage of allowing the arm tube’s vertical bearings to be supported on both sides of the bearing housing, which is one of the reasons that many consider the RB250 a better design. Neither arm provided any means of adjustment of the vertical tracking angle (VTA), but more about that later...

The RB100 is Rega’s entry level arm, fitted as standard to the Rega P1 turntable. It has a simple machined aluminium arm tube with the headshell bonded to it. It also features a three-point arm fixing, in place of the threaded arm pillar of the RB250 and RB300. The RB301 evolved from the RB300 tonearm, as with the RB100, the armboard mounting features a three-point configuration rather than a 23mm arm pillar. The counterweight is stainless steel and VTA is adjustable by using shims inserted underneath the three-point fixing.

Next came the RB600, which was a higher specification version of the RB300, manufactured to higher tolerances and with a silver finished arm. This was also the first arm to utilise high quality tonearm cable and phone connectors, instead of the ‘el cheapo’ cable and connectors of the previous arms! Tonearm cable was Klotz GY 107 and the interconnects were terminated with Neutrik phone connectors. This arm was subsequently replaced by the RB700, which sported a newly developed coating for the arm tube and the bearing housing was redesigned and manufactured to higher tolerances. Additionally, there was a new rigid stainless steel three point mounting block to support the arm as well as a new, bias adjuster. Finally, the RB900 was similar to the RB600 but had a better finish to the arm, employed a rigid three point mounting system and was fitted with higher specification bearings. This arm was finally replaced by the RB1000, reviewed here.

an enjoyably powerful and tight bass, an open and expansive midband and a nice sweet treble. It tracks demanding cartridges like my Lyra well and generally gives a very polished feel to the user.

Although considerably more expensive than other arms in the range, the RB1000 is very much a ‘fully upgraded’ product, that’s head and shoulders above the budget Regas and their tweaked variants. The only extras that should be considered are a means to set the VTA accurately and perhaps a nice plastic contact plate to support the arm tube’s vertical bearings to be supported on both sides of the bearing housing, which is one of the reasons that many consider the RB250 a better design. Neither arm provided any means of adjustment of the vertical tracking angle (VTA), but more about that later...

The RB100 is Rega’s entry level arm, fitted as standard to the Rega P1 turntable. It has a simple machined aluminium arm tube with the headshell bonded to it. It also features a three-point arm fixing, in place of the threaded arm pillar of the RB250 and RB300. The RB301 evolved from the RB300 tonearm, as with the RB100, the armboard mounting features a three-point configuration rather than a 23mm arm pillar. The counterweight is stainless steel and VTA is adjustable by using shims inserted underneath the three-point fixing.

Next came the RB600, which was a higher specification version of the RB300, manufactured to higher tolerances and with a silver finished arm. This was also the first arm to utilise high quality tonearm cable and phone connectors, instead of the ‘el cheapo’ cable and connectors of the previous arms! Tonearm cable was Klotz GY 107 and the interconnects were terminated with Neutrik phone connectors. This arm was subsequently replaced by the RB700, which sported a newly developed coating for the arm tube and the bearing housing was redesigned and manufactured to higher tolerances. Additionally, there was a new rigid stainless steel three point mounting block to support the arm as well as a new, bias adjuster. Finally, the RB900 was similar to the RB600 but had a better finish to the arm, employed a rigid three point mounting system and was fitted with higher specification bearings. This arm was finally replaced by the RB1000, reviewed here.

### VERDICT

Rega’s flagship pickup arm represents superb value for money, tuning in an extremely incisive and engaging sound, yet with a good degree of musicality too.

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<thead>
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### AGAINST
- no built-in VTA adjuster
Vinyl Section

i Time

David Price lives with Inspire's new i2 budget turntable...

It's hard to review a product like this. When I was last in the market for a £399 turntable (including a fitted Sumiko Oyster MM cartridge), I had to sell my moped to buy it. These days, I'd consider myself a vinyl veteran, and not naturally concerned with - to put it in a rather matter of fact way - 'entry level' record players. But thinking about it, if you're in the market for a device to play LP records well but without a lavish budget, then (to borrow a line from a well known daffodil wielding Mancunian), "how to start, where to go, who do you need to know?"

Well, the Inspire i2 is of course the answer to that question - or at the very least an earnest attempt to answer it. It's essentially a tricked up Rega P2. As serious students of the black art of vinyl reproduction know only too well, this is no bad thing of course. Indeed the Rega is my nomination for the world's best ever budget turntable, and I don't say this lightly. Having bought a Dual CS505 (also described as such) in the early eighties and then sold it to upgrade to a Rega, which then totally beguiled me with its smooth, svelte sound, I can tell you all the remarkable things it does at the price. Indeed, I could bore for England on how to set it up, tweak it and push it to the limit...

Inspire's Bob Isherwood could also do the same, I suspect. So perhaps it's ill advised to put he and me in the same room together; and should our paths ever cross in a hotel lift at a hi-fi show, it would be interesting to see who'd be the last man standing by the 8th floor. One thing's for sure; anyone else in there would be pleading for a speedy end to this mortal coil before we'd even got to the subject of belt tension!

So, the Inspire i2 starts with the best budget platform, and adds "all the mods", according to Bob. It's effectively the equivalent of buying a Rega P2 then getting a host of little tweaks done to it, to eke out all the performance it's capable of giving. "We're doing it all for you," says Isherwood, "so you're buying a ready made tuned up turntable instead of having to mess around upgrading from scratch. It appeals to Rega buyers who want something a bit extra".

The headline modification is the 12mm clear diamond polished acrylic platter, which replaces the Rega's unlovely conventional one. As it has been often observed, acrylic works very well when deployed as a platter; it's very dead sounding which is why companies such as Michell use it for bases and isolation platforms. On top of this is an Inspire 3mm 'ACRI MAT', which is a high quality acrylic platter mat with recess for record label. Atop this sits a 'Puka' platter weight, which adds mass but it is not sufficient to tax the main bearing or slow the motor. All this sits on a rigid plinth, made of "very dense" MDF, which is then finished in grey acrylic. The new Inspire (nee) Rega 251+ tonearm gets a bespoke counter-weight and end stub, and comes fitted with a Sumiko Oyster cartridge (although other cartridge options are...
available). For the purposes of this test, we ended up with an Ortofon 2M Red.

For those readers who already own a Rega P2 or P3, the various mods are available separately, comprising the Acrylic platter (£40), the Acry mat (£20), the Arm stub and end weight (£60), the Puka platter weight (£40) and the Sumiko Oyster cartridge (£40). Inspire also sells the Ortofon stylus balance (for £15) and a set of two VTA 'risers' (£15).

**SOUND QUALITY**

For those unschooled in the delights of the original Rega P2, it’s about the lowest you can go before you leave the realms of hi-fi. I don’t mean that in a bad way however, as it does just enough across the board to not ‘fatally’ obstruct what’s in the groove. Put a record on the P2 and it plays it with happy abandon, without wowing, rumbling or skipping. There’s a simplicity and a directness to its sound, but none of the coarseness you’d get from anything much cheaper. It simply gets on with the job, without drawing attention to itself, so much so that you can put it through a relatively high end system and the Rega will sound nice, when almost all its price rivals would be nasty. That’s why I rate it so highly, given its lowly position in life.

What then of the Inspire i2? Well, obviously the modifications package (for that is what it is, in essence) adds a good deal to the basic deck, making the listener just a little less aware of its humble origins. It’s a testament to the decent basic build of the P2 that so much can be achieved so simply, in fact. But it only goes to show how little there is that’s actually wrong in the first place. You do need to get the deck level though; that’s a basic prerequisite, as it affects both the arm/cartridge tracking and the perceived speed stability, and also the i2 (and Rega P2) really, really, really benefit from a good place to sit. A wall mounted turntable shelf is best, but in the absence of this a good turntable table; I used my favourite flavour of this in the shape of Quadraspire. I repeat - siting and levelling this deck is critical. Properly set up things just snap into focus. Oh,
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and if you then pull the dust cover out, the music gets better still...

Ride's 'Twisterella' is a jaunty, energetic guitar pop song, and that's precisely how the Inspire i2 presented it. There was a nicely propulsive bass, with a touch of warmth and softness for good measure. The deck doesn't quite start and stop bass notes like a Technics SL1200 (or any other good direct drive), yet it doesn't slur things too badly either. Instead, the bass guitar was able to push things along in a gently enjoyable way. Further up the frequency spectrum, the deck showed a surprising amount of detail; this classic piece of 'shoegazing' pop is a tad muddy yet the i2 picked through the dense wash of electric guitars and pounding ride cymbals better than I'd have expected considering its price. Vocals definitely sound too, the whole song coming over as enjoyably as it should do.

K-Klass's 'Rhythm is a Mystery' on 12" showed the deck's willing nature once again. It proved nicely clean and open across the midband with a smooth, slightly softened treble and a bass that was warmer than many budget turntables, but had just enough grip to get the gist of the powerful sequenced house bassline. The female vocal, which can sound a little cold or dispassionate on a stock Technics SL1200 was again sweeter than expected, the i2 really showing how nicely polished a good budget belt drive can be.

It was also surprisingly dynamic; not the most pronounced dynamic contrasts I've ever heard admittedly, but considering the lowly price the deck was good at carrying the song's subtle accenting that give it that hypnotic quality.

Spinning a bit of Miles Davis again reminded me this was a budget Rega. I was listening to, albeit a well feted one. There was a wide, spacious feel to the proceedings, just enough insight into what was going on at the back of the soundstage and a fair sprinkling of detailing with 'So What'. I'd have liked a slightly more secure, gritty feel to the double bass, but I did enjoy the rasp of the brass and the deck's generally engaging feel. Piano showed just the tiniest amount of pitch instability, but that's to ears spoilt by the almost terrestrial stability of a high end direct drive. Certainly it wasn't easily audible unless you listened for it.

The baby Inspire deck also made a fine fist of classical music. It's impressively clean and open across the midband and this, coupled with that trademark Rega smoothness, made for a pleasant sounding recorded acoustic in the first movement of 'Spring' in Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons' (The English Concert, Simon Standage). Violins had a crisp, believable tone, while cellos displayed decent body and weight. There was a good sense of atmosphere, although considering the base P2 is already a strong product at the price, and has far fewer weak points than it should. The result is a 'plug and play' (well, nearly) budget turntable that works very nicely with minimum fettling and turns in just enough of the sound to be called 'real hi-fi'.

The only problem for the Inspire i2 is that, at its price, it's in direct competition with Rega's own P3-24 (£390), which is Rega's own view of how the P2 should be upgraded, rather than Inspire's. Effectively, it's swings and roundabouts; the P3-24 gets a better motor but the Inspire's

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Loudspeakers

47 Lab Lens black S/H
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Wilson Audio Sophia Mercedes Silver S/H

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Attacama Europa Reference 8 3 tier S/H
BCD set of 3 Cones black with 8mm threads X-demo
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Cardas Cables Golden Cross 6m set of RCA interconnects
Crystal Cable Piccolo 1m RCA S/H
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Email: audiolaurie@yahoo.com
Telephone: 07906 336 176

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LOVELY MUSICAL Fidelity preamp, MIMIC, all inputs, XLR and RCA outputs, £150. MFX-LPS phonostage, MIMIC, mine £100. Sony belt turntable, £90. Technics D.D.T.T £70. Vinyl collection, 70 albums, offers. Unico sensitive valve R.D.S. tuner, remote, mint, boxed, £450 (£1275) Super sound. Wanted: Acoustic Zen Silver Ref II interconnects. (not 0.5m) V.H.H.Y. Tel: Stanley 07951 553 091

AUDiolAB 8000 P/C UK built, well cared for. £375. Tel: 01952 728 773 (Shropshire) Email: upgorez@tiscali.co.uk for more information

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REGA AMPLIFIER Bird 3 £190. Advance Acoustics UM20 speakers, £99. All as new. Boxed. Tel: Mick 01782 785 734

MERIDIAN 507 CD player for sale. Excellent condition with user guide. Superb sound. Bought for £1100, selling for £500 ono. Tel: 0151 281 3051 or 07845 395 396

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PAIR OF Linn kan speakers with stands excellent condition £125 Tel 0125333955 tecass@hotmail.com

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GARRARD 401 record turntable £300, SME3009 tone arm £150, Quad 33 / 303 amplifier / preamplifier £140. Michael. Jewson@aspiredence.co.uk

PROJECT RECORD deck + project phono amp/ Music Fidelity XA-1 Pre Amp/Arcam Alpha CD Player/Arcam P60 Power Amp/Rogers Studio 5 enlarge. Includes all power cords (Russ Andrews) and cables/speak stands and equipment stand Value £ 300 Sell £ 2350 ono. Must be heard Contact Steven on 00353 87 637 6623

TAG MCLAREN T20 Analogue Tuner for sale (in perfect working condition). All serious offers considered. paulkingsleysmith@gmail.com

GARRARD 301/401 and their range of spares and associated services. Also Shure V1-3 or 4 cartridges, Denon DL103 cartridge. Contact Mike with reasonable offers 01758 613790.

GARRARD 301/401, Garrard 417/419 after 6pm.

Classical Contacts
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WEMBLEY LOUDSPEAKER
(Phil MacCallum, London) Comprehensive loudspeaker servicing. Telephone: 020 8743 6582. Email: phil@wemblyloa.decker.co.uk

CLASSIC KIT
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(Dave Smith, Hornchurch, Essex). Re-covering of hi-fi loudspeakers, high quality loudspeaker systems, PA, power loudspeakers. TeleFax: 01708 447 344

LOCKWOOD AUDIO
(London) Tanner loudspeakers parts, restoration and repair.Also Epos and TDL loudspeakers. Telephone: 020 8864 8008. Email: lockwoodaudio@btinternet.com

LORICRAFT AUDIO
(Terry O'Draven, Bucks) Garrard 301/401 and their own 501 repair, spares and parts. Email: to01942790600

LEEMA TUCANA2, Black, two months old and A1. New £3450. Instructions, remote, box and unsigned warranty card. Genuine sale. £2500 ono. Joe 07976 261576.e-mail: raeljon@aol.com.

BLOWERS AND WILKINS DM 602 S3 floatingstand loudspeakers, black ash, immaculate condition, boxed, owned from new with manual, £140, buyer collects. 01229 584509 (Cumbria/Lancs)

TANNOT MONITOR GOLD 3LZ speakers, crossover network and switch panel plus mounting screws. Manchester area. Photos available. Offers to grovesdj@live.co.uk

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WANTED: MISSION 767 loud-speakers. Condition relatively unimportant (within reason!) but must be in good working order and preferably complete with original LFAU amplifier.

Email: audiolaurel@yahoo.com
Telephone: 07906 336176

WANTED Arcam AVR200 or similar. Please mail grafynl@yahoo.com

MERIDIAN 566 24bit dac with xlr outputs £350.00 Meridian 504 tuner £250.00 please ring for details, dave on 0191-4171669 after 6pm.

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(London) Tanner loudspeakers parts, restoration and repair. Also Epos and TDL loudspeakers. Telephone: 020 8864 8008. Email: lockwoodaudio@btinternet.com

LORICRAFT AUDIO
(Terry O'Draven, Bucks) Garrard 301/401 and their own 501 repair, spares and parts and service. Email: to01942790600

LEEMA TUCANA2, Black, two months old and A1. New £3450. Instructions, remote, box and unsigned warranty card. Genuine sale. £2500 ono. Joe 07976 261576.e-mail: raeljon@aol.com.

BLOWERS AND WILKINS DM 602 S3 floatingstand loudspeakers, black ash, immaculate condition, boxed, owned from new with manual, £140, buyer collects. 01229 584509 (Cumbria/Lancs)

TANNOT MONITOR GOLD 3LZ speakers, crossover network and switch panel plus mounting screws. Manchester area. Photos available. Offers to grovesdj@live.co.uk

CHORD INDIGO interconnect 1m RCA. One pair £299, two pair £549. Call Ian 07789712775

WANTED: MISSION 767 loud-speakers. Condition relatively unimportant (within reason!) but must be in good working order and preferably complete with original LFAU amplifier.

Email: audiolaurel@yahoo.com
Telephone: 07906 336176

WANTED Arcam AVR200 or similar. Please mail grafynl@yahoo.com

MERIDIAN 566 24bit dac with xlr outputs £350.00 Meridian 504 tuner £250.00 please ring for details, dave on 0191-4171669 after 6pm.
As the chilly winter lingers on, what better excuse do you need for staying indoors with the latest copy of your favourite audiophile monthly?

April's Hi-Fi World is full of the joys of spring with the usual host of great products for your perusal. Here's just some of what we hope to bring you next month...

POWER AMPLIFIER SUPERTEST
ICON AUDIO MB90, MIÇROMEGA PW-250
MYRYAD MXXA150, QUAD 909, ROKSAN K2 POWER
SILK GLOWMASTER, STEREONOW LFD NLE SIG
VALVET A1

DCS PAGANNI CD TRANSPORT/DAC/UPSAMPLE
ELECTROCOMPANET AW400 POWER AMPLIFIER
ORTOFON CADENZA BLACK MOVING COM
MONITOR AUDIO PL200 LOUDSPEAKER
AUDIO ANALOGUE CRESCENDO SYSTEM
ICON AUDIO STEREO 40/3 INTEGRATED
KLIPSCH HERESY III LOUDSPEAKER
OLDE WORLDE: B&O BEOCORD 220
PRO-JECT XPERIENCE2 TURNTABLE
WIREWORLD ECLIPSE 6/vdH VAV
SENNHEISER HD800 HEADPHONE
AVID PULSARE PHONO STAG
(pictured) SPENDOR ST LOUDSPEAKER
ROKSAN K2 CD2 CD PLAYER
OTELLO-M CARTRIDGE

PICK UP THE APRIL 2010 ISSUE OF HI-FI WORLD ON SALE FEBRUARY 26TH, OR SUBSCRIBE AND GET IT DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR: p82
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FREE READER CLASSIFIED ADVERTS COPY DEADLINES
APRIL 2010 - 5TH FEBRUARY 2010
MAY 2010 - 4TH MARCH 2010
This album is a contemporary classic, winning many plaudits, not least the Best Album at the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards in 2008. One of the highlights of this particular folk recording is Simpson’s guitar playing. He’s recognised as one of the best exponents of the instrument. In fact, this Scunthorpe-born lad moved to the USA in the eighties and further expanded his repertoire, adding to his guitar skills by absorbing forms present in that country.

Simpson has released an array of albums, commencing in 1976 with ‘Golden Vanity’ (Trailer Records) and taking in works alongside noted artist June Tabor, and his wife Jessica Radcliffe Simpson. On these and this featured release, Simpson works best when he can draw both upon the past, with traditional folk songs, and his own new works whilst mixing cultures from the UK and America. ‘Prodigal Son’ also showcased his instrumental virtuosity as his acoustic guitar gives way to electric guitar, lap-slide and banjo. Simpson’s own vocal delivery should not be ignored, either. He has a gentle style, low key, presentation that slides easily into the songs he sings without any apparent effort.

His cohorts enhance the whole experience: Kate Rusby, Jackson Browne and Kellie While back Simpson on vocals while Barry Phillips (cello), Andy Cutting (melodeon) and Alistair Anderson (concertina and pipes) provide worthy instrumental accompaniment.

Originally released as a CD on Topic Records, the new vinyl version has just been issued by Three Black Feathers, a new vinyl-only record label dedicated to releasing classic British folk records. MD of the company, Chris Heard, has always had the Simpson album high on his list when he was compiling his initial release list. “I felt that, because of the warmth and inherent acoustics, the album would really lend itself to vinyl. Include the packaging and the aesthetics of the release and you have an LP that provided me with a clear vinyl vision, probably more than any other title. Simpson is of a certain age and is, himself, a card-carrying lover of vinyl. It’s the album that he wanted to be released on vinyl.”

Relating to that, Heard stated that he wanted to plug into an emotional musical resonance that the vinyl version provides but which, he believes, is missing on CD. The vinyl version has been mastered by Steve Rooke, who also worked on the recent Beatles CD remasters. After chatting with Chris Heard, Rooke recommended that all of Heard’s initial vinyl releases should be released on 200gm vinyl and mastered using the contentious DMM process. Direct Metal Mastering was developed jointly by Telefunken-Decca and Georg Neumann GmbH and asks that, instead of utilising a lacquer-coated aluminium disc, you cut straight to ‘metal’, normally copper, instead. Apparently, Abbey Road owns the only two working DMM lathes in the UK.

The great thing about DMM is that, instead of utilising a lacquer-based media, it’s cut directly to metal, with a result that is, supposedly, more relaxed, with a broader soundstage but the CD version can have an edge in certain areas. The vinyl version allows you to hear all of the instruments all of the time. Hence, if you’re looking for a complete listening experience then you really have to buy the vinyl version.

Following a new interview with Simpson, organised especially for this new vinyl edition, Three Black Feathers’ release of ‘Prodigal Son’ is highly recommended and should be actively pursued by folkie vinyl fans.

"Simpson is of a certain age and is, himself, a card-carrying lover of vinyl..."
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